

Summer College Tour on a Budget

The journey to the EOC's second annual Summer College Tour began in April 2011. With such a short time before we'd be going and not even 20% of the budget we had last summer, in which we were able to take 23 students to visit 11 Historically Black Colleges and Universities as far south as Atlanta, we had a daunting task ahead of us. That was not going to stop us from offering an enriching and enlightening experience for our students.

My coworkers and I wanted to provide a well-rounded view of different college settings and experiences. We wanted a variety of private vs. public, size, affiliation, community setting, tuition and programming. With our budget, staying within New York State seemed the logical choice. The students participating in the trip deserved a voice in preparation so a survey was prepared to gauge their experience with college at this point. We asked which schools they had visited already and where they were interested in seeing. Activities, restaurants, distance, length of time, types of communities and special programs were questioned. The survey was distributed by email and paper to about 50 students. Barely a few actually responded.

On May 12, Western Suffolk Counselors' Association held its annual Spring College Fair at the Huntington Hilton Hotel. With over 200 colleges in attendance, it was the ideal networking opportunity to make connections for the tour. My colleague and I walked from table to table, speaking with representatives from so many colleges, inquiring what their schools could offer us. I gave out my business card to at least 50 admissions counselors and collected cards from almost half of them to follow up. On a limited budget, our choice in colleges to visit was going to be based on what accommodations they could provide. Food and lodging were our biggest concerns, since they cost the most. Many schools did not offer lodging because of insurance issues but a few told me they would look into it. Several schools were willing to offer either a free or discounted meal while we were there.

The first school to contact me was one I had never heard of prior to the College Fair. It was a small school located in the heart of the Finger Lakes Region of New York, called Keuka College. The Admissions Events Coordinator followed up with her representative who was at the Fair and offered to work with me. Little did I know, she would be so accommodating.

Emails were sent to 15 potential schools to find out what they could provide for us. Responses were slow in coming and time was running out. Follow up phone calls were made. All the schools that responded were plotted on a map to determine the best route. In analyzing the map, I realized that although it wasn't a New York college, Scranton University was exactly midway between Long Island and the majority of our schools. Contact was made and offers were suggested and it was added to the list of schools on the tour. By the end of May, a tentative list of schools was decided upon. With that done, transportation needed to be secured. We contacted several bus companies and were surprised to see how much that actually was. We were looking at about \$1,400 a day, which was more than we had budgeted for the entire trip,

without accounting for food and lodging. Changes needed to happen. A day was shaved off the trip. The schools located in the northeast part of New York had to be cut because they were just too far away from the rest. A budget was created but it was still more than the amount allotted to us in our grant. The only possibility was to have students pay a small portion of the cost.

Once all the colleges had been chosen and transportation was secured, the application to students needed to be approved and then distributed. Drafts were written and edited and eventually agreed upon. By the time they were distributed, our school programs were over and Regents week had already begun. There was much interest in attending the trip but due to conflicts with another program in which the students were being paid to attend, we didn't receive as many applications as anticipated. Who would believe that a virtually free trip to visit 5 colleges would be so difficult to fill? By the time of our orientation meeting, however, all 20 slots had been filled.

With just one week left before the trip, I decided to contact all the schools and confirm that everything was all set. It was a good thing that I did. After repeated emails without a response to the person in charge of our stay in the dorms at one of the schools, I contacted Admissions, who informed me that my contact had resigned and not left any information for anyone else. They had no record of us taking a trip there. Fortunately, they worked diligently to put everything together and within a day, everything was resolved as if nothing ever happened.

The 20 students and their parents/guardians were required to meet with the four chaperones for an orientation meeting one week prior to the trip. Introductions were made. Parents and students signed a contract for rules and regulations. Money was collected. With students hailing from such districts as Brentwood and Wyandanch, the group of students was robust with diversity and eager to taste a sample of the college experience.

For someone who is not a morning person, having to be at Wyandanch Memorial High School at 6am was not easy. Bagels were bought for breakfast to give a good start to the journey. Feelings of anticipation, anxiety and exhaustion lingered in the air. The bus was loaded with bags underneath and students on board. The bus driver began by informing us that although there was a bathroom on board, please only use it for emergencies because it could smell up the bus. Guess who sat next to the bathroom on the first leg of the journey?

We arrived at Scranton University right on schedule. Immediately upon arrival, the Admissions Counselors provided a lot of information to us about the school in a brief presentation. For some, this was the first time they were on a college campus. The students asked questions about requirements, majors, sports and student life. They completed an information sheet with their data for the school. Many students were somewhat taken back by the price of tuition but staff did a wonderful job explaining that there are many scholarships and financial aid opportunities available in order to lessen the financial burden. The fun began as we walked around the campus. We saw the library, the gymnasium and the dorms. Scranton sponsored our lunch in its cafeteria.

When asked what the students remembered most about the school, they cited that it is a Jesuit college, with crosses everywhere on its 56 acre campus, they need a 3.2 GPA, it is SAT/ACT Optional, Division III and that they have ROTC. The overall feel was that Scranton was a very impressive University but the students were eager to move on and see what the other schools on our agenda had to offer.

After Scranton, it was onto a small, relatively little known Liberal Arts school named Keuka College. They were eagerly waiting for us when we arrived. As we entered the dorm, the counselors distributed rooming assignments and room keys. Some students complained about not getting to choose their roommates but it gave them the opportunity to experience what it will be like to have roommates chosen for you. We were all surprised when each of us received a Keuka t-shirt in our package. Many of us donned the shirt immediately. Though the students were skeptical at first because of its size and relative obscurity, the staff at Keuka did an excellent job of explaining the benefits to a smaller school and smaller college community. Many students were impressed by the fact the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once spoke in the college church, which was located right in the heart of the grounds. The most unique feature of the school to me was the required month of internships. Students do not return to school until February because they take January to intern at a placement of their choosing. Following the tour, we had dinner, which Keuka Admissions paid half the cost.

The Admissions Coordinator set up a mock class for the students to experience college life. The professor began by asking the students their opinions on the value of education. In the beginning, the students were anti-education and very vocal about it. It did not seem to bother the professor in the least; he just kept asking questions. Within 45 minutes, he had changed the point of view of almost every one of the students to be pro-education and advocating for their rights as students. Some of the students hugged the professor after he finished, thanking him for such a powerful presentation.

After this intense demonstration of college life, Keuka co-sponsored a lakeside bonfire and ice cream social. We used this time to have the students from the two school districts on the trip get to know one another and bond through activities and discussions. Once the mosquitoes began showing us who was in charge, we went back to the dorms. Girls were on one floor while guys were on the one below. Most of us gathered in the common area to chat about anything and everything for a few hours. The most challenging college life experience for everyone, including myself, came in regard to the bathroom. I was fortunate when I went to college, to have had a personal bathroom in my dorm room. I was not accustomed to sharing a communal bathroom. Setting up a showering schedule in the morning was never- an issue for me, or for most of the students or chaperones. We learned quickly. I stayed up most of the night, making sure students didn't sneak out of their rooms to visit anyone else. Each time someone needed to go to the bathroom, I jumped up to escort them to their rooms and back. I got up an hour earlier than everyone else, despite only about 2 hours of sleep, to take my shower before any students invaded the area. The entire Admissions staff joined us for breakfast, which again, they paid

half. The Admissions Director spoke briefly to the students and we took more pictures before departing.

I did not know what to expect of Keuka College. In all my years of working as a guidance counselor, I do not think I met a team as accommodating and friendly as them. They bent over backwards to provide a great experience for us. Knowing our financial situation, they offered to cover half the cost of everything, from the food to the residence hall. The mock class had such an impact on the lives of so many of our students that they went to the next three colleges with a new attitude and desire to learn. Facts about Keuka that students remember most are that it used to be an all-female school, it is a private, Division III College where SAT/ACT scores are not mandatory, and it has a non-denominational church on campus. Although it is a very small school, with only about 1,800 students, many students take courses across the world, including Asia, and all students have a month of interning in their field of study. Some of the students learned that they didn't want a school that was so isolated from a major city but "the lake view they had was phenomenal." Ironically, after the trip was over, at an event with the students from the trip, I bumped into the family of a former student who just graduated from Keuka College. Her mother raved about the school and the education it provided for her daughter, who had just been hired in her dream job just a few days prior.

After such a great experience in the beautiful Finger Lakes region of Keuka College, we continued onward to SUNY Oswego. It was a wonderful opportunity to head further upstate and see parts of the Empire State that many of the students had not yet travelled to. The landscape, the people, the scenery was breathtaking in many respects. Oswego proved to live up to its billing as one of the most beautiful campuses within the SUNY system. Sitting adjacent to, and with an astonishing view of Lake Ontario, Oswego's campus provided students with a more rural/sub-urban topography. Snacks and drinks awaited us upon our arrival. We divided into two groups to tour the campus. We began with Al Roker's Television Studio. I contacted a former student who currently attends Oswego and he insisted on us visiting the ice hockey rink, which he claimed to be the highlight of the school. The students toured the dorms, taking pictures of each other "planking" wherever they went. We were treated to a free meal in the cafeteria. Several current Oswego students sat down to speak with our students to share their experiences at college, even though they weren't even part of the tour. The admissions counselor provided an information session for the students to tell them about Oswego and what it has to offer. Rather than simply leave the campus, she rode the bus with us to show us around campus, pointing out locations and making sure we did not miss the beautiful scenery of Lake Ontario. The students liked the variety of majors Oswego had to offer as well as the cost of a SUNY education. "The only downfall about Oswego is that come winter time, they're right next to Lake Ontario and the winters are rough."

Based on name recognition, the next part of the college tour was the climax: Syracuse University. Upon arrival, students immediately began buzzing about all the famous athletes who once walked the very same campus they were now visiting. The Admissions representative

spoke to the students about the school and answered questions for them. The students were disappointed that our guided tour was not able to bring us into the gymnasium where the basketball team plays but they received a good taste of the beautiful campus and surroundings. They learned some of the myths and superstitions of the school, such as the infamous kissing bench where, if two people kiss while sitting on the bench, they will eventually marry and be happy but if someone sits alone, he or she will be destined to never marry. We finished our tour by visiting the shops downtown at Marshall Street, where the students purchased their Syracuse University souvenirs. Orange Pride was beaming the rest of the trip.

The students checked into their dorm rooms and freshened up before dinner. As a treat, instead of having another college dining center meal, I set up for us to have dinner at the popular Dinosaur BBQ, which had been featured on the Travel Channel and Food Network's shows, "Man vs. Food" and "The Best Thing I Ever Ate." This restaurant is always packed, but we decided to wait out our tables in the Boneyard. With the motorcycles lining the curb and the smell of smoked ribs cooking, we finally agreed to split up into separate tables so we could dig in to the food and the atmosphere. Although the restaurant had live blues music, many of the students didn't feel it and preferred heading back to the dorms. Rather than drive the bus back, we walked the two miles and exercised away our meals. Once back in the dorms, the students played pool, cards and simply hung out in the recreation room until it was time for curfew. Once again, the chaperones patrolled the hallways and set up camp to make sure kids stayed in their rooms or only went directly to the bathroom.

Syracuse University seemed to be the favorite for most of the students. It offered a wide variety of majors and the EOP program, providing these students with an opportunity they might not have had otherwise. It was popular for its athletic programs, with several students dreaming to play football or basketball for their teams. Even though we were not able to see inside, they could tell that the stadium was huge and would love the opportunity to play on its court. Staff wisely expressed to the students that all the schools on our list had their positive and negative characteristics but the quality of a school has far more to do with the educational experience one receives than it does with the number of famous people who attended it. Syracuse was a lovely campus and experience but being a popular school alone doesn't somehow make it superior to any other school.

We managed through the second morning of communal bathrooms and breakfast in the dining hall before boarding the bus to Albany. As we pulled up to the campus, we couldn't help but be drawn to the fountains. Two students ran through the water, getting soaked just before embarking on our tour of the campus. They viewed lecture halls, the library, the student center, and the dorms. They were able to compare the various types of dorm rooms at each of the colleges. The Admissions Counselor gave an information session. The students ate a discounted lunch in the dining hall before heading back to the bus for the home stretch. Once again, the students found a large school with many options. In addition to its undergraduate programs, it offered many graduate level degrees, which appealed to chaperones as well as students. Its

prestigious law facility that they are building will enhance the law program, which caught the eyes of some students.

Overall, our second annual college tour was a success. If we were able to inspire just one mind to begin to seriously consider higher learning then it was a worthwhile and enriching experience. We wanted to give students the impression that there are many options to consider and although some schools cost more than others, ultimately it comes down to what works best for the individual student and their family. There were no major complaints about the trip. In fact, the prevailing sentiment was that many students would have liked the trip to be longer in terms of length of days away and number of schools on the agenda. It is because of opportunities like these, that EOC has been able to establish and maintain its reputation as a comprehensive agency that works to serve the community. Inspiring young minds toward college is just one of the many ways in which we can impact the community. Education is the key to breaking the generational cycle of poverty in high risk communities. Better education means better jobs, better jobs lead to greater financial security, thus breaking the cycle and helping to ensure that our young people have access to the resources they need in order to succeed.