

# INSIDE SOURCES

## Choosing a College Is All About the Fit

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With senior year underway for high schoolers, many will focus on college application deadlines. Among the sources consulted during the college search, such as viewbooks, websites, school counselor advice, and expert reviews, college rankings get a lot of attention.

High school students, understandably, aim to get into a “good school.” In reality, unpacking what is meant by a “good school” is beyond the sundry of hard metrics used by college ranking publishers, e.g. endowments, attrition, graduation rates, money earned after graduation, functional allocation expenditures.

In the end, determining a “good college” has more to do with the fit of the student with the mission, purpose, programs, faculty, services, and overall college environment, than it does with the ranking a college receives.

To illustrate, in the recent “College Rankings” supplement published by The Wall Street Journal, among its top 100 colleges in the U.S., the U.S. Naval Academy is on the list accompanying several “sub-Ivies.” This contrast of schools could not be more dramatic. Religious-based schools have played a major role in the development of colleges in the US; many students choose among religious affiliated schools.

A student’s or family’s mindset of getting into a “good school” is actually a mismatch with college admission officers’ objectives. The latter see their selection as not so much getting the best students recruited, but rather making sure those admitted are a good fit, i.e. will have a good experience academically and socially and contribute to the overall school environment.

As the cost of college becomes more expensive, the decision on when to go, where, and how much a family is willing to pay are the more salient questions that assist prospective students and families choose the “best-fit college.”

Slowing the decision process down to exam the best fit versus an expedient selection for the legacy school, those with winning sports teams, or the business college with “great name recognition,” is understandably unsettling for a family on the college search.

The notion of finding yourself at college, while romantic, is overstated. There are less expensive ways a young adult can “find themselves,” than investing \$50 thousand a year to meander on a college campus. Sure, one purpose of college is to develop the habit of industry for a job, but higher education is about amalgamating this with the habits of the heart, mind, and soul.

So, what is a [paying] parent to do?

Consider first the “if and when” question: Don’t overact if your child suggests not going to college right away. Conversely, you should put this question on the table as well. If and when to go to college should be an open and honest discussion.

Choose the school, not the major: The purpose of college is to get educated, not to “be someone.” That professional identity comes later and may be quite different than the ostensible major.

Consider community colleges: States have various reasons for investing in community college systems. The financial value added is hard to dismiss, as this is something you already paid for. Taking advantage of community college up front, or for further education is a smart choice.

Review the College/School and academic departments within the University. Major universities are comprised of several colleges and schools. The university may seem to be a good fit, but make sure you align with a school within the university that matches your expected experience and interest in college.

Same goes for the major. Review the department’s strengths and concerns, especially related to a close review of the faculty, and get a sense of resources given to the department and major.

Money matters: Don’t hesitate to not pay for a high-priced school. The price differential of most colleges belies a strong rationale.

Don’t show your preferences too soon: Hold your cards for concerns about a particular school. Your instincts are probably good but let the process of review and selection play out.

Similarly, trust the instincts of your children. Allow them to openly articulate their pros and cons about any prospective school.

Of course, there are exceptions and nuances to what is advised above, but even among these schools considered in your narrow pool, the advice above should be useful.

The best school is the best fit for your child. That rank is #1!

**About the Author**



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