

Prestige Versus Education

By Thomas Sowell
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High school seniors who want to go to a selective college in the fall of 2008 should already be making arrangements to take the tests they will need before they apply ahead of the deadlines for such schools, which are usually in January or February.

One of the consequences of taking these tests is that, if you do well, you may be deluged with literature from colleges and universities all across the country.

Some students may feel flattered that Harvard, Yale or M.I.T. seems to be dying to have them apply. But the brutal reality is that the reason for wanting so many youngsters to apply is so that they can be rejected.

Why? Because the prestige ranking of a college or university as a "selective" institution is measured by how small a percentage of its applicants are accepted. So they have to get thousands of young people to apply, so that they can be rejected.

While we are on the subject of reality and prestige, one of the tragic misconceptions of many students and their parents is that you have to go to a prestigious, big-name academic institution to really get ahead and reach the top.

Some students get sunk deep into depression when they are notified in April that they have been rejected by some Ivy League school that they had their heart set on. When they are accepted, some parents go deep into debt to finance the education of their offspring at the college of their dreams.

Seldom is either reaction warranted.

Stop and think: What is an academic institution's prestige based on?

Academic prestige is based mostly on the research achievements of the faculty. Places like Harvard or Stanford have many professors who are among the leading experts in their respective fields, including some who have won Nobel Prizes.

Good for them. But is it good for you, if you are a student at Prestige U.?

Big-name professors are unlikely to be teaching you freshman English or introductory math. Some may not be teaching you anything at all, unless and until you go on to postgraduate study.

In other words, the people who generated the prestige which attracted you to the college may be seen walking about the campus but are less likely to be seen standing in front of your classroom when you begin your college education.

Lower level courses are usually left to be taught by junior faculty members or even graduate students. Yet these courses are often the foundation on which higher level courses are built.

If you don't really master introductory calculus, physics or economics, you are unlikely to do well in higher level courses which presuppose that you already have a foundation on which they can build.

By contrast, at a small college without the prestige of big-name research universities, the introductory courses which provide a foundation for higher courses are more likely to be taught by experienced professors who are teachers more so than researchers.

Maybe that is why graduates of such colleges often go on to do better than the graduates of big-name research universities.

You may never have heard of Harvey Mudd College but a higher percentage of its graduates go on to get Ph.D.s than do the graduates of Harvard, Yale, Stanford or M.I.T. So do the graduates of Grinnell, Reed, and various other small colleges.

Of the chief executive officers of the 50 largest American corporations surveyed in 2006, only four had Ivy League degrees. Some -- including Michael Dell of Dell computers and Bill Gates of Microsoft -- had no degree at all.

Apparently getting into Prestige U. is not the life or death thing that some students or their parents think it is.

Unfortunately, prestige rankings are so hyped in the media -- especially by U.S. News & World Report magazine -- that many people think that is how to choose a college.

What you really want is not the "best" college but the college that fits you best. For that, you need in-depth information, not statistical rankings. For such information, you could start looking up colleges in the 900-page guide, "Choosing the Right College." After that, campus visits would be in order.

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