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DVD series gives glimpse of 50 top U.S. colleges

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Did you know that UCLA's dorms and food service are considered among the best in the nation? And that its student body - which runs heavily to Asians and Caucasians - is fiercely competitive?

These are the kinds of insights you'll discover by watching "The U," a DVD series that gives students and parents an inside look at 50 of America's top colleges and universities.

It's "unauthorized" in that only students and a few professors (no administrators) were interviewed for the segments. But it also offers helpful facts about rates of admission, tuition and room/board costs, average SAT scores of successful applicants, ethnic breakdown and average class sizes.

The series is hosted by WB stars Gregory Smith of "Everwood" and Hilarie Burton of "One Tree Hill," and each segment is narrated by an actor from a WB show. That means the viewer has to put up with TV promos before getting to the meat of the DVD, but it lends a feel of familiarity for most teens.

Students give their schools grades on many aspects, such as campus life and safety, off-campus life, college clubs and sports, food, professors, dorms and class size.

You find out which academic departments are considered strongest, which weakest and even what kind of weather to expect.

While a video tour can't replace a campus visit, this behind-the-scenes series can be far more useful than a brochure in weeding out some choices and zeroing in on others. Most schools are grouped by geography (West, Midwest, South and Northeast), with the fifth DVD devoted to the Ivy League.

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