



Why Has College Admissions Become So Competitive?

For members of the baby boom generation born between 1946 and 1964, applying to college was a pretty simple process. Those bound for a four-year college usually planned to go to a school in their home state or one fairly close by; many considered a college even 300 miles from home to be far away. Few students felt the need to apply to more than two or three colleges, and many applied to just one. They chose their colleges based on location, program offerings, cost, and difficulty of admission, with a parental alma mater sometimes thrown in for good measure. For the most part, the whole process was fairly low key. If students did their homework carefully before deciding where to apply, the outcome was usually predictable. Of course, there were surprises—some pleasant and some disappointing—but nothing that would raise the issue of college as to the level of a national obsession.

IT USED TO BE SIMPLE . . . BUT NOT ANYMORE

Fast-forward 50 to 60 years when headlines tell a very different story for students applying to college now: “Why Is College Admissions Such a Mess,”¹ “Applied to Stanford or Harvard? You Probably Didn’t Get In. Admit Rates Drop, Again,”² “New SAT Brings New Challenges, Same Old Pressure,”³ “Best, Brightest and

Rejected: Elite Colleges Turn Away up to 95%,”⁴ “How College Admissions Has Turned into Something Akin to ‘The Hunger Games,’”⁵ “Why Colleges Aggressively Recruit Applicants Just to Turn Them Down,”⁶ and “The Absurdity of College Admissions.”⁷

Colleges themselves make equally jarring announcements. In spring 2003, Harvard announced that for the first time it had accepted just under 10 percent of the students who applied for freshman admission for the class of 2007, or about 2,000 out of 21,000 applicants. This was a new low not only for Harvard but also for colleges nationwide. But much more was to come. By spring 2016, the admissions rate at Harvard had fallen to 5.2 percent out of an applicant pool of over 39,000 for the class of 2020, and at least nine other colleges had joined Harvard in the “under 10 percent” club. Among them was the University of Chicago, reporting an admissions rate of less than 9 percent for the class of 2020, down from a little less than 16 percent five years earlier and just over 38 percent a decade before.

Many public universities, particularly state flagship campuses, have also experienced dramatic growth in applications as well as falling admission rates. For example, UC Berkeley received 82,000 applications for the freshman class of 2020 and admitted 17.5 percent. Ten years prior, the campus received fewer than 42,000 applications and admitted 23.8 percent.

These are just a few of the many colleges reporting record-breaking numbers of applications and record-low rates of admission, continuing a trend that began two decades earlier. What has happened to change the college admissions picture so dramatically in such a relatively short time?

POPULATION GROWTH

The simple explanation seems to be supply and demand: more high school graduates than ever are now competing for seats in the freshman class. After declining somewhat in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the number of students graduating from high school in the United States has risen steadily. In 1997 there were 2.6 million graduates; by 2013, the number had grown to almost 3.5 million. Although the numbers are now declining slightly, they are projected to stay at or above 3.4 million until 2028.⁸

I don't think anyone is complacent about getting a high-quality applicant pool.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
ADMISSIONS OFFICER

SOCIAL CHANGES

But it turns out that the increase in applications is not just because of population growth. Application numbers have risen much faster than the age cohort because of important social changes. Not only are more students graduating from high school each year but also a greater percentage of them are interested in going to college. Studies confirm that a college diploma increases lifetime earnings, and many desirable careers require education beyond the bachelor's degree. As a result, more students are seeking to attend four-year colleges, including students from underrepresented minority groups who previously attended college at much lower rates.

At the same time, colleges themselves have increased their efforts to attract large, diverse pools of applicants. Many have mounted aggressive programs to spread the word about their offerings nationally and internationally. Through colorful brochures mailed directly to students, e-mail blitzes and social media activity, visits to high schools by admissions officers, college nights at local hotels, and information booths at college fairs, colleges are reaching out to prospective freshmen in the United States and abroad with unprecedented energy and at great expense.

Sophisticated marketing techniques are used not only by colleges that may have problems filling their freshman class but also by colleges with an overabundance of qualified applicants. And it works! As a result, more and more college-bound students have become aware of and are willing to seriously consider colleges far away from home. Rising standards of living across the globe are also contributing to the number of students from abroad, particularly Asia, choosing to study in the United States.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET

In addition, the Internet has played a major role in how students approach college admissions. Although printed material and in-person presentations still help students learn about different colleges, the web has become the primary source of information for students. Students can visit campuses through sophisticated online virtual tours and videos and find answers to many of their questions from college Facebook pages, FAQs posted on their websites, and by tracking college-sponsored blogs and Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat feeds. Colleges have invested heavily in technology to showcase themselves.

The Internet has also made it easier than ever to apply to college. Applications can be completed and submitted online, saving a lot of the time and effort that traditional paper applications once required. Simplifying things even more, more than 700 colleges now accept the Common Application, a standardized application in which a student can put in his or her basic information just once and then submit it online to up to 20 of those colleges.

With admission harder to predict, students are now submitting more applications than ever before. Ten to 12 applications are now the norm at many private schools and high-performing public high schools; 15 or more applications are not uncommon. Through technology students can apply to an ever-larger number of colleges.

All of these factors taken together—growth in the population of 18 year olds, greater interest in college, sophisticated marketing efforts, ready access to information, and ease of applying made possible by the Internet—explain why it is harder to get into college now than ever before.

But even that is not the whole answer.

As word spreads about the competition for college admission, students respond by applying to even more colleges to increase their chances of acceptance. In so doing, they end up unwittingly contributing to the very problem they are trying to solve for themselves.

HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELOR CONCERNED
ABOUT THE TREND

WHERE THE REAL CRUNCH LIES

Many people are quite surprised to learn that with relatively few exceptions, most four-year colleges in the United States still accept well over half of their applicants. In fact, each May, the National Association for College Admission Counseling posts on its website a list of hundreds of colleges still seeking applicants for the fall. Many of these have vacancies well into the summer. How can this fact be reconciled with the newspaper headlines (not to mention

firsthand reports from students and parents) about a crisis of hyper-selectivity in college admissions?

It turns out that the real crunch in admissions—the crunch that drives the newspaper headlines and the anxiety that afflicts many families at college application time—applies to only about 150 of the most selective colleges that attract applicants from all over the country and the world. What's wrong with all the

rest? Nothing, of course, except that they aren't in that list of 150. Bill Mayher, a college advisor, summarizes the problem succinctly: "It's hard for kids to get into colleges because they only want to get into colleges that are hard to get into."⁹

WHAT IS SELECTIVITY ALL ABOUT?

The percentage of students offered admission to a college is a major factor in determining its selectivity. As the number of applications to a college increases, its admissions rate decreases. Another key factor affecting selectivity is the academic strength of the applicant pool because strong applicants tend to self-select when applying to certain colleges, especially some smaller ones, well-known for their academic rigor. Both of these factors—admissions rate and strength of the applicant pool—help determine the selectivity of a particular school. Complicating matters even more is that some schools have different admissions processes for different programs, with some programs, such as engineering or business, more selective than others within the same school.

OUR DEFINITION OF SELECTIVITY

To simplify our discussion here, we define *selectivity* only in terms of admissions rate and define a *selective* college as one with an overall admissions rate of less than 50 percent. We further divide selective colleges into four categories: ultra-selective colleges (those admitting less than 10 percent of their applicants), super-selective colleges (those admitting less than 20 percent of their applicants), highly selective colleges (those admitting less than 35 percent of applicants), and very selective colleges (those admitting less than 50 percent of applicants). In the following box we include colleges that offer a broad array of programs and not those that have a highly specialized mission such as military academies, conservatories, or those offering instruction in only one academic area such as business. We will discuss these specialized programs further on in *Admission Matters*, but for now we are not including them in the data presented here.

Our selectivity classifications are arbitrary, of course, and they don't consider the self-selection factor we previously noted. Nevertheless, they provide a general idea of the relative difficulty of gaining admission to various schools. Although

Colleges by Admissions Rate for the Class of 2020

Ultra-selective (less than 10 percent of applicants admitted)

- Brown University
- Caltech
- University of Chicago
- Claremont McKenna College
- Columbia University
- Harvard University
- MIT
- University of Pennsylvania
- Pomona College
- Princeton University
- Stanford University
- Yale University

Super-selective (less than 20 percent of applicants admitted)

- Amherst College
- Barnard College
- University of California, Berkeley
- Bowdoin College
- Colby College
- Colorado College
- Cornell University
- Dartmouth College
- Duke University
- Georgetown University
- Grinnell College
- Harvey Mudd College
- Johns Hopkins University
- University of California, Los Angeles
- Middlebury College
- Northwestern University

- University of Notre Dame
- Pitzer College
- Rice University
- University of Southern California
- Swarthmore College
- Tufts University
- Vanderbilt University
- Washington University, St. Louis
- Wesleyan University
- Williams College

Highly Selective (less than 35 percent of applicants admitted)

- American University
- Bard College
- Bates College
- Boston College
- Boston University
- Bucknell College
- Carleton College
- Carnegie Mellon University
- Colgate University
- Davidson College
- Emory University
- Franklin and Marshall College
- Georgia Tech
- Hamilton College
- Haverford College
- Kenyon College
- Lafayette College
- Lehigh University
- University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

- New York University
- University of North Carolina
- Northeastern University
- Oberlin College
- Reed College
- University of Richmond
- Scripps College
- Skidmore College
- Trinity College (Connecticut)
- Tulane University
- University of Rochester
- Vassar College
- University of Virginia
- Wake Forest University
- Washington and Lee College
- Wellesley College

Very Selective Colleges (less than 50 percent of applicants admitted)

- Baylor University
- Binghamton University
- Brandeis University
- Bryn Mawr College
- Case Western Reserve University
- University of Connecticut
- Connecticut College
- University of California, Davis
- Denison University
- Dickinson College
- University of Florida
- Fordham University

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • George Washington University • Gettysburg College • College of the Holy Cross • University of California, Irvine • University of LaVerne • Macalester College • University of Maryland • University of Miami • University of Minnesota, Twin Cities • Muhlenberg College • North Carolina State University, Raleigh • Occidental College • Ohio State University | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pepperdine University • Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute • St. Lawrence University • University of California, San Diego • University of California, Santa Barbara • Sarah Lawrence College • Smith College • University of South Florida • Southern Methodist University • Southwestern University • Spelman College • Stony Brook University • Syracuse University | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Texas Christian University • Trinity University • University of Tulsa • Union College • Villanova University • Washington and Jefferson College • College of William and Mary • University of Wisconsin, Madison • Worcester Polytechnic Institute <p>Note: This list is not all-inclusive and omits schools with a highly specialized focus.</p> |
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over 2,000 nonprofit four-year institutions of higher education in the United States admit 50 percent or more of their applicants (and many admit at least 75 percent), many students focus their attention on the colleges that fall into the four groups we have just defined as selective.

The students applying to these colleges (and especially those in the super-selective and ultra-selective tiers) are the ones experiencing the “crisis” in college admissions. The crisis does not affect those applying to community colleges or seeking admission to the many colleges that accept most or all of their applicants. Nevertheless, it is very real to those who are applying to selective colleges in the next few years. You (or your child) may be one of them. In fact, that may be why you are reading this book. We will help you understand all aspects of the college admissions process, build a college list that is right for you, and submit strong applications.

But you don’t have to plan to apply to schools we define as selective for this book to be valuable reading. If you’ll be applying to some of the many schools that admit at least half of their applicants, this book will help you, too. All students need to understand the admissions process, and all face the challenges of identifying colleges that will be a good fit and then submitting strong applications. We wrote *Admission Matters* to help all students take the college admissions journey successfully.

WHY IS THERE SO MUCH INTEREST IN A SMALL GROUP OF COLLEGES?

What is behind the intense interest in the small group of colleges and universities that is driving the headlines about a crisis in college admissions, and, in particular, why is there a mystique surrounding the colleges in the Ivy League and a few others accorded similar status? Just what benefits do these elite colleges bestow (or do people believe they bestow) on their graduates?

Prestige, of course, is one obvious answer. The more selective a college, the more difficult it is to get into and usually the greater the prestige associated with being admitted. The student enjoys the prestige directly, and parents do so also by association. Parents are often the primary driver of the push toward prestige, but students also report similar pressures from peers in high school. And, of course, some students seek prestige themselves. Over the last generation, going to a highly ranked college has become a status symbol of greater value than almost any other consumer good, in part because, unlike an expensive car, it cannot simply be purchased if you have enough money.

Although some people openly acknowledge considering prestige in college choice, many more cite the assumed quality of the educational experience as the basis for their interest in an elite college. But this rationale often depends on the unstated and untested assumption that a good indicator of the quality of something is how much others seek it. People assume that selective colleges offer a better education: the more selective, the higher the quality. But is this really true?

Take the eight colleges in the Ivy League, for example: Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University. One counselor we know refers to them as the “climbing vine” schools to take away some of the glamour attached to the common brand. The Ivy League originally referred only to a football league. (At first, only seven colleges belonged. Brown eventually joined as the eighth member, although several other colleges were considered possibilities at the time.)

Lots of times it's kids, I think, trying to define themselves by their school choice, not so much choosing the school that's right for them, but trying to look good through it. I'm not sure if they get it from parents or from other kids or from teachers. But they get it from somewhere.

VOLUNTEER IN COUNSELING OFFICE AT
PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL

Over time, though, the term *Ivy League* became synonymous with prestige and a very strong academic reputation rather than an athletic league. The admissions rate of each Ivy places it in the ultra-selective or super-selective category. Certainly, each has fine students and faculty members renowned for their research. Everyone agrees that they are excellent schools, but do the Ivies automatically offer undergraduates a better educational experience than many other institutions? The answer, commonplace to those in academic circles but surprising to much of the public, is assuredly no.

THE RANKINGS GAME

A major contributor to the mystique of selective colleges has been the annual rankings of colleges published since 1983 by *U.S. News and World Report*. Over time, the rankings became so popular that they outgrew the magazine itself and became a separate annual guidebook simply called *Best Colleges*. A number of other rankings have emerged as competitors, but the *U.S. News* rankings are the best known and most influential.

Although *U.S. News* no longer exists as a print magazine, the rankings continue through the guidebook and an accompanying website published every year in August that feature extensive information and advice about applying to college, as well as rankings based on reputational and complex statistical formulas. The yearly rankings drive the sales of *Best Colleges* and generate considerable media attention and controversy among those, including us, who believe the ranking process is fundamentally flawed.

Concern about the rankings is not new. More than 20 years ago, Gerhard Casper, the president of Stanford University, expressed his concern about the rankings to the editor of *U.S. News* as follows: “As the president of a university that is among the top-ranked universities, I hope I have the standing to persuade you that much about these rankings—particularly their specious formulas and spurious precision—is utterly misleading.”¹⁰

Harvard is perhaps the most overrated institution of higher learning in America. This is not to imply that Harvard isn't a good school—on the contrary, Harvard is an excellent school. But its reputation creates an unattainable standard; no school could ever be as good as most people think Harvard is.

COMMENT BY A HARVARD STUDENT

Some kids want that acceptance letter to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton so desperately, but they really do not know why except to impress family, friends, whomever. It is one thing to include prestige as a factor in your list of schools. It is a problem when it becomes the only factor, and I am seeing this more and more.

PRIVATE COUNSELOR CONCERNED ABOUT
THE EMPHASIS ON PRESTIGE

WHAT GOES INTO THE *U.S. NEWS* RANKINGS?

For the 2016 rankings, a little less than one quarter—22.5 percent to be exact—of a college’s ranking is based on reputational ratings it receives in the poll that *U.S. News* conducts annually of college presidents, provosts, admissions deans, and a small group of high school counselors. The administrators are asked to rate the academic quality of undergraduate programs at schools with the same mission as

their own (for example, liberal arts colleges or research universities) on a scale of 1 to 5 from “marginal” to “distinguished,” with an option to respond “don’t know.” The counselors are asked to rate both liberal arts colleges and research universities. Many of the recipients of the questionnaire acknowledge that they lack the kind of detailed knowledge of other colleges that they would need to respond meaningfully. Why would the president of George Washington University be familiar with the undergraduate program at Georgia Tech? The response rate is usually fairly low: less than 50 percent for college administrators and less than 10 percent for the high school counselors.

The remaining 77.5 percent of a college’s ranking is based on data collected in five categories, each weighted in the final calculation as follows: retention and graduation rate (22.5 percent), faculty resources (20 percent), student selectivity (12.5 percent), financial resources (10 percent), alumni giving (5 percent), and graduation rate performance (7.5 percent).¹¹

U.S. News collects all of these measures annually for each college, puts them into a formula that weights them differentially, and then computes an overall “ranking.” To avoid comparing apples with oranges, *U.S. News* ranks campuses of the same type, so that research universities and liberal arts colleges, for example, are ranked separately. (We’ll discuss the differences between these two kinds of institutions, as well as others, in chapter 4 when we look at factors to consider in choosing colleges.) Every few years, *U.S. News* slightly modifies its formula, ostensibly to demonstrate its precision and respond to criticism.

Overall, the rankings don’t change much from year to year, although a school’s position may bounce up or down a few notches because of a change in

the formula or some aberration in a statistic reported for a given year. Does its quality relative to its peers really change significantly in one or two years? We think not. Critics of the rankings argue that meaningful changes in college quality cannot be measured in the short term and that *U.S. News* changes the formula primarily to appear fresh and up-to-date—and to sell more guidebooks.

MORE CONCERNS ABOUT RANKINGS

Critics have pointed out that although the *U.S. News* variables may contribute indirectly to educational quality (perhaps higher salaries lead to more motivated faculty members, and smaller classes mean more personal attention), educators do not agree on how those variables can be used to measure the quality of a college. To make things worse, colleges can manipulate directly or indirectly some of the factors in the *U.S. News* formula to raise their standing. Alumni, boards of trustees, and even bonding agencies on Wall Street pay close attention to the rankings and expect to see “improvement.” As much as college leaders disparage rankings, they are too high profile and too influential to be ignored.

Under pressure, some colleges have actively worked to look better in ways that have little to do with educational quality but will boost the school’s ranking. One common but harmless approach that has been used for many years is the production of elegant, full-color booklets that typically highlight a college’s new programs and facilities, as well as its ambitious plans for the future. In addition to distributing them for fundraising and other purposes, some college presidents send them to their colleagues at other campuses in the hope that the booklets will raise awareness of their college and possibly lead to a higher reputation rating when the *U.S. News* questionnaire arrives the following year. No one knows if this actually works, but some colleges expend considerable effort in the

Now more than ever, people believe that the ranking—or the presumed hierarchy of “quality” or “prestige”—of the college or university one attends matters, and matters enormously. More than ever before, education is being viewed as a commodity. . . . The large and fundamental problem is that we are at risk of it all seeming and becoming increasingly a game. What matters is less the education and more the brand.¹²

LEE BOLLINGER, PRESIDENT OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

While rankings such as this should always be taken with a grain of salt, it is certainly a clear sign that we are a top university and recognized as such.¹³

COLLEGE PRESIDENT COMMENTING ON JUST-RELEASED RANKINGS SHOWING AN IMPROVEMENT FOR HIS SCHOOL

hope that it does. Much more troubling are recent disclosures by several well-known colleges that admissions staff members misrepresented data used in the rankings in an apparent effort to enhance their school's position.

WHY ARE RANKINGS SO POPULAR?

It is not surprising that students and parents turn to rankings such as those published by *U.S. News* when they think about colleges. Deciding where to apply isn't easy, and having supposed experts do the evaluating is an attractive alternative to trying to figure things out on your own, especially if you have no experience. We accept ratings that assess washing machines, restaurants, football teams, hospitals, and movies, so why not colleges, too?

College rankings, though, are very different. Although they offer the illusion of precision, the rankings simply don't measure what most people think they measure: the educational experience for an individual student. Doing that requires a personal look at a college through the eyes of that student. No standardized ranking can hope to evaluate how you as an individual might fare at a certain college.

There is no easy substitute for investing the time and effort to determine which colleges will be a good fit for you. Merely knowing which ones are the most selective or enjoy the highest reputations among college administrators (which, as we have said, is essentially what the *U.S. News* rankings are telling you) doesn't get you very far toward finding a place where you will thrive and learn.

ADMISSIONS RATE AND YIELD AND HOW THEY CONTRIBUTE TO COLLEGE FRENZY

Rankings aside, a college's admissions rate or selectivity is the one figure that captures the public's attention and the most headlines. A decline in the admit rate from the previous year is often interpreted as a reflection of a college's increased quality, not just the result of successful marketing. Sample headline: "College *X* Admits Record Low Percentage of Applicants." This is news.

FACTORS THAT AFFECT ADMISSIONS RATE

Aggressive outreach to students to encourage them to apply, although the college knows that they will admit only a fraction of those applying, is the easiest way for a college to become more selective. Although most colleges engage in outreach



I overheard a conversation at a reception for the parents of newly admitted students. A mom was chatting with a young admissions officer who was mingling with parents on the lawn of the president's house. "I have a question I'd like to ask you," she said. "Since Elite U takes less than 15 percent of those who apply, why does the university work so hard to encourage more applications?" The admissions officer was silent for a moment. "I'm afraid you'll have to ask the dean of admissions that question," she said.

PARENT OF PROSPECTIVE FRESHMAN



with more noble goals, such as increasing diversity, the result is the same. Rachel Toor, a former Duke University admissions officer, vividly describes her own experience: "I travel around the country whipping kids (and their parents) into a frenzy so that they will apply. I tell them how great a school Duke is academically and how much fun they will have socially. Then, come April, we reject most of them."¹⁴

Colleges can also lower their admissions percentage by offering admission to those students who are most likely to enroll. Yield—the percentage of admitted students who decide to enroll—varies greatly from college to college, from about 80 percent at Stanford and Harvard to less than 20 percent at many others. A college with a high yield can admit fewer students and still fill its classes. If it has a low yield, it has to admit more to meet enrollment targets.

WAYS COLLEGES CAN INCREASE THEIR YIELD

High yields are prized as a symbol of a college's attractiveness to potential freshmen. There are several admissions practices that will increase yield.

Accepting More Early Decision Applicants

A college can raise its yield by admitting a larger percentage of the incoming class by early decision, often referred to as ED. Through an ED application, students submit a completed application by November 1 or November 15 rather than the traditional January 1 deadline, in exchange for receiving an admission decision by mid-December rather than in the spring. The catch is that an ED application

is binding on the student, meaning that the student is obligated to attend if admitted, subject to the availability of adequate financial aid. So a student admitted by ED is a sure thing for a college. The yield is close to 100 percent. We'll talk much more about ED and its cousin, early action, in chapter 7, but we mention it now because it indirectly increases a college's overall yield and thereby reduces its overall admit rate. Some colleges admit from a third to more than half of their incoming freshman class under ED.

Wait-Listing the "Overqualified"

A college may also increase its yield and lower its admit rate by rejecting or, more likely, wait-listing students they consider "overqualified" because the college believes the student won't accept the college's offer of admission and will go elsewhere. The dean of admissions at one such college realistically defended the practice at his institution as follows: "We know our place in the food chain of higher education. We're not a community college. And we're not Harvard." This practice is not common, but it is not rare either.¹⁵

Considering Demonstrated Interest

Finally, a college may increase its yield by preferentially admitting students who have shown that they are strongly interested in that school in some way beyond simply submitting an application. Colleges know from experience that students who connect with a college in different ways beyond submitting an application are more likely to enroll if offered admission than students who do not make such a connection. Some colleges, but not all, take this into account when they make their decisions. We'll talk more about "demonstrated interest" and its role in admissions in chapter 10.

"I'LL MAKE MORE MONEY IF I GRADUATE FROM AN ELITE COLLEGE": A MYTH

Let's return now to the basic question of why there is so much interest in the most selective colleges. Okay, you say, you now see that name recognition and rankings do not necessarily equal educational quality. But maybe that is irrelevant to you. Isn't the value of an elite college education the contacts you make while there? Everyone knows that the rich, the famous, and the well-connected attended these

colleges. Wouldn't attending one of them increase your chances of getting to know the right people, getting into a prestigious graduate school, or getting an important career-enhancing break—all eventually leading to fortune if not fame?

THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN INCOME AND COLLEGE SELECTIVITY

Several studies have been interpreted as supporting this conclusion. Years after graduation, graduates of elite institutions on average earn more than graduates of less well-known colleges, just as the income of college graduates is higher than those with a high school education. The simple interpretation is that attending a selective college is responsible for the income difference. But economists Stacy Dale and Alan Krueger investigated another possibility in two studies conducted a decade apart. Perhaps, they hypothesized, the students who apply to elite colleges have personal qualities to begin with that lead in some way to later income differences.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDENT, AND NOT THE COLLEGE, ARE KEY

When Dale and Krueger controlled for a student's grade point average and test scores on entering college, they found no difference years later in the income of students who attended elite colleges versus those who had applied, were denied, and subsequently attended less selective schools. Students of similar academic ability who had the self-confidence and motivation to envision themselves attending a selective college showed the economic benefit usually ascribed to those who actually attended such a college. However, some subgroups of students—African American and Hispanic

Students may have a better sense of their potential ability than college admissions committees. To cite one prominent example, Steven Spielberg was rejected by the University of Southern California and UCLA film schools.¹⁶

STACEY DALE AND ALAN KRUEGER,
RESEARCHERS WHO STUDIED THE
LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF ATTENDING
DIFFERENT TYPES OF COLLEGES

My advice to students: Don't believe that the only school worth attending is one that would not admit you. That you go to college is more important than where you go. Find a school whose academic strengths match your interests and that devotes resources to instruction in those fields. Recognize that your own motivation, ambition, and talents will determine your success more than the college name on your diploma.¹⁷

ALAN KRUEGER, PROFESSOR OF ECO-
NOMICS, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

students as well as those from less-educated or low-income families—did show significantly increased future earnings associated with attending a selective college. Overall, with these exceptions, Dale and Krueger’s research suggests that the kind of college that students attend is less important than their inherent ability, motivation, and ambition.

GETTING INTO GRADUATE SCHOOL

What about admission to graduate school? Does attending a selective college affect your chances of getting into a highly regarded law, business, medical, or other graduate program? A disproportionate number of graduates of selective colleges attend prestigious graduate and professional schools. But here, too, perhaps students admitted to selective colleges bring personal qualities with them that make their subsequent success in gaining admission to these schools after graduation more likely. Those same students may have done just as well if they had gone to a less selective college.

Dale and Krueger found that people who went to a selective college were no more likely to obtain an advanced degree than those who were admitted to a selective college but chose to attend a less selective school. In addition, they found no evidence to suggest that the selectivity of a student’s undergraduate college was related to the quality of the graduate school the student attended. Students admitted to a selective college but who chose to attend a less selective one seemed to fare just as well in graduate or professional school admissions as those who actually attended a more selective college.

Do not choose a college by the numbers. Most of those numbers are about resources and reputation and not actual quality or performance. Base your choice on your own needs and aspirations and which colleges can best meet them. As Albert Einstein reminded us, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”¹⁸

DAVID DAVENPORT, FORMER PRESIDENT
OF PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

THE IMPORTANCE OF FIT

We believe that the college selection process should be about finding colleges that are a good fit for you. A number of factors contribute to fit—academic, extracurricular, social, and geographical, and just feeling comfortable there, among others—and the determination of fit will be different for different people. Assessing fit takes time and effort and is much harder to do than simply looking at a ranked list. It is not a shoe that you slip on once and decide if it fits well.

This book does not try to dissuade you from selecting a college based on prestige—you would have lots of company if you choose this route. However, in chapter 4, we discuss many other important dimensions to consider in selecting colleges and encourage you to think carefully about them. Nor does finding a good fit mean that you must find just one perfect school for you. Rather, it means exploring many factors that can lead to your academic and personal success.

In the end, you may make the same choices as you would have before, but your choices will be more informed. You may also seriously consider other options that you had previously overlooked. Either outcome is fine. We simply want to help you understand as much as possible about yourself, the college admissions process, and colleges themselves so that you can make the best choices for you.

Stephen Lewis, former president of Carleton College, stated it well: “The question should not be, what are the best colleges? The real question should be, best for whom?”¹⁹