

Esteban Aguas:

Hello everyone! Welcome to Meet Princeton, a podcast to introduce prospective students and their families to Princeton University, brought to you by the Office of Admission. I'm your host, Esteban Aguas. I'm an assistant dean of admission and a Princeton graduate from the class of 2019, and I want to thank you for tuning in today.

Throughout the academic year, admission officers from colleges and universities around the country hit the road to visit high schools, college fairs, and CBOs as a way to connect with students, parents, and counselors. These visits provide a great opportunity for students to learn more about the schools that they're interested in, and oftentimes introduce students to institutions that they hadn't even previously considered. We know this time can be both exciting and stressful for students in the middle of their college search journeys, so we hope to offer our tips for students when meeting with admission officers on the road so that they can feel prepared and empowered.

So today I'm joined by my colleague, Elysia Garza, who's an assistant director of admission here at Princeton. Elysia is a graduate of Bates College, where she majored in psychology. Originally from Houston, Texas, she's entering her third admission cycle here with our office. So welcome to the podcast, Elysia.

Elysia Garza:

Thank you. I'm really excited to be able to talk to you today and talk a little bit about the kind of work that we've been doing every fall.

Esteban Aguas:

To kick off our conversation, let's go back to the basics. I think it would be helpful to first define or explain some words that we'll be using throughout the episode. So could you tell me what exactly is a school visit?

Elysia Garza:

Yeah, so a school visit is an opportunity for us to connect with prospective students from all around the country. I think we do get to see a good amount of students that are here visiting our campus, but will get to visit each school, potentially go to their counselors, talk with some students who are interested, or even just students [who hadn't previously considered Princeton]. So whether you have been someone who's really interested in Princeton your whole life and you want them to get some face time or you've never heard of the university and you just want some more general information, a school visit is a really great way to get that. Often it takes place in a library, a cafeteria, or an auditorium. Sometimes it's a really formal presentation where we talk and give the similar info session that you might get here on campus, or sometimes I'm just meeting with a handful of students and talking a little bit more about their specific admissions questions.

Esteban Aguas:

Yeah, I think that's a really good point where school visits look really different from school to school. So if you have questions of what school visits are like at your school, it's a good thing to stop by the college career center or your school's counseling office to learn about that. Sometimes it's a table outside of the cafeteria, or like Elysia said, we might be in the library with a formal presentation with audiovisual components. So no matter what, it's still a great touch point to have with that admission office or officer and to really learn more about those institutions.

Now, obviously the United States is quite large and we have only so many bodies in an admission office. So where do officers travel? How do we determine what schools they're going to and what does that look like?

Elysia Garza:

In our office, we follow something that's called territory model overview, which basically means that an admission officer is assigned to a specific territory, really to be the first one who's looking at that area and becomes a little bit of an expert in that part of the country. That doesn't mean that you are the only person who's going to be reading in that area, [or] the only person who will see those applications or make all those decisions, but it does mean that we get to know that part of the country a little bit better, learn about the curriculum style, learn about the different extracurriculars and opportunities that tend to apply to students in that area so that way we have better context to understand what exactly is your educational upbringing going to look like in this part of the country. Because the way a [education system] might look like in an urban setting, such as Manhattan, versus maybe a small town in Oklahoma, is going to be really different. So the hope is that we become experts in that area to really use this context to make better choices and really better support you in this process.

Esteban Aguas:

Right. That's kind of a point that connects back to our holistic review process. So here at Princeton we use holistic review, which means we're reviewing a student's application within the context of their learning environment. So being able to visit these schools and have some boots on the ground, meet with counselors, really helps inform our work then in the end.

And as Elysia mentioned, territories can look different from office to office and officer to officer, so they can be states or counties within a state. Also for international readers, they can be whole countries or continents. So all that comes together to piece together the map of the world for our office to then be able to review those applications accordingly.

Now, I said earlier in the introduction, officers also meet with CBOs. I'm sure a lot of our listeners have never heard that term before. So Elysia, could you tell me what exactly a CBO is and why we partner with them?

Elysia Garza:

I personally love CBOs. I think it is a core part of increasing access to universities such as Princeton. So CBO stands for community-based organization. And so they often play a really critical role in encouraging and supporting student success in post-secondary education. These organizations often strive to provide college preparedness, academic and social [support] and financial awareness, particularly for underrepresented communities.

And sometimes this can look like getting support during your high school years, getting help in your classes, writing some of those college applications, [or] whatever it is that the CBO specializes in. There are other CBOs that also continue to extend that support during your four years at a different university, so it can go even beyond your high school experience. It's really important for us to work with these CBOs and continue to build a really diverse and inclusive community by building these relationships.

So ideally, we're hoping that these partnerships raise our awareness of what students really need and the best ways we can support them, as well as gaining some interest from students from backgrounds that haven't always been represented at Princeton.

Esteban Aguas:

Right. And so many a times, CBOs might be affiliated with a school or they might be an after-school program where students go to get additional support. They might be on weekends, but again, they offer an incredible kind of support in these students' academic careers and oftentimes play a pivotal role in [helping] them applying to colleges. And that's why it's so important for us to connect with them and to meet those students because sometimes we're not able to visit the high schools that these students attend. And overall, it helps us cast a wider net, I think, in our recruitment process, to really let students from many different backgrounds know about our respective institutions and how they could find a place there as well and be successful.

I would say the last kind of program that admission officers are involved with during the fall travel season are some group travel programs, and again, just like school visits, these look different [between] school consortiums and various partnerships, but could you give me a sense of some of the various partnerships that Princeton has and the group travel programs that we do?

Elysia Garza:

Yes. Group travel is a really unique way for students to hear about several different schools in one visit or in one evening program. Some of the ones that we are a part of are called Coast to Coast [and] there's one with a very long abbreviation that is essentially a group of our peer institutions as well as schools that aren't necessarily the same type of institution as Princeton. We are a liberal arts curriculum with a research focus, but you might have schools there that are really catered to one specific interest. It's a very different type of school, or it's in a very different part of the country, and the hope is that you get a variety of schools in this one setting. So, you'll have the opportunity to learn about multiple institutions.

You'll also have the chance to ask any questions, which can be really helpful if you want to compare and contrast right then and there, and you're hearing about two schools that you're interested in that are really different. As these different representatives answer questions, you get to hear, "Oh, this really resonates with me and I think kind of shows me that maybe this other institution doesn't quite have what I want," which isn't a negative thing at all, but helps you see what does school fit mean for you and what schools are going to be a good fit for you. These often do require pre-registrations, but they're open to all.

Esteban Aguas:

So Elysia, I'm curious, obviously you have multiple travel seasons under your belt. Do you have any memorable experiences on the road visiting schools and students? And maybe it'll be helpful as well to tell our listeners what your territories are.

Elysia Garza:

Yes! So, this upcoming year I'll be reading for Houston, Texas and San Antonio, Texas. I'm originally from Houston, so that's something that is really personally meaningful for me. And it's also my first year reading for Brooklyn and Queens, so I'm excited to tackle that. Last year though, I did also read for a few other states including Nevada, and I think that was probably one of my most memorable experiences, not necessarily because of the state specifically, but because one of my biggest goals in the education field is to work with students who are coming from backgrounds similar to my own.

And I was really able to work with a school where I connected with a lot of students who were coming from first-generation backgrounds, who were coming from lower-income backgrounds, and that was something that was such a big part of my own college journey and my own college experience and it felt

really fulfilling to not only have so many students in one room interested in what I was saying, but also hearing them ask the questions and getting the answers that I wish I had the answer to when I was 16, when I was 17. And so I think that part has been just a really fulfilling part of this job—the travel season and knowing that I won't get this face-to-face access as often when I'm here on campus—so traveling does feel like a privilege in that way.

Esteban Aguas:

Yeah, I totally agree. I think being on the road and visiting schools can be such an eye-opening experience both I think in terms of the amazing students that we meet, but also just being able to see the diversity in types of schools that are out there. I grew up on the east coast in New Jersey, and so schools here look very different than the schools that I visit in southern California. It's funny because the schools that I visited in the greater LA area very much remind me of the schools that I saw on TV growing up like Zoey 101 and so forth where they're outside and students are walking from class to class in the open air, and that's something that's so different than the schools that I attended here in New Jersey. So I think just seeing the vast differences in student experiences better informs our work overall. It makes it really exciting to be on the road.

I think it will be helpful to share some advice that we have for students who plan on attending these sessions. Who knows? Maybe Princeton is stopping by your high school and you're wondering, "Well, how should I approach this visit? What should I ask? What should I do?" We both have some thoughts on things that we want to advise our students to look out for and to do in those visits. So Elysia, what is one piece of advice that you would share with students who are preparing to visit with a college admission counselor at their high school?

Elysia Garza:

I think one of the things that I would consider is really making the most out of the time that you have with them. I think sometimes students maybe have tutorials during lunch when the [college] is coming to visit and think that it might not be beneficial to go if they can only stay for the five to 10 minutes. But even short visits can be really beneficial! It's okay to stop by, pick up some information and materials, and just get a sense of what that institution is like.

I also think sometimes [admission officers] bring specialized materials to school visits, things that you won't necessarily get if you come visit campus, so even just dropping by, saying hello, and seeing what they have to offer is really nice. And I think some students worry if [they] don't know enough about that institution, or if [they] don't have questions prepared beforehand—which ideally if it's a school you're interested in, you will—that they think they can't go, but even just getting a sense of the general vibe of a school can really encourage you to maybe look into it further later on. So even a five-minute visit is really worth your time.

Esteban Aguas:

And I think that goes back to what we were saying earlier about how there's no one type of school visit. Some visits might be up to 30 minutes, some might be casually standing in a hallway at a table passing by. So even if you don't have questions prepared about a certain institution or haven't even learned about that institution before, that's okay. Pick up the publication, read through some of the pages, take a beat. And if you have a question for that admission officer, they're there to answer them for you. So again, even like Elysia said, a short visit can be beneficial!

I think another important thing to mention is demonstrated interest, and obviously different schools have different demonstrated interest policies. So for those who don't know, demonstrated interest is a

way for colleges to gauge how interested a prospective student is in attending their school. And so essentially it's a measure of how much a student has shown their excitement or desire to attend a particular college, and it sometimes can be an important factor in the admissions process.

Like I said, some schools track demonstrated interest and others do not—Princeton does not track demonstrated interest. That means attending one of our sessions does not in any way impact our admission decision, but for some schools it might be important. So that might be something to keep in mind when deciding whether or not to attend a school visit for certain colleges. And that information is usually available on a school's admission website as well.

Elysia, do you have anything else to add in terms of advice for these students?

Elysia Garza:

I think one thing that helps students whenever they're trying to formulate their thoughts is that some students get intimidated about, "Do I know good questions to ask? Am I wasting somebody's time by asking these questions?" And I think a good way to tackle, "How should I plan out my questions," is to think about what are the things you would be really excited to do over the course of four years? What are the things that you would wake up in the morning and think, "I can't wait to do that. I hope this opportunity is there"?

So it doesn't even have to be school-specific, but think about the things that you really want out of an institution and a university and ask questions about those things. And not every school will have an answer, and that's completely okay, but it does help you get a sense of what it is that you value and if a school is a good fit for you, which I think is the biggest part of these info sessions. You want to get a sense of, "Am I going to be happy there and am I going to find a place that suits me and my wants and my needs?"

Esteban Aguas:

No, I totally agree. I think a big part of it is to not feel like you need to be perfect in that interaction. I feel like a lot of students feel pressure or might be nervous or intimidated that they need to really impress this admission counselor, but in the end, they're there to help humanize the application experience.

I think a lot of students, when they're writing their applications and ready to submit, can feel detached because they're preparing everything on a computer and just clicking send. But in the end, we're all human in admission offices who are reviewing your materials. And so I think every step of the way that we can help humanize that experience, the better it is for everyone involved, because ultimately, we're all trying to help students find their best fit in their college search journeys.

With that, I want to thank Elysia for joining our podcast today and for being a wonderful conversationalist.

Elysia Garza:

Thanks so much for having me. I really appreciate the time.

Esteban Aguas:

We hope you enjoyed hearing about college admissions on the road and feel better equipped for when institutions visit your high school. As I said earlier, this podcast was created with prospective students and their families in mind. So I'd like to direct all of our listeners to our admission website at admission.princeton.edu. There you can watch, read, and learn more about Princeton. Also, if you have

any questions about anything admissions related and you'd like to hear your questions answered live on air, please write into our mailbag found on the Meet Princeton webpage on our website.

Meet Princeton's audio engineer is Nick Donnoli of Orangebox Pictures. Mary Buckley and I, Esteban Aguas, are executive producers. We'd also like to give a special thanks and shout out to today's guest, Elysia Garza, for her great contributions to this episode, and to our listeners for tuning in. Thank you so much for listening, and we hope you'll join us next time on Meet Princeton!