

Applying to college? Do the schools you're considering value free expression? Here are seven questions to ask.

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Open inquiry and constructive disagreement are essential for allowing institutions of higher learning to advance their missions of education and discovery. Yet, increasingly, professors and students alike are describing the toll that being publicly reprimanded for one's ideas — and the resultant apprehension about sharing ideas — are having on campus culture and the pursuit of knowledge.

If you are a high school junior or senior (or parent the parent or guardian of one) who will be touring college campuses this fall — and enjoy being with and learning from people who see the world differently than you do — here are seven questions that you should ask during campus visits to get a sense of whether a school values free expression and, in turn, has created the conditions necessary to prepare you for a diverse, challenging, and complex world.

1.

Does your first-year orientation discuss civility, viewpoint diversity, or academic freedom?

Many colleges offer incoming students the opportunity to learn about their peers' and professors' expectations during orientation sessions. The content covered in these orientations tells you a lot about the values and principles of the institution. Look for a college that, beginning with orientation, explicitly states the importance of regularly engaging with people who have beliefs and ideas that are different — even vastly different — than your own.

2.

Does your college sponsor a speaker series featuring speakers who take different views on the same topic?

Observing prominent individuals engage with complicated and controversial ideas, in a good-faith effort to understand the nuances of complicated problems, is a great way for students to deepen the habits of mind that enable critical thinking. Such attempts at constructive engagement should flourish on your campus.

3.

How many speakers have been disrupted by protests in recent years?

Protests are a wonderful feature of our democracy. However, when protestors prevent speakers from speaking, or audience members from hearing, they are violating the promise of the First Amendment — and squashing an opportunity for critical engagement and learning. An ideal response to this question may go something like, "We've had some really controversial speakers, but they weren't shouted down or disinvited. There were some demonstrations outside, but nothing that interfered with participating. They were rigorously challenged in the Q&A, with evidence-based arguments — and responded to later in the student press. We recognize the importance of hearing other viewpoints, even those some find offensive and objectionable."

4.

How often do student groups of differing political orientation host events together?

The ideal college campus welcomes students from a range of ideological perspectives and offers opportunities for those students to come together to productively explore topics, problems, and questions.

5.

How often do you hear your professors say, “That’s just my perspective,” then ask, “But how do you see it?”

Intellectual humility and curiosity are excellent starting points for learning from others. When professors exhibit these virtues, they remind their students to be genuinely interested in and empathetic toward others’ perspectives. Ideally, in response to this question you will hear comments like, “All the time! Our professors keep saying their job is teach how to think, not what to think.”

6.

Is there an opportunity in the classroom or in co-curricular activities to examine or reconsider one’s own strongly held beliefs?

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7.

Are students welcome to share their perspectives in class if most others disagree?

Let’s be honest: discussions in which everyone agrees are boring. And what you’re able to learn from them is limited, too. Find a college where students feel welcomed and able to express ideas and to ask questions that might represent a minority opinion.

Finding the perfect college can feel overwhelming. There are so many decisions to make – Small, private college or big, public university? Close to home or far away? A place where your friends will be or a place where you don’t know anyone else? Amid a sea of uncertainty and daunting questions, one thing is clear: For the sake of your current learning and your future success, you should want a college that will enable you to learn about yourself, your area of study, and your world.

A college that welcomes and engages multiple worldviews will provide skills — concrete and intangible — whose use will extend far beyond any classroom or campus. Conformity and homogeneity of ideas simply will not leave you fully prepared for life beyond the quad. So go forth and find a college that will welcome your curiosity and ideas, and sharpen your abilities to understand and constructively engage with others.

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