

August 19, 2009

## Colleges Seek to Remake the Campus Tour

By [JACQUES STEINBERG](#)

CONWAY, Ark. — For as long as high school seniors have been visiting colleges, it seems, there have been tour guides walking backward in front of them, breathlessly reciting statistics from a script while, hopefully, avoiding tree roots and other hazards.

Not so at [Hendrix College](#), a liberal arts institution outside Little Rock, Ark. It is one of several dozen colleges and universities that are increasingly directing their tour guides to turn around and walk forward, and to purge their memories of all those dates from the college's history in favor of personal anecdotes and frequent breaks for give-and-take.

Driving the overhaul of the campus tour is colleges' desire to provide visitors a more natural, spontaneous and, ideally, engaging experience — and to relieve mothers, in particular, of the nagging worry that their guide might, at any moment, fall backward over a bicycle rack.

The changes have been fortunate for Katie Rice, 21, a senior at Hendrix and longtime guide here, who does not even know when her college was founded — “I just tell my groups it was a long time ago,” she says — and who never did get the hang of walking backward.

“Look at these shoes,” she said the other day, after leading a campus visitor along red-brick paths lined with crape myrtles. “They are very basic sandals. I fall just walking forwards.”

The remaking of the campus tour is the latest development in the pitched competition among colleges to woo the most talented applicants.

Among the institutions that now encourage their tour guides to walk forward, alongside visitors, are big ones like the [University of Texas at Austin](#), [American University](#) in Washington, and the [State University at Oswego, N.Y.](#), as well as smaller colleges like [Trinity University](#) in San Antonio, [Albright](#) in Reading, Pa., and [Spelman](#) in Atlanta.

Though some have done so on their own, others have been urged to turn their guides around by a private consulting firm called [TargetX](#). It charges colleges thousands of dollars to “audit” their tours and look at other aspects of how they present themselves to visitors, including visitor parking.

“Walking backwards is just not conducive to having a conversation,” said Jeff Kallay, a principal at the firm whose job title is experience evangelist. “Not only are you talking at someone, but it’s also so stressful to watch. We have seen guides hit signs and trees and lampposts.”

Three years ago, Hendrix put its campus-visit program under the direction of a former Disney employee named Jennifer McKenzie and retained TargetX to provide annual training for its student guides, who are volunteers. The endeavor is considered so crucial — the college spends \$1.5 million, or 4 percent of its annual operating budget, on marketing and student recruitment— that freshmen are deemed too inexperienced to participate.

Since 2006, the number of students visiting Hendrix each year has risen by more than 300, or 25 percent, to 1,765 this year — with the number of applications increasing by a similar percentage, to 1,625. (The incoming freshman class is 430.)

After showing prospective guides at Hendrix examples of tours that were so staid they became easy targets for pranksters — including a video of a University of Virginia tour upended by streakers — Mr. Kallay and Ms. McKenzie work with the students to hone the stories they might tell of a favorite professor or experience.

That the guided “walks” at Hendrix — they are not even called “tours” any more — are more relaxed than those at many of its competitors was obvious to Katie Bigbee of Corrales, N.M., who visited in mid-July.

“My father and I noticed on the Hendrix tour that the guy wasn’t rehearsed, which we really appreciated,” Ms. Bigbee said. “I didn’t need to know all the facts and when the buildings were built. I was going to so many colleges that the facts weren’t sticking.”

What did stick was her guide’s telling her group about a theme night in the cafeteria that commemorated the fall of the Berlin Wall.

“He told us how, on the east side of the room, the cooks removed all the salt and pepper shakers, took all the tablecloths away and served really bad food,” she said. “On the west side, they gave nice German candy and decorated the place really well.”

“That made me want to go there and experience that,” she said.

By contrast, Ms. Bigbee said that her guide at [Elon University](#) in North Carolina not only walked backward but followed an obviously set route.

“One thing I didn’t appreciate at Elon is that he took us through an extensive parking lot to look at the sports center,” she said. “None of us had expressed any interest in the sports center.”

Which is not to say that walking backward does not have its virtues.

At [Franklin & Marshall](#) in Lancaster, Pa., Emily Pavlos, a senior, says she would be unable to show her tour groups everything the college wanted them to see in the 90 minutes allotted without walking backward.

“Making eye contact with them while I’m walking also helps me make a connection with the parents,” Ms. Pavlos added.

So, too, at [Ohio State University](#), a TargetX client that nonetheless advises its tour guides to walk backward. “We are still true believers,” said Jill Hampshire, a university administrator.

Hendrix, though, has emerged as enough of a pace-setter for the modern campus tour that administrators from as far away as [Bennington College](#) in Vermont have traveled to Arkansas to see the program.

And yet, Hendrix considers its tour strategy so proprietary that when a direct competitor that it would not name — a college that, like Hendrix, is featured in the book [“Colleges That Change Lives”](#) — recently asked if it could send a delegation on a tour, the request was turned down.

“That would be like Coke letting Pepsi into their plant,” said Laura Martin, the director of admission at Hendrix.

*An earlier version of this article misstated the location of Franklin & Marshall College. It is in Lancaster, Pa., not Carlisle.*

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