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METROPOLITAN DESK

From College Guides, Reality and Tact

By **KATE STONE LOMBARDI (NYT)** 1054 words

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As a drum major in his high school marching band, Matt Thomas mastered the art of walking backward. And that has turned out to be an essential skill for his job as a tour guide at Tufts University.

Mr. Thomas, who will be a sophomore at Tufts in the fall, is one of a corps of students entrusted with being the university's public face for potential applicants.

For despite all the money that colleges and universities spend on brochures, Web sites and other marketing efforts, high school students and their parents often base their impressions of an institution on the young man or woman who has led them around campus for 45 minutes.

"We know that the campus tour has the biggest impact on whether a student decides to apply to Tufts or not," said Kerrin Damon, its assistant director of admissions.

Ms. Damon said the university had done surveys, querying those who enroll and those who do not, as well as students who visited Tufts and decided not to apply.

Historically, the campus tour, which is given all year but draws heavily throughout the summer, is cited as the biggest influence on students' decisions, she said.

As a result, Tufts, and most other colleges and universities, invest considerable time and effort in training their tour guides and preparing them for the delicate situations that can arise.

At Tufts, for example, the guides are admonished not to speak poorly of other colleges. They are also taught how to respond to queries about issues that might reflect badly on their own university.

One common minefield is the question about alcohol and drug use on campus, which many parents ask.

"Basically, you have to be honest with them and say that Tufts is like any other college in the country," Mr. Thomas said. "There are drugs and there is alcohol."

"If they want to drink," he added, "they are going to be able to, and if they don't want to they don't have to. It's a personal choice."

Most student guides try to assess each group they lead and pitch the tone of the tour accordingly. Deborah Bemel,

another Tufts guide, said that if a group appeared to have "a lot of uptight and very conservative parents," she skipped describing the annual naked quad run in December.

While questions about social life are common on all tours, many student guides get questions that are specific to stereotypes about their schools.

"One question I always get is, 'Is Tufts a safety school for Ivy League rejects?' " Mr. Thomas said. "I tell them that people are choosing Tufts because they want to come to Tufts, not because they want to be somewhere else."

When Beth Furtwangler, who will be a junior at George Washington University, in Washington, in the fall, gives tours, she gets a lot of questions from parents worried about urban crime.

"You don't use words like 'crime' or 'rape,' which would kind of be turnoffs," she said. "We talk about how students here are more aware of security, and that obviously our security here is incredible, because it overlaps with the Secret Service, the F.B.I., the World Bank and the State Department."

At Kenyon College, in Gambier, Ohio, prospective students and their parents alike worry about the isolated location.

"They've driven for hours through cornfields, and it's a little intimidating," said Erica Carroll, associate director of admissions. "Our tour guides talk about how much is happening on campus, all the lectures and concerts, and how our students focus on the idea that they make their own fun."

Visits to dorm rooms are also fraught with possible danger. Guides risk walking into rooms that have empty vodka bottles lined up on windowsills, posters of naked women on the wall, and occasionally, naked overnight guests in bed. Some institutions, like the University of Rochester, simply set up a model room, with two beds and two desks, but none of the detritus of real college students.

Many guides also described dodging parental questions about their own SAT scores, high school grade-point average and the other colleges they applied to. Instead of revealing personal information, most tour guides just talk about the average scores and accepted applicants' grades.

At Tufts, the training program for guides is run by the admissions staff. During the training, Mr. Thomas studied the tour guide manual, gave mock tours, fielded a sampling of the tough questions that parents might ask, and even played "Tufts Trivia," a game like "Jeopardy!" with questions about the role of fraternities, library hours and the ages of campus buildings.

"We really try to stress during their training how important their role as a tour guide is," Ms. Damon said.

Because student guides are essentially part of the school's sales staff, some high school seniors find the tours too sanitized and turn to the growing number of unofficial guides that purport to give a behind-the-scenes look at each college.

One DVD series, "The U: Uncut," offers video tours of 50 colleges, including scenes of dirty dorm rooms and tipsy students, as well as students talking about how much access they have to professors.

A book series, College Prowler, grades colleges on school spirit, the drug scene and how attractive the male and female students are, among other criteria.

In the "guys and girls" section of the College Prowler Boston University guide, women earned a B-plus but men only a C-plus.

But high school students sometimes bring their own 16- or 17-year-old mindset to the process. Parents report

students who have dismissed colleges on the basis of the day's weather ("too dreary"), the tour guide's clothes ("too preppy") or just some vague "bad vibe" feeling that cannot be articulated.

And after visiting campus after campus, the tours can start to seem alike.

"At most schools, tour guides generally gave the same speech and filled in the specifics of their school, like 'we have this many a cappella groups' or 'you can meet this professor one-on-one,' " said Andrew Poppick, who will attend the University of Chicago in the fall.

"For the majority of the schools I went to, within a minute of stepping on campus, I knew whether or not I was going to like it. The subsequent tour just gave me a rationalization for it."

Photo: Matt Thomas, at left, leading a tour of Tufts University last month for prospective students and their parents. (Photo by Jodi Hilton for The New York Times)

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