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Selecting the Right College

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Our Universities: Selecting the Right One

Study before You Study... <http://walterwendler.com/>.

Finding the right college to fit individual needs is critical, and one size does not fit all. Only thoughtful personal consideration should guide decision making. However, some issues cannot be overlooked.

“The college search doesn’t have to begin and end with the Ivies and the name brand schools. There are many schools out there to choose from — some known and some less known, all worthy of your attention.”

Martha O’Connell -- *How to Choose A College That’s Right for You*

The New York Times carried an article by David Brooks on April 4, 2013, entitled *The Practical University*.

The thrust of Brook’s reflection focused on the conflicts and possibilities of delivering content based on technical knowledge and its relationship to applied knowledge online. The argument goes that technical knowledge is reasonably well transmitted through online education. However, applied knowledge and the social skills and abilities that go along with the application of knowledge are best learned on site, with and through others.

The concept of a student-focused, functionally driven institution, where distinctions are made not between technical and applied knowledge, but by what’s necessary for student learning and a more enlightened and prosperous life, should be paramount. Indeed, some of the frills provided on college campuses get in the way of any learning, be it technical or applied, that can be personally beneficial.

I would offer the following thoughts.

First, visit the campus. If you do not meet a tenured, full-time faculty member, an advisor or staff person who supports academic work, *and* at least one academic leader -- a department chair or a dean expert in the field you wish to study -- beware that you may be at a place that puts something between you and your learning experience. I don’t care how many energetic, sprightly student leaders you meet -- and recruiting new students is an excellent opportunity for current students who value community engagement to practice it -- they are not faculty. They don’t have the professional qualifications and experience you seek to make learning valuable; they don’t teach classes; they don’t make assignments; and they don’t set expectations. If the academic enterprise does not have time for you on the way in, why would it when you get there?

Make an academic investment at an academic institution.

Second, if student fees for nonessential aspects of study, athletics, various organizations, Disneyland-like facilities are unrelated to academic excellence but exceed the cost of tuition: Look out. The institution is investing incorrectly and fees are a way to increase revenue while appearing to hold tuition low -- and can sometimes constitute carefully considered deceptions: accounting manipulations, not academic investments. A \$300 million football stadium at any university that does not have a research library ranked in the top 10 nationally is a fundamental misfit. I don’t care what university you are considering. But be

careful, the University of Michigan is one of the best public universities in the world, and it charges athletics fees, but at a fraction of other institutions. And it has an excellent intercollegiate athletics program and a first-rate library too. **Find out a university's priorities.**

Third, read every ranking and comparative assessment system you can find regarding the universities you are considering attending. Trust none of them – at least not a *single* one -- but pay attention to all of them, and study each as a means to help shape your opinions. We read **Consumer Reports** for a week before we buy a \$100 coffee pot. A \$100,000 life investment demands a little scrutiny too. Tuition and fees, library quality, faculty achievement and honors, faculty salaries, scholarships, alumni giving rates, endowments, research funding, student clubs and organizations, student debt, student work opportunities, the nature of student government... all this stuff matters. And make sure you compare apples to apples...don't look at a national research university in the same way that you look at a regional college. Different institutions have different purposes, which address different aspirations, for different students, at different costs with different benefits. **Know what you expect from the university, and what it will provide.**

Fourth, if the headlines from a university don't trumpet learning and student achievement, be careful. Here's a headline from the **Star-Ledger**, Monday, April 8, 2013: "For Rutgers, Big-Time Scandal Will Mean Big-Time Costs in Dollars, Reputation." When priorities are contorted everything is affected: *"Wealthy supporters are threatening to close their checkbooks. The disgraced coach and the tarnished athletic director are walking away with university-funded golden parachutes of more than \$1 million each. In less than a week, a middling basketball program has turned toxic."* Not all of these failures can be laid at the doorstep of leadership -- as was the case at Penn State -- but universities that twist priorities away from academics eventually diminish value to current, future and past students. Athletics is sometimes an easy target. Other forms of malfeasance, machination, and misappropriation are also embedded in university leadership. And mistakes can become cultural: *"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."* Luke: 6:45. **Understand a university's culture, its heart.**

Choose carefully, it will follow, or lead you all of your life.