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Keeping Higher Education in Perspective

By Dr. Brendan Ryan

Introduction- Ionce had a client from the North East from a good family (Dad was a professional, Mom was an entrepreneur). He was a very strong student with credentials that included a GPA above 4.0 with AP classes, a SAT north of 1500 and strong leadership and hundreds of hours of community service. He was also a good golfer and hoped that golf would be the tipping point for an Ivy League education. After an evaluation, which included the day together and a round of golf, I thought it would be a stretch for him to attend the Ivy League; there are eight schools with two spots each. In my opinion, golf was not going to attract a coach at the Ivy League but his game would be very appealing at Williams, Emory, Notre Dame or Lehigh. After calling and speaking to the coaches, they confirmed they would be interested in offering the young man a spot on the golf team, a great education and guaranteed admissions before the start of his Senior year. As an advisor, would you suggest the student accept this deal?

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Keeping Higher Education in Perspective

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I. Introduction

I once had a client from the North East from a good family (Dad was a professional, Mom was an entrepreneur). He was a very strong student with credentials that included a GPA above 4.0 with AP classes, a SAT north of 1500 and strong leadership and hundreds of hours of community service. He was also a good golfer and hoped that golf would be the tipping point for an Ivy League education. After an evaluation, which included the day together and a round of golf, I thought it would be a stretch for him to attend the Ivy League; there are eight schools with two spots each. In my opinion, golf was not going to attract a coach at the Ivy League but his game would be very appealing at Williams, Emory, Notre Dame or Lehigh. After calling and speaking to the coaches, they confirmed they would be interested in offering the young man a spot on the golf team, a great education and guaranteed admissions before the start of his Senior year. As an advisor, would you suggest the student accept this deal?

a) Early Specialization and Positive Youth Development

Early specialization has been a term used in the athletic world for youth who choose to focus significant time and effort into one sport at any early age (usually before puberty). However, in 2017, it should be noted that early specialization may also apply to academics. In the last couple weeks, I have visited a daycare with a friend who is 14 weeks pregnant, as well as taken my nephews to tutoring (they are 5 and 7 and go their times per week). Data in sports suggest that early specialization can lead to increased injury and burn out, what could the impacts of early specialization in academics mean?

Academics are very important however life demands more than academic competency. This idea is the foundation for research in Positive Youth Development by Richard Learner at Tufts University who fuses ideologies to focus on best practices and outcomes for youth. According to the Search Institute, the process should involve youth building competency in up to 40 external and internal assets. For advisors and parents, it is important that adolescence receives a balance among the assets, taking a role in the decision-making of activities. Building diversity in assets is important because they allow students to build skills that will transfer to either their passion or just life in general. For example, my best golfers are usually not the best students. However, school is very important because it not only leads to college golf but also helps students build focus, mindfulness, and strategy. Each of these skills is important in golf as well as life.

b) Malcolm Gladwell, My School Experience, and Frank Bruni

In Malcolm Gladwell's "David and Goliath," Malcolm introduces the idea of being a "big fish in a little pond" through the story of Caroline Sacks. Ms. Sacks decides on attending a more prestigious Ivy League School to study science rather than the University of Maryland. Soon into her choice, she finds the courses necessary to pursue science too rigorous and changes majors to English.

As a young man, I attended a very challenging academic school with a plethora of engaging students who were very committed. Many had outstanding grades and high academic goals. I was a little different; I loved sports, people, and travel. I rarely did homework, and my grades reflected my actions. When it came time to college, I had a couple good options including a name brand school and a smaller lesser known option. My mother deeply wanted me to go to the brand school. I wanted to go to the lesser school and play college golf with a friend, and in the end, that's what I did.

Many years later, it is clear that decision was the best of my life. At my alma mater, I was among the best students. I thrived academically, was given many opportunities to be involved in different academic and leadership programs and gained a ton of confidence. This confidence changed my life; today I hold several academic degrees and have authored both books and academic papers. I truly believe none of this would have happened if I had attended the other school.

The 2015 book, "Where you go, is not who you'll be" by NY Times writer Frank Bruni, outlines the case for parents and students to make careful considerations of their school decisions in a carefully constructed and well-written piece. Among the highlights of the book include an explanation of why many parents and college advisors should ignore the rankings, as well as a breakdown of the admissions matrix of elite schools. The rankings, according to Bruni are "rickety assumptions…that have enormous meaning to parents and student". Rankings are also the foundation of panic by parents, driving the assumption that Ivy League or elite Liberal Arts schools provide students an unequivocal advantage as they launch into their careers. According to Bruni, this is not only a heuristic, but a danger; the ideologya particular school

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is better than other is at best misleading, and a worst the catalyst for the destruction of self-discovery, motivation, and unhappiness of millions of adolescencts. According to Adam Weinberg, the president of Denison University, "I think U.S. News & World Report will go down as one of the most destructive things ever to happened to higher education". Jeffrey Brenzel, a former dean of admission at Yale who wrote after resigning the position "make no mistake, the publication of college rankings is a business enterprise that capitalizes on anxiety about college admissions."

Bruni suggest "what's troubling about the fixation on a small cluster of colleges to the exclusion of others isn't just the panic that it promotes in the people clamoring at the gates, the unwarranted feelings of failure that it creates in the kids who don't make it through and the pessimism that it suggests about America's fortunes." In support, Bruni has a significant amount of information including the Platinum study, which involves an investigation of more than 550 leaders in Business, Politics and nonprofits groups. The study found that nearly 2/3 of these leaders did not attend institutions that are considered elite. Bruni's own analysis of the winners of the Mac Aurther geniuses grant from 2009-2014 suggests that more than half came from public universities or private schools that many would not generally consider amongst the highest tier. His research also suggests that Oberlin College (Ohio), since the 1920's has had more graduates go on to earn Ph.D.'s than any other liberal arts college of its size.

Another example is the work of Jonathan Roth well, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, who was gathering data about the earnings of graduates from a plethora of institutions. The reason this work is interesting is that Roth well adjusted based on the course of study, knowing that people with certain specialized degrees, like STEM, command higher. The idea of Roth well's work was to examine the "value added," of degrees; does the name on the degree add to income? If so, by how much? After crunching the numbers schools did make a difference, however they were not the ones you might expect; no Ivy made the top 20. Similar research done by Alan Krueger and Stacy Dale had found that "someone with a given SAT score who had gone to Penn State but had also applied to the University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League school with a much lower acceptance rate, generally made the same amount of money after college".

In the book, "the Price of Admissions" by Daniel Golden, he estimates the following distribution of a class at an elite academic institution; 10-15% minorities, 10-25% recruited student athletes, 2-5% children of people who are likely to become generous donors, 10-25% legacies, children of celebrities and politicians 1-2% and children of faculty 1-3 %.Golden's work suggests that between 34%-75% of the class is determined before the admissions process begins.

c) What is a good education?

The heuristic in college admissions is that highly ranked schools offer the best education, which of course is ridiculous! The 26th school is not slightly better than the 27th school and so on. Instead college is an experience which is influenced by a multitude of variables including the classes you take, the people you meet, the activities you engage in and the location and how that culture compliments your own (or doesn't).

As advisors, it is important to have conversations that extend beyond majors and locations and size. To push our students towards more than the "college experience" and allow them to experience studying abroad, or maybe even something more amazing like the Adirondack experience at St. Lawerence University, where students live in a yurt village off the grid for an entire semester. No cell phone, no internet. There's something that would change the life of a young person!

Final Thoughts

Considering the material presented by Frank Bruni, Malcolm Glad well and the other information presented in the paper, does your opinion of what the person in the example should do, change? Then and now, it has always been my opinion that the student should have made visits to the institutions and strongly considered the offers. Should the student have been comfortable, then it would have been an excellent opportunity for a student who wanted a prestigious education.

The student in the example did not only turn down the offers but was greatly offended that anything was discussed other than the Ivy League. In fact, he instructed his parents to "fire" me. They did so, he early applied to the Ivy League and got rejected. He ended up at a school ranked academically behind the schools I had guarantee offers from.

As parents and students continue to drive record college applications, I believe the best option is to be thankful that students have so many outstanding options. We must also continue to educate parents and students on the options, as well as work to change the conversation from rankings to using education as a way to continue to gain knowledge and skills which will prepare adolescents for their next challenge. Easier said than done, but it's something to work towards.

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