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School Daze: With So Many Choices, How Do You Pick the Right College?

Admissions and student life experts at Rensselaer offer advice

Troy, N.Y. – Acceptance letters are in the mail, the deadline for deposits is rapidly approaching, and high school students across the country face a tough decision: With so many choices, how do you pick the right college?

As they prepare to welcome another freshman class, the admissions and student life experts at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute offer advice to help reduce stress and smooth the transition to college life.

What is the campus like?

“Most college campuses offer various programs scheduled throughout the year that provide students and their families with opportunities to tour the campus, learn about academic programs, and meet current students, faculty, and staff,” says Karen Long, director of undergraduate admissions. Last year, Rensselaer hosted more than 2,300 visitors to campus for the annual Accepted Student Celebration. And in 2005, the Institute launched RPI *PolyBlogs*, an online student journal showcasing student life and experiences at Rensselaer. To view RPI PolyBlogs, go to <http://polyblogs.rpi.edu/>.

How can I adjust to student life?

All first-year students at Rensselaer participate in a series of welcoming events, team-building adventures, and festivities — called Navigating Rensselaer & Beyond (NRB) — designed to lessen stress and help make the transition to college life comfortable. “Beginning during the admissions process, concepts of teamwork, leadership, cultural exploration, community service, and citizenship are instilled throughout the first year as students learn about each other, the campus, and the surrounding Capital Region community,” says Lisa Trahan, dean of the Office of the First-Year Experience (FYE) and interim director of residence life. FYE was recently awarded the 2006 NASPA Excellence Gold Award that recognizes their first-year experience and orientation programming as “standing out among the best in the country.”

What is there to do on campus?

“Beyond academics, the college campus offers students an opportunity to complement their academic experience with a variety of extracurricular activities, student leadership opportunities, and participation in cultural, educational, and social clubs and organizations,” says Rick Hartt, director of the Rensselaer Union. In fact, the *Princeton Review* ranked Rensselaer second on their 2007 “More to Do on Campus” list. Rensselaer has more than 160 clubs, sports, and organizations to choose from. The Rensselaer Union – one of approximately 20 student-run Unions in the nation – is a self-supporting and self-governing body that controls finances and organizes student activities.

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How do I afford college?

Often the looming question is how to pay for college. “Finding ways to reduce the tuition bill requires research, time, and a healthy dose of patience,” Karen Long says. “Meeting the financial needs of students who decide to attend Rensselaer is our top priority, and we are committed to making the cost of a private college education an affordable choice for students and their families.” Nearly 90 percent of Rensselaer’s undergraduate student population receives some form of either merit or need-based aid; this includes about \$90 million in aid from all other sources. Rensselaer offers several competitive, merit-based scholarships and grants to students in recognition of their academic excellence in mathematics and science, and leadership, service, and devotion to their respective schools and communities. Among them, the Rensselaer Medal Program – established more than 85 years ago – awards \$60,000 to promising high school juniors.

I have a laptop, but can I use it?

“Make sure you can seamlessly connect anytime, anywhere on campus, wired or wirelessly,” says Mark Miller, acting director of Rensselaer’s Academic and Research Computing division. “No matter where you are, a student should be able to use e-mail and instant messaging to communicate with classmates, professors, friends, and family; access the Internet to research assignments and explore new ideas; and participate in computer-enhanced instruction.” Rensselaer was ranked among the top 25 “most connected campuses” in the country, according to a 2006 *Princeton Review* survey. Rensselaer’s Mobile Computing Program offers a complete laptop package including a state-of-the-art ThinkPad loaded with a special suite of software.

What is it like to live on campus?

“Prior to moving to campus, first-year students and their families get an inside look at the residence experience through campus and summer orientation programs that address campus housing arrangements and options, campus dining options, and residence hall social/academic programs,” Lisa Trahan says. “The mission of Residence Life at Rensselaer is to build a community that values the potential of each individual student and encourages students to broaden their perspectives, enhance personal growth, and prepare for life beyond the campus community.”

How safe is the campus?

“A college should give parents and potential students peace of mind,” says Jerry Matthews, director of public safety and emergency management. Rensselaer’s Department of Public Safety “takes a proactive approach to maintaining a safe and secure environment for all.” The department provides overall campus awareness and safety programs, laptop security tips, safety education and training, among other things. Matthews notes that campus safety information is available through the federal “Jeanne Clery Act,” which requires colleges and universities to disclose their crime statistics and security policies to students automatically, and to prospective students upon request.

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Can I get a job when I graduate?

“Check each college’s career development Web site for placement and employment statistics,” suggests Tom Tarantelli, director of Rensselaer’s Career Development Center (CDC). “For first-year students, the idea of being gainfully employed upon graduation may not be on their minds when they first start college. However, it’s important for students to know that participation in co-ops, internships, and summer employment during college – what we call experiential opportunities – are what’s giving graduating students the edge.”

In addition, the CDC developed a new program for sophomore students in an effort to build on their first-year experiences. Launched last fall, the Sophomore Career Experience (SCE) program is designed to offer career, job search, and professional development opportunities through various hands-on and interactive programs, seminars, and networking. Rensselaer’s CDC offers a range of programs that include career counseling, resume writing workshops, interview preparation, and networking opportunities with alumni and employers. Tarantelli serves as president of the Eastern Association of Colleges and Employers (EACE) – the largest regional college and employer network in the country.

What services does the Student Health Center offer?

“College is an exciting transition for a parent or guardian, and their son or daughter,” says Leslie Lawrence, medical director of the Gallagher Student Health Center at Rensselaer. “While on college campuses, students have to learn to manage their own health for the first time, and may have questions ranging from scheduling appointments to knowing who to contact in an emergency.” Most campus health center services include medical, gynecology, and allergy clinics, a counseling center, and health education and wellness programs. Rensselaer’s Student Health Center also offers a comprehensive, nationally accredited, physician-directed program providing outpatient ambulatory care. Specialty consultation and a prescription delivery program are also available.

Additional Information

Office of Enrollment Management, <http://www.rpi.edu/admission/index.html>

Student Life, http://www.rpi.edu/student_life/index.html

Mobile Computing Program, <http://www.rpi.edu/laptops/>

About Rensselaer

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, founded in 1824, is the nation’s oldest technological university. The university offers bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees in engineering, the sciences, information technology, architecture, management, and the humanities and social sciences. Institute programs serve undergraduates, graduate students, and working professionals around the world. Rensselaer faculty are known for pre-eminence in research conducted in a wide range of fields, with particular emphasis in biotechnology, nanotechnology, information technology, and the media arts and technology. The Institute is well known for its success in the transfer of technology from the laboratory to the marketplace so that new discoveries and inventions benefit human life, protect the environment, and strengthen economic development.

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