

**SALLY P. SPRINGER · JOYCE VINING MORGAN
NANCY GRIESEMER · JON REIDER**

ADMISSION MATTERS

FIFTH EDITION

What
Students and Parents
Need to Know About
**GETTING INTO
COLLEGE**



JOSSEY-BASS™
A Wiley Brand

PRAISE FOR
Admission Matters

Fifth Edition

Admission Matters is the most comprehensive, detail oriented, big-picture focused book on college admissions that I have read in my 45-year career in higher education. The authors take the mystery out of admissions, giving great advice to students and parents with the goal of turning a stressed-filled process into one that makes sense and that can be easily managed.”

—**Robert J. Massa, Ed.D.**, former Dean of Enrollment at Johns Hopkins University and Vice President Emeritus, Dickinson College

“When some of the wisest folks in college counseling get together to offer comprehensive, current, and practical advice—take it. This is a must have resource.”

—**Tara A. Dowling**, Director of College Counseling, Worcester Academy

Admission Matters is a straightforward approach to everything you need to take the mystery and stress out of the college search process.”

—**Lisa M. Ellrich**, Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management and Director of Admissions, University of Maine, Farmington

“Are you in search of a comprehensive guide to the often-changing college admission process written by professionals who possess extensive, relevant experience? If so, *Admission Matters* is the book you need to read.”

—**Gary L. Ross**, Vice President for Admission and Financial Aid, Colgate University

“This is a remarkable compendium of admission practices, principles, and advice. The authors’ expertise and wisdom are indispensable in getting you where you want to go: finding a college that fits academically, socially, and financially.”

—**Steven R. Antonoff, Ph.D.**, Author of *College Match*, *College Finder*, and *A Student of Colleges*

“All parents and students going into the college search and selection process should read this book. The section on working with students in the performing and visual arts cannot be found in most publications of this kind. I’m so glad that this resource is available to creative students.”

—**Edward L. Schoenberg, M.A.**, former Vice President for Enrollment Management, Otis College of Art and Design

“Navigating the road to higher education and the process of applying to college is a challenging process for both high school students and their parents. Practical, thoughtful, credible, and intuitive, *Admissions Matters* is my go-to reference for all things college admission related.”

—**Sarah G. Soule**, Post-Secondary Counselor, Middlebury Union High School

“Students today face a very different college admissions landscape than their parents did, and having a guide like this to help navigate the process is important to help alleviate uncertainty and outright confusion.”

—**Jon Boeckstedt**, Vice Provost, Enrollment Management, Oregon State University

“*Admission Matters* brings clarity to a process that feels increasingly unpredictable and opaque. Leveraging years of experience, the authors adroitly present the myriad issues in a way that is comprehensive without being dense.”

—**Heath Einstein**, Dean of Admission, Texas Christian University

“A much-anticipated update to an indispensable fixture in college counseling.”

—**Bruce Reed**, Executive Director and Co-Founder, Compass Education Group

“This book provides families with valuable insight on admissions, while recognizing the anxiety associated with the frenzy that currently exists. It does not assume that the audience understands admissions jargon but gives all students, particularly those who are the first ones in their family to go to college (like I was), a clearer understanding of the admissions process.”

—**Costas Solomou**, Vice President for Enrollment, SUNY Geneseo

“*Admission Matters* fifth edition dissects the many changes students are facing as they navigate the quagmire of college admissions. Well done.”

—**Brenda Poznanski**, Director of School Counseling and Admission, Bishop Guertin High School

ADMISSION MATTERS

ADMISSION MATTERS

What Students and Parents Need
to Know About Getting into College

FIFTH EDITION

Sally P. Springer

Joyce Vining Morgan

Nancy Griesemer

Jon Reider

JB JOSSEY-BASS™

A Wiley Brand

Copyright © 2023 by Sally P. Springer, Joyce Vining Morgan, Nancy Griesemer and Jon Reider.
All rights reserved.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.
Published simultaneously in Canada.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4470, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at www.wiley.com/go/permission.

Trademarks: Wiley and the Wiley logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates in the United States and other countries and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and authors have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services or for technical support, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993 or fax (317) 572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic formats. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is Available:

ISBN 9781119885733 (Paperback)

ISBN 9781119885757 (ePDF)

ISBN 9781119885740 (ePub)

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Image: © Michael Burrell/iStock/Getty Images Plus

To our children and grandchildren

Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	xiii
Part 1 What You Need to Know Before You Begin	1
1 Why Has College Admissions Become So Competitive?	3
2 What Do Colleges Look for in an Applicant?	19
3 How Do Colleges Make Their Decisions?	45
4 How Colleges (and Students) Differ: Finding What Fits	58
Part 2 Making the Right Choices for You	95
5 Building Your College List	97
6 A New Look at Testing	124
7 Deciding About Early Decision and Other Early Options	145
8 Paying the Bill	159
Part 3 Tackling Your Applications	191
9 Applying Well, Part I: The Application and the Essay	193
10 Applying Well, Part II: Recommendations, Interviews, and Activities	209
11 Making the Most of Your Special Talents	229
12 Students with Special Circumstances	254
13 International Students Applying to Study in the U.S. and U.S. Students Applying to Study Internationally	277

Part 4 Bringing the Process to a Close	305
14 Making <i>Your</i> Decision After the Colleges Make Theirs	307
15 What Matters Most: Advice to Parents and Students	329
College Preparation Timeline	339
Resources	349
Notes	359
About the Authors	367
Index	369

Acknowledgments

The fifth edition of *Admission Matters*, like those before it, was born out of a desire to improve the college admissions experience for students and their families. We are grateful to those who believed in our mission and helped us ensure the accuracy of our work at a time when so much is changing. We thank Katie Andersen, Jed Applerouth, Karla Baldwin, Ronn Beck, Karen Fong Donoghue, Jeffrey Durso-Finley, Marybeth Kravets, Claire Law, Jeff Levy, Debora Norris, John Raftrey, Bruce Reed, Anne Richardson, Edward Schoenfeld, Bill Smith, Xiaofeng Wan, Leigh Weisenburger, and Eddie West for generously sharing their time and expertise.

Many others helped us with reviews of previous editions; we thank them as well. Three people made contributions that lasted through all five editions and deserve special acknowledgment and recognition. Lesley Iura, previously education editor at Jossey-Bass, plucked the manuscript for the first edition from the slush pile and saw its value and potential. Rising to publisher at Jossey-Bass, she continued to support our work before leaving Jossey-Bass soon after the publication of the fourth edition. Marion Franck was coauthor of the first and second editions, and her insights into parenting remain an integral part of the current edition. Jon Reider, coauthor of the second, third, and fourth editions, made major contributions to those editions that continue to be reflected in the fifth edition as well.

We are indebted as well to the Jossey-Bass editorial team for the fifth edition. Riley Harding, acquisitions editor, reached out to us and encouraged us to consider writing a fifth edition. Her enthusiasm for our project was key to both motivating us

to tackle the project as well as securing approval at Jossey-Bass to move forward. Both Riley and our original managing editor, Christine O'Connor, were invaluable during the early stages of our work. Natalie Muñoz, current acquisitions editor, and Satish Gowrishankar, managing editor, have guided us to the point of publication. We are grateful to them, as well as the team at Cape Cod Compositors, our copyeditors, who ensured that our book would be free of inconsistencies and errors.

Finally, we want to thank the thousands of high school and college students whose lives we have touched over the course of our careers, both in the classroom and as counselors. They continue to inspire us to try to ease the path for others yet to undertake the college admissions journey.

Introduction

The past few years have been a time of rapid and extraordinary change and introspection in the world of college admissions. In less than five years, we have faced challenges presented by a global pandemic, renewed reckoning with racial injustice, and scandal affecting the ethics of the admissions process. Meeting these challenges has involved new thinking, fresh approaches, and technological innovation broadening access to college admission.

The Varsity Blues scandal came first, revealing in early 2019 how an unscrupulous college counselor received large payments from wealthy families hoping to gain admission to highly selective colleges for their children. The whole episode highlighted the extremes to which a small group of families would go in a process that many believed was spiraling out of control and already stacked in favor of the affluent. A year later, the death of George Floyd in Minnesota reverberated throughout the country, reigniting calls for racial justice and encouraging many colleges, public and private, to rethink and then redouble their efforts to diversify their student bodies. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic turned the world upside down, forcing many colleges to pivot to remote instruction as well as develop and implement new ways to recruit and select students. And as we go to press, we anticipate a ruling by the Supreme Court on the legality of affirmative action, a major tool used by many colleges to increase diversity.

Taken together, these events—along with significant developments in technology—dramatically accelerated the pace of change in an industry that has always been forward-looking as it seeks to improve outreach to prospective students and to equitably select among applicants it will welcome to campus each year.

Challenge is often a catalyst for new and innovative ideas, and we are seeing new ideas in abundance as the admissions world continues to devise ways to do things differently and, most importantly, to do things better. As we watch these changes unfold, we are excited and optimistic about the future. We understand, though, that change can be unsettling. We wrote the fifth edition of *Admission Matters* to help students and families navigate this evolving world of college admissions with confidence, enthusiasm, and success. Emphasizing *why* as well as *how*, *Admission Matters* is designed to provide guidance to all students planning to apply to four-year colleges, whether highly selective or not, in an authoritative, reader-friendly way. The goal of *Admission Matters* has always been to level the playing field so our readers, regardless of family background or the high school they may attend, will have access 24/7 to authoritative, up-to-date, and supportive guidance they need and deserve.

Admission Matters will give you, the student, the tools you need to take charge of the college admissions process and submit strong applications to schools that are a good fit, academically, socially, and financially. *Admission Matters* will give you, the parent or guardian, the information and insights you need to support your child throughout the process and reduce everyone’s anxiety along the way. Sometimes “you” in the text will refer to the student; sometimes “you” will mean the parent or guardian. Context will make the distinction clear, but we hope both students and parents/guardians will read all of the book so that everyone involved will understand the admissions process and what their different but complementary roles are.

Highlights of the fifth edition include:

- Building a list of good-fit colleges designed to ensure a successful outcome given increasing unpredictability in the admissions process
- A discussion of test-optional and test-free admissions and whether you should test and submit scores if given the opportunity
- An overview of how the SAT and ACT differ given the SAT’s new digital adaptive format, and tips on how to choose the best test for you—*if* you decide to test
- Descriptions of how selective colleges make their decisions and the increasingly important role character is playing in the admissions process
- The differences between need-based financial aid and merit aid, as well as information on the new, simplified Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- When it makes sense to consider an early decision application

- New tools to research colleges and keep track of applications after submission
- How to craft strong applications including essays, recommendations, and activity descriptions
- Advice for students with special circumstances including international students planning to study in the United States, students with disabilities, and students wanting to transfer colleges
- Specific information for potential recruited athletes and students wanting to study the visual or performing arts
- and much more

The fifth edition of *Admission Matters* is as up-to-date as possible as of this writing. To ensure you continue to have the most current information, we are maintaining a website (admissionmatters.com) where we will post changes that occur after we go to press, keyed to the chapters in the book. We also plan to use our website to share information about developments that were too new for us to meaningfully incorporate into this edition. This would include, for example, revolutionary AI tools like ChatGPT or ongoing experiments with the “flipped” model of college admissions in which students receive offers of admission without actually completing applications. And more yet to come. You may want to check our website often!

Collectively, the *Admission Matters* team has well over 125 years of experience as high school teacher, high school counselor, college professor, college admissions officer, and independent educational consultant. Thank you for letting us share our knowledge and be your guides. We are honored to be part of your journey to college.



What You Need to Know Before You Begin

- Chapter 1** Why Has College Admissions Become So Competitive?
- Chapter 2** What Do Colleges Look for in an Applicant?
- Chapter 3** How Do Colleges Make Their Decisions?
- Chapter 4** How Colleges (and Students) Differ: Finding What Fits



Why Has College Admissions Become So Competitive?

For members of the baby boom generation born between 1946 and 1964, now in their sixties or seventies, applying to college was a gentle, low-key rite of passage. Those bound for four-year colleges 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. 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 subject of college admissions to the level of a national obsession.

IT USED TO BE SIMPLE . . . BUT NOT ANYMORE

Fast-forward to the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, and media headlines tell a very different story: “Record Applications, Record Rejections,”¹ “Ivy League Acceptances Drop to a New Low. They’re Not Alone,”² “This Year’s College Admissions Horror Show,”³ “The College Admissions Process Is Completely

Broken,”⁴ “Selective College Admission Is March Madness,”⁵ and “CEO Who Bribed Kids into USC, Harvard, Stanford Tries to Delay 15-Month Prison Sentence.”⁶

Some well-known colleges made equally jarring announcements. For the class of 2006, Harvard accepted 10.5 percent of its 19,600 applicants. Twenty years later, Harvard announced that just 3.2 percent of those who aspired to be part of the class of 2026 had been accepted from an applicant pool that had ballooned to 61,200. And Harvard was not alone in admitting 5 percent or less of its applicants for the class of 2026—it was joined by at least 10 others. Another school reporting even more striking changes over the past two decades was the University of Chicago. It admitted around 42 percent of its applicants for the class of 2006 from a pool of about 8,200. Twenty years later it admitted 5 percent of applicants from a field of 37,500.

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 128,200 applications for the class of 2026 and admitted 11.4 percent. Twenty years before, the campus received fewer than 37,000 applications and admitted about 24 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 in the 1990s. What happened to change the college admissions picture so dramatically in such a relatively short time?

POPULATION GROWTH

The simple explanation is supply and demand: more high school graduates have been competing for seats in the freshman class. In 1997 there were 2.6 million high school graduates. By 2013, the number had grown to almost 3.5 million, with the number of graduates projected to peak at around 4.0 million in 2025 before declining to 3.5 million in 2037.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic may lead to small changes in these long-range projections, but population growth has clearly been a driver of increasing demand for a college education over time.

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

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
ADMISSIONS OFFICER

SOCIAL CHANGES

It turns out that the increase in applications is due to more than simple population growth. Not only have more students been graduating from high school each year

but also a greater percentage of them have been 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. Over time, this has led to more students seeking to attend college, including students from underrepresented minority groups who previously attended at much lower rates. Although disruptions caused by COVID-19 as well as recent discussions discounting the value of a college degree have slowed demand somewhat, potential economic benefits remain an important incentive for attending college.

Colleges themselves have also contributed to demand by increasing their efforts to attract large, diverse pools of applicants. Over the past two decades, many mounted aggressive programs to spread the word about their offerings. Through mail and email, social media, creative advertising, virtual or in-person visits to high schools, and information booths at college fairs, colleges are reaching out to prospective applicants in the United States and abroad with unprecedented energy and at great expense.

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

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET

The Internet now plays a major role in how students approach college admissions. Although printed material and virtual or in-person presentations still help students learn about different colleges, the web and social media have become primary sources of information for students. Students can visit campuses at any time of the day or night through sophisticated online virtual tours or videos on college websites and find answers to many of their questions via Facebook, Instagram, or even TikTok. Colleges have invested heavily in technology to make themselves easily accessible to students anytime and anywhere.

The Internet has also made it easier than ever to apply to college. At the time of this writing, more than 1,000 colleges accept the Common Application, a standardized online application students use to enter basic information and then submit to up to 20 of those colleges. Online applications are now the norm. Long gone are the days when applications were completed on paper, by hand or on a typewriter.

With outcomes harder to predict, individual students are now submitting more applications, on average, than ever before. Improvements in technology have made it relatively easy to submit multiple applications. College costs have also contributed to an increase in application numbers as students seek the best financial aid packages they can obtain. As a result, it's not unusual for students at many private schools or high-performing public high schools to submit 15 or more applications, with a small percentage of students across the country submitting even more.

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—help explain why it seems harder to get into college than it was a generation or two ago.

But that is not the whole story.

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

THE REST OF THE STORY

Many people are quite surprised to learn that with some exceptions, most four-year, nonprofit colleges in the United States still accept well over half of their applicants. In fact, each spring, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) posts on its website a list of hundreds of colleges still seeking applicants for the fall. Many have vacancies in their freshman classes and financial aid available well into

the summer. How can this reality be reconciled with media headlines like the ones at the beginning of this chapter, not to mention firsthand reports from students and parents, about a crisis of hyperselectivity in college admissions?

It turns out that the real crunch in admissions—the crunch driving newspaper headlines and the anxiety afflicting many families at college application time—applies to only about 200 of the most selective colleges, which attract applicants from all over the country and the world and admit less than half of them. What's wrong with all the rest? Nothing, of course, except that they aren't on that list of 200. Bill Mayher, a college advisor, summarized 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."⁸

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 unless the college is able to increase the size of incoming classes. 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 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 at some schools, programs such as engineering or business may be more selective than others within the same school.

OUR DEFINITION OF SELECTIVITY

To simplify our discussion, we define *selectivity* solely 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 provide a sampling of colleges that fall into each of these categories as of this writing. We have included as examples colleges offering a broad array of programs and enrolling students from across the country.

Our definition of selectivity and our 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 about 2,100 nonprofit four-year institutions of higher education in the United States admit half or more of their applicants (and about 40 percent admit at least three quarters of them),⁹ many students focus their attention on the colleges that fall into the four groups we have just defined as selective.



Representative Colleges by Admissions Rate for the Class of 2026

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

- Bowdoin College—9%
- Dartmouth College—6%
- Duke University—6%
- Swarthmore College—7%
- Yale University—4%

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

- Boston College—16%
- Colorado College—12%
- Georgia Tech—17%

- Harvey Mudd College—13%
- University of Virginia—19%

Highly Selective (less than 35 percent of applicants admitted)

- Bucknell University—33%
- Cal Poly San Luis Obispo—29%
- Florida State University—23%
- Villanova University—23%

- College of William and Mary—33%

Very Selective (less than 50 percent of applicants admitted)

- Brandeis University—39%
- University of Georgia—42%
- Lehigh University—36%
- Occidental College—39%
- Stony Brook University—49%

SELECTIVITY AND THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

The students applying to selective colleges 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 almost 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. Our goal is to 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, as all face the challenges of identifying colleges that will be a good fit for them and then submitting strong applications. We wrote *Admission Matters* to help *all* students successfully complete the college admissions journey.

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 driving headlines about a crisis in college admissions? In particular, why is there such mystique surrounding Ivy League colleges and a few others accorded similar status? Just what benefits do these elite colleges bestow (or 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 by association. Parents are often the primary drivers 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 it cannot simply be purchased if you have enough money. The Varsity Blues admissions scandal, noted in the Introduction, revealed how a small group of wealthy parents went to extremes to be an exception to this rule.

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. The Ivy League originally referred only to a seven-member football league (Brown was invited as the eighth member, although several other colleges were considered possibilities at the time).

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 category. Certainly,

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

each has fine students and faculty members renowned in their fields. Everyone agrees that they are excellent schools, but do the Ivies automatically offer undergraduates a better educational experience than many other institutions? The answer, well known to those in academic circles but surprising to much of the public, is assuredly no.

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

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 & 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 complex (and constantly changing) 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 25 years ago, Gerhard Casper, then 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

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

For the 2023 rankings, 20 percent 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, and admissions deans. These 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.” Many recipients of the questionnaire acknowledge that they lack the kind of detailed knowledge of other colleges they would need to respond meaningfully.

The remaining 80 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 percent), faculty resources (20 percent), student selectivity (7 percent), financial resources per student (10 percent), alumni giving rate (3 percent), and graduation rate performance (8 percent).¹¹ Categories relatively new to the rankings include social mobility (5 percent), which looks at the graduation rate of students from low-income backgrounds, and graduate indebtedness (5 percent).

U.S. News collects all 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 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.

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 previous 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.

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

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 EMERITUS 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
RANKINGS SHOWING AN IMPROVEMENT
FOR HIS SCHOOL

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 bond-rating 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 harmless approach 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 have sent them to colleagues at other campuses in the hope that the booklets would raise awareness of their college and possibly lead to a higher reputation rating when the *U.S. News* questionnaire arrived the following year. Some colleges have focused their efforts on selected metrics in the *U.S. News* formula such as alumni giving rate (for this metric, an alum who donates \$5 is as valuable as one who donates \$5 million) or percentage of classes under a certain size. These tactics work. Much more troubling, however, are recent disclosures by several well-known colleges that admissions staff members deliberately misrepresented data used in the rankings in an apparent effort to enhance their school’s position. For these transgressions, colleges endure a public scolding and a temporary delisting by *U.S. News*.