

# Informed Consumerism for the College Bound

BY PETER VAN BUSKIRK

“If I had to do it again, I probably wouldn’t be able to get into my alma mater” is the sobering response of many adults to a college admissions process that is far removed from the one they followed only a generation ago. I heard it recently at the National Association of College Admission Counselors conference as seasoned admissions professionals discussed a process that has gone awry—a process that has taken on circuslike qualities as the good of the student has given way to the good of the institution.

Applying to college used to be a fairly straightforward undertaking. Students applied to a few colleges that met their academic needs. The institutions responded by admitting the most-worthy candidates. It was simple. No fuss. No fanfare. But that seemingly benign process is a distant memory. In its place is a swirling cauldron of angst and anxiety, especially for the families that aim to get their children into highly selective colleges.

Nowhere is the effect felt more acutely than in secondary schools as administrators and counselors deal with heightened expectations for college placements. In particular, guidance counselors and others who assist in the college application process find themselves in a constant battle with parents in an effort to set realistic expectations. They feel increasingly out of the loop as highly stressed parents primp and coif their kids with test prep, essay-writing tutorials, and summer camps that are geared to college preparation. The students, in turn, flex their scores, GPAs, and accomplishments, constantly stretching against real and imagined standards. Eager to attend the “best” colleges, they strain against the odds with the expectation that their objective is within reach.

## Obsessed With the Best

The process changed forever in the early 1980s as product accountability entered U.S. consumers’ consciousness and we

*Principals must provide solid resources and information to help students and their families cut through the hype and restore sanity to the college admission process.*



became a society obsessed with the best. We want the best appliances, the best cars, and the best vacations. And for each item we buy, there is a consumer guide replete with research and rankings to make the decision making easier. It wasn’t long before the approach to colleges followed suit.

In a stroke of marketing genius, *U.S. News and World Report* published its first college-ranking issue in 1982. For the first time, colleges and universities were quantitatively compared. Never mind that the data was—and remains—self-reported and the methodology flawed. (The single greatest determinant of an institution’s ranking continues to be reputation, a nebulous index derived from a peer review by college presidents and deans—most of whom have conceded they don’t know much about the schools for which they assign quality ratings.) The once-mythical pecking order had been given the look of something official.

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Although the validity of the *U.S. News* project is still very much in question, the project itself has had a galvanizing effect on higher education. Despite loud protests from colleges and universities, many of which disdainfully regarded the highly profitable *U.S. News* college guide as its “swimsuit issue,” most quickly fell into line as the guidebook grew rapidly each year. Whether they feared the consequences of being left out of the ratings guides or saw the opportunity to secure or enhance their respective positions in the marketplace, institutions scrambled to churn out data.

What followed has taken on the dimensions of the arms race as once-sedate institutions rally to improve their position in the court of public opinion—and to compete with one another for the mantle of “the best.” But without clear definition or points of discrimination, the best was hard to define, so the ratings-guide editors invented a host of measuring sticks: Which college has the best faculty? the best campus? the best social life? Which is the most exclusive—the hardest to get into? And perhaps the ultimate tease for institutions and consumers alike: which college or university enrolls the best students? It is now hard to imagine a conversation about higher education that doesn’t include a comparative reference.

This race has profoundly affected the way colleges and universities think about themselves. Colleges vying to be regarded as the best have invested millions of dollars to remake themselves into bastions of the latest in lifestyle, learning, and entertainment with public relations machines that manufacture compelling data while cranking out catchy phrases and glossy images.

No longer able to simply promote education, colleges have gone designer, reinventing themselves as fashionable learning centers with posh amenities. Image development is now central to attracting applicants and defining value in the marketplace. In their attempts to attract more students—a decline in applicants or a dip in academic profile could prove costly—colleges now sell image packaged as a privileged commodity.

Determined to remain competitive, colleges and universities persist with strategies that are designed to enhance selectivity, improve yield, bolster the test-score profile, and leverage their resources strategically. Effective as such practices might be, they are conducted behind a heavy layer of rhetoric that shrouds the process in secrecy. On the one hand, colleges aggressively court students with promises of need-blind

admission; the advantages of early admission; and such perks as tuition discounts, free computers, and the latest in campus amenities. Then, at the apex of the courtship, admission officers determine who will be admitted. In a process obscured by smoke and mirrors, they seemingly pull the class out of a hat. Students are left guessing, and high school administrators are finding it more difficult to explain the rationale behind admission decisions. They often give valuable time to investigating why one student didn’t get in instead of helping others gain admission to great institutions that are not necessarily rated among the best.

### A Sane Approach

Despite the propensity of the media to focus on top-tier colleges, administrators can present evidence to their school communities that a quality college education is not reserved for a select few institutions and foster a more in-depth and multidimensional view of institutions of higher learning. College-

seeking families need the calming effects of accurate, fact-based information and the freedom to discover on their own which schools would meet their children’s needs.

Guiding students toward a successful higher education starts with researching higher education opportunities properly.

In addition to preparing students for college-level studies academically, educators and counselors should ensure that families know where to go for the information they need to make the best choices for their children. When this happens, the increasingly neurotic buying behaviors give way to informed consumerism, instead of the other way around.

Educators at all levels have a responsibility to ensure that form does not transcend substance in this high-stakes public relations gambit. They must all take part in creating a fully transparent admission process. College leaders must come out from behind their self-serving rhetoric to regain the trust of college-bound families and restore integrity to the selection process. Secondary school administrators and counselors must speak up at the local level about the validity of rankings and provide examples of successful careers that derive from a range of college experiences from their very own pool of alumni.

In every conversation with students and families, educators must insist that defining the best has to be within the context of what is good for the student. It is their duty to lessen college-bound anxiety and foster greater college access for all. **PL**

