Two Wheelin’ It
Director Kirk Blackard on the Road in California

Our peloton was not quite as fast as the Tour de France, but for many of us, our trek on two wheels was as satisfying as any leg of that famous European tour. Cycling with our luggage on the back of our bikes through the urban sprawl of LA and along the Pacific Coast, from LA to San Diego, we were often greeted by curious onlookers asking, “Who are you?” We answered simply, “We’re high school college counselors touring schools by bike.”

Over the span of nine days, seventeen counselors from across the US and I spun our wheels in excess of 300 miles. Along the way, we visited 15 colleges. We often began early and occasionally cycled until dusk with lights on our handlebars and reflective vests on our bodies. Perched on our bikes, we were privy to a unique view of the surrounding neighborhoods and grounds of some schools such as UCLA and the Claremont schools, and we had a brief visit with Pepperdine’s Emergency Rescue Squad. While we did enjoy standard information sessions and tours, we were also able to get a more intimate feel for campuses with the help of each school’s admissions office. Some schools hosted us in dorms or guest houses. We shared meals with admissions staff and students. At times, faculty and administrators accompanied us for a few miles on the roads. There were trips to nearby events and attractions such as a Dodgers-Marlins baseball game and a late night trip to the Rose Bowl stadium, courtesy of Occidental’s admission staff. These were just a few of the many ways we were able to get to know these diverse schools, and the schools to know us.

What will I remember? I will remember the people, the journey — the blood, sweat, tears and gears — and the added confidence I have that there are, indeed, so many outstanding colleges.

To read more about Kirk’s tour, visit his blog updates on The Choice, the New York Times’ webpage dedicated to college admission and aid (thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com).

Exploring Our Backyard
Counselor Emily Pulsifer Tours Colleges and Universities in Central North Carolina

My tour of schools in the Winston-Salem and Greensboro areas may have been more conventional than Kirk’s ride in California – we traveled by bus and left our reflective vests at home — but it was equally interesting. Given that my previous experience in college guidance was rooted in New England, I was grateful for the opportunity to learn more about 12 of the fine independent schools located within two hours of Christ School. Starting at High Point University and finishing at Greensboro College, our group of 40 high school and private counselors spent a week hearing from admissions teams and strolling around campuses with students. When I could, I broke away from the group to indulge in my own exercise of choice, running. I made some amazing discoveries on my runs, discoveries that enriched my knowledge of some schools. Below Guilford College’s baseball field, for example, I stepped off the paved road to follow a beautiful, 2-mile trail that wound through the community’s 320 acre nature preserve. Later, I learned that I had run through woods that once served as a refuge for runaway slaves. At High Point, I slipped through a gate and ran 400 meter repeats on their track. That facility, like much of the campus, was state-of-the-art and entirely spotless.

After getting to know some of the institutions in central North Carolina, I look forward to next summer’s circuit of schools further east. Who knows what I’ll find on my runs around Methodist, Meredith, and Duke.
Travel Notes: Some Schools to Consider

From Kirk:
California Institute of Technology (www.caltech.edu)
With just 1,000 undergraduates, Cal Tech, located in Pasadena, is one of the smallest schools we visited and one of the smallest schools in the country to offer engineering as a major. I will remember Cal Tech for its beauty, but also for the students’ enthusiasm for their professors. According to our tour guide, a rising junior from San Jose, California, there are so many wonderful professors, but her Physics teacher, David Politzer, a Nobel laureate, is her favorite. Why? Because of his “down to earth” attitude and the riveting demonstrations he designed to illustrate new concepts. Her descriptions of Politzer’s teaching style reminded me of Mr. Fagen and Mr. Clapper’s famous science experiments on Christ School’s football field. On a scale of one to five, with one being “not favorable” and five being “most favorable,” Cal Tach registered a 5.2 with our group, the same Richter reading reported on the day we toured its campus. Yes, we rode through an earthquake!

Chapman University (www.chapman.edu)
Located in Orange County, California, this school of approximately 5,000 undergraduates impressed me with its facilities, but also with the level of support it receives from alumni and other generous donors. Over the last nine years, the school has embarked on several noteworthy projects with price tags totaling $200 million. A tour of the school’s Dodge College of Film and Media Arts with its state of the art equipment helped us understand why Chapman’s theatre and film programs are ranked among the best by Parade Magazine and The Hollywood Reporter.

From Emily:
High Point University (www.highpoint.edu)
The word of choice on this campus was extraordinary and it was easy to see why. Starting in 2005 when President Nido R. Qubein’s tenure began, this school of approximately 3,000 undergraduates has been growing, both in size and reputation. The school has just constructed new schools of commerce and communication, a huge student housing complex, and a university center with a movie theatre, a free-for-students arcade, and an elegant restaurant that serves some of the best wild salmon I’ve ever had. With ambitious plans for its students, faculty, academic programs, and facilities (in September, the board announced a 10 year, $2.1 billion development plan), High Point is a school to visit.

Travel Tip:
Our trips this summer reminded us of just how important it is to visit schools. Websites, fliers and promotional videos reveal a lot, but they cannot convey the unique feel of a campus or the character of the student body. So, if you are taking a family trip this fall, consider taking tours of some colleges on your route. Finding these schools is surprisingly easy thanks to Google Maps. Simply enter “colleges near _______” in the search field and you’ll see a map with dots representing local colleges. Move your cursor over a dot to learn the college’s name and general contact information.

College Focus

During the College Focus Program on September 21st, admission directors shared words of wisdom about preparing for the college admission process with Christ School 9th, 10th and new 11th grade students. Pictured here (with moderator Kirk Blackard): Wells Shepard of Wofford College, Frank McClary of Furman University, and Thomas Griffin of North Carolina State University. For a transcript of the program, contact Emily Pulsifer.
Going the Extra Mile, or the Extra 500 Miles

Christ School teachers labor over the recommendation letters they write. They carefully describe those moments in the classroom when their students’ work ethic and academic abilities shine. They catalog the special traits they observe in sporting events, on school trips and in the dorm on rainy Sundays. They search for the words – those unique adjectives, that apt simile – which capture the qualities that distinguish their students from others. They do this because they know that GPA’s and test scores can’t tell the whole story.

But sometimes even a carefully crafted letter won’t do the trick. Last fall, Mike Mohney realized that Carnegie Mellon University needed to hear, and not just read, the tale of Tommy Cheng’s astonishing success at Christ School. So, just two days before Thanksgiving vacation, Mr. Mohney and Tommy took the eight and a half hour trip to Pittsburgh for Tommy’s interview — and Mr. Mohney’s direct advocacy campaign.

“Having a teacher show up was obviously pretty foreign to them,” Mr. Mohney recalled recently. “But I told them what I know and what other teachers told me about Tommy: that he’s one of the most naturally gifted, hardest working people we’ve ever been around. He sacrifices everything to learn.”

For Tommy, Mr. Mohney’s presence was very helpful. “The night before I went to the interview,” Tommy wrote in September, “I was extremely nervous because I was afraid that I would not do well. Mr. Mohney encouraged me throughout the whole trip by sharing his great sense of humor and life experience.”

During the winter and early spring, Mr. Mohney maintained contact with Carnegie Mellon’s admissions team; he repeated his praise for Tommy’s work ethic and natural ability, and updated them on Tommy’s steady, exceptional work.

“They had to give him another look, they had to,” Mr. Mohney explained. “Tommy’s story is one everybody should hear.”

It took some time but Carnegie Mellon heard the story, loud and clear. In May, Tommy received word that he’d been accepted and offered a generous scholarship. Fortunately this tale did not end with graduation. Mr. Mohney and Tommy continue to be in touch, and when Tommy needed advice about his first semester courses, he called Mr. Mohney, his teacher, mentor, and persistent advocate.

“Tommy’s story is one everybody should hear.”
– Math Instructor Mike Mohney

What We’re Reading:  
Cutting Through the Chaos of College Admissions by Bert Hudnall

There is no shortage of books about the college admissions process. A recent Amazon.com search unearthed nearly 3,000 guides, workbooks, and manuals. Some of these texts emphasize the importance of finding “right fit” schools, while others promise a formula for the perfect essay. There are standardized testing guides, complex rating systems, and behind-the-scenes accounts of how specific schools make tough admission decisions. The selection of titles, like the topic itself, can be dizzying.

In an effort to help our students focus on the most essential components of the process, we have selected one concise guide. In Cutting Through the Chaos of College Admissions, Bert Hudnall draws on his experience as a college admissions director and secondary school counselor to explain the process in clear, direct terms. Some topics Hudnall examines include shaping a distinctive application, healthy parent involvement, the role of standardized tests, and the importance of college visits. Since every Christ School sophomore and junior has been issued a copy of this booklet, we will be referring to Hudnall’s advice in our individual meetings with students.

If you are interested in purchasing a copy, please visit the Christ School Bookstore.

College Guidance Fall Calendar

- October 13 – Application Blitz (Seniors) and PSAT (Freshmen, Sophomores and Juniors)
- Parents’ Weekend
  October 29-30 – College Guidance Conferences and Naviance Family Connection Tutorials
- November 6 – SAT
- November 9 – PLAN (Sophomores)
- November 17 – Enrichment Visits to Wofford/Furman, Clemson, Wake Forest or Davidson (Juniors)
- December 4 – SAT
- December 11 – ACT
- December 15 – Christ School’s College Application Deadline (Seniors)

Students meet with Davidson Hobson of Wofford University, one of approximately 40 college representatives to visit Christ School this fall. These casual information sessions give students a chance to learn about a variety of schools and programs. Any student can sign up to participate. To see the full list of college visits this fall, consult the calendar in Naviance Family Connection.