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THURSDAY STYLES

Online Shopper; 2,200 Colleges, So Little Time (and Money) to Visit

By MICHELLE SLATALLA (NYT) 1044 words

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OVER dinner at the Gun Club, a restaurant on the outskirts of a rural Midwestern town, my husband and I recently were congratulating ourselves on surviving the first day of a family trip to visit colleges when a text message arrived from our 17-year-old daughter.

"I'm sitting on the floor watching a vegan with tattoos eat nuts in a dorm room that smells like hamster, although none is present," my husband read aloud.

I paused, my knife poised to cut into a fillet of cornfed local beef, and asked, "Is that all she wrote?"

He scrolled down. " 'Help, get me out of here,' " he read.

"It seemed like a nice school to me," I said.

He wrote back: "It seemed like a nice school to your mother. Enjoy the overnight visit."

Then we both ordered another drink.

At least the restaurant was good. But this particular college clearly was not what guidance counselors would describe as "a good fit" for our daughter. We had traveled more than 2,000 miles from California, spent \$900 on plane tickets to visit three schools, and here, at our first stop, we suddenly had to confront the possibility that the trip might be a bust.

What lay ahead? We had no idea, really, because all the guidebooks we had consulted heaped praise on the schools on our itinerary, failing to mention negatives -- like crumbling concrete steps, leaky classroom ceilings or a pervasive smell of rodents -- that greet visitors upon arrival.

Another problem we faced was the mother-daughter factor. Qualities that had sounded good to me didn't appeal to her.

"Most students are impressed with the collective knowledge and academic rigor of the professors," I read aloud from a College Prowler guidebook that described the university where I attended graduate school.

She preferred schools with other merits. "Live local bands playing almost every night," she countered, reading from a guide that described my undergraduate alma mater.

Last week, as Zoe and I made plans to visit more colleges, I looked back on our previous trip and wondered if there was a better way. Although we had been lucky in the Midwest -- she liked two of the three schools we saw -- there are about 2,200 four-year colleges and universities to visit nationwide, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education. We needed to eliminate the duds without wasting travel money.

Virtual tours turned out to be one answer. On the Internet, I found sites that offered glimpses of campuses. At [ecampustours.com](#), we could view fishbowl snippets of buildings and clock towers online, and at [campustours.com](#), we saw a selection of colleges' promotional videos.

It was a first step. But we wanted more than glimpses. We wanted to follow a camera lens as it panned a campus in a leisurely, Altman-esque fashion, recording ambient sights and sounds. We wanted, in other words, to see a school's personality. We got lucky at two sites -- [theu.com](#) and [collegiatechoice.com](#) -- that sell in-depth video tours of campuses. [Collegiatechoice.com](#) sells DVD's of 350 campuses (for \$15 each) that the company's owners, Cliff and Sami Kramon, have visited in the last five years. At [theu.com](#), a boxed set of 50 college tours costs \$40, a pricing structure that will change soon. By the end of the month, site visitors will be able to download one tour free and create and order customized five-campus DVD's that cost \$20 each, according to Doug Imbruce, the chief executive.

After warning me that they take vastly different approaches, Mr. Imbruce and Mr. Kramon sent review copies. (I requested tours of campuses that either my daughter or I had visited or, in my case, attended, so we could compare them to firsthand observations.)

First we watched [theu.com](#)'s videos, narrated by television actors from shows on the WB channel, with production values reminiscent of an MTV spring break special. Against the backdrop of hip soundtracks and flashy graphics, very attractive students described the pros and cons of 50 public and private schools from the Ivy League to the Big Ten. "I definitely want to go to all 50 of those schools," Zoe said.

"What was that long pipe thing the students were drinking out of in the party scene at Indiana?" I asked.

"That's a beer bong," she said.

"I don't remember that from the 80's," I said.

Next we watched the [collegiatechoice.com](#) DVD's, which included tours of the three schools we had visited recently. The scenes, recorded on a jerky hand-held camera, had the homemade quality -- and entertainment value -- of an amateur's first family movie as the Kramons walk around campus with a student tour guide.

"No, no, no, no," Zoe said as the hamster school's campus came onscreen.

Clumsily, the camera panned an empty quad.

"This looks exactly like it did the day we were there," I said. "No students anywhere."

"Oh no, it's the Indian burial mounds," Zoe said, as a tinny student tour guide's voice intoned, "Here are the Indian burial mounds."

As if possessed, Zoe started to chant, eerily in sync with the onscreen tour guide, "I don't study archaeology but I have a friend who does, and the burial mounds have been a valuable. "

"Stop that," I said.

"I'm having a flashback," she said.

In real time, the camera moved across the campus, as agonizingly slowly as the actual tour we remembered. We saw dormitories, the science building, the admissions building, the theater, then dorms again as the tour backtracked across campus, then admissions again, and then for a second time ----

"Oh no, it's the Indian burial mounds," Zoe said.

I clicked the remote. The screen went black.

"Thank you," she said.

Our verdict? Neither company's tours replace the experience of a real visit. But both provided enough details for us to eliminate prospects that seemed redundant when compared with other schools already under consideration. And the DVD's were powerful visual reminders that kept us from confusing the memories of schools we'd visited.

I preferred collegiatechoice.com's videos for the very reasons that Zoe found them unbearable: the tedious attention to detail lent a verisimilitude to the tour experience. Zoe appreciated the zest and enthusiasm that theu.com captured on camera.

Call it a generational thing. At least we agreed to eliminate the hamster school.

Drawing (Drawing by Leslie Lammle)

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