

The College Search Process: Advice from a Participant Observer

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For twenty-five years I have been a professor, a dean, a scholar of higher education, and a curriculum innovator at the local and national levels. I now find myself a college president...and a father of sons going off to college. In this letter, I share my advice to them. I hope you, too, find it helpful.

Dear Son,

If life is a book, then there are key chapters that give it meaning: your birthday, going to kindergarten, becoming a teenager, getting your driver's license...and going off to college. This is a big one. In fact, the only other chapter heading, or life decision, that you will make that will have as much influence on the person you will become and the life you will lead is getting married. I'll save that topic for later... much, much later.

So this is a big decision, and a very important process. It is one of those transitional moments from being a child to being an adult. You didn't really ask to have this responsibility thrust upon you, but here it is. That is the way life works.

Why is going to college such a big deal? First, for the rest of your life, your opportunities, your introductions, your very identity will be defined by your answer to the question: "Where did you go to college?" This might not be fair or rational, but it is true and important. In our society - in every society - colleges and universities have reputations; they are known for their character, their quality, and for the kinds of students they graduate. For the most part, reputations are earned, and since it will be with you for the rest of your life, you always want to be proud when you say, "I went to X." In addition, your answer to that question will determine what kinds of graduate schools you have access to and what kinds of job opportunities you will have.

The most basic truth of this whole process is that you want to go to a college whose character reflects the person you are striving to become. The formula is simple: if you find the right fit, you will be both happy and proud; if you are happy and proud, you will do well; and if you do well the choices you have for your future will be many.

So what do I mean by "character". I mean the spirit of a college, the clarity and confidence it has about its mission, the passion and loyalty the faculty and students have about that mission. In other words, great colleges are places where the people take their purpose seriously, where they are proud to be part of a noble tradition, and where there is a shared sense that there is something special and important going on there.

The second factor that determines the quality of a college is the quality of students who go there. Why does this matter so much? First, at the schools you will be considering, the quality of the professors will not differ greatly. That is just the way higher education works. At any place you consider, there will be some great professors who are inspiring to learn from. I will talk about this later.

The students, however, differ greatly from one place to the next, and they differ not only in how smart they are, but in how they relate to and form the mission of the college, how engaged they are with their learning, how they spend their time outside of class, and in a host of other ways that go into what is called “student culture”. Make sure you try to find a student culture that sits well with your personality and values.

One of the things you will hear over and over again is that much of what you will learn in college you will learn outside the classroom. This doesn’t mean that your classes aren’t important – that is silly. It means that what you get out of your studies, the quality of time you spend when not in class, the insights and understanding you come to as you make your way through your college years...these things are highly, highly influenced by the quality of your fellow students. We call it the “peer effect”; the effect the quality of your peers will have on the depth and importance of your overall education is huge.

How do you learn about student culture? First, you have to spend time on a campus, not simply on formal tours, but at your own pace. Spend a night if that is a program that is offered. Take a hard look at the social media that you can find on a college’s web site or on Facebook. There are blogs, and videos, and profiles and groups; you know how to do this stuff. Are these the kind of people you want to live and learn with for four years? Are they the kind of people who you will be pleased to call your fellow alumni for the rest of your life?

The second things you want to probe are the priorities and values of the professors. I promise you this: You will come across some professors that will change the way you see the world. To some extent, what you study matters less than with whom you study. You need to search for colleges where professors are passionate about teaching. It is an unfortunate truth that many universities with fancy names have brilliant professors who are abysmal teachers; they simply don’t care about undergraduate students. What is worse, at many of these places, you will not even be taught by the senior professors, but by their graduate students. Not good.

So how can you tell if the faculty culture of a place places a high value on teaching? Sit in on classes when you visit. Ask students about their favorite professors. Ask what the average class size is: places that are serious about teaching don’t have huge lecture classes filled with hundreds of students. And be sure to ask who teaches the introductory courses to a field or discipline; again, places that really care about teaching have their best faculty introduce new students to the subject.

Here are some things to look for in a college curriculum. Colleges where the first commitment is to a transformative education for its students will have very thoughtful and interesting curriculums. You ought to be able to find these elements:

- **A first-year seminar program:** Look very carefully at how colleges invite new students into the curriculum, into the mission of the college. I would avoid colleges that don’t provide some kind of freshman program or seminar. This is a widely valued best practice and if there isn’t something like this offered, it is a good signal that the college’s mission – its sense of its core purpose – isn’t focused on its undergraduate students. A freshman program should be an intellectual orientation, an engaging invitation into the mission of liberal education. They are meant to open up the world of college learning to new students. They are often organized around big themes or global problems, and they are often interdisciplinary, designed in ways to help freshmen see the scope of human inquiry.

- **Faculty advising:** You want to choose a college where your professors are going to be your advisors. Again, this will be the case at any place that is serious about its mission of educating undergraduates. Ask about how advising works. In college, you will have hundreds of courses to choose from every semester. Your advisor should be a professor who will help guide you in creating a meaningful, a purposeful, path. Towards what? Towards discovering your passion and becoming the person you want to become.
- **Writing:** Ask about the writing programs at the colleges you are looking at. The answer should be that the college has a commitment to writing across the curriculum; in other words, colleges that care about teaching take very seriously their commitment to developing all of their students as writers, across the whole curriculum – and not only in English – and throughout the four years. The fact is that it takes a lifetime to become a good writer, and the better your writing the better you will fare in any walk of life.

Beyond writing, more progressive and innovative colleges are now developing programs in speech and in information and media literacies across the curriculum. Again, whatever you do, the better you are at communicating your ideas, the better you are at finding good information and using it in multiple media, the better you will be at achieving your purposes.

- **Research:** Ask about the role of research in the mission of the college. If the answer is that the professors are extremely prolific scholars and very engaged with their research, a warning light should go off. What do I mean?

The right answer is that professors are passionate about scholarly research, and that every class is organized to develop students' own capacities for original inquiry. Great colleges – colleges that care deeply about undergraduate education – draw all their students into the rigors and methods of scholarly research.

The wrong answer, and something you have to be very careful about, is that faculty love their own research and find teaching to be something of a distraction from it.

What to look for? Thus the right answer isn't that research is a separate activity of faculty and a distraction from teaching, but that it is an integrated and shared activity between faculty and students. Ask about opportunities for undergraduate research. If there are ample opportunities for upper-class students to engage in research, mentored by professors, that is a good start. But ask if students present their research at scholarly conferences. Ask if sometimes they co-author scholarly papers with professors. Ask if there is funding available for undergraduate research, summer opportunities, and the like.

- Finally, look for colleges that have a robust commitment to **diversity and global engagement**, on campus, throughout the curriculum, and also through rich offerings for study abroad. The fact is that you will be charged to lead in a world without borders, you will live and work with people from a variety of backgrounds, nationalities, races, ethnicities, and faith traditions. Part of your work in college is to develop cosmopolitan sophistication, and you want to see evidence of this in the mission and programs of a college.

What are the best colleges for YOU?

The best college for you is one that has the qualities of mission excellence I have talked about and where you feel, deep down, that you belong there. Does that mean that there is one, single, best college out there for you? Probably not.

But it does mean that your decision should be driven by a combination of objective evaluation, a keen discernment of mission and values, and a healthy dose of intuition. It should not, should not, be driven by rankings. The various ranking schemes out there do not actually measure the quality of teaching and learning that goes on at a college or university and they do not pay much attention to what really matters, including the elements of excellence I have talked about here.

Finally, son, we want the best for you, both because we want you to be happy and because we know you have so much to offer the world. Any college that gets you will be damn lucky, and better for it. We will help you with every step of this process, and also throughout your college career. But it really begins with you.

With tons of love,

Dad