

When it does matter where you go to college

By Jeffrey J. Selingo



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My [post last week](#) on a new book by New York Times columnist Frank Bruni, “Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be,” generated hundreds of comments here and on Facebook. Many people agreed with Bruni, telling their own stories of attending less-selective colleges and turning out just fine. But lots of others mentioned the very real recruiting practices of a handful of blue-chip companies, especially on Wall Street and among consulting companies, that only look at graduates of elite schools.

[\[Forget Harvard and Stanford: It really doesn’t matter where you go to college.\]](#)

Bruni’s book largely focuses on students who made choices between selective colleges and slightly less selective colleges or brand-name public flagship campuses. The difference between going to Penn State, for example, instead of Carnegie Mellon, or Indiana University instead of the University of Michigan.

Those are the choices most high-school seniors are making at this time of year. They applied to a bunch of colleges that are probably similar in many ways. They are all small, private liberal-arts colleges; or they are all large, public universities; or maybe all close to home or in a specific region. Rarely do students apply to both Yale University and Radford University, for example.

In most cases, as readers pointed out, students mostly make the college experience what it turns out to be in the long run of life. There are plenty of failures at Harvard just as there are plenty of successes at Shenandoah University.

But in some cases, where you go to college does matter. When the primary measure of a degree’s value is actually graduating, then getting the right match between a prospective student and a school is what matters most. In making that match, colleges are the more important player.

It’s called “undermatching.” That’s what happens when smart students, usually low-income, could succeed at an elite college but never apply to one or go to one. The idea has [received plenty of attention from researchers](#)

in recent years, and even the White House, where officials see it as way to boost the college graduation rates of low-income students. (Some also question the idea).

One of the leading proponents of this theory is William Bowen, an economist and former president of Princeton. In a 2009 book called “Crossing the Finish Line,” Bowen and his coauthors found that the harder-to-get-into colleges that they studied had higher graduation rates for all types of students, even those the admissions office might have worried about admitting in the first place.

There are all sorts of reasons why students pick less-selective colleges. They might want to stay close to home or go to the least-expensive college (this is particularly true of poorer students). Or maybe they are worried they won’t be able to keep up with their classmates.

Bowen and the other researchers studied a rich set of subjects: 60,000 seniors who attended more than 300 high schools in North Carolina in 1999. Not only did they have access to wide-ranging demographic data on those students, but they were able to link them to their college experiences. Of the 60,000, they determined about 6,200 students were eligible, based on grade-point averages and SAT scores, to attend the best college they could have. They found that four in 10 of those students chose not to attend one of those schools, either because they didn’t apply or didn’t enroll.

What is interesting about their findings is exactly who decided not to go to the best college they could have: Just 27 percent of students from the wealthiest households undermatched, but 59 percent of those from the poorest households did. Among those students whose parents did not go to college, 64 percent of them went to the less-selective college.

These are students who could have been admitted to a school like Ohio State (where about 78 percent of students graduate in six years), but instead they went to schools like Youngstown State (37 percent) or the University of Akron (35 percent).

Bowen told me that there might be a good reason for why students pick against their own self interests. The criteria for picking a college often conflict with one another. In his mind, there needs to be a good reason for deliberately choosing not to attend the best college you can get into. Too often the reason students make these questionable choices is a “combination of inertia, lack of information, lack of forward planning for college, and lack of encouragement.” Sometimes students rebuff the best college because they are getting a free ride somewhere else.

The bottom line is this: You should be sure to check out the graduation rates of a college you’re considering, and take particular note of the graduation rates for students like you (for example, they differ between men and women, and even by major). If the real value of college is in actually graduating, then Bowen’s research shows that it really does matter where you go to school.

 **11 Comments**



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