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Leo I. Higdon Jr.: Getting value in your college pick

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This college-admission season, nearly 3 million high school seniors and their parents will visit college and university campuses across America. Each of these future college students seeks his or her own unique destiny, but they all share a common goal: To find the best fit with the best education and the best value.

We all know the campus visit helps establish fit. But in this economy, how does one determine value — especially when costs vary so widely? And, how can parents know they're getting what they pay for?

Unlike most prior recessions, the current economic downturn has had a strong and direct impact on our nation's colleges and universities. Endowments are down, lower bond ratings have raised the cost of funding and many institutions are operating with budget deficits for the first time ever.

Some institutions' short-term solutions have been to cut programs, increase enrollment, halt construction projects, reduce hiring or, worse, lay off faculty and staff. These topics don't generally come up during the admission tour.

Do your homework to decide which colleges to visit. Then, when visiting colleges in these turbulent economic times, there are several questions parents and students should ask to ensure the education experience will be worthy of the investment. The answers to these, and some more traditional questions, can help you determine which institutions will provide the best education and the best value.

Is the college currently investing in the student experience? No college can rest on its laurels. Ask about campus facilities, programs and the faculty. Colleges that focus on the student experience will find ways, even in a recession, to renew the campus, launch new learning programs and partnerships and hire the best faculty members they can. Admission representatives, including your tour guide, should know about investments that the college is making in students, and be eager to tell you about them.

How comprehensive — and flexible — are the financial-aid options? While I don't recommend that you focus on cost to the exclusion of all else, it definitely factors into choice. Look for colleges that have increased financial aid available to students despite this economy. Ask if they meet 100 percent of demonstrated need, and check the sources of those funds. Some public colleges that rely on state funding to support financial aid simply don't have the available dollars they had just a few short years ago. Many private colleges, on the other hand, have been

able to count on generous benefactors to increase support for financial aid in these tough times.

What kind of success do the graduates enjoy? College should teach students habits of the mind — how to think, frame issues, approach problems, develop solutions. Ask about the range of careers among graduates and the success rates for those entering professional schools or other graduate programs. Dig deeper and ask about the alumni network. Strong alumni communities are a source of support for students and are intricately involved in the college's networking and career counseling opportunities. If you can speak with graduates, ask them about the impact the college had on their lives.

Where do students come from? Colleges and universities today should prepare students to be active citizens in a global society. Look for colleges with well-defined diversity programs, and students from many different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as from abroad. Students who become active members of a diverse community will be better prepared to offer creative solutions to the world's challenges.

Do students have opportunities to apply learning outside the classroom? Internships, research projects and community service are just some of the ways colleges provide meaningful learning opportunities that enhance and complement academic classes. Make sure the college offers an array of options for students to engage in real-world problems and adapt their learning in those situations to develop solutions. Often, these co-curricular activities introduce students to other interests or even life-long passions.

How would you describe student-faculty interaction? Perhaps most important, a quality faculty is critical to the education experience. Look closely at the senior faculty. Do they teach classes, oversee labs and invite students to take part in research projects or co-author papers? Do the faculty mentor students, challenge them? Teaching excellence should be a core priority of every college and university on your list.

Above all, trust your instincts. The above questions will help you determine the quality and value of a specific college's education experience. The fit is up to you.

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