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## Carefully planned campus visits encourage middle schoolers to feel college-bound

Campus visits are a common approach to preparing students for college. In many cases, students and their parents research potential colleges and then visit a select few to help make a final decision about which college to attend. Campus visits are viewed as important enough that students are often excused from high school classes to make the trip. Because not all parents have the time or resources to take their children to visit colleges, many high schools organize

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campus visits for groups of students. This is a step forward in ensuring all students have access to information about college. However, more effort is needed.

For most students, the decision to attend college begins long before high school. As early as elementary school, students begin to perceive whether college is an option for them. This perception develops from the implicit and explicit messages students receive from educators and family.

Students who are given affirmation of their college potential begin to take note of information about the college-going process and their options for postsecondary education. They notice what colleges people attend. They listen when school counselors and teachers talk about course selection, and they begin to envision what life will be like when they get to college. This is not the case for students who see college as out of reach. Such students may disregard even explicit discussions about college because they do not believe college could be an option. Providing support for campus visits in middle school is one strategy to help culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students see themselves as college-bound. These visits must be purposefully planned.

### HELPING STUDENTS FEEL THEY BELONG

In spite of efforts to increase diversity in higher education, most four-

year colleges remain largely white. This is true for the student population and the faculty. When culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students visit college campuses and see few people who look like them, the idea that they do not belong is reinforced. Educators must make special preparations for their visits.

Most colleges and universities have a standard procedure for arranging campus visits for groups of students. Such visits usually include a presentation by someone in the admissions office and a guided tour. Typically, little thought is given to choosing the presenter or tour guide, other than to ensure that he or she is knowledgeable. When culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students are visiting, however, more planning is necessary to ensure that the students feel welcome and understood.

### PLANNING CAMPUS VISITS FOR STUDENT GROUPS

For educators planning campus visits, there are a number of issues to consider.

First, be purposeful in selecting the



university to visit. Selection begins with a review of campus demographics. Research the diversity of the student population and university faculty. Compare these figures to your school's demographics. Are the student bodies similar? If not, are there particular degree programs that have a more diverse student body? Are there particular degree programs that have a more diverse faculty population? This kind of information is often available on university web pages, but you may have to dig a bit to find it. If necessary, call the admissions department and ask about student and faculty demographics.

Another aspect of the selection process is researching the diversity among student organizations. Does the campus have a wide variety of student organizations? Does the campus have organizations that focus on

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the interests of students who are often marginalized? Examples include groups for African-American, Asian-American, LGBT, and Latino students. Sometimes groups are general interest, such as the Black Student Organization. Other times organizations are particular to a degree program, such as the LGBT Business Association. In almost all cases, student organizations that focus on a particular student group have the name of the group in the title.

If you learn from your research that there is virtually no diversity on the campus or that finding information about the diversity of the campus is nearly impossible, you may want to re-think taking students there. There are plenty of colleges and universities that are working to increase diversity. There is no need to take students to one that does not even have the issue on its radar screen. In fact, it may be harmful to do so.

### **SETTING UP THE VISIT**

After identifying a university to visit, contact the admissions department. Find out its process for arranging campus visits for school groups. Ask if the department is willing to tailor the visit to your students' needs. Tell the admissions representative about your students, and explain that you want your students to see and hear from people who look like them and understand what it's like to be one of a few diverse students on a campus that is largely mainstream, if that is the university's demographic profile. Some admissions representatives will immediately understand your request. Others may find your request odd. You may have to explain why it is important for students to see and interact with diverse students and faculty. Be prepared to use your research about the campus to give the admissions representative ideas about particular faculty or programs that have the diversity you are looking for. Ask if you may contact the program head or faculty directly to plan the visit. If the admissions officer indicates that the visit will be set up through the admissions office, be sure to get the name and contact information of the person who will make the arrangements.

When talking with the person making the arrangements, explain that you want students not only to see the campus and all it has to offer, but also to hear from people who can help your students identify with the university. Ask whether students from the diverse student groups you identified can provide a campus tour or talk with the students about campus life. Ask whether faculty with diverse backgrounds can talk with your students about academic programs and whether someone from the admissions office who is familiar with issues first-generation college students face can speak with the students. Ask whether a financial aid officer sharing the students' background and language can meet with parents to

discuss funding options for college.

Once arrangements have been made, prepare for the visit by personally inviting students and their families to attend. It is important to include families in the visit because going to college is a decision that affects the entire family. The earlier the family is involved, the more likely the student is to develop a college-going mind-set. A personal invitation gives you a chance to address any concerns the student or family may have, such as college being out of reach financially or being uncertain about campus safety. Making general announcements through letters, flyers, and/or e-mails is generally not an effective strategy for recruiting students because students who do not already see themselves as college-going tend to think such messages are for other students.

### **WHEN YOU'RE THERE**

During the visit, be mindful of what students are seeing and hearing. Ask people the students interact with to talk about their campus experiences and to advise the students and families. While most who interact with students will be affirming, it's possible some will not be. Be prepared to counter any negative or deficit messages with evidence that your students belong at the university. Some of this can be done during the visit, but a deeper discussion is possible in a debriefing session after the visit.

Debriefing with the students and families is important regardless of how the visit goes because it gives you a chance to answer questions and to evaluate whether the visit was successful in helping students develop a college-going mind-set. School staff should use this information to improve future visits. But more importantly, they should use it as insight into how to reinforce a college-bound mind-set in students as they continue on to high school and how to assist their families in developing step-by-step plans to realize the goal of college. ■