**UW HELP Podcast 6**

[00:00:09] Randy: Welcome, and thanks for downloading and listening to this week's episode of the University of Wisconsin HELP Office podcast. My name's Randy Parvin and I am a student services coordinator here at the University of Wisconsin System HELP Office. Well a few weeks back, I talked to a current college student a little bit about the college tour experience. So I think it is fitting to go at this differently and talk with an admissions professional about how to get the most out of a college tour. My guest today brings a wealth of knowledge about college admissions and the process. Melissa Perez is the Director of Admissions at the University of Wisconsin Colleges and previously was the Assistant Director of Admissions at University of Wisconsin-River Falls. Welcome, Melissa, to the HELP podcast.

[00:00:52] Melissa: Thank you so much for having me!

Randy: Awesome, I'm happy you're here.

Melissa: I'm happy to be here.

[00:00:57] Randy: All right. Well everywhere I go, you know, even myself… I find myself and admissions people are always saying, “Tour the campus. Tour the campus.” Can you give me your perspective on why that's important?

[00:01:11] Melissa: When I think about the campus tour, I think you can have students looking at the websites, you can have them going to college fairs, you can have them reading brochures. But not until they set foot on that campus can they actually see it, feel it, touch it, believe it, understand it--and really get the vibe of what that campus is. So I feel like the tour is so important because they get that firsthand view that firsthand perspective. They may have people telling them, you know, what they think about certain campuses, or what they think they know about certain campuses. But the students don't know themselves.

So I think to have that firsthand view of what the dorms look like, what the food tastes like, what the atmosphere feels like, what the faculty are like, what the staff are like--they get to experience that firsthand. So really do, you know, having that firsthand knowledge of what that's like. I also think the tour is important because you may have specific questions that you want answered. The tour is the time to get those questions answered. You can, again, dig through websites like crazy to try and find your answers, but sometimes it's just nice to have a conversation with people about, you know, your questions and your concerns. I also think that's the time where you can get the contacts you need. Again, sometimes that's kind of hard to find on a website. Maybe you have questions about financial aid, or an admissions or scholarship question.

[00:02:36] That's your time to really get those contacts so you know who to reach out to when you have questions. Ultimately, at the end of the day, I think the tour is what really helps students decide where they're going to end up. This is a huge investment and a huge decision that students are making. And so when they're doing that tour if they can see themselves there, if they can believe that “I could actually be a student here, this could be my life.” I think that tour does that for a lot of students. I also think about when students go on tour, you know, making a college choice should be such a logical decision. “They have my major.” “I can get admitted there.” “The cost is this.” It should be logical, right? But there's nothing logical about making an admission, a college choice, because students feel a certain way about schools. It's very emotional and I think those tours evoke that emotion.

[00:03:36] Randy: OK, I like that, a lot of things you said there. The networking, I never really thought about. That's one place where that starts early. The networking about who to go see and who knows what.

[00:03:47] Melissa: Everyone that you meet on your campus tour--they're there to help you, and they're there to support you through the college process, especially that admissions counselor. They’re a wealth of knowledge. They know a lot of information about a lot of different things and so if you can at least get even connected up with your admissions counselor because then you can reach out to them and say, “Hey, I've got a question on this” and they are the person that can liaison you with other folks on the campus.

[00:04:17] Randy: OK. Well let's start from the beginning. If my senior daughter, Ainsley, is thinking about touring, let's say UW-Baraboo, which you represent. What should my daughter and I consider or talk through before we schedule that tour?

[00:04:30] Melissa: Yeah I think a couple different things I’d talk about with my child before going on tour.

[00:04:37] The first would be is that I, as a parent—you, as a parent—probably have a great idea of what you think Ainsley should do, right? But you have no way that you can say that to your child and be convincing of that, because they need to be the ones that that say, “yeah, this is kind of what I'm feeling.” But again, I think coming to a compromise on somewhere you want to tour is a great idea. I think parents oftentimes have a list of colleges and universities that they want their students to see, but the students have done a lot of research as well, and feel like “I want to go see these schools.” I think coming together on those and really looking at, you know, “Is this a realistic choice for you to look at?” or “You maybe haven't thought of this one yet so I'd like you to take a look at this.” So many students that I meet on their college tours say, “My mom signed me up to come today.” And again I think some of that, you know, the student just has to get going at some point.

But I think coming together and talking about your list of prospective schools together as a family I think is a great idea. Just to look at all the different criteria, whether you want rural, whether you want small, whether you want urban, whether you want rural--I mean so many different options to consider. And again, they might not even know what they want, either. So exposing them to some different environments and different campuses can be a good idea, too, because you might have an idea some of those.

I also think it's important prior to going on the tour to review the admissions criteria of the particular school that you're going to visit, because when you go visit that school, again, it's a great time for you to ask some of those questions. If the admissions criteria is… maybe you're not quite reaching that admissions criteria, to have a really frank conversation with the admissions counselor about what that looks like. I think is a great time just so you can have an idea of what the admissions criteria looks like.

[00:06:36] And I also think it's important to talk about cost, and this is the last thing the students want to talk about, or the families want to talk about!

[00:06:45] But again I think if you're touring schools, I think it's important to have an idea of what the costs might look like, because that financing portion of the college search process is a lot. It's a huge investment for students. Ultimately that investment falls on the student. And I think it's important to be really frank about, you know, here's what we've saved up for you, here's what you might be looking at in terms of loans. Let's really dig into scholarships with this school and see if we have some scholarship opportunities. So I really think a frank conversation about cost is important prior to touring as well.

[00:07:22] Randy: I like that and I think it's, you know, it's difficult for me. It was difficult for my family, my first daughter. One thing that I did with her, and I’d suggest to everybody out there, is when you go to fill out that Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which is FASFA (what you need to fill out to get any kind of financial aid, including loans) is you fill that out with the student. Preferably the student fills that out. Now I know with my daughter, and I know with a lot of people, there will be a lot of hard questions about finances, but that also gives the student a better idea of where we’re at and where they’re at.

[00:07:56] Melissa: I think it really does give them a better idea because at the at the end of the day this is the student financing their future. And they've never had to take on those types of questions or concerns or, you know, types of money questions like that ever in their lives! And so it's a big conversation to have. But I think a really important one, because when students graduate, the level of debt that they have is something that for them to consider, because students that have less debt do in fact advance quicker in their lives. There's been studies that show they get married earlier. They buy cars sooner. They buy houses sooner depending on how much student loan debt they have. So it's really kind of interesting when you think about how much debt you want to leave college with, which obviously should be as little as possible.

[00:08:51] Randy: Yes, definitely. Well let's go back. One thing I thought of was how do students and families schedule a college tour? What do they need to do to get that done?

[00:09:05] Melissa: I usually tell students when thinking about starting off and scheduling your college tours, take a look at your high school calendar to see what might be some days you don't have school. Because oftentimes, universities and colleges have school going on when high schools don't have school, and I know everyone hates to miss a day of class.

[00:09:27] So check out your high school calendar and see when you are off school because that could be a great opportunity to visit. Presidents Day in February is often a great time, your spring break is often a great time, in the fall there are some teacher conferences at the end of October. So I always say take a look at your calendar and see when you when you are off because that's a great time to come visit. Most of the times, colleges and universities are in session when high schools are off.

You can schedule visits in a couple different ways. The web is typically the easiest way for students to set up a visit. They can usually just navigate to the school’s visit page and they'll be shown a plethora of options in terms of visit opportunities and they can also call on the phone as well and set up a time to visit. Most schools have a lot of different options in terms of types of visits that they offer. Some offer a presentation and a tour. Some offer more robust visit opportunities like preview days where a full open house of campus is on. So it kind of depends what you want and how much time you have to spend on your tour. I usually say for when you're just starting off as a junior, you're kind of dipping your toe in the pool, so taking a tour or hearing a presentation sometimes is enough to just learn about the school. And then as you move further into the process, to really go back and dive into the major, talk with some faculty, maybe financial questions come up. But schools have a lot of great options for students to visit.

[00:11:06] Randy: So when I do the first visit with my family or with my daughter, it doesn't mean I can't come back and visit with a faculty member and those other types of things?

[00:11:15] Melissa: You can come back as many times as you want! Oftentimes students will want to come back and meet with a faculty member in the major just to hear more about the classes, curriculum, lab opportunities, future mentoring opportunities, internships. Sometimes families will want to come back and meet with a coach, too, if students are interested in playing a sport. They want to connect with a coach and just learn about how to try out, and what the season looks like.

[00:11:43] And some families come back because they really have financial aid questions. They want to learn more about financing everything. So I've had students that I've met with that have been on my campus up to four times visiting, just because they want to make really, really sure that they're making the right decision and getting the questions answered that they need answered.

[00:12:02] Randy: So if my daughter Ainsley is listening, we should go back and visit both of the campuses we visited when you were junior, Ainsley.

[00:12:11] Melissa: I would say go back and dive in. I think it's important because now you're admitted. Now you know that “Yes, this could be a reality for me.” I think that you think about it a little differently, because as a junior, you're kind of imagining the possibilities, but when you're a senior and now you're admitted, now it's getting real. It’s getting real!

[00:12:32] Randy: All right. Well, anxiety. That's what my wife and I were feeling on a car ride with my older daughter, not Ainsley, to the first college tour. If we're trying to take some of that out, can you give me a visualization? What generally happens when a family comes to a tour? Whether it be at UW-Baraboo, UW-La Crosse, UW-River Falls. What happens when the family gets out of the car? And you know, what happens generally?

[00:13:00] Melissa: And we see the anxiety on your faces when you walk in the door, so admissions counselors and folks that work in the admissions office are great people to chat with, and they'll typically put your mind at ease. We can see the anxiety. So we'll chat with you and hopefully put your mind at ease. But a typical visit opportunity at a school would be someone comes into the admissions office and they check in.

[00:13:23] Folks that work in the admissions office will give you an itinerary of what your day looks like, whether that be a tour, meeting with a counselor, meeting with a coach, the presentation, but at the very bare bones. At most schools you do a walking tour that's probably an hour or hour and a half, depending on the school size. And then you'll have a presentation or sit down with an admissions counselor and talk about what the school offers. And that admissions counselor I think is such a great person for you to connect with, network with, be in touch with, because if you do have questions in the future, they’re your person you'll connect with. And I always feel like people leave campus and they're like, “Oh, I wish I would have asked this question!” and then you have that contact to be able to go back and ask that question. But people shouldn't have anxiety or feel nervous about touring.

[00:14:15] I think what makes people so nervous is just the whole prospect of college and looking at it. It's such a huge thing and turning point in students’ lives. But hopefully by the time we are done we can put you at ease and make you feel good that you have had time to come visit.

[00:14:33] Randy: All right. Let's say you’re like a lot of juniors. We have a junior who is visiting three or four campuses. Do you have any suggestions about what they can do to remember that tour because it might be almost a year later when they apply? Any things that you as an admission's professional would suggest they do?

[00:14:51] Melissa: When I have met with families that have came and visited, I feel like a really helpful tool that I saw some families using as they would have a chart, or a rubric, and they would ask the same questions at every campus so they could compare apples to apples. So ACT, high school requirements, cost information, deadlines of scholarships, and they would fill this out while we were sitting together. And they would take that same chart, that same question, to their next school, and ask those same questions. Because I think they all kind of meld together in your mind as you reflect on these.

[00:15:32] And so having that clear information documented. I also think pictures are so great, and not just Snap Chat. You have to really take pictures (because they'll disappear on Snap Chat). So take pictures of the spaces, take pictures of the buildings, take pictures of the dorm and the facilities so that you remember what they look like, because they will kind of blend together in your mind at some point.

[00:15:58] Randy: I would think so. All right. Well now, a lot of times, the tour is in the morning or the afternoon, and usually takes what, two or three hours? OK. Do you have suggestions for...? I know you've been in a couple of places around the University of Wisconsin System. Do you have suggestions for what a family or a student might do after the traditional tour to get a better understanding of one, the campus, and two, the community that they're really moving to? Suggestions along those lines?

[00:16:30] Melissa: I always tell students to eat lunch; on campus is probably the best option because you’re going to be eating that food for quite a few years!

[00:16:41] So I tell students I think it's important to eat on the campus you're going to, whether that be in the cafeteria that you'll be eating in, or someplace on campus is great. If you don't want to eat on campus, just staying in the community for that extra hour to have lunch, I think is nice, too, just to reflect on your day, reflect on the campus, reflect on the community around you. So I think food's an important part of any visit. You've got to stick around for lunch. And I also think if you want to connect with other people, a coach… those are typical requests that we'll hear students make.

[00:17:17] I also have a lot of students that request to sit in on a class, and sometimes in the afternoon after they've done their tour, they say, “Oh I'd like to kind of experience a class, too, and see what that feels like.” You’ll want to connect with the admissions office if that's something you want to do, because the admissions office can help you either coordinate it or give you to the person that will coordinate that for you. Sometimes it can be hard if the class isn’t offered on the day that you're there—there's a multitude of factors—but a lot of students want to just check that out and kind of see what a classic college class feels like.

And then the other thing I was thinking about, too, is many campuses offer an admitted student day. So once a student has been admitted to the university, usually in the spring time, February and March, they'll offer admitted student days, so students that have been admitted to the university will be invited to these days. And you get a little bit more of a deeper dive on those days into life at the university. And so students might want to consider that, if they do want to go back after they've been admitted, looking at some of those admitted student days.

[00:18:34] Randy: OK. You know, I was recently on a tour and I was amazed. I had an opportunity to eat in the residence hall. I was amazed at all the amazing and different choices in terms of the meal.

[00:18:48] Melissa: It's so delicious! I even eat when I'm on campus! And also people have food sensitivities as well. Every, every place that I've ever been is super accommodating, so students can make sure that their dietary guidelines are met. And I think it's just great because there are so many good options!

[00:19:12] Randy: All right. Now I know a lot of what you've talked about today, which is great, in terms of your perspectives as an admission professional. Let's say some point in the future, you have a junior or senior. As a parent what would you do? What do you think now you would be looking for, as you walked around the campus with your son or daughter, at whatever campus we're talking about?

Melissa: I thought, I am five years away from this right now! When I was reflecting on this I'm like, “Oh my gosh! I'm five years away from doing this with my own child!” Oh my goodness, that's a little nerve wracking.

[00:19:49] But the most important part that I would look for, for my child, is fit. I think making sure that the student--my child--feels like that can be a space they can grow in, feels like that can be a space they can connect with other students, feels like that's a space they can be mentored by faculty, feels like that's a space they can find an internship, find a major. I think that fit is what is so important. And fit encompasses so much, because they have to be able to get admitted, they have to be able to afford it, we have to be able to see ourselves there. Fit would be the biggest thing that I would look for, for my daughter.

And of course I'm going to have feelings on what I see as a good fit. And she's going to have feelings on what she sees as a good fit. Ultimately, it has to be her decision and what she feels like is a good fit. I would also be looking for scholarship opportunities! And I would be really digging into that with whatever place I was looking at. You know, if scholarships are guaranteed scholarships, if their scholarships she has to apply for, if there are scholarships down the line that she could be eligible for. But I would really dig into scholarships because I think that's… again, the cost part of this is sometimes a little intimidating.

[00:21:10] And with scholarships being free money, I would want to know everything that she could be eligible for. And again, I keep coming back to cost, but I think a really frank discussion with her on cost, and what that would look like if you choose the school, and what that would look like if you chose the school after four years, I think, is a really important discussion to have with her. Just in knowing what student loan debt can do when students are done. I think it would be important to just know the facts upfront about cost and what students will be looking at.

[00:21:43] But again the tour is just the best place to start to have those questions answered. And I think everyone should come visit! I am sometimes surprised that students apply to schools and they never visit the school. I’m like, “How did you come to decide that this was the best fit?” And maybe they had enough information from peers, from parents, from guidance counselors, but I think you have to have that firsthand knowledge yourself to make the best decision for you and your future.

[00:22:16] Randy: I want to follow up with something you said. I thought it was an interesting choice of words. You said, “Does that space….” Now why did you use the word “space” instead of let's say “place” or “institution?”

[00:22:28] Melissa: I use the word “space” because so much of what is done on the campus has that community feel to it. And so whether that be activities the students are involved in, whether that be having lunch in the cafeteria, whether that be the class that the student’s in. I think the student is going to be in so many different spaces on campus where they need to grow, they need to learn, they need to develop--and that campus as a whole needs to be able to meet that need. And so I just feel like space is a word that the students can… I just see that as a word that students can learn, develop, and grow in.

[00:22:48] Randy: Well, it works for me, that's why I asked. I hadn't thought about University of Wisconsin or institution, whatever it may be, in terms of thinking about a “space” which it really is, so that's why I asked.

[00:23:23] Alright. Is there anything else you want to share about campus tours or the college admissions process that we haven't touched upon?

[00:23:30] Melissa: I think timeline a little bit. I see a lot of juniors obviously visiting campus their junior year, and I think that's a great time to start. When you're in your junior year of high school and you're starting to think about the college process, probably that second semester, January, February you're starting to think about what could be with the college search process. I think starting in your Junior year is great. If you want to start in your sophomore year, super! Wonderful! We'd love to have you. But starting your junior year is a great time frame.

I also think visiting as many schools as you can during your junior year is important, because you need to start off your senior year applying to college, and the application opens August 1st. And I think we know how crazy the end of summer and fall can be. And so I tell students it's nice to have a good idea on where you're going to be submitting those applications to starting your senior year. But that means you've got to have your tours in by the time you start applying, to know. So I think junior year is pretty critical for doing tours. I just also wanted to mention, too, if students can come during the school year, during the academic year, just to get a feel for the campus. You really feel the hustle and the bustle of the campus, whereas summer on our campuses is gorgeous! Our campuses are so beautiful, but there's just not that same vibe of the school year.

[00:25:06] So if you want to use summer to tour schools it's, again, a great time to tour universities. But you won't have that same feel. You'll get to see everything you'd be able to see during the school year, but there's just not as much going on at our campuses in the summer. So I tell students if you can get there during the school year, that’s a better time to come, during the academic year.

[00:25:31] Randy: I think your key suggestion there, too, is to have an idea where you want to apply to by the time comes around to that senior year.

[00:25:38] I always tell students and families there's going to be so many lasts and firsts in that senior year. “I don't want to miss this last show choir event.” “I'm just trying out for the swim team. And I want to really try; it's my last year to do that.” And I get all that. So that means you have to be prepared when you roll into that senior year, as to where you want to apply.

Melissa: And you've got this whole other element of your life that's building like crazy with the college search process.

[00:26:09] So I think Junior year is a really critical year to really start having the conversations around where you want to tour, where you're thinking about, and where you might want to apply.

[00:26:20] Randy: I love it. All right. Well this podcast, I think—well I know--this podcast promotes the System, and we seek to take a little mystery out of the college admissions process. And Melissa, I think you've moved us forward in our goal today.

Melissa: Wonderful, thank you!

Randy: Yes. Melissa before I let you go., I’ve got a very important question that I’ve asked the last few guys. Brat or hot dog?

Melissa: Brat! Especially in the summer. Grilled. But first cooked in beer.

Randy: Onions with the beer, or just beer?

Melissa: Onions with the beer. And then grill the brat, you know, it's like sizzling and kind of crackling open, with the super soft bun—it’s got to be super soft—with ketchup. I'm not a mustard girl.

Randy: That was my next question!

Melissa: Oh, it's ketchup for me. Not mustard, which I think would turn off brat enthusiasts. Aren’t they mustard people?

[00:27:17] Randy: I'm not about making judgments when it comes to mustard, ketchup, brat, hotdog. I'm just here to hear people's perspectives.

[00:27:24] Melissa Brat.

Randy: All right, brat and ketchup.

Melissa: Register me as brat and ketchup.

[00:27:29] Randy: All right, mark that down, Jeremy. Jeremy's our audio engineer, you met him earlier. Mark that down.

Jeremy: Got it.

[00:27:35] Randy: All right, well thanks for listening everyone. I'm Randi Parvin, again, your host and student services coordinator. If you have questions or suggestions for future episodes, email me at randy.parvin@uwex.edu. That’s randy.parvin@uwex.edu. Until next time, this is UW HELP, your guide to the college process.