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ADMISSION MATTERS

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former dean of admission
at Vanderbilt University,
Macalester College, and
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Fourth Edition

Choosing the **Right College**

How Colleges **Decide**

Writing **Great Applications**

Preparing for the **SAT/ACT**

Getting **Financial Aid**

What STUDENTS
and PARENTS
**NEED TO
KNOW**

About GETTING
INTO COLLEGE



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Bob Bardwell, school counselor and director of school counseling, Monson High School (MA)

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**Patrick O’Connor, associate dean, college counseling,
Cranbrook Kingswood Upper School (MI)**

“Clear, comprehensive, and sane advice from trusted experts. This updated guide provides a road map to what is often a bewildering and anxious process for students and families.”

Debra Shaver, dean of admission, Smith College

“Comprehensive, insightful, based on current research and insider expertise. A straightforward guide to today’s complex college admission process that is anything but straightforward.”

Bruce Reed, co-founder, Compass Education Group

“I wish I had this book when my daughters were applying to college. *Admission Matters* somehow finds clarity amidst the complicated set of confusing, even contradictory college admission practices.”

Kirk Brennan, director of undergraduate admission, University of Southern California

“An enormously useful and easy-to-read guide to getting into college. While others may claim to be the ‘gold standard,’ this one is the real deal.”

Nancy Griesemer, independent educational consultant and long-time blogger on colleges and the admissions process

“All readers of *Admission Matters*—whether students, parents, or counselors—will benefit from the deep insights and expertise of the authors. Accessible and a good read, the book provides much needed guidance for the college admissions process.”

Sam Carpenter, senior assistant director of admissions, Duke University

“This book is a ‘must read’ for all families going through the college admissions process. If you are looking for a guide to help you approach the college search in a meaningful way, this is the book for you.”

Angel Perez, vice president for enrollment and student success, Trinity College

“*Admission Matters* provides a straightforward, no nonsense blueprint to navigate the complex college admissions process.”

Jon Westover, senior associate director of undergraduate admissions, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

“As an experienced counselor and the parent of a high school junior, I found this book packed with so many helpful and informative ideas to share with both my students and my own children. A must-have for every college-bound student’s household.”

Kathi Moody, school counselor, Lynnfield High School (MA)

“This brand new edition of *Admission Matters* is just what the doctor ordered. It is filled with wise, up-to-date information and insider knowledge. Families will love it.”

Marjorie Hansen Shaevitz, author and founder, adMISSIONPOSSIBLE

“This is a must-have resource for students and families navigating the college admissions process. The authors are respected, long-time professionals and get it right from the search to enrollment.”

Jeff Rickey, vice president and dean, admissions and financial aid, St. Lawrence University

“*Admission Matters* is current, insightful, non-dogmatic and the most inclusive book about the complex U.S. college admission process I have read. I can even see using it as a training manual for my new staff on the complexity of U.S. college admission; it is that thorough and in-depth.”

Paul Thiboutot, vice president and dean of admissions and financial aid, Carleton College

“*Admission Matters* is the quintessential book for anyone who wants to thoroughly understand today’s college landscape. It is a must read.”

Nanette Tarbouni, director of college counseling, John Burroughs School (MO)

“This is a valuable resource, with encyclopedic information on nearly every aspect of college admission. Whether you are new to college searches or a seasoned professional, you will find answers to detailed questions as well as a rich overview of this ever-changing and complex process.”

Ralph Figueroa, dean of college guidance, Albuquerque Academy (NM)

“Filled with both common sense and sage advice, the fourth edition of *Admission Matters* is the only guide any high school student—and his or her parent—will ever need.”

Jennifer Delahunty, former dean of admissions and financial aid, Kenyon College

“This updated edition is a great addition to the library of any family with college-bound students or any counselor’s library.”

**William S. Dingledine Jr., certified educational planner,
past president Southern Association for College Admission Counseling**

“*Admission Matters* is the single best comprehensive guide available to help students and their families avoid the harmful aspects of the ‘admission marketplace.’ The new edition continues that noble tradition by providing essential information and tools to make the college admission process sane, humane, and perhaps even, for its fortunate readers, a great voyage of personal growth and discovery.”

**Michael Beseda, vice provost for strategic enrollment management,
University of San Francisco**

ADMISSION MATTERS

What Students and Parents Need to
Know About Getting into College

FOURTH EDITION

Sally P. Springer

Jon Reider

Joyce Vining Morgan

JB JOSSEY-BASS™
A Wiley Brand

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To our children

Acknowledgments

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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. Their dreams and aspirations have encouraged us to try to ease the path for others yet to undertake the college admissions journey.

Introduction

It is easy to understand why the college admissions process has become such a challenge, and even an ordeal, for many students and their families. Everywhere they look, families are barraged by evidence of “college mania.” Online and print media regularly regale readers with horror stories about the competition involved in gaining admission to selective colleges as application numbers rise and admissions rates fall, sometimes dramatically in a given year. Classmates, neighbors, coworkers, and even virtual strangers are all too eager to share tales about terrific kids with great academic and extracurricular records who were denied admission by the colleges of their choice.

As likelihood of admission becomes harder to predict at many schools, students find themselves applying to an increasing number of colleges to protect themselves. Of course, one major consequence of such behavior is an overall increase in application numbers and corresponding declines in admissions rates at those schools, feeding the very problem students are hoping to address by submitting more applications.

Adding to the challenge is the continuing rise in the cost of college, with the sticker price at some private four-year colleges now approaching \$70,000 per year. Recent changes in the standardized testing policies of many schools, as well as changes in the tests themselves, have also contributed to the uncertainty surrounding college admission.

The result of all of this is that families often find themselves caught up in a high-stakes competition in which they are uncertain about the rules and even more uncertain about the outcome. Parents feel uncomfortable trying to support their children in a process that they do not completely understand and are not sure they can afford. Even those who consider themselves knowledgeable may quickly find that much of what they know is out-of-date or based on unverifiable hearsay.

Frank Bruni, author of a widely acclaimed book entitled *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania*, dedicated his book as follows: “To all the high school kids in this country who are dreading the crossroads of college admissions and to all the young adults who felt ravaged by it. We owe you and the whole country a better, more constructive way.”¹ We fully agree.

College admissions does not have to be, and should not be, an ordeal. A clear understanding of the process can empower students and their families to make good choices for themselves and allow them to retain their balance and sanity at the same time. That has always been the goal of *Admission Matters*, from its first edition in 2005 through this fourth edition today.

We have written this book to demystify the college admissions process by explaining how it works and to level the playing field for those without access to extensive assistance from knowledgeable high school counselors or sometimes any counselors at all. It will also help those who have access to good counseling but would still like some extra support. Our advice is designed for students planning to apply to any four-year college, whether highly selective or not.

Admission Matters explains

- How rankings motivated by profits contribute to the application frenzy
- How the admissions process really works, and what you can, and cannot, control
- The ways in which colleges differ that really matter
- How you can build a list of colleges that are a good fit for you and submit strong, competitive applications to gain admission to them
- How and why many colleges use standardized tests and how you can best prepare for them

- What recent changes in standardized tests as well as testing policies at many schools mean for you
- When an early application makes sense, when it can be a mistake, and how to tell the difference
- How financial aid works, what you can expect from it, and how you can increase your chances of receiving more
- How to prepare strong applications that can help you distinguish yourself from other applicants
- What you—student and parent—can do to work together in appropriate and respectful ways throughout the admissions process to achieve a happy outcome

And much more. In this thoroughly revised fourth edition of *Admission Matters*, we have worked hard to address the many changes that have occurred in the world of college admissions since our last edition. We want you, our student and parent readers, to begin the college admissions journey confidently with the latest and most complete information available. As before, students with disabilities, international students, and transfer students will find much needed guidance to address their special circumstances, as will athletes, artists, and homeschooled students. Information for first-generation college students and undocumented students is included as well. We want *Admission Matters* to continue to be the most up-to-date, clear, insightful, supportive, and practical book on college admissions anywhere.

We recognize, however, that you may want more information on certain topics than space allows us to include. To help you access that additional information easily, we have provided a list of resources, many of them on the web, that give detailed information on topics such as financial aid and athletic recruiting to supplement our own coverage. To keep *Admission Matters* as up-to-date as possible, we are maintaining a website with free updates and additional materials. You can find it at www.admissionmatters.com. We welcome your feedback.

We feel we are especially well qualified to be your guides. Among the three of us, we have more than 100 years of experience in secondary and higher education in the roles of high school teacher and college counselor, college admissions officer, college professor and administrator, and independent educational

consultant. Collectively we have worked with thousands of students across the United States and abroad. We are also proud parents of successful college graduates, so we have experienced the admissions process firsthand from the parent perspective as well. We are delighted that our readers in the general public have found *Admission Matters* enjoyable and easy to read, and we are honored that professional colleagues use it widely as a text in courses on college admissions for those studying to be counselors themselves.

We hope *Admission Matters* will serve as your trusted road map through the college admissions journey.



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, 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

- | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <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><i>Note:</i> This list is not all-inclusive and omits schools with a highly specialized focus.</p> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

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 Uni-

versity, 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