Going
places
You’ve heard the Steve Miller song:
“I’ve been from Phoenix, Arizona, all the way to Tacoma, Philadelphia, Atlanta, L.A. …”
This UPS admission counselor lives it.

For Melanie Reed ’96, the arc of an academic year is familiar and quick: In autumn, hit the road for weeks at a stretch to help high school students figure out if the University of Puget Sound is the right school for them. In early winter, screen applications. (Puget Sound’s admission counselors read 5,200 of them last year.) In spring, advise families about financing and enrollment.

All the seasons of her work are busy—the work is fast paced and varied; one of the least boredom-inducing jobs on the planet, Reed says—but the travel is positively Odyssean, both for the miles logged and the stories of the journey. She’s been to Oregon, Montana, Hawai‘i, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, Texas, Oklahoma, Illinois, and a lot of states in between. Over the course of 11 years, Reed has talked with students in the middle of Manhattan, at picnic tables on Kauai, and in the halls of her own high school, Marysville-Pilchuck, in Washington state.

Here, a few notes from her part of this fall’s UPS road show.

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Friday, September 8
Jones Hall, Puget Sound Campus, Tacoma
And so it begins. Another year.

Returning to the road brings memories of past travels: Middle-America Dairy Queens. Oversleeping and missing a flight to Hawai’i. The runaway brass luggage rack that konked me in the head. The time, post-migraine, I threw up while driving a rental car on the curvy road from Kahului to Kaanapali. “Guest Appreciation Day” at a Wisconsin hotel, with free beer and meatballs for all. Catching an R.E.M. concert in Texas. The tiny upcountry inn on the Big Island, where only three guests could be on the telephone at a time. Mars Cheese Castle, south of Milwaukee, with its clever blend of outer space and medieval themes. Touring the Spam Museum with a 70-year-old “Spambassador.” The Ashland, Ore., High School college counselor who scored me a ticket to Tom Stoppard’s Arcadia. Ernest Hemingway’s high school. Fall leaves so bright they hurt my eyes.

Tomorrow I leave for Minnesota. A big stack of Puget Sound publications blocks my office door. On my to-do list: set “away” messages, pack cell charger, read latest online airport security restrictions, schedule off-campus interviews, edit presentation.

Sunday, September 10
The Mississippi River Room, Marquette Hotel, Minneapolis
Christine Manganaro ’03, once an admission tour guide, now a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota, arrives to help make a presentation. I was Christine’s admission counselor when she applied. Now she will speak to the crowd about the benefits of a small, private college. The questions from families are informed and enthusiastic. A number of students have already seen the school and others have trips planned. After an evening addressing issues like campus diversity, access to college, affirmative action legislation, early application plans, changes to the S.A.T., and the rising cost of higher education, one mom thanks Christine and me for giving an upbeat, “myth-busting” tone to a process that’s sometimes bewildering to high school students.

Monday, September 11
Marquette Hotel lobby
Tonight I interviewed two different Minnesotans. Both already love Puget Sound and plan to apply early decision. One spent the first year of his life on an Indian reservation in Washington state and said, “It’s time to go home.”

Tuesday, September 12
Orono High School, Orono, Minn.
A typical “road” day. I’ll visit four schools and afterward interview more students in the hotel. After 10 years at this I’ve developed an internal homing device for finding high schools: stadium lights and flag poles are good tip-offs. And, at least for a few minutes each day, I assess the strength of a high school on its ability to provide easy-to-find visitor parking.

I pull into Orono High with time to kill (not always the case). This morning is misty, yet the day promises late-summer heat. Canada Geese fly overhead. I slap a hastily scribbled sign “VISITOR—UNIVERSITY OF PUGET SOUND—DO NOT TOW—THANKS!” on my dash and lug college materials into the school. Six students arrive for my talk, including the younger sister of a current student, who loves it in Tacoma.

Wednesday, September 20
After my meeting at the University School of Milwaukee
My boyfriend is a commercial fisherman. He calls from the flying bridge of a 58-foot purse seiner in Alaska. We discuss the similarities between admission counseling and fishing: Being away from home for weeks. How conditions that are out of your control can affect outcomes. The dichotomies: Teamwork and independence are critical. Experimentation and history. Luck and deliberateness.

Admission counseling is perfect for someone who craves equal amounts of human contact and alone time. There’s really no in-between. You’re either by yourself in a hotel room catching up on the day’s paperwork, or you’re inundated with students at a college fair. The job has taught me how to eat alone and see movies alone, and how to ask questions and travel gracefully. It’s also taught me the importance of coming home.

Friday, September 22
In a parking lot at Clark and Belden streets, Chicago
Last night I woke up in my Skokie, Ill., hotel room and had no idea where I was. I finally remembered that earlier I’d sat on a panel with other admission deans and directors from the University of Chicago, Northwestern, and Stanford at Francis W. Parker School and answered questions from families anxious about the application process.

I spend a lot of time in the car, driving from high school to high school, fishing for toll change with one hand and groping for coffee with the other. I divide my dimes and nickels into separate cup holders and feel like a complete toll pro at the freeway plazas. Only
a few days into travel and the passenger seat is dumping ground for Luna Bar wrappers, annotated maps, Sarah Vowell’s *Partly Cloudy Patriot*, and student inquiry cards. This week the seat also holds chips and nacho cheese dip: the all-time great road meal.

**Monday, October 16**
**Meridian High School parking lot, Bellingham, Wash.**
I have a half-hour break between school meetings. Drowsy from driving, I catch some shut-eye. I kick back the driver’s seat and snooze for about 28 of the 30 minutes I have free. If, next fall, you scan the nation’s high school parking lots, chances are you’ll see sleepy admission counselors catching naps between visits.

**Tuesday, October 17**
**Oak Harbor High School, Oak Harbor, Wash.**
Today I listen to the Office of Admission’s annual “Travel CD.” Colleague Zach Street polled admission counselors about their favorite contributions from the travel CDs we made during the past six years. He compiled a “Greatest Hits,” for which the top vote-getter was submitted by Britten Snider ’00 (“Movin’ Right Along” from *The Muppet Movie*).

In other years we’ve had photo contests, bad-postcard contests, and challenges to bring home the kitschiest artifact from one’s territory. Among these last, the entries were often scatological: Elvis sunglasses with sideburns (from Nevada); plastic cow-pie Frisbee (from Montana); bear-bell and moose-turd swizzle sticks (from Alaska); a Meramec Caverns serving tray (from Missouri); and a Can-of-Spam bank (from Minnesota—guess who’s contribution that was).

**Wednesday, October 18**
**Somewhere near Lake Stevens, Wash.**
I’m lost. Way lost. When this happens I play a game I call “I’m not late yet.” That is, until two minutes after the start time of my presentation, when I really am late. I find the career center and talk to 11 students, about half of whom are awake at 7:37 a.m.

**Thursday, October 19**
**Evening, Marysville-Pilchuck High School**
Fifteen years after I graduated from my own high school, I return to present on applying to private colleges. Despite the years, I’m sure I’ll refer to my high school counselors as “Mr. Stokes,” “Mr. Thomas,” and “Mr. Thordason.”

**Thursday, October 26**
**Central High School, Duluth, Minn.**
What a week! After representing Puget Sound at the largest college fair in the country (23,000 attendees!), I wake in Duluth, scrape my rental-car windshield, and watch the day bloom pink and gold over Lake Superior. Duluth makes me nostalgic for Tacoma. Both cities have an appealing mix of natural beauty, history, and industry. This morning I interviewed one student before my regular admission presentation at Marshall School and another student afterward. The second drove an hour and a half from her family farm in the Iron Range to meet me. She commercial fishes Bristol Bay in the summertime and wants to study engineering in college. After a final Duluth meeting, I’ll drive three hours to my last Midwest meeting of the season at St. John’s Preparatory School in Collegeville, an appropriate town name for the year’s fall-travel finale.

**Thursday, October 26**
**Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport**
6:22 p.m. (CST): I undergo airport security with the entire University of Minnesota women’s soccer team. Halfway through the security line I spot the big pile of liquids-too-large-to-fit-in-a-one-quart-Ziploc-bag. Heaped on a metal table are family-sized bottles of lotion and Listerine, impossibly big for travel. Aerosols of any kind are not allowed, forcing one passenger to abandon a huge can of AquaNet. After I quip to the TSA employee that the AquaNet has been in someone’s bag since 1982, I overhear the TSA worker repeating my joke over and over to passengers in line. It’s time to leave. They’re stealing my material.

**Friday, October 27**
**Home**
12:30 a.m. (PST): Finally home to a pile of junk mail and an empty refrigerator. Some of my admission colleagues are “out” until Thanksgiving. One I won’t see until November.

Travel reminds me how representing the University of Puget Sound is a real extension of a liberal arts education. Admission counseling requires fluency with different topics of conversation, ability to address various audiences, and willingness to adapt to unexpected situations. Touring for work is its own continuing education, exposing you to different communities and viewpoints, biases and beliefs. If you happen to hit the Spam Museum along the way, so much the better. If you guide excited students toward a great college, better still.

*Melanie Reed, who is in the first generation of her family to go to college, was an English major at Puget Sound. She is working on an M.A. through Middlebury College’s Bread Loaf School of English.*