

A Beginner's Guide to College Fly-Ins

*How High School Students Visit
America's Top Colleges — For Free*



*Compiled by a rural student
who participated in 5 college
fly-in programs*

College fly-ins are fully funded visit programs that allow high school students to experience a college campus at no cost.

These programs exist because colleges know talent is everywhere, but access to information and opportunity is not. Many fly-ins are specifically designed to reach students who may not otherwise see themselves on these campuses.

This guide was created to explain what college fly-ins are, how they work, and why students—especially those from rural communities—are well within reach of them.

THE OPPORTUNITY MOST STUDENTS NEVER HEAR ABOUT

What is a college fly-in?

A fly-in is an invite-only program where a college pays for you to visit campus—often covering flights, housing, meals, and programming.

These programs are designed to:

- Introduce students to campus before they apply
- Identify strong applicants early
- Reach students who might not otherwise visit

Who are fly-ins for?

Despite what most people think, fly-ins are **not** only for:

- Recruited athletes
- Perfect test scores
- One “type” of student

Many programs actively look for:

- First generation students
- Rural students
- Low-income students
- Students from underrepresented high schools
- Students with strong curiosity and initiative

What you actually do on a fly-in

- Stay overnight on or near campus
- Attend classes or mock seminars
- Meet admissions officers
- Talk directly with current students
- Learn how admissions *really* works at that school

This is not a tour.

It's a **preview of college life**, and an evaluation of opportunity for both sides

Why fly-ins matter

- Visiting a school helps you envision yourself living and thriving there
- Meeting admissions officers helps put a face to your application
- Many fly-ins include application fee waivers and additional school specific support

In short: fly-ins lower the barrier to selective colleges

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WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

This guide is for students who:

- Want access to selective colleges but lack easy campus exposure
- Attend high schools with limited counseling resources
- Come from rural, small-town, or underrepresented communities
- Are strong students but unsure how holistic college admissions actually works
- Are willing to apply early—often before senior fall gets busy

This guide assumes **curiosity, effort, and follow-through**—not perfection

This guide is especially useful if you've ever thought:

- “I didn't know this was even an option/”
- “My school doesn't send many students to top colleges.”
- “Visiting campuses is expensive or unrealistic for me.”
- “Why not me?”

This guide may not be for you if:

- You have regular access to campus visits
- Your school provides extensive one-on-one college advising
- You're only interested in applying to one or two local schools

That doesn't mean fly-ins won't help—just that this guide is built for students facing **information gaps**, not abundance.

A quick note on eligibility:

Fly-in programs vary.

Some focus on:

- First generation status
- Financial need
- Geographic background
- Academic curiosity or leadership

This guide does not promise eligibility—it shows you where to look, when to apply, and how to position yourself honestly.

So... how are students chosen?

Fly-in programs are **not rewards** for already-admitted students. They are **recruitment tools**.

Colleges use fly-ins to identify talented students they might otherwise miss—especially students without easy access to campus visits or admissions guidance.

What Fly-Ins Are Designed to Do:

Most program are trying to:

- Expand geographic and socioeconomic reach
- Identify students with strong potential, not just polish
- Build relationships *before* applications are submitted
- Encourage students who may underestimate their chances

That's why many fly-ins happen **before senior year or early fall** — timing matters.

What Programs Commonly Look For

Selection criteria vary, but many programs prioritize:

- Academic curiosity and effort (not perfection)
- Evidence you take initiative when resources are limited
- Context: your school, community, and opportunities available
- Genuine interest in learning about the institution
- Students unlikely to visit campus on their own

Grades matter—but they are rarely evaluated in isolation.

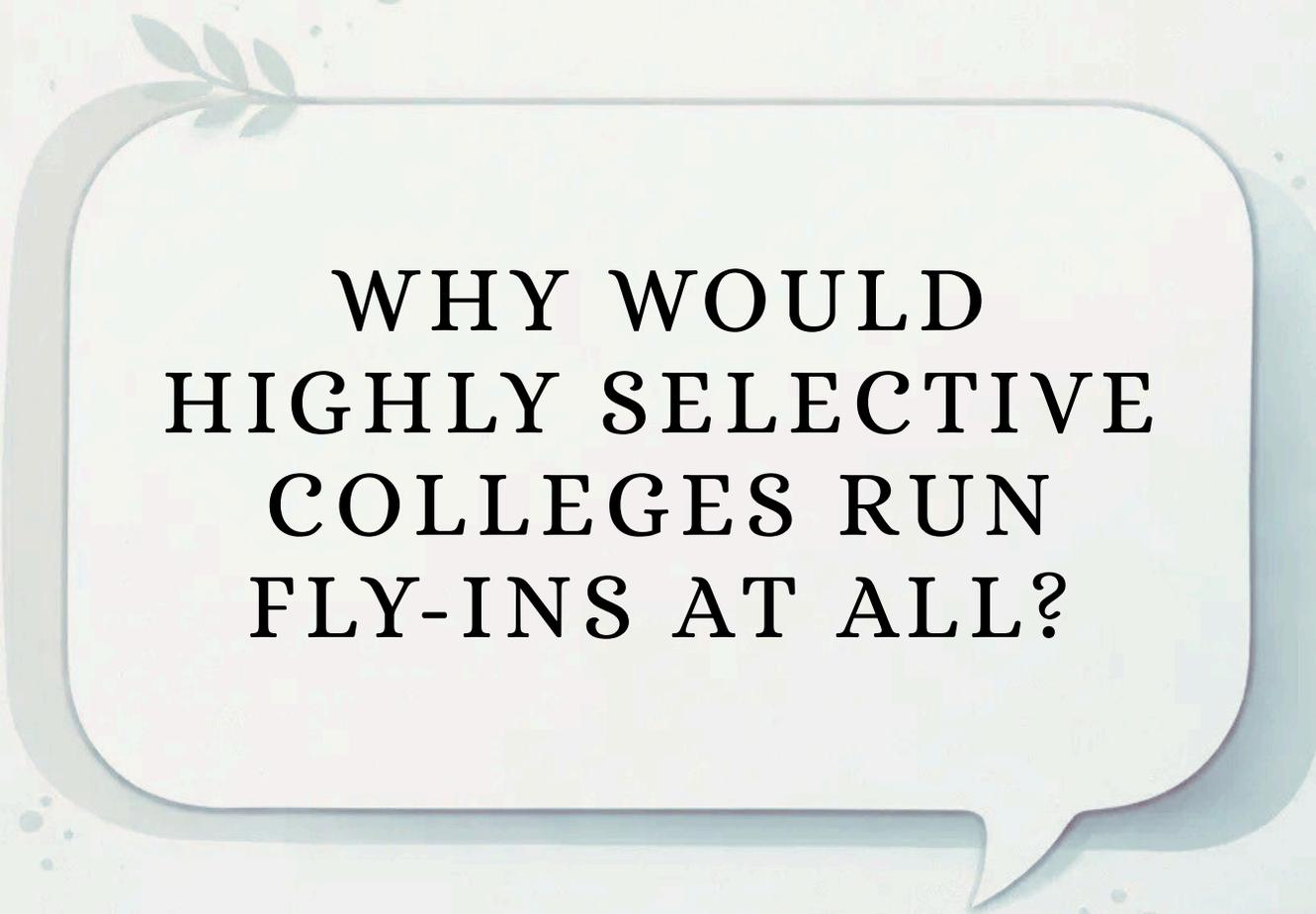
A Critical Point Most Students Miss

Selection for fly-ins doesn't mean:

- You are guaranteed admission
- You must apply to that school
- The school has made a decision about you

It does mean:

- They want you to see yourself on campus
- They believe you are worth investing in
- You are on their radar earlier than most



**WHY WOULD
HIGHLY SELECTIVE
COLLEGES RUN
FLY-INS AT ALL?**

**Highly selective colleges don't struggle
to get applications.**

**They struggle to reach the right
students.**

Top Schools Use Fly-Ins To:

- Find students beyond major cities and feeder schools
- Reduce barriers to visiting campus
- Build early relationships with students they care about
- Makes admissions less dependent on who knows the system

What This Means For You:

- These programs exist because of promising students from unconventional backgrounds, not in spite of them
- Your location is not a weakness — it's a reason
- Curiosity and initiative matter more than polish

**Fly-Ins are not about proving you belong
they exist because you already do**

Where College Fly-In Programs Exist

Including many of the most selective schools in the country



Northwestern
University

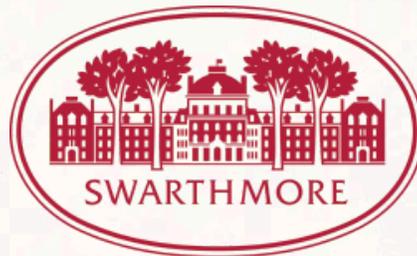


Caltech



CASE WESTERN RESERVE
UNIVERSITY

Williams Bowdoin Amherst
College



HAVERFORD
COLLEGE



Middlebury

Tufts
UNIVERSITY



EMORY
UNIVERSITY

Schools are subject to change, select logos for link to the most updated information.

A Day On A College Fly-In

Inside Northwestern's START-UP Innovation Intensive



Arrival & Welcome

Students arrive on Northwestern's campus and are welcomed by current undergraduates and program staff. For many, it's their first time visiting a college campus outside their state.

You don't need to "know anyone."
Everything is structured.



Highlights

- Explore *The Garage*, Northwestern's student maker space and the center of entrepreneurship on campus
- Tour school facilities with professors and hear first-hand what makes students successful at Northwestern
- Sit down with admissions officers and learn about Northwestern's holistic admissions process and commitment to affordable education
- Experience life in Chicago by experiencing The L, eating local cuisine, and visiting the Skydeck at Willis Tower
- Learn about the world's largest refracting telescope in the Dearborn Observatory



"START-UP gave me a first-hand view of the possibilities of opportunities outside my rural home. I met like-minded people who encouraged me to dream big, regardless of background. The support from the admission officers and current students is top-tier. Also, Chicago is just a world-class city!!"

Jennie, Illinois

A WEEKEND IN PROVIDENCE

A LOOK INSIDE BROWN UNIVERSITY'S STARS FLY-IN

FROM THE MOMENT students touch down at Rhode Island's TF Green Airport, they are welcomed by admission's officers into the Brown family.

After touring through historic downtown Providence and braving the infamous **College Hill**, students find themselves in a community focused not on credentials, but on exploration and curiosity.

The **OPEN CURRICULUM**, a staple of a Brown education, may sound daunting initially, but after walking through a realistic class schedule with current students, it's suddenly feels real.

What better way to see what a college class is like than to attend a college class? Don't know what you want to study? It's the perfect place to start exploring!

“Brown changed my life. Not in some corny way about finding my true meaning, but in the manner that it showed me that I truly wanted to be an Ivy League student and made me feel like I could be. I met friends for life and made decisions that I will never regret. And today? I am a student of the Ivies.”

Ben, Kentucky





VISITING THE BIG APPLE

INSIDE COLUMBIA'S STARS FLY-IN

Together with the Small Town and Rural Students (STARS) College Network, students from the nation's smallest towns and schools to explore the City That Never Sleeps and all that Columbia has to offer.

From exploring Columbia's century-old Core Curriculum with curriculum director Professor Larry Jackson to exploring the Morningside Heights neighborhood and trying local NYC cuisine, attendees get a glimpse not just into what Columbia is really like, but why it's built itself into the thriving community it is.

In addition to exploring Columbia, students experience New York through activities like:

- Visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art
- Walking around Central Park
- A evening bus tour of Manhattan's top landmarks hosted by current Columbia students from rural communities

“The Columbia STARS program truly showed me that it was possible for students from the tiniest schools in the nation to succeed in America's largest city. The access to current students from communities like mine and admissions officers who truly cared about bridging the gap made me realize dreaming big is not just dreaming, it can be reality!”

Lawson, Tennessee



ACCESS ISN'T ONE STORY

INSIDE DARTMOUTH BOUND



WHO DARTMOUTH BOUND IS FOR:

Dartmouth Bound is designed for high-achieving students from underserved communities—including students who are the first in their families to attend college, students from low-income families, students from rural communities, and students from underresourced high schools or who otherwise lack access or opportunity to programs or resources that would assist them in preparing for college.

“Fly-in programs like Dartmouth Bound helped me not only understand the college, but guided me through the application process. The journey I went through at each fly-in helped me know what to look for in a college and what I should value. In addition, I was able to meet and connect with so many smart and talented individuals which really widened my perspective.”

Justin, Texas

“At Dartmouth Bound, I got to meet so many creative and passionate students and engaged in interesting intellectual conversations. From breakfast chats in ‘58 Commons to game nights in the dorms, learning from the lived experiences of my peers was such a fun and unexpected blessing. Moreover, the opportunity to learn directly from Dartmouth professors gave me insight into colleges as a means of expanding my perspective and pushing outside my comfort zone. Ultimately, my experience at Bound encouraged me to keep living curiously!”

Silvia, California

Notice the Pattern

These programs aren't random. They exist because schools are actively looking for underrepresented students—and they're investing money to do it

THIS ISN'T A COINCIDENCE

Highly selective colleges don't offer fly-ins out of generosity

They offer them because they need perspective, talent, and geographic diversity they struggle to find otherwise

GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

Rural ≠ invisible. It's underrepresented — which makes it valuable

ACCESS GAPS ARE REAL

Fly-ins exist because colleges know opportunity isn't evenly distributed

FLY-INS TARGET POTENTIAL, NOT POLISH

Curiosity, initiative, and trajectory matter more than perfect resumes

Fly-ins don't guarantee admission

They exist to make sure talented students

realize their full potential

and to make sure colleges don't miss them

What Applying Usually Looks Like

Nothing fancy. Nothing secret. And rarely perfect.

Short Responses

A few questions about:

- what you're curious about
- what you care about
- where you're coming from
- why you're interested in learning about the school

These aren't trick questions. They're trying to understand you, not test you.

Basic School Info

Usually includes:

- your transcript
- current classes
- classes you want to take in the future

This is about context — not ranking.

Recommendation (Sometimes)

Only required by certain programs

- Standard rec letter
- Any teacher/counselor/mentor who knows you well

Strong curiosity matters more than polished praise.

Still unsure? Read this:

Many students apply to fly-ins before they feel “ready.”

For a lot of students, fly-ins are where they *learn* how college applications work — not the reward for already knowing.

Why I Made This Guide

I grew up in a rural community with a graduating class of 18 students where highly selective colleges felt distant, almost mythical. I assumed schools like that were for other people, from other places, with better information and more resources.

I didn't learn about college fly-ins until late in my junior year. Applying to them, and visiting campuses through them, dramatically changed how I saw myself in the college process. What once felt like far-off dreams started to feel like real, reachable possibilities.

Fly-ins didn't guarantee anything. But they gave me clarity, confidence, and the belief that I belonged in these spaces. That shift shaped how I applied, and eventually led to me being accepted to the University of Notre Dame which I plan on attending for the next four years.

I made this guide because I don't believe talent is rare in rural and other less-conventional backgrounds within higher education — access is. Rural students bring perspective, resilience, and curiosity that colleges actively value, even if we're not always told that early enough.

If this guide helps one student see possibility where they previously saw distance, then it's done its job.

“Doubt kills more dreams than failure ever will.” - Suzy Kassem

David Wahl

All photos in this guide were taken by students during college fly-in programs.