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6 Factors That Predict a Student's College Success

By Lynn O'Shaughnessy

Some parents are obsessed with getting their children into top-ranked schools no matter the cost. You can save a lot of money by understanding what truly leads to the best outcomes for your children.

With some schools now costing more than \$300,000 for a single bachelor's degree, it's incredibly easy to overspend and think such an expenditure is absolutely essential. And this just isn't true, even for the most highly ranked schools such as the Ivy League institutions and such vaunted institutions as Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University and Duke University, which is now just a few hundred dollars shy of \$80,000 for one year!

Further down on U.S. News & World Report's college rankings, plenty of universities in cities on the coasts charge more than \$70,000 a year. These schools can charge more largely because of their location, location, location!

Here are some cost-of-attendance examples:

- Fordham University: \$80,801
- New York University: \$80,878
- George Washington University: \$79,410

- Santa Clara University: \$76,497
- Emerson College: \$76,754
- Drexel University: \$76,524
- Loyola Marymount University: \$74,309

Consequently, spending an obscene amount of money on a bachelor's degree is a temptation and a possibility for all parents, not just those with the most brainiac and ambitious kids, who think they have a shot at Harvard.

I understand, however, that it can be hard to convince yourself that overspending isn't necessary. After all, choosing colleges is an emotional decision tied up with ego. People also mistakenly believe that schools with higher rankings represent the only source of "golden tickets"—that they will get a dream job and salary just because they went to that particular school. Actually, high-income students already possess their golden tickets because of the way they were raised.

But when you broaden your college searching horizons, you can save yourself a significant amount of money and be positioned for a more secure retirement and possibly a greater financial legacy for your heirs.

THE BEST ARGUMENTS IN ONE REPORT

The good news is that the very best arguments against focusing exclusively on the most expensive college's net price are cogently summarized in an invaluable report published by Challenge Success, a highly regarded nonprofit affiliated with Stanford University's Graduate School of Education.

I would urge you to Google and read the 22-page report. I firmly believe there is no other single document that tackles the two most stubborn myths that parents and their teenagers believe as they start their college hunt.

The report summarizes well-regarded research that obliterates these two beliefs:

- 1) Schools with higher U.S. News rankings and higher rejection rates are the only schools worth attending.
- 2) Students must attend highly selective schools because they are the only ones that can bestow golden tickets—excellent, high-paying careers.

In their words:

Rankings are problematic.

Many students and families rely on college rankings published by well-known organizations to define quality. The higher the ranking, the logic goes, the better the college must be and vice versa. We find that many of the metrics used in these rankings are weighted arbitrarily and are not accurate indicators of a college's quality or positive outcomes for students.

College selectivity is not a reliable predictor of student learning, job satisfaction or well-being.

We explore the research on whether attending a selective college predicts important life outcomes and find no significant relationship between a school's selectivity and student learning, future job satisfaction, or well-being. We find a modest relationship between financial benefits and attending more selective colleges, and that these benefits apply more to first-generation and other underserved students. We also find that individual student characteristics (such as background, major, ambition) may make more of a difference in terms of post-college outcomes than the institutions themselves.

WHAT DOES MATTER IN COLLEGE OUTCOMES

The College Success Report also looked at what does matter in terms of having a successful college outcome. The report nicely summarizes a much-publicized survey conducted by Gallup and Purdue in 2014 that indicated that the key to happiness in graduates' lives and careers is not the colleges they attended but their level of engagement at whatever school they ended up at.

The Gallup-Purdue results illustrated that the more engaged a student was, as measured by six factors, the more likely he or she would be successful in life. Sadly, only three percent of graduates with a bachelor's degree could answer yes to the following six statements!

6 Signs of Personal Engagement in College Predict Success in Later Life

Support	% strongly agree
I had at least one professor at [college] who made me excited about learning.	63%
My professors at [college] cared about me as a person.	27%
I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams.	22%
Strongly agree with all 3 support statements	14%
Experiential	% strongly agree
I worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete.	32%
I had an internship or job that allowed me to apply what I was learning in the classroom.	29%
I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while attending [college].	20%
Strongly agree with all 3 experiential statements	6%
Strongly agree with all 6 statements	3%

Source: Gallup

My daughter is a perfect example. Caitlin would have been one of the three percenters. A former marketing director for a toy company, Caitlin launched a start-up in early 2018, moved to the Silicon Valley, and is happy in her career and her personal life.

She went to a school hardly anybody has heard of—Juniata College in Pennsylvania—with the help of two merit scholarships. We didn't pay more than we had budgeted for and Caitlin graduated with no debt.

KEEPING YOUR OPTIONS OPEN

I am definitely not suggesting that families must avoid prestigious schools, but I do not think these institutions are worth going into deep debt for or paying full price for when there are many schools which will offer merit scholarships like the ones my daughter received. Families will never know what kind of aid their child could receive—and thus how much money they could save—if they don't look past the Ivy League schools and the rankings darlings.

Lynn O'Shaughnessy is a nationally recognized college expert, higher education journalist, consultant, and speaker.