***Who Gets In And Why: A Year Inside College Admissions***

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**Preface**

* Students (and their parents) emphasize the SAT/ACT- and prepping for the tests- much more than the admissions officers who evaluate the scores. Don’t get me wrong; test scores are important at schools that require them. But high school grades and curriculum matter more. Research shows that the courses students take and how well they do in them are two leading indicators of how students will perform in college.
* Don’t fret if you can’t get to campus before you apply to a school. Even before Covid-19, most campus visits were made in April, *after* a student was accepted by a school. In the meantime, take virtual tours and attend online information sessions. Learning about a college virtually, however, takes much more work than a physical visit. Go beyond what colleges are offering and look for students on social media who attend the schools you’re interested in. Search through Reddit and You Tube for threads and videos about campuses.

**Introduction: Steering the College’s Agenda**

* For more than two decades, I’ve written about colleges and universities as a journalist for the *Washington Post*, the *Atlantic*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.
* For this book, I got an inside look at three very different institutions. I was with the staff at the University of Washington as they were trained to read admissions files. I went to Davidson College in North Carolina to see counselors debate, applicant by applicant, whom to admit for early decision. And I examined the details of applications alongside pairs of readers in their offices at Emory and I listened as they weighed their choices. Over seven months, as I sat with dozens of admissions officers in their offices and conference rooms, and joined them for early morning coffees, casual lunches, and late-night drinks, I started to slowly pull back the curtain on what it takes to get into a selective college today. In the pages ahead, I’ll give you that same backstage view of probably the most mysterious, misunderstood, and debated aspect of American higher education, and maybe its most important function.
* It’s worth reminding you in these first pages that it’s much easier than you probably think to get into colleges these days. Yes, if you’re applying to a handful of elite colleges, seats are scarce and the demand for them excessive. And yes, if you’re a parent who graduated from one of these campuses, it’ definitely more competitive to get in than when you went. But there are plenty of seats available at U.S. campuses for the two million high school graduates each year who plan to go to college. Part of the aim of this book is to reveal the smoke and mirrors that have made applying to college a kind of mythical quest to get into the right schools at any cost when, in fact, plenty of good schools offer a top-notch education and have high acceptance rates.
* The last five U.S. presidents attended a highly selective college, as did the nine Supreme Court justices, and one-third of Fortune 500 CEOs. We believe going to one of these colleges buys access to a certain set of careers, at a select class of employers, and an alumni network of connections for life, so we do everything we can to get into this handful of schools. We don’t want to take a chance that our kids will end up on the wrong side of the economic divide. Compounding this anxiety about admissions is then how to pay for the ever-rising sticker price once our child gets in.
* The average four-year college in the United States accepts 6 in 10 applicants. Only 46 out of nearly 1,400 four-year colleges accept fewer than 20 percent of their applicants. Every year, hundreds of colleges are still accepting applications after the traditional May 1 Decision Day for high school seniors.
* Yes, the majority of colleges have a seat for most of their applicants. Indeed, slightly more than three-quarters of college freshman nationwide reported in the fall of 2018 that they were enrolled in their *top-choice* college.

**PART ONE**

**Fall: Recruitment Season**

**Chapter 1: Selling A College- The Endless Pursuit of Students**

* College admissions is a big business. Colleges and universities spend an estimated $10 billion annually on recruiting students- mostly with old-fashioned direct mail and email, using tactics not much different than those of credit card companies and clothing retailers.
* In the years around World War II, students typically applied to one school, and most colleges admitted anyone who graduated from high school. Colleges we refer to today as elite depended on heavily on feeder high schools, usually boarding schools, where officials understood the academic standards and knew the student body. Until the 1950’s, colleges didn’t have an admissions office to speak of.
* If you’re a high school student deluged with mail from colleges on a daily basis, it’s because the College Board as has your name. Most people know the College Board as the owner of the SAT. It collected one *billion* dollars in revenue in 2017, according to its federal tax forms, mostly I fees for the SAT and AP tests.
* The idea of selling the names and addresses of test takers started with a noble intent- to increase access to college by putting information in the hands of students who historically didn’t go. But as campuses competed aggressively for new undergraduates in the 1980’s, peddling names turned into a moneymaker.
* In 2006, the College Board sold 60 million names. By 2010, 80 million names were licensed, even though only 5.2 million students took the Sat and PSAT that year. Exactly how much name-selling has grown since is unclear. The College Board refuses to disclose how many names it now sells through “search,” as the practice is commonly called in the world of admissions.
* A student’s name is sold, on average, 18 times over her high school career, and some names have been purchased more than 70 times- all at a cost now of 45 cents a name, each time it’s requested among those test takers who opt in (students have the choice to participate).
* Today, 9 out of every 10 colleges purchase names of sophomores.
* When colleges buy names, they can filter the purchase by a variety of factors. An admissions office, for example, might order the names of men with PSAT scores above 1200 who live in Pennsylvania and want to major in the humanities. A college isn’t looking to send mail only to straight-A students who scored a 1500 or higher on the SAT. Campuses have certain needs- more men, more minority students, more English majors, more students from five states away- priorities they attempt to fulfill by buying names fitting those criteria.
* No matter the medium, teenagers ignore the vast majority of marketing from colleges: only 11 percent elicits some sort of response. The consensus among high school students and parents I met while researching this book is that colleges send way too much mail- and most of it end up in the recycling bin or ignored in email boxes.
* So why send so much? They want to make themselves look more selective to the outside world. They’re uncertain about who is actually going to apply, so perhaps they want you to get a brochure but their interest has declined by the time your application is reviewed. What’s more, selective colleges are always looking for that needle in the haystack- the talented student from a middle-of-nowhere high school that they hope will be among a stack of search names they buy. Most of all, colleges want students able to pay, so schools tend to overbuy names of test takers from wealthy zip codes.
* Unlike when we buy a house or a car and check out the price tag first, cost doesn’t initially factor into a student’s decision about where to apply. Research has shown that parents focus on selectivity and reputation more than cost when discussing colleges with their kids. Parents usually avoid the money conversation as long as they can because they don’t want to deny their child the chance at a dream school.
* Grace’s counselor recommended she check out the College Board’s BigFuture website before they meet again. Grace opened her laptop’s web browser and signed on to the interactive college-planning tool. *You have 3,825 college options. Choose a category on the left to find the right ones for you*. The message on the opening screen was meant to pry open the minds of teenagers as they developed their college lists; instead it just induced anxiety in Grace. “There’s just so many colleges to look at,” she said later. “It’s such a crazy, randomish process.”
* For high school students, the college search is likely the first time in their lives they are confronted with so many choices and swamped with so much information as they try to make a momentous decision. It’s a classic case of what psychologists and economists refer to as choice overload and information overload. An abundance of college options paralyzes teenagers or makes them doubt their subsequent decisions compared to those who had fewer options. Comparing colleges requires students to digest hundreds of data points. As a result, they tend to retreat to what is familiar or simple. They glance at the rankings, follow their friends’ lead, or look for the nicest dorms or universities that dominate the March Madness basketball tournament.
* Savvy applicants typically approach the college search by breaking it down into smaller, manageable parts. First, they figure out what they’re looking for in a college- a particular major, research opportunities, location, size- before they ever start a list of schools. Using those attributes as filters in online search tools, they begin to build their list over many months by comparing colleges two or three times at a time.
* Many school counselors have a general of thumb that it is important to put together a list of ten to twelve schools overall, with three to four colleges in each of three categories: *likely* or safety *schools*, where she’s above the school’s ranges for GPA and test scores; *target* or f*undamental* schools, where she’s solidly in the middle; and *reach* or *dream* schools, which would be a stretch for her. Remember, many students start their college search in the fall with aspirational dreams that end in the spring with a cold reality: you might only get into your “likely schools,” so be sure they’re colleges you’d want to attend and not just placeholders on a list.
* In those first months of her search, one factor Grace failed to fully consider was exactly how she would pay for college. I found in my interviews that many middle-income- and especially upper-middle-income and even wealthy families- rarely discuss finances early on. They either believe they can cover tuition from their income or from savings or, more likely, they think they’ll secure a merit scholarship in the form of a tuition discount from some college. After all, they hear at parties about family friends whose children received such scholarships, and the media remind them constantly that no one really pays full price for college anymore. The problem for students like Grace who consider only very selective colleges is that financial aid there is usually based on family need, not merit. When looking at top schools, Grace never took into consideration whether her parents’ earnings put her above the cutoff for need-based aid.
* By comparison, one of Grace’s friends had winnowed out costly colleges on the front end, using the net-price calculators colleges are required to display on their websites. If her projected financial aid package was inadequate, she took the school off her list. Grace had looked at the calculators, too, because she used estimates based on her limited knowledge of her family finances, the dollar amounts never fully sunk in.
* There’s no denying that the competition for a seat at *a specific* college is much tougher for today’s students than it was for their parents. But it’s not true that getting into any selective college is actually that much harder. Even top colleges accept higher numbers of students than they need because they know only between a third and a half of those accepted will say yes to their offer.
* Let’s pause for a moment to explain what I mean throughout the book by a “selective” college. It mostly describes a set of around two hundred colleges and universities based on categories chosen by Barron’s, which you can find in a popular annual guide called *Profiles of American Colleges*. It separates schools into selectivity categories from “very competitive plus” to “most competitive.” In general, the two hundred “selective” schools accept fewer than half of the students who apply.
* In 2013, a new generation of students stated to arrive on college campuses. Gen Z, those students born in 1995 and beyond, have different expectations for college-most of all they want a job after graduation- and approach the search for the right fit in a very different way than their Millennial predecessors. Studies find that a third of today’s students are “stealth applicants,” meaning they have no contact with a college before applying. Instead of filling out a form at a high school visit, they “like,” they “follow,” or they “subscribe.” Finding them requires a different marketing strategy for colleges once again.

**Chapter 2: Defining Prestige- The Buyers and Sellers**

* The first thing to recognize is that colleges are either “buyers” or “sellers.”
* Sellers are the “haves” of admissions. They have something to sell that consumers want, typically a brand name that signals prestige in the job market and social circles. As a result, they are overwhelmed with applications, many from top students.
* The buyers are the “have-nots” in terms of admissions- although they might provide a superior undergraduate education. They lack names that are instantly recognized when the scores of sports teams stream across the bottom of ESPN. Rather than select a class, their admissions officers must work hard to recruit students to fill classroom seats and beds in dorm rooms.
* Whether a college is a buyer or a seller matters to applicants for two reasons.
* First, getting past the gatekeepers at the sellers is becoming increasingly difficult. If students have only sellers on their list, they risk getting rejected from every school they apply to. Second, sellers don’t need to buy students with tuition discounts to fill their classrooms. They are prestigious enough that a large percentage of families are willing to pay full price. Most sellers offer financial assistance only to students who really need it or are truly exceptional. Yet many upper-middle-class families above the cutoff for need-based aid at a sellers school- which could range anywhere from $60,000 to upward of $200,000 with lots of caveats-think their financial reality is not what some formula says it is. They believe that every school offers a discount (they don’t) or that every financial aid package is negotiable (it isn’t). If your family can’t easily write a $21,000 check for the *average* in-state public college or $49,000 for the *average* private school- and do that for four years- be sure to have a few buyers on your list where your chances for merit aid are better.
* To better understand what’s happening, let’s explain what we mean by “financial aid.” The common kind of aid is based on financial need. Parents disclose their income and assets on various forms and aid is awarded through grants, loans, and work study.
* Colleges also give out another kind of aid without regard to how much parents earn. This is called merit aid, and it’s usually based on specific academic criteria, such as test scores and high school grades, but not always. A lot of merit aid is simply bait used to reel in accepted students- in some cases despite middling grades in high school. Such efforts usually come from the most desperate of buyers. The U.S. Education Department found that in one year some 40 percent of full-time students at four-year colleges who had *less than* a B average and *scored under* a 1000 on the SAT received “merit scholarships” from their institutions. We call these “scholarships” and “merit aid.” It’s good marketing. If colleges referred to them as “coupons,” parents and students might feel a lot less excited. But that’s really what they often are. That $15,000 merit scholarship sounds nicer than “but three year, get your fourth free.”
* Sellers make up a fairly small number of four-year colleges and universities, less than 10 percent. The vast majority of schools are somewhere on the spectrum of buyers. On average, sellers admit just 20 percent of applicants, while colleges as a whole admit two-thirds.
* I want to emphasize that none of this buyer-seller division is a reflection of the actual educational quality of the school. You can get a great education at a buyer. I went to one myself, built a satisfying career, and am now privileged to sit on the board of that same college.
* Savvy students willing to look beyond the brand-name sellers can find great schools that are buyers. Compare, for example, two private universities in upstate New York. Colgate University, with a sticker price of $72,000 per year, accepts just over one-quarter of applicants and spends less than 1 percent of its financial aid on merit-based discounts. Colgate is a seller. But just up the road in Troy, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, with a nearly identical sticker price, spends one-quarter of its institutional aid budget on merit-based aid. Yet both schools attract top-tier students with average ACT scores of 32.
* The same distinctions exist between public research universities- even in the same state. The University of Virginia is a seller; the flagship admits just 27 percent of applicants and spends about 6 percent of its own aid dollars on merit scholarships. But in-state rival Virginia Tech is a buyer. Tech accepts around 70 percent of students who apply and spends 75 percent of its aid without regard to financial need. Yet the schools both have high graduation rates and ten years later, graduates earn nearly identical average salaries, according to the Education Department’s College Scoreboard.
* Buyer institutions don’t “craft” an incoming class the way sellers do. Buyers “make” their class by enticing students to apply, usually through an application process that is as simple as posting to Instagram. Then they enroll students by offering hefty discounts on their sticker price using what are euphemistically called merit scholarships. One of the schools at the fair, Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania, hit their enrollment target of 640 incoming students in 2019 only by offering discounts that averaged around 70 percent. With that coupon, the typical freshman paid around $14,000 of Susquehanna’s advertised $48,000 sticker price for tuition.
* Not only do colleges occupy two different admissions worlds, so, too, do high school students. When teenagers and their families embark on the college search, they are largely empty vessels waiting to be filled with information. Over time, they separate into two worlds and follow different calendars as they hunt for a college. One group starts early as voracious consumers of information, reading guidebooks or regularly talking to counselors or others who can help them. They are what I call “drivers.” The other world is occupied by “passengers” along for the ride. Some students are passengers by choice- myopic teenagers propelled by parents and counselors. Others might have the motivation to be drivers but they lack access to good advice either at school or at home.
* Just because you’ve never heard of a school doesn’t mean it isn’t good. By starting the search at the widest part of the funnel with enough time to narrow it, students and their families sometimes end up embracing an idea that was foreign to them when they started: that there is life beyond the elite prestigious, brand-name schools.
* When we buy a house, we have a specific set of needs- a certain number of bedrooms, an updated kitchen. We usually know the neighborhoods where we want to live, and, of course, we have a price range. When we go to a car dealer, we show up with a ton of information. We know the brands. We’ve read the consumer reports about performance and resale value.
* College is different. It’s an emotional decision, one economists refer to as an “experience good.” We don’t know what we’re buying until after we experience it. Choosing the right college, the right major, or the right classes is difficult because we lack the tools to make bottom-line comparisons between options. As a result, the decision-making process is ill-informed, usually haphazard, and full of false starts.
* An elite college now is almost exclusively defined by how hard it is to get into. Unlike the corporate world where a company’s prominence is evaluated in direct proportion to its earnings or stock price, colleges have no such clear standards. The result, as Malcolm Gladwell argued in the *New Yorker* in 2005, is that prestige in higher education is measured by the quality of students the admissions office admits, not the education they receive.
* Just as driving a BMW or a Range Rover or carrying a Louis Vuitton bag is a symbol of success, so too is an acceptance to an Ivy League school or any top-tier seller. In many communities, students and parents want a college to pass the “window-sticker test”- a college that’s worthy of bragging about on the rear window of the family car.
* The goal of securing a college spot by December of the senior year seems, at least on its surface, a prescription to reduce anxiety. After all, it eliminates the uncertainty of seniors waiting in the spring when they are competing against a bigger pool of applicants. But early decision also speeds up decision-making when students aren’t quite ready for it. We know from neuroscientists and psychologists that the teenage brain is still maturing throughout high school- in fact, its structure and development continue in a person’s twenties. Every month in high school is mentally like a year to adults. As a result, moving everything up, even by just a few months, to meet earlier deadlines curtails a student’s performance, especially on the SAT and ACT.

**PART TWO**

**Winter: Reading Season**

**Chapter 3: Understanding Merit- Look at All the Bs**

* The first thing Mark Butt notices on the high school transcript is the variety of classes advanced classes. “Wow,” he says, this is a good curriculum.” Mark is an admissions officer at Emory University. Like other selective colleges, Emory considers Advanced Placement courses the most rigorous in a high school curriculum because they are assessed by national organizations. (Dual enrollment courses offered by local colleges to high school students are seen by local colleges to high school students are seen by some admissions offices as less rigorous because they lack such oversight.)
* Admissions officers use scores mostly as a check against the transcript. Do the test scores and grades line up? If not, a deeper look might reveal why, although grades and rigor always trump test scores.
* Whenever I sat inside committee meetings or read applications with admissions officers, I felt I was on a faraway planet. Admissions people have their own language. They read “files” instead of applications, the “pull up” applicants and “shape them down,” and they have a dizzying array of acronyms: IC (intellectual curiosity), LTE (likelihood to enroll), HIS (high school index). They also have their own numbering system. They rate applicants from 1 to 5 or 1 to 9 or 1 to 10 with a formula that seems precise enough to land someone on the moon, but in reality is mostly amorphous. By the time an application reaches them, it has turned into a virtual “file.” It has been filtered and massaged by pre-readers and machines that assemble its component parts into something that’s easy to scan. The pieces a teenager toiled over for months, such as an essay, might receive one quick read.
* What they are looking for in the file is the entirety of a teen-agers story. This detail is what I found most high school students miss in their rush to finish six or eight or ten applications in the fall of their senior year. To save time, they cut and paste from massive Google docs full of essays and short answers- taking a paragraph from their answer to Boston College’s essay and using it for Emory or UCLA. They work on multiple applications at a time, instead of compiling them in sequence to better make the case of why they are the right fit for *that* college. In doing so, they abandon the cohesiveness of their own story, the one that is supposed to be at the foundation of “holistic” admissions.
* At Emory, applicants are rated in four areas: high school curriculum, extracurricular activities, recommendations, and intellectual curiosity. Each rating is on a scale of 1 to 5. Of these four categories, the rigor number is the most important, and at first blush seems the most objective because it’s based on the assortment of college-level courses on a transcript.
* Whether colleges use a broader concept of merit or a narrow one, we still struggle to define what we mean when we say admissions should be based on merit. Ask thirty students, parents, high school counselors, and college admissions officers for a definition of “merit” and you’ll get thirty different answers.
* What’s more, parents especially tend to conflate “merit” with “achievement.” I can’t tell you how often I’ve heard parents say how “hard” their child worked to score a 90 on an algebra test, finish an English literature paper, or win the 800-meter dash in track. Parents mistake achievement, often associated with one specific and fixed event in the past, with merit. That’s why colleges typically weigh the score on the four-hour SAT (achievement) less than the grades earned over four years of high school (merit).
* Watching the reviews of applications and listening to admissions officer’s description of merit over eight months, I came to understand the term defines a mind-set they look for in an applicant, rather than a specific attribute. They’re looking for signs an applicant refuses to acknowledge a ceiling on her ability and keeps persevering at tasks. That’s why they scan transcripts for rigorous courses in a variety of subjects, appreciate when students collect a recommendation from a teacher outside of their major area (a pre-med student with a recommendation from an English teacher, for instance), and look for students who have committed to an activity for an extended period of time and seek out a leadership position.
* Even though many colleges have adopted the Common Application and standardized the ingredients, once the files get into their offices most institutions have cooked up their own special recipes for reviewing them.

**Chapter 4: Playing the Odds- Early Decision**

* Applications for ED, as early decision is widely known, are due at most colleges November 1.
* Getting accepted ED eliminates any possibility of comparing financial aid offers from multiple colleges. As in any game, the players in admissions are constantly trying to outmaneuver their opponents. They carefully weigh every move. They constantly plot to gain even a tiny advantage. Both colleges and applicants are players in the game, although schools are more like the everyday stars who always seem to play offense while students are the scrubs left to flounder on defense.
* In this game, few moves are as consequential as early decision. Indeed, few things have contributed as much to the insanity of the admissions process. It’s the origin of the compressed calendar students must now follow in their college search. It’s the source of the growing divide between the buyers and the sellers among colleges, as well as the one between drives and passengers among students. It has even come under scrutiny by the U.S. Department of Justice.
* Early decision and early action (or EA) cause so much hand wringing because they are the most popular among the colleges that are sellers and the high schools with many drivers. After all, no one is rushing to get into a school that accepts most of its applicants anyway. Selective colleges make up the majority of the 450 schools that offer ED and EA. To give you a sense of how pervasive it is, only nine of the top 65 U.S. colleges *don’t offer* ED as an option. Not only that, the more selective the college, the larger the number of early applicants they receive.
* Early decision is a mechanism that from its start, and through several iterations, has been fashioned to assist colleges in managing their application pools in uncertain times.
* It’s important to take a deep breath and recognize that the vast majority of applicants to college- 95 percent in any given year- don’t roll the ED dice. They apply regular decision. Regular decisions allow students to apply to as many schools as they want, anytime up until January of their senior year. Colleges review applications and send a decision by the end of March. Students have until May 1 to commit to a school. The process essentially takes up a student’s entire senior year of high school.
* Early decision pushes the admissions process backward to the junior year of high school because students must choose one college and make a binding commitment- by the beginning of November- just a few months into their senior year. Colleges release those admission decisions in the middle of December. If a student is accepted, the college search is over. The applicant is obliged to go to the ED school (although there are ways to get out of the commitment).
* Students deferred or rejected in the ED round are left with about two weeks during the busy holiday season to apply somewhere else for regular decision or to rush an application to meet yet another deadline, called ED2. Some schools offer that second early decision round, with deadlines perfectly timed to come *after* top-ranked colleges send out their ED1 decisions. Their unspoken goal is to win a few more binding agreements from emotional teenagers at a vulnerable moment by turning them to their preferred second choice.
* Finally, there is early action, or EA. It’s similar to ED in that students apply early and hear back in December or January. But the key difference is that students are not required to attend if accepted and they have until May 1 to make their decision.
* Simply put, ED is one more way for schools to gain an advantage in admissions.
* For schools such as Tulane with ever-growing application pools but with too many accepted students turning down an offer, early admissions is the strongest indication of what’s called “demonstrated interest”- the willingness of the applicant to actually enroll. “Demonstrated interest” is one of those jargony terms describing what has become an important metric to colleges. Measuring it helps protect their yield rate as they wade through rising numbers of inquiries and applications. Their reasoning goes something like this: Why admit applicants who are often on the bubble- and risk looking for less selective- if they’re planning to go elsewhere anyway?
* Schools measure demonstrated interest in a variety of ways beyond early admissions applications. How many of their emails did you open and how quickly? Do you follow them on social media? Did you show up when an admissions representative visited your high school? Have you taken a campus tour? Or they ask a supplemental question on the Common Application about why you want to attend the school.
* In 2017, a group of economists published a study looking at two years of contacts that a highly selective university made with more than twelve thousand applicants. They found that applicants who visited campus increased their chances of getting accepted by 30 percent compared with those who went only to off-campus events (although those who went to off-campus events also got an admissions boost over those without any contact). The most interesting finding was that students with the highest SAT scores were really helped by visiting campuses. That *suggests* colleges which track demonstrated interest are reluctant to admit smart students who don’t engage in the admissions process for fear of being used as a safety school.
* The rich colleges are getting richer because seniors are willing to apply ED if they perceive the regular pool as one of their top-choice schools is just too competitive. Sure, there are plenty of early applicants reading to make a binding commitment to their dream school. But the seniors I met in reporting this book and the high school counselors I interviewed said that’s not the case for the majority of ED applicants. It’s a choice they are forced to make just two months into their senior year. They really don’t know where to apply ED, which is why so many seniors find themselves still weighing their decision only days before the deadline.
* Every year a whole new crop of applicants applies ED- most of them to sellers- blinded by the long-standing and popular perception that going early offers a better chance of getting in than regular decision does.
* Unless you really know where you want to go for college and don’t care about financial aid, applying early takes your attention away from seeing the forest of the college search for the one tree of ED. You get so focused on the ED school in October, maybe even earlier. Many ED applicants don’t do anything else on their college search in November and early December while they wait. All the students I followed in the fall of 2018 who applied ED were confident they’d get in. Perhaps they had never faced disappointment other times in their lives. But then they didn’t get in and panic ensued.
* Another piece of advice: if you apply ED and it doesn’t work out, don’t restart your college search. It’s worth a checkup on your overall list but applying to even a handful of additional schools at a stressful time of year will only add to your anxiety. And be sure to have the other applications ready to go in early December in case ED doesn’t work out.
* How could these seniors be so wrong about their chances? Maybe it was that their ED choice was ultimately an unrealistic one. Maybe their counselors and parents weren’t honest with them. But maybe there was another explanation. Maybe the numbers about early admissions that they analyzed didn’t reveal the whole story. Maybe they overestimated their chances of getting in.

**Chapter 5: Finding an Edge- Athletes and Legacies**

* Athletes aren’t the only applicants with special talent given a boost in admissions. So too are musicians, artists, and debaters. But the preferential treatment given to athletes is far more systematic and prevalent than that for any talented applicant. When it comes to getting into a selective school, you’re much better off taking up water polo, fencing, rowing, or some other niche sport than playing the tuba in the band or the lead in a school musical. College sports not only exert a gravitational pull unlike any other extracurricular activity- including music and the arts- they create a huge quantifiable need to fill positions each year.
* Because athletics is now known as an increasingly popular door into a top school, it’s one reason why parents in affluent communities are rushing to get their kids- as early as elementary school- on youth travel teams. They see athletics as *the* ticket- and maybe a free one- to college.
* This new reality for young athletes is almost exclusively a symptom of rising college costs: parents shell out thousands of dollars a year and skip family vacations hoping, praying that their son’s slider or daughter’s drop kick will one day pay off with a full ride at a college somewhere.
* Here’s the problem with that strategy: the odds are impossibly long for anyone to land an athletic scholarship. Nearly 8 million kids played high school sports in 2019. But only 495,000 of them ended up competing in college, and many fewer- just 150,000 or about 2 percent of those who participated in high school- received scholarships, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association. If you’re expecting a *financial* return on the investment in your kid’s sports, you’re better off putting your money into a plain-vanilla savings account.
* When you watch television on a Saturday in the fall, you probably think every college athlete gets an all-expenses paid scholarship to play. Far from it. A very small percentage of athletes lands that kind of deal. Most of your neighbors, in fact, who tell you that their child earned a “sports scholarship” actually received something worth less than a very used car. The “full-ride” athletic scholarship is largely a myth perpetuated by coaches in youth leagues and passed around by parents on the sidelines.
* Only six sports in Division I- football, men’s and women’s volleyball- award scholarships that cover the entire cost of every athlete’s education. Otherwise, colleges are limited in how they give out money in dozens of other sports. Take Division I lacrosse, as an example. Schools are allowed to give the equivalent of a dozen scholarships for men and women. Most college teams have about thirty-three female and forty-four male players. Or take swimming as another example. A college team has about 60 swimmers, but can give out only the equivalent of two dozen scholarships in total.
* Because college sports on almost every campus lose money- at least directly- what happens is that the best athletes get most of the money, and the rest of the team gets the leftovers. It’s not uncommon for recruited athletes to receive little more than a few hundred dollars to cover books. Also, to save money, schools don’t always give out their full allotment of scholarships. Schools are playing the odds: they know that competitive students who played a sport their whole life often want to be on a Division I team no matter what- so why give them a lot of money if they don’t need to.
* Often, it’s only when the reality of paying for college comes into full view in the waning days of high school that the parents grasp that the athletic scholarship a club team’s coach mentioned when their kid was ten was a fantasy. Then parents realize the return on their investment in sports was no better than the discount tuition coupons colleges hand out to nearly everyone, whether they’re athletes or not.
* But playing a sport *can* pay off in the admissions game. Athletics can assist applicants in a different way, one likely to prove far more valuable than a meager scholarship: access to an elite school that otherwise might be off-limits academically.
* How colleges recruit athletes varies widely by school. In general, coaches start looking at athletes a year or two before their applications are submitted to the admissions office. (The NCCA has strict rules on when coaches can first reach out to recruits, but athletes are allowed to initiate conversations with coaches at any time.)
* Just like students fall in and out of love with colleges during the search process, so do coaches with potential recruits. A piece of advice for athletes in the recruiting funnel: always ask coaches about where you stand both academically and athletically. Because coaches are balancing multiple recruits, they often are vague about your place on the team, your chances of getting in, and how much aid they can offer. Coaches are always shuffling around recruits. They have different needs and wants at different times in the year. So, it’s often about being in the right place at the right time.
* Many selective schools reserve a specific number of “slots” in admissions for athletes to hold them a place, so they don’t get crowded out by higher achieving nonathletes.
* A slot is a virtual lock on admissions for an athlete, although schools don’t guarantee slots for specific applicants. Admissions officers still pre-read the applications of highly rated athletes to see if they’re in the ballpark academically.
* Meanwhile, overburdened admissions officers wouldn’t have time to evaluate the athletic prowess of recruits, or even check that they played the sports. They trust the coach’s evaluation as long as the applicant is close enough academically.
* Colleges defend legacy admissions on two fronts. First, they say legacies are just as academically qualified as non-legacies. But two studies have shown that’s not true, including one by Bill Bowen, the former president of Princeton, which still considers parental ties in admissions. He found in reviewing entering classes over three decades that applicants who were sons and daughters of alumni had a nearly 25 percent higher chance of getting accepted than a non-legacy with the same SAT score.

**Chapter 6. Comparing Grades- High School Matters**

* During my time inside admissions offices I quickly discovered that the unit being evaluated was less often the *applicant* than the applicant’s *high school*.
* Colleges, in essence, are recruiting and evaluating high schools, not students. Admissions officers target certain high schools for fall visits to court prospective students. They know some high schools so well they can easily recall a counselor’s name. Before admissions decisions are sent to students, most selective colleges sort their applicant pool by high school.
* One question I get frequently from applicants and their parents is how colleges compare students from different high schools. The simple answer is they don’t- at least not in explicit side-by-side comparisons. What they try to do is measure an applicant’s academic and personal achievements based on what courses are available at their specific high school. But yet, as they review hundreds of files over many months, admissions officers can’t help making comparisons between high schools and taking that into account as they build a class. You see it when they agonize over accepting even above-average students from less-rigorous high schools. A key metric Davidson uses to judge the quality of a high school is the proportion of students who go to college. That number determines how “deep” admissions officers want to go into a school’s senior class to admit students- the more students who go to college from that high school, the more willing they are to take a chance in accepting students ranked lower in the class.
* An applicant’s high school is the foundation of two of the most important criteria to admissions: grades and depth and breadth of courses. For those colleges that require the ACT/SAT, the test score provided a third critical metric. That score is also toed to the high school since test results are closely correlated with family income, and so, too, with school boundaries.
* Selective colleges favor grades and test scores because thousands of statistical studies over several decades indicate they predict a student’s first-year grades, and in some cases, grade-point average throughout college.
* But the metrics also present problems. For one thing, there is no common high school curriculum, even within states. For another, there isn’t a standardized grading scale.
* Advanced Placement (AP) courses are one way top colleges measure the quality of a high school. AP Calculus, in particular, has become the strongest signal of preparedness for an elite college. Eight in 10 college students who completed AP Calculus did so because they thought it would look good on their college application. But consider this: only half of American high schools offer a calculus course.
* When the GPAs of applicants are all in the A range, it’s difficult for admissions officers to make distinctions among students. That’s when test scores offer another measure for interpreting grades and differentiating between applicants. But test scores present their own set of problems. Students tend to score higher the more often they take the test.
* Sitting for the test multiple times also helps the applicant’s so-called superscore, the number that combines the highest verbal and math score, no matter the test date. Roughly 8 out of 10 colleges use the superscore in admissions.
* So, taking the SAT early and often *could improve* the chances of getting into a top college. But who retakes the test varies greatly. Higher income students- from families making over $100,000- tend to sit for the test multiple times, as do girls, white students, and Asian American teenagers.
* My advice is to take the SAT or ACT at least twice if you’re applying to schools that require the exam. Given that most colleges use superscores anyway, you have nothing to lose. Worry less about your overall score and more about where your score places you in the range of the schools you’re considering.
* Some of the most important learning that occurs in college comes from interactions with your peers. If you’re surrounded by students who aren’t engaged in their studies or campus life or are indifferent about graduating in four years, you might fall into that trap as well, no matter your academic achievement in high school.
* The opposite also happens. Overmatching occurs when students end up at colleges that above their league academically. About a quarter of students overmatch. Overmatchers tend to be from wealthier families who are often sought after by colleges that need full-pay students. Some top colleges are happy to take below-average students who can pay the entire tuition bill (or close to it) and parents are happy to pay to ensure their child attends a selective school. But one worry students should have in overmatching is that if they’re a poor fit academically, they likely won’t keep up in class once on campus and risk not graduating on time, or at all.
* One view of the world of admissions is that SAT and ACT offer a critical balance for assessing students who come from high schools of widely varying quality. But that perspective isn’t universally shared. There is a long-running and heated debate in the admissions profession over whether test scores are needed to compare high schools or should be used at all in the selection process.
* Numerous studies show that grades by themselves are a better predictor of a student’s success in college than test scores on their own. That’s why many colleges feel comfortable dropping the SAT/ACT as an admissions requirement without jeopardizing academic quality. But studies also show that both metrics taken together are the best predictor of success-better than either measure alone. That’s why other deans-led mostly by elite colleges and the leaders of the College Board and ACT- believe that test scores provide an added insight when evaluating students.
* Alongside the SAT and ACT, another mainstay of the admissions process that has attempted to standardize the high school experience is the Common Application. When the Common App, as it’s known, debuted in 1975, it was used only by a handful of schools. Today, the Common App is pervasive in competitive college admissions thanks to the Internet. Walk into almost any high school counseling office and you’re likely to see a wall may of the nearly nine hundred Common App schools that dot the landscape in every state. In the 2018-19 application cycle, more than 1 million students completed 5.3 million applications using the Common App.
* For today’s teenagers, the college application is a transaction, an exercise in counting up activities and checking off boxes on a list. It’s a constant game of one-upmanship encouraged by the blank spaces on the application and the “brag sheets” that students complete for their high school counselors to use when writing a recommendation.
* “Let us acknowledge the anxiety our words and policies cause,” David Coleman, the College Board’s president, told hundreds of college admissions officers, high school principals, and counselors at the organization’s annual meeting in October 2018. Coleman conceded that the College Board itself needed to reduce worry over the SAT and Advanced Placement. Research released at the meeting showed that a student’s academic improvement in college leveled out at five AP courses. In other words, taking eight or ten AP courses doesn’t really influence how well applicants end up doing in college, yet some admissions offices still tally AP courses as a sign of rigor. Coleman also took aim at the Common App, suggesting it reduce the number of extracurricular activities on the form to just three. “We need to do more,” Coleman said, “to stop the madness that has arisen around college admissions.” It was a little rich coming from the head of a $1.3 billion operation that sits at the exact center of America’s college madness.

**Chapter 7. Finding Diamonds- Regular Decision**

* For most applicants to most colleges, grades and test scores align. In other words, the test score makes sense with the grades on the transcript and vice versa. One study from 2011 of more than 150,000 students nationwide found that some 60 percent of applicants to college have test scores consistent with their academic performance in high school. The remaining students in that study, however, had a significant gap between the two metrics-either high test scores combined with low grades or low test scores along with high grades.
* What researchers find is that students with relatively low GPA’s compared to their SAT scores often take more rigorous courses in high school. The reverse is true for students who have high GPAs, but low test scores. This is why the most important thing teenagers can do to improve their prospects at a selective college is to take the toughest courses they can in high school, not focus as much on prepping for the SAT. Once in these courses, aim for the best grades possible. It’s usually better to get a B in a difficult class than an A in an easy course.
* Ask teachers for recommendation letters during your junior year of high school. Recommendation letters give admissions officers the opportunity to read between the lines of a student’s application. The best ones give detailed information other parts of the application can’t. they give specific examples and stories about how hard the applicant worked for a grade, how a student faced adversity in a course or in an activity, or how engaged the applicant was in learning.
* When choosing a teacher to write a recommendation, consider the following among those you might ask: a teacher in a class where you had to work hard for a grade; a teacher outside the subject you want to major in to show your breadth of interests; or a teacher in a major subject area you had twice during high school to show your growth. Overall, admissions officers want to read a letter from someone who can adequately describe your weaknesses but also detail your potential.

**PART THREE**

**Spring: Decision Season**

**Chapter 8. Shaping a Class- The Final, Close Calls**

* The home stretch for admissions is late February to early March. As the calendar turns and winter gives way to spring, admissions offices undergo their own transformation in seasons. The “rough” sort of the class is nearly complete. These were the relatively easy calls, up or down. Now comes time for the “fine” sort of applicants sitting on either side of the admit line.
* During these tense and hectic weeks, acceptances are set in stone. Think of it as finalizing the invite list for a wedding. Guests are moved on and off the list based on whether you think they’ll show up or the groom’s family has too many invites compared to the bride’s.
* Admissions officers ask questions about their invite lists, too. Do we have enough African American students or Latino students? Enough students who can pay the tuition bill? Too many women in the class? Too many students from the Southwest or Northeast? Enough humanities majors?
* The admissions profession calls this “shaping the class.” This term describes the point in the selection process where selective admissions *is* the most unfair- especially if you believe that merit is based on a specific set of qualifications.
* The applicant pool at this stage has been reduced to students who could prosper at that school- or at many campuses. These final decisions depend on what the class looks like or how much students in the admit bin will cost to enroll. This is the break point between fair and unfair, between a selection based on some measure of traditional criteria and one based on a variety of other factors: money, race, gender, and major.
* Where applicants ultimately end up hinges largely on criteria beyond their control. But this is also a spot where an applicant’s background can help push them over the line to an acceptance. Legacies, children of faculty and staff, and applicants under the watchful eye of a college’s president or fund-raising office usually receive their biggest boost at this point.
* Admissions officers loathe the shaping process. Some prefer to call it by the most unpleasant term Harvard uses: “looping.” Not only do they need to make difficult choices for often arbitrary reasons, but they are forced to jettison an applicant they favored during reading season. On the other hand, shaping offers one last chance to find a hidden gem to shift into the admit bin.
* Just as the reading routine differs by college, so does the shaping process. Public universities with huge applicant pools and large numbers of incoming students typically use an ax rather than a scalpel smaller private colleges employ.
* The “wait list” in admissions is a bit of a misnomer. Unlike a wait list as a busy restaurant when all the tables are filled, think of the wait list at a selective college as similar to an airline’s practice of overselling seats, knowing not every passenger is going to show up. When colleges send out acceptances, they’re never sure just how many will “yield”- how many of those admitted will take them up on the offer. Popular, brand-name colleges worry that too many students will accept their offers and there won’t be enough room in the dorms. So, admissions deans often factor the wait list into their yield models. In other words, they admit fewer students knowing they’ll likely pull at least a few off the wait list.
* It sounds better to say you’re waitlisted than outright rejected. When you’re rejected, you have no idea how far you were from getting in. The wait list gives the impression you were somewhat close, even though you don’t know how many students are on the wait list. Moreover, it’s another way colleges serve their needs- by maintaining valuable relationships with alumni and school counselors. In one recent study, nearly a quarter of admissions deans at private colleges said they put applicants with ties to the school on the wait list to avoid rejecting them.
* By putting applicants on the wait list, colleges also have a ready pool of students to quickly fill seats without officially accepting them. Thus, admissions offices can keep a group of students connected to the college while also keeping their acceptance rates low.
* For colleges, the wait list brings stability amid the uncertainty at the end of the admissions process, much as early decision does at the front end.
* There is a dirty secret in the shaping of a freshman class that a few admissions deans like to talk about: money matters. When I approached two dozen admissions offices about seeing inside their process for this book, one reason several declined was because they are what’s called “need aware.” That means at some point they take an applicant’s ability to pay into account when deciding whether to accept them.
* The vast majority of colleges consider an applicant’s finances at some point, typically in the selection process or by shorting them on aid. Colleges might take the high road and claim they’re “need blind” in making admissions decisions, but most of those schools give students only a fraction of the money a federal financial aid formula or the institution’s own aid recipe determines a family can afford to pay for college. Those students are “gapped” in their financial aid packet because colleges don’t have enough dollars to dole out to every accepted student who needs help. So, the schools either give aid on a first-come, first-serve basis, or to students they most desire.
* How much families should pay for college all starts with the FAFSA (the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid), which generates what is known as the Expected Family Contribution, or EFC. It’s a number that shocks most families the first time they see it because it’s often higher than they expect. What’s more, some four hundred colleges- mostly private, selective schools- require families to complete another form called the CSS Profile to determine what the institution will give them in aid. The expected family contribution spawned by the CSS is typically higher than the federal one because it captures the equity in a home and the net worth of a family business, unlike the FAFSA formula. Either way, no matter what number the formula spits out, many families end up paying even more out of pocket.
* Consider a family where the EFC is, say $10,000 a year. That student is offered a financial aid package from a school that covers only $50,000 of a $70,000 total bill. So, the family who a government formula says can contribute $10,000 is charged $20,000 – that $10,000 is the gap. Gapping is prevalent at American colleges, and the gap itself is growing as tuition and fees rise, family income remain stagnant, and most schools are unable to make up the difference from their endowments. The average amount students are gapped at a public college is $11,000; at private colleges, it’s more than $16,000.
* When it comes to the diversity of elite colleges campuses, students of color and first-generation students receive the most attention these days. But colleges are also struggling to maintain a gender balance. Two-thirds of colleges and universities report that they get more female than male applicants. Among the 135 most selective colleges, half of the schools admit men at a higher rate than women. Even with that advantage, men still represent less than 45 percent of students at American colleges. Schools worry about that number falling below 40 percent and changing the campus culture.
* A decade-plus ago, the former dean of admissions and financial aid at Kenyon College wrote a popular essay in the *New York Times* laying bare the male preference in admissions. “The reality is that because young men are rarer, they’re more valued applicants,” Jennifer Delahunty wrote. The op-ed caused a firestorm in higher education circles, exposing what was regarded as an open secret in admissions: the selection process at top colleges *is* particularly tough on qualified women. That’s especially the case in regular decision when colleges might need to make up for the shortages of men from early decision, when women are more likely to apply knowing that ED could give them their best shot of getting in.

**Chapter 9. Paying for College- The Best Class Money Can Buy**

* Every year, parents and students await both the coveted acceptances from colleges and the kicker that soon follows: the financial aid package. That’s when the reality sets in. Pinpointing the precise amount colleges need to give to the students they most desire- and preferably not a penny more- is a delicate balancing act. Schools want to offer enough money to lure students away from other schools where they were also accepted. But they need to collect sufficient tuition revenue to operate, too.
* Let’s revisit the idea we talked about. It’s simplification, of course, but I argue you can divide the universe of American colleges into two camps: buyers and sellers. The sellers are the most prestigious places that could fill their classes many times over will students willing to pay the full price. The buyers (and most places are buyers) don’t have their pick of the litter in the same way. They need to use discounting and other tools to attract the class they want. That’s where this type of “leveraging” comes in.
* Financial aid can sound like charity, but that’s not the best way to think about it. Most colleges are forgoing revenue in one category-tuition- to use those resources in another-financial aid. The math is quite simple. Instead of giving a $60,000 full ride to a poor or middle-income student and yielding one undergraduate, colleges split that scholarship into four $15,000 discounts that are offered to four wealthier kids who can bring some money to the table. If the college yields two or three of them as a result, it pulls in hundreds of thousands of dollars in tuition revenue over four years to pay for small low-income students or another applicant that it desires. Do that several times over for an incoming class and you see why leveraging works for the vast majority of colleges, the ones that don’t have a billion dollar endowment.
* Even before students begin college, they need to make sure to ask about their sophomore year financial aid. Why? Because half of colleges practice what is known as front-loading- giving bigger grants to first-year students than to everyone else. The practice is a classic bait and switch. Colleges attract students with a big discount the first year, and then once the students like the campus and want to stay to finish a degree, they get (or receive) less aid for the remaining years. To figure out if a college might be doing this, go to the federal government’s College Navigator website to look at the average grant amount for first-year students compared with all undergraduate students. If there’s a significant difference, that is a sign that you should at least ask about front-loading.
* The pressure that families feel to pay huge sums for what they see as the “right college” is real. In her research, Caitlin Zaloom, associate professor at New York University, found that parents see their kid’s potential as unrealized in high school and only the “best” college can provide the environment for them to explore and develop. In more than 160 interviews, parents told Zaloom they first consider how a college “suited their child’s hopes” before grappling with the costs. “Parents made clear that they believed they had to suppress their own financial anxieties,” Zaloom wrote, “so that they could allow their children’s potential to take precedence.”
* The problem is that only the sellers among colleges have the money to provide enough in grants and scholarships to keep student and parent debt down. The much larger group of buyers encourages families to focus on the value of education rather than the actual cost.
* When teenagers start looking for schools, their quest is guided by academics and social needs as well as geography. Cost is a concern, of course, but families have only a hazy idea of what their tuition bill might look like. The college sticker price listed on its website is useless unless since, at most schools, few people actually pay that figure. Exactly what a family’s bill will be, however, isn’t clear. At the most-sought-after colleges, financial aid offers don’t arrive until after admissions decisions are released in March. From the moment the letters arrive, students and their parents have only about a month until the May 1 deadline to decide where the want to go- and most important, how to pay for it.
* Some sellers do have scholarship programs-for handfuls of truly outstanding students- but they don’t tend to offer the well-publicized tuition discounts to students whose families have assets and the ability to pay. Those discounts are offered by less selective colleges downstream that use the money to lure high-caliber students away from top schools.
* Many students from upper-middle class families don’t have financial need as defined by the government or institutional formulas but still need a discount. If that description fits you, be sure your list of colleges includes a mix of sellers and buyers. Getting aid at the buyers is easier if you can pay a good portion of the cost and are a strong student compared to their averages.
* We spend so much money, time, and attention on choosing a college and getting into a college. Perhaps we could take just a bit of that and put it toward understanding how much college is going to cost, how we are going to pay for it, and what we might do once we get there.

**Chapter 10. Making the Final Decision- May 1**

* For colleges, April is like the end of a quarter for sales executives or Black Friday for retailers. It’s when they must close the deal for students and parents who are weighing multiple options.
* The campus tour has been called the “million-dollar walk” or the “golden mile” because of its importance to feeding the enrollment machine. The tour is another way that schools serve their own agenda in admissions by highlighting the bells and whistles they think separate their campus from other schools students are considering. For colleges, it’s a lot cheaper and easier to design a better tour than improve the undergraduate experience by hiring more full-time professors, adding career advisors, and building new classrooms and labs-all elements teenagers rarely realize they should care about while being herded around campuses.
* The anxiety about getting into a brand-name school starts with a single, fundamental principle believed by students and parents in top high schools: it matters *where* you go to college.
* It’s a bedrock belief I have wrestled with for more than two decades of writing about higher education. I didn’t go to a highly selective college, yet I’m surrounded by people who did- and many of them maintain that the name of their diploma has had a significant impact on their success in life.
* But CEOs and hiring managers tell me something different. When I wrote my last book, I spent time observing how executives from companies as large as IBM, Xerox, and Enterprise Rent-A-Car and as small as IDEO and Pinterest hire new college graduates. For the most part, I found that job applicants’ experiences and their skills matter more in hiring than their alma mater or major. The advice I that book was that *how* students go to college- from choosing a major and courses to finding internships- plays a much larger role in life after graduation than *where* they go to college.
* Consider this: every year, some 1.8 million twentysomethings graduate from a four-year college. Only 54,000 of them receive a bachelor’s degree from what we’d consider a selective college. Clearly, employers have more than 54,000 good jobs they need to fill each year with college graduates.
* That said, parents and students who obsess over getting into highly selective colleges aren’t thinking about just any job after graduation. Rather, they’re often focused on elite professions where graduates from top colleges typically land-management consulting firms, Wall Street investment banks, and white-shoe law firms. They’re all filled with alumni from ultra-selective colleges. So, too, are the clerkships in the Supreme Court, the ranks of the national media in New York, the staff of Senate offices in Washington, and the CEO suites of the Fortune 500.
* Elite colleges seem to lead to elite jobs, and in turn, elite money. Around half of *Forbe’s* list of the most powerful people, as well as half of America’s billionaires, attend top schools.
* The problem with these often-quoted statistics about selective schools is that they overlook the role that the individual student plays in their own eventual success- both the social and financial “capital” they bring to their undergraduate careers is very important. Top colleges don’t just take anyone who applies. They except smart students who exhibit promise- or who are well connected or come from upper-middle-class and wealthy families- and then unite them with top-notch faculty, research opportunities, ambitious classmates, and an extensive alumni network.
* For forty years, top-ranked institutions have sold us on those distinctions, telling prospective students and their families that the brand name on the degree is what matters most when it comes to success after college. But in recent years, economists have been digging deeper into a stockpile of data from tax records and job postings. What they’re finding is starting to shift the conversation around the question “Does it matter where you go to college?” For economists, it’s a much more nuanced answer than before” majors and skills might count for more in the job market than a college itself. It makes sense. Employers hire for jobs requiring a distinct set of skills. Colleges as a whole don’t signal that someone has those skills, but employers think a student’s college major does.
* Would-be college students now have access to those numbers that for years sat buried in government databases. In 2019, the U.S. Education Department released an update to the College Scorecard (collegescorecard.ed.gov), allowing students to take a more granular look at what graduates earn and how much debt they take on broken out by academic program, not just the college they attended.
* In general, browsers of the College Scorecard will see that graduates of nursing, computer science, and information technology programs earn the most a year after college- almost no matter where they go- while psychology, drama/theater arts, and biology are the lowest paid (likely because psychology and biology majors go on to graduate or medical school, where the real money comes).
* The bottom line: in your college search worry less about specific brands and even majors and worry more about acquiring skills and experiences once you’re on campus, such as finding an undergraduate research project or landing an internship. Remember: fewer than a third of college graduates work in jobs related to their majors.
* Sure, if you go to Harvard you probably have a greater chance of rubbing elbows with the founder of the next Facebook or the daughter of a Fortune 500 CEO. You also might have a better shot of getting into a top law school, landing a grant from the National Science Foundation, or earning a PhD from an elite university. But if you’re a well-prepared student whose parents attended college, you’ll likely find important connections and pathways to success at nearly *any* school on your list. As I’ve tried to make clear, just because you have the qualifications to get into Harvard, Stanford, Michigan, or Amherst doesn’t mean that these sellers will accept you. Be sure to broaden your search and apply to a mix of private and public schools that are also selective-but not as hyper-selective- and take into account other factors such as the likelihood of graduating on time, affordability, and access to faculty, mentors, and advising.
* So, I’m not saying that it doesn’t matter whether you end up at Rochester Institute of Technology instead of Yale, but the differences are a lot *less* stark than we like to believe. Does going to Yale help? Sure. But there are so many other factors contributing to your ultimate path to success that focusing exclusively on this one narrow stretch of it seems out of whack. Are you majoring in the right thing? Have you pursued the right internship? Did your parents let you “fail” enough as a teenager to build resiliency and the ability to navigate the uncertainty of a changing workforce? Do you know the right place at the firm where you’re applying for your first job? In the end, college is a staging ground. It’s one of many stops you’ll make throughout life, but it’s not the only one, and certainly not the last.
* The students I found who were happiest with the way many things had turned out were able to maneuver through the unpredictability of life after their senior year by embracing a new school or two near the top of their list rather than remain entranced with the luster of the best brands and crowned by some magazine or website.
* Few of the seniors I met in high schools across the country throughout 2018-2019 were accepted into their first-choice colleges that were often among the most selective in the nation. But you know what? They didn’t end up skipping college nor did they end up at Pondunk U. In the end, they discovered that there is no such thing as a perfect fit.

**Conclusion: Charting the Future**

* Colleges themselves are making other changes. Perhaps the biggest shift is the declining significance of standardized test scores. More than one thousand campuses have dropped the SAT/ACT as an admission requirement. Most of them are buyers looking for another way to boost application numbers.
* In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, buyers will become increasingly desperate to fill seats with tuition discounts- especially those near the bottom of higher education’s hierarchy. Those schools will flood the market with even more marketing appeals to a wider range of teenagers, offering easier ways to apply and get in, while also struggling to balance what they collect in revenue from students with what they then give out in tuition discounts.
* About a dozen colleges have closed each year since 2015- double the number at the beginning of the century- a trend that, along with mergers, is projected only to increase.

*Two suggestions for parents, students, and their counselors:*

**Take control over more of the admissions process.** Assert the clout you have- decide for yourself what is important. Right now, it feels as if colleges get to press all the buttons: students essentially let colleges tell them what should matter in high school, and even in life. Turn the tables. After all, you’re the customer. Colleges dictate the process because we allow them to.

The best way for students to gain leverage is to broaden their search beyond the super selective schools- the ones that have amassed great fortunes and generate so much attention that they must reject more than 90 percent of applicants. If you focus your search on what you want to *do* in college rather than *where* you go to college, you’ll find schools that will provide a superb education at a reasonable price but that may not be wealthy or necessarily well-known.

**Encourage students to drive the college search but allow for detours.** High school, like college, is a staging ground for the next phase of your life. Allow for changeability throughout your search. It’s okay to be unsure about what you want to major in and where you want to go. The students I met who ended up being most satisfied with their final choice were the ones who embraced the ambiguity of the process rather than got fixated on one or two schools. And, parents, let your child see the search as a learning experience. Stop using the college where *you* want them to end up as a trophy for your parenting.

*How could the federal government make the college search better?*

**Eliminate binding early decision.** October is the new January for seniors in pressure-cooker high schools, where ED tends to be more popular and only adds to the anxiety about choosing the right college. For too many teenagers, ED has turned into little more than a strategy, a trick to help them get into a super selective school. They don’t necessarily love the college; they just love their chance of admission.

Early decision- with its application deadline two months into a student’s last year of high school- rushes a process that should be a journey of discovery and reflection for teenagers and their families. Early decision leaves students with the impression that there’s only *one right college* for them.

**Redesign the application to focus on what really matters.** Schools typically know that two basic measures indicate whether students will succeed on their campuses: high school courses and grades. That’s why nothing usually carries more weight in admissions than those two elements.

After those two factors, there is a steep drop-off in the emphasis given to other parts of the application: essays, counselor and teacher recommendations, and extracurricular activities. Fewer than 15 percent said those factors are of considerable importance, according to an annual survey by the National Association for College Admission. Forty percent said they carry “moderate” weight. One reason is the unreliability of key elements of the application, said John Latting, Emory’s admissions dean. “Activities are embellished, recommendations lack negative comments, and the standard now is multiple editors for essays,” he said.

**Expand the field.** The reason college admissions has turned into a race to be won is that angst-ridden teens and their parents believe higher education is a scarce commodity. It isn’t. Only seats at the most selective colleges are.

In the United States, prestige in higher education is measured by how many students a university rejects. While the philosophy on Wall Street is that growth is good, with higher education the prevailing wisdom is that increased size comes at the expense of academic quality and reputation.

**Allow students, early in their college search, to see the total price they’d likely pay.** Right now, too many students don’t know the actual price tag of a college until after they’re accepted and shortly before the May 1 deadline for choosing where to go. Even if colleges never adopt the idea of a national clearinghouse, they should at least release a searchable database of their financial aid offers every year. Then prospective students could look up previous applicants with a similar academic background and family income to understand early on in the search process what kind of aid they might get.

By knowing the total and true price of a degree, students could shape their lists to take affordability into consideration rather than selectivity alone. The likely result of syncing the financial fit of college with the social and academic fit is a list that includes a wider range of schools because it finally includes a critical data point: what you’ll actually pay.

**Appendix**

**Getting In: What Matters Most**

Rather than provide advice for every contingency you’ll face in your college search, I’ve decided to identify four parts of the process you should focus on. My choosing those four areas doesn’t mean all that other advice you’ll get isn’t important. It’s just that if you’re going to dedicate your time and energy anywhere, here’s where I think you should put it.

1. **Worry about what you do in high school, and a little less about standardized tests.**

I’m not saying don’t prepare for the SAT or ACT at all- spending an hour so a day for three weeks with practice tests might prove useful- but don’t fret over studying for the exam.

* **Use freshman year to explore your academic and extracurricular interests.** The first year of high school is a tough transition for many teenagers. Colleges know that, so most pay little, if any, attention to what you do in ninth grade. Where freshman year does matter is how it sets you up for what follows. Take the prerequisites needed in ninth grade so you can enroll in upper-level courses in junior year.
* **Take the hardest courses available, but also what interests you.** Admissions officers look at what courses were available to you based on your high school profile. The more advanced classes your high school offers, the more you’re expected to take. Few things matter more than those reading applications more than strength of schedule and grades. So, don’t skip upper-level math courses just because you don’t like math. Indeed, Al Calculus is seen by selective schools as a signal of academic achievement.
* **Keep grades consistent, and don’t** **blow off senior year.** Colleges are looking for grades that are either consistently good throughout high school or on a steady rise form the start. What concerns them is a downward trend or one that is “spiky.”
* **Don’t ask for recommendations from the usual suspects.** Seel at least one recommendation from teachers *outside* of your area- an English teacher for science majors, for instance- to show your breath of interests. Admissions officers want to read a letter from someone who can adequately describe your weaknesses but also detail your potential. And ask early: the popular teachers especially are overwhelmed in the fall with requests from seniors for letters.

1. **Make the initial college list about your *needs* and fuss with the *names* later on.**

Before you get caught up in the rankings, the guidebooks, and Naviance, explore the most basic aspects of the higher education ecosystem and make your own ranking based on what’s important to *you*.

* **Gather information from those around you.** Talk to everyone you might know- undergraduates as well as adults who went to all kinds of colleges. Ask about the differences between a college and a university, between a research institution and a teaching college, what a bachelor’s degree is, and what it means to major in something.
* **Visit campuses but not necessarily because you want to go there.** If you have the time and resources, go to college campuses near your home. Don’t worry about whether you have a desire to go there or not. Walk around. Sit in a class or two Go to a dining hall. Get a sense of what a large public university or a small liberal arts college is like.
* **Connect with colleges.** As you start to compile a list of schools you’re interested in, explore their websites and sign up for information. Follow schools on social media, check out their students who have You Tube channels, look for the schools at a college fair, show up if their representatives visit your high school, and try to visit as many campuses as you can when your list starts to take shape.
* **Balance your list.** Have ten to twelve schools overall, with three to four colleges in each of the three categories: *likely* or *safety* schools, where you’re above the school’s ranges for GPA and test scores; *target* or *foundation* schools, where you’re solidly in the middle; and *reach* or *dream* schools, which would be a stretch for you. Remember, many students start their college search in the fall with aspirational dreams that end in the spring with a cold reality: you might get into only your “likely schools,” so be sure they’re colleges you’d want to attend and not just placeholders on a list.
* **Think about the money.** Forget about that scholarship your neighbor’s kid got to some school; not every college offers a discount and not every financial aid package is negotiable. If you can’t easily write a $21,000 check for the *average* in-state public college or $49,000 for the *average* private school- and do that for four years-be sure to have the “buyers” I spoke about in the book on your list. That’s where your chances for merit aid are better. You can explore my list of “buyers” and “sellers” at jeffselingo.com/buyersandsellers.

1. **Think about each application individually, rather than all of them collectively.**

Resist cutting and pasting from a Google doc to fill in the blanks on the Common App or to complete a supplemental question about why you want to go to X school.

* **Tell admission officers what you want them to know.** If you don’t want them to know about the 2 you scored on an AP test, don’t list it on the application. Make acronyms clear. Don’t assume they know anything about you, your high school, your classes, or your activities. If you want them to know something, tell them.
* **Explain what matters to you.** In the activities section, put first what matters most you you. Use all the characteristics available to describe what the activity is (again, don’t assume unless it’s something like student government) and the impact you made in it.
* **Be sure those who recommend you *know* you.** Too often a recommendation mentions a school club or passion for an academic subject not listed elsewhere in the application, leading admissions officers to what really matters to the student. As much as you can, make sure the person recommending you knows what you’re going to focus on in your application.
* **Finally, what’s the story you want to tell?** Think of your application **as a narrative of your journey-** the social and educational path you took to reach this particular point in your life, your passions, and interests. Before you hit Submit on the application, think: *What do I want this document to tell someone who doesn’t know me and will have only a few minutes to review it?*

1. **Focus on what fits you rather than how good the sticker looks on the back of your family’s car window.**

Throughout the search, go back often to that list of what matters to you in a college. Yes, it might change but be sure it does so because of what *you* want- not your parents, counselors, or friends.

* M**indsets and skills matter more than colleges and majors.** Spend time during the college search thinking about *how* you’re going to spend your undergraduate years, instead of w*here* you’re going to do it. Your goal is to acquire skills and experiences on campus- for example, an undergraduate research project or an internship- that matter in the job market, not just to major in something.
* **Think about the money.** Don’t wait until you’re accepted to think about the tuition bill. How you pay for college is more than a dollar-and-cents question. It impacts what you do after college. The less debt students have afterward, the more freedom they have to pick job opportunities without regard to pay.
* **One other thing on money:** **the majors you *think* pay don’t always.** A few years ago, when I wrote about majors for the *New York Times*, I found that salaries within specific majors vary greatly. For example, the top quarter of earners who majored in English make more over their lifetimes than the bottom quarter of engineers. Even English or history graduates who make just above the median lifetime earnings for their major do pretty well when compared to typical graduates in business or a STEM field.