

# The right reasons to pick a college

## Op-Ed

### **Consider where you will thrive intellectually and psychologically, both in the near term and after you graduate.**

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By Barry Glassner and Morton Schapiro

Two million recent high school graduates will start college in the coming weeks. Sadly, many of them selected schools for the wrong reasons.

How did they pick them? Many played the ratings game. "By all means stick to the rankings," they believed. "Never go to a school that is even one slot below the top one that admitted you."

Others chose a college because they liked the tour guide or thought they would make the most friends and be most comfortable.

Those are two common ways students and parents choose a college. Neither holds up to scrutiny.

Stick to the rankings? Which rankings: Those that measure the quality of teaching? The quality of research? The best program in your intended major? The most accessible professors? The medley of cost and performance criteria President Obama has proposed — tuition, graduation rates, earnings of alumni and the like?

And what does it mean to be comfortable? To have the most people who look and think like you? If so, you might as well stay in high school.

As professors and presidents who have taught and advised thousands of undergraduates, we suggest a very different approach to high school seniors frantically trying to decide which colleges are best for them. Consider where you will thrive, both in the near term and after you graduate.

If you want a career in theater, pick a school in a community with a vibrant local theater scene. Find out whether alumni help newcomers break into the field. The best school for an aspiring actor may have fewer students who look and think like he or she does, and it may be ranked lower than other choices.

If you want to become a global titan of industry, don't go to a school where you will spend four years in classrooms primarily studying accounting and management. Pick a place that forces you to gain global literacy, whether through overseas programs, an international student body or courses on other cultures. That school may be ranked lower than others and almost certainly will enroll plenty of students unlike you.

If you're a nerd who has already invented great new apps and wants to be a tech entrepreneur, why spend four years in a school that will teach you skills you either already know or that will be off-shored or antiquated by the time you're 30? Better to go where you can take great courses in design, the history of science or anything else that will make you more intellectually nimble.

If you want a career in medicine, you clearly want your school to have a strong pre-med program, but if the faculty members don't welcome undergraduate students to work alongside them in their labs, why go there? You're more likely to get into medical school and become a better doctor if you've experienced firsthand what science is about. Better still, select a school that pushes you into courses in medical ethics and cross-cultural communications or has a program that allows you to shadow a working physician or assist medical staff in shelters and clinics.

By the way, we walk this talk. We love the schools we lead, but we don't blindly advise that children of friends come to our respective institutions. It depends on the kid. Sometimes we recommend schools that are ranked higher, sometimes schools ranked lower.

The specific schools we recommend depend on the student's needs and passions. Some need the comfort of a close-knit, hands-on environment. Some want to re-create themselves far from the prying eyes of their parents and others who know them. Some will thrive best in an urban environment; others amid mountains they can climb when they need to burn off steam. For kids who learn as much from coaches as they do from teachers, we propose schools with strong sports programs. For independent learners, we suggest places with a wide choice of electives. We always send those we love to places where they will be forced to grapple with difference.

In seeking these matches, we are not looking for the most comfortable place for the student, but rather where he or she can thrive intellectually and psychologically. The most important learning might well be uncomfortable learning, where students take courses that terrify them and where they live and work alongside classmates from backgrounds much different from their own. The school that best achieves that for a particular young person may well not rise to the top of a list predicated solely on prestige or comfort.

We recognize it is harder to apply the criteria we have laid out than to adhere to a published list or choose the school where your best friend is going. But in the end, the payoff will be greater. After all, the goal is to develop the skills and the inclination to educate yourself for life.

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