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Higher Education

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Ivy League isn't everything. Here's what we get wrong about getting a good education.

Instead of focusing on how 'selective' a school is or how many applicants it rejects, students and their families would be better served by focusing on myriad other factors.

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Nearly 3,000 four-year colleges and universities enroll students in America. Only about 25 of them have an admittance rate of 10% or less, which means that we're effectively letting the 1% dominate the conversation around higher education – and not for the better.

A narrative has taken hold in the public imagination that if you want a good future, you have to get into one of these highly selective schools. A recent New York Times focus group of 11 graduating high school seniors addressed this point: 10 said attending a highly ranked college would lead to them making more money in their career.

At the extreme end, this obsession with admission leads to perverse behavior like the Varsity Blues scandal. A high-quality education is perceived as a scarce resource that people should grab by any means necessary, even if it means lying, cheating or bribing.

This perceived scarcity is, of course, nonsense. As high school students and their parents visit college campuses this spring, they should keep in mind that one of the strengths of the U.S. higher education system is just how broad and deep it is, offering thousands of schools where young minds can gain a good education.

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Moreover, despite what the admissions policies of a handful of elite schools might lead folks to believe about “the way things work,” the vast majority of schools – including plenty of

excellent ones – actually admit the majority of their applicants. That’s true for schools on the West and East coasts, and all points in between.

Forget acceptance rates: More affordable options are available outside highly selective schools

If this 1% of schools has skewed public perception about where a high-quality education can be attained, they’ve also had an outsized impact on the conversation of college affordability.

While tuition prices might be spiraling upward at a small number of highly selective schools, College Board data shows that the average price paid by families for a college education has actually been decreasing for more than five consecutive years, thanks to merit scholarships, need-based grants and other institutional financial aid.

You’d think the high sticker price at the elite schools, especially when stacked against the comparatively attractive value proposition offered by the other 99% of schools, would drive more families to broaden their college search. However, families are willing to pay top dollar and, in some cases, spend money that they don’t really have to send their kids to one of these highly selective schools, because they think it’s “game over” for their child otherwise.

It’s hard to think of another space or industry where we’ve allowed the distortion to get this crazy and to so severely affect decision-making. For example, there aren’t cars that cost 10 times more than a similar model despite being comparable in what they deliver. But that’s precisely the type of mentality that’s been allowed to exist in the higher education space.

Instead of focusing on how “selective” a school is or how many applicants it rejects, students and their families would be better served by focusing on myriad other factors.

Listen to parents: How teachers can help repair the fracture between schools and families

SCOTUS hears student loan forgiveness: Biden's student loan plan is an abuse of power. Supreme Court must rule against it.

How do you make college decisions? Questions to ask while selecting a school.

Here are questions prospective students and their parents should ask:

► Is the school in an urban setting or a rural setting, and which of those types of locations is the best fit for the student?

- ▶ Would the student be better served by the intimacy of a relatively small school, or would they thrive in a large school?
- ▶ What's the student-to-faculty ratio? What kind of support networks are available, both during the undergrad years and after graduation?
- ▶ Are arts or athletics important to the student? If so, are the right kind of extracurricular programs available at the school?
- ▶ What kind of hidden fees or costs does a particular school come saddled with? At some schools, if you want to study abroad, you must pay for the privilege; at other schools, that perk is fully covered.
- ▶ Do art supplies and athletic trips come out of your own pocket, or are they subsidized by the school? What about "technology fees"?

If you're a middle- or low-income student attending college, these questions are not trivial.

It's easy to come up with dozens of factors to evaluate a college that are more important than its selectivity. But people have been hypnotized by the 1% into hyperfocusing on a single metric.

The result is that families take a multidimensional experience like college and try to boil it down to a lone number tied to admission rates. That approach just doesn't work when it comes to finding the right school, and it has led to the insanity permeating the college application process.

Quality higher education is not a scarce resource in the United States. It's widely available and largely affordable. The sooner we stop letting a tiny percentage of schools paint a distorted picture of the higher education landscape, the better.

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