

The Choice



Demystifying College Admissions and Aid

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Tip Sheet: On the Wisdom and Merits of Exploring ‘Less Visible’ Colleges

By [Marty O’Connell](#)



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“You’re applying WHERE?”

Academically talented high school students around the country tell me this is often the reaction they receive when sharing their thoughtfully chosen, but not “highly visible” colleges list with friends and family. We exist in a name-brand obsessed culture which creates stress-inducing media headlines every year, all year — including during the summer, when high school seniors are winnowing their prospective colleges list. Articles and blogs highlight only the attention-grabbing process of a very narrow band of highly visible colleges, and are translated by most students into “I’ll never get in anywhere!”

To counteract the notion that “a college can’t be any good if I’ve never heard of it” — another familiar student opinion — I challenge students to think about the people in their lives who are happy and successful and find out where, or if, they went to college. Doing this same exercise using “famous” people, they discover that most often the name and visibility of a college choice has much less to do with success in life than do the experience and opportunities students take advantage of during their college years.

Employers and graduate schools look for outstanding skills and experience, not college pedigree. In an attempt to flip the application process for students, I pose this question to them: “Would you want college admission deans to ignore your application, and the chance to learn all about your background and talents, only because they have never heard of your high school?”

Looking beyond name recognition when searching for colleges, students leave themselves open to more possibilities for colleges that will be a great fit for them.

If you had to choose a friend, spouse or partner for life, would you use a publication ranking him or her by income, IQ scores, and reputation — as reported by others who have never met the person? As a culture, we love consulting search engines, consumer guidebooks, and ranking lists for shortcut methods to choosing electronics and cars; the college search requires a more thoughtful, personal and time consuming approach.

The process can't be reduced to rankings with numerical values when it truly requires starting with who the individual student is and why he or she is going to college – not to mention personal needs, desires, learning styles, and interests.

This self inventory is the start for finding colleges that “fit” for an individual, instead of beginning with the assumption that only the “Top Twenty” on the [U.S. News and World Report](#) or other rankings lists have any value. These ranking guides sell big, but their purported value in the college search process can certainly be diminished if students, parents and counselors learn to go after fit, rather than name brand.

One of the biggest flaws in starting the college search process by using ranking lists is that the lists tout entering-class statistics, rather than focusing on what happens during the four years those students are enrolled. The late Loren Pope, author of [“Looking Beyond the Ivy League”](#) and [“Colleges That Change Lives.”](#) said that choosing colleges based on the entering statistics of the freshmen class, is like choosing a hospital based on the health of those in the ER — ultimately, it's the treatment that really matters.

In the case of colleges, what matters is what happens between the first year and graduation, not on the desks of the admission office. Researching colleges based on student outcomes highlights many schools that outperform the Ivies and Name Brands, even if they don't have the benefit of name recognition.

The research from the [Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium](#) on the Undergraduate Origins of Ph.Ds finds colleges like [Beloit](#), [Denison](#), [Earlham](#), [Goucher](#), [Hampshire](#), [Kalamazoo](#), [Lawrence](#), [Marlboro](#), [Reed](#), [St. John's](#), [Wabash](#) and [Wooster](#) listed in the top ten, in various categories, of producers of future Ph.Ds — often ahead of more highly recognized colleges and universities.

Students need to examine their reasons for going, before making a list of colleges to apply for admission. Why, really, are you going? What are your abilities and strengths? What are your weaknesses? What do you want out of life, or in life—something tangible or intangible? Are you socially self-sufficient or do you need warm, familial support? What kind of learning community do you want to be part of? And so on. Exploring these questions with family, friends and high school counselors — the people who best know the student — can help in choosing colleges that match their learning style and goals.

[NSSE, The National Survey of Student Engagement](#), is a wonderful resource for gathering information about college outcomes and provides a list of the right questions to ask during the college search.

The simple truth is that the majority of the colleges and universities in this country admit more students than they deny. The college search process should be an enjoyable and memorable experience, not an exercise to be dreaded. Students willing to investigate beyond the very narrow band of highly visible colleges will find many options that lead to a great fit and a worthwhile college experience — one that will instill a lifelong passion for learning and prepare students to meet the challenges and changes they will face during their lifetime.

To respond to Ms. O'Connell's essay, please use [the comment box below](#).

Periodically in its "Tip Sheet" feature, The Choice will post short items by admissions officers, guidance counselors and others to help applicants and their families better understand aspects of the admissions process.