

Organizing a college fair

A college fair features a variety of college reps who have traveled to a school or another location to meet with students and their parents. A school may conduct its own college fairs, collaborate with other local schools, or inform their students and parents of college fairs being hosted by the National Association of College Admissions Counseling, which presents more than 54 college fairs throughout the nation (for a current list, go to www.nacacnet.org). In addition, corporations or other organizations in your area may sponsor college fairs that you can publicize to your students.

Most fairs are evening events lasting several hours, although some are held during the day. Some schools hold fairs for seniors in the fall and fairs for juniors in the spring. State counseling organizations and some colleges now suggest collaborating with other high schools in your area and using the state counseling association to put together a college fair. This approach helps avoid conflicts with other fairs and ensures that more colleges will send reps.

These suggestions for conducting a fair are from Jan Cannon, Maine Township High School, Illinois:

- Choose the date early. Counselors who hold their own college fairs suggest a lead time of nine months. (In January, choose the date for a mid-September fair.)
- Work with your state counseling association and register your fair with NACAC to avoid conflicts with other key events. College reps schedule their lives in early summer. If you wait until the last minute to invite reps, you won't get the college participation you would like.
- Coordinate scheduling with all other events and activities at your school. You'll probably need to use the entire building for a fair at your school. Make sure there will be no athletic events, night classes or other extracurricular events during your fair. Careful planning ensures that you'll have enough parking and enough room in the building.
- Set up a budget immediately. Allow for table rental if you are planning on hosting the fair at your school. In many areas, it is standard to provide food and bottled water for the college reps. If your budget is tight, look for help from the community (e.g., from restaurants or caterers).

TIP

"In my experience, parents don't read letters, but they read postcards. One important postcard I send has the dates and locations of all local college fairs. We mail that out early in the fall."

— **Pat Rambo**, *Springfield High School, Pennsylvania*

- Before inviting colleges, determine how much space you have available. Remember that the more popular colleges might need a larger space (you might position them at the end of a row). Some may even request a separate room. Expect a response rate of approximately 75 percent.
- Decide which colleges to invite. Include colleges in your immediate area, ones that have sent reps to your school, colleges you have visited and colleges that the students are applying to (you can survey students to see which colleges they are interested in learning more about).
- Send invitations to colleges four months before the fair (end of May for the mid-September fair). Note that some colleges will send alumni rather than college staff. Your school must decide beforehand if this policy is acceptable. Some high schools allow alumni to represent colleges at their fairs, but others want only colleges that are willing to send employees. It is helpful to provide suggestions if you know that alumni are coming and to give them an idea of how many students they may see, so they will have enough materials to hand out.
- When the college responds that it would like to participate in the fair, it usually sends the contact information for the rep who will attend; you can then communicate directly with the rep. Ask reps to come an hour early, so they can get a good parking spot and unload their materials. Have student volunteers on hand to help set up the tables.
- Make announcements about the college fair at college planning nights in February and in your newsletter (if you issue one). Send a reminder to parents in June. Send formal invitations approximately three weeks before the event. (Postcards work well, too.) If you are collaborating with several schools, you might use other community resources (newsletters, marquee at the local arena, local newspaper) to get the word out.
- Provide signage for colleges that don't have proper identifying banners.

TIP

"We help students use the Web to learn which colleges might be a good fit for them. **We also have a workshop** in which students research various colleges. The student researches a college they want to learn more about, a college that they want to attend and a college as a backup plan."

— **Sylvia Lopez**, Dallas ISD, Texas

- Have a guidebook/directory for families when they arrive. List each school and its location at the fair. Be sure to point out if a particular school is in its own room. Give a detailed description of each school, including size, location, religious affiliation (if any), most popular majors and mid-50 percent admission test. Distribute a list of suggested questions for the students and families to ask of the reps (you can use **Handout 3E**).
- Provide an evaluation form so that college reps, students and families can give you feedback to use in planning the next fair.

A handout can help your students prepare for the fair. See **Handout 3F**: *How to get the most out of a college fair: Tips for students from the Associated Colleges of the Midwest*.

Organizing a presentation on college majors

“Major Mania” is a program created by the counselors at Plano West Senior High School (Plano, Texas) to help students and parents get a better understanding of college majors. The program, held annually in the fall, begins with a 30-minute general assembly presentation covering the basics of selecting a major. After that, there are two breakout sessions, each 20 to 25 minutes long, with a five-minute break between them. This schedule gives students and parents the opportunity to attend presentations on two majors. Department heads from several universities are invited to give a presentation about the major.

Presentations about each major cover the following information:

- academic strengths needed for success in the area of study
- a list of courses required in the first two years of a typical program — such as general education courses and prerequisites for the major
- the kinds of jobs the major frequently leads to, and with which types of companies or other employers (including government agencies) it is associated
- employment forecast for graduates in the area of study
- the variety of career paths that graduates in the major can pursue
- personal experiences of the presenter that would be helpful to a student considering this major

TIP

“I remind students that **they don’t have to know their major** when they’re applying to colleges. For many students it’s too much pressure to make that decision while still in high school. I encourage those students to go to college with an open mind—take a variety of classes, explore their interests”

— **Missie Heady**, West Jessamine High School, Kentucky

20 Questions to ask college representatives

Whether you meet them at a college fair or on a campus visit, college reps genuinely enjoy talking to high school students and answering questions about their college. The following questions will help start a good dialogue:

1. What makes your college unique?
2. What academic programs is your college most known for?
3. How would you describe the kids that go there? Where do most of them come from?
4. Where do kids hang out on campus?
5. What happens on weekends—are there things to do on campus or in town, or do most kids go home?
6. Are fraternities and sororities a big part of campus life?
7. What are the housing options for freshmen?
8. Do many students live off campus?
9. Is there a sports complex or fitness center?
10. What are the most popular clubs and activities?
11. What's the security like on campus?
12. What's the surrounding area like? Is it easy to get around?
13. What are the most popular majors?
14. How would you describe the academic pressure and workload?
15. What support services are available (academic advisers, tutors, etc.)?
16. Do I need to bring my own computer?
17. What's the faculty like? How accessible are they outside of class?
18. Are there opportunities for internships?
19. Is there job placement help for graduates?
20. Are any big changes in the works that I should know about?

Source: *Get it Together for College 2nd ed.* (College Board 2011).

Handout 3E

How to get the most out of a college fair

TIPS FOR STUDENTS FROM THE ASSOCIATED COLLEGES OF THE MIDWEST

Going to a college fair

- Take along a pen and a small notebook.
- Take a bag to carry the brochures you pick up.
- Print out some address labels with your name, address, phone number, email address, high school and year of graduation. Spend your time at the college tables asking questions, not filling out contact cards!
- When you arrive, check out the floor plan and find out where the tables for your top-choice colleges are located so you can go directly to them.
- Write your most important questions down in advance so you don't forget them.
- Check on whether any information sessions, such as financial aid, are being offered. Interested? Budget your time accordingly.
- Jot down notes about a college while your memory is fresh, such as right after visiting the table.
- Pick up the business cards of any representatives you talk to, so you can contact them if you have any more questions.

After you get home

- Make a point of going through the materials and your notes within one week after the fair. You'll probably remember more about your conversations with college representatives while the memories from the fair are still fresh.
- Follow up with any college that interests you by contacting the admission office to ask further questions, and, if possible, plan a visit to the campus.

Source: *Associated Colleges of the Midwest (www.acm.edu)*

Handout 3F