

Key Concepts:

selectivity

retention rate

six-year graduation rate

success rate

Chapter 8

Understanding Universities: How to Size Up Your Options

You're smart to want to find a college that fits you. Finding an educational environment where you feel comfortable and that suits your needs is important to the learning process. But so much of what is written today in terms of college choice advises you to think about "fit" primarily in intangible, emotional terms. Did you feel welcome on campus? Could you picture yourself there? Did the new dormitories you were shown seem cozy but cool? Did your tour of state-of-the-art facilities leave you impressed?

Make no mistake – colleges spend big money these days trying to ensure that you have a "feel-good" experience when you take your campus tour. The recruitment and admissions process has become a multibillion-dollar industry. That's right, *multibillion*. Schools, especially big public institutions that can't compare to the coziness of small private ones, hire consultants to teach admissions officials and student tour guides exactly what to highlight, right down to the most advantageous spot on campus to stop and answer any questions you may have. Recruiting students, particularly the best and the brightest, is competitive business, and colleges have to do what they need to do. But you should assume a certain amount of staging has gone into every brochure, every visit and every "frank" discussion with a "real" student.

In some ways, the pressure and emphasis on making the “right” college choice is similar to all the frenzy and excess that surrounds planning a wedding nowadays. The fantasy of creating the “perfect” wedding has little bearing on the reality of marriage. Similarly, the fantasy of picking one “best” or “right” college has little connection to the reality of day-to-day life on campus. The intense social pressure to achieve perfection in both endeavors drives many families to spend money in ways they never would for less emotionally charged financial decisions. And think about this: Even if the wedding day or the college choice seemed to have been perfect at the time, the odds of the marriage ending in divorce or the degree going unearned are, on average, nearly 50 percent. Perhaps that means, in both instances, the focus may be too much on the fantasy and not enough on the reality.

Understanding Differences

You already know that colleges differ financially. On paper, there are huge differences in price. You also know that some colleges are considered more academically elite and demanding than others. For some schools, that reputation may be well-earned; for others, it may simply be an “aura” of prestige.

But you have also learned – at least you have if you read Chapter 2 – that, regardless of what advertising materials say, undergraduate programs tend to be very similar. The campus setting, surrounding environment and extracurricular experiences may differ drastically, but the actual undergraduate program, meaning the courses and curriculum, at most campuses are remarkably similar. Because most schools are accredited by the same associations, you can assume that you will receive a comparable education in terms of faculty quality, course content and degree requirements regardless of where you choose to pursue your bachelor’s degree. Sure, there will be individual academ-

ic strengths, but, at the undergraduate level, these differences are not as critical to the overall learning package as they are at the graduate level.

What you also may not know or fully appreciate is that humans – even brand-name-obsessed college students – are incredibly adaptable beings. A song from 1970s folk rocker Stephen Stills sums up the phenomenon quite nicely: “If you can’t be with the one you love, honey, love the one you’re with.” In other words, even if you end up going to a school that is not your first, second or even fifth choice, you’re likely to leave that fall-back choice happy with the experience you had.

The Higher Education Research Institute surveys students about their college satisfaction levels. In HERI’s 2008-2009 survey of graduating seniors, more than 95 percent of the 24,000 students who responded said they were satisfied with the general education or core curriculum of their university. This suggests that the vast majority of students leave school relatively happy with their college experience. Even students who thought they were not going to like their school when they first arrived on campus tend to leave relatively content.

So, given the broad similarity in academic programming and this remarkable human ability to adapt, what factors should a discerning student (like you) consider when weighing college options? After 12 years of primary and secondary school, you know all about the 3 R’s. When it comes to assessing your higher education options, think about 4 S’s:

- **Sticker price**
- **Size**
- **Selectivity**
- **Success rate**