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# Who Needs Harvard?

**Competition for the Ivies is as fierce as ever, but kids who look beyond the famous schools may be the smartest applicants of all**

By NANCY GIBBS, NATHAN THORNBURGH

It's the summer before your senior year, and you're sweating. The college brochures are spread across the table, along with itineraries, SAT review books, downloaded copies of Web pages that let you chart the grades and scores of every kid from your high school who applied to a given college in the past five years and whether they got in or not. You're hunting for a school where the principal oboe player is graduating, or the soccer goalie, so it might be in the market for someone with your particular skills. You can be fifth-generation Princeton or the first in your family to apply to college: it's still the most important decision you've ever made, and the most confounding.

You're a parent watching your child, so proud, and so worried. Your neighbors' son was a nationally ranked swimmer, straight As, great boards, nice kid. Got rejected at his top three choices, wait-listed at two more. Who gets into Yale these days anyway? Maybe they should have sent him to Mali for the summer to dig wells, fight malaria, give him something to write about in his essay.

You're the college counselor at a public school in a hothouse ZIP code, and you wish you could grab the students, grab the parents by the shoulders and shake them. Twenty thousand dollars for a college consultant? They're paying for help getting into a school where the kid probably doesn't belong. Do they really think there are only 10 great colleges in the country? There are scores of them, hundreds even, honors colleges embedded inside public universities that offer an Ivy education at state-school prices; small liberal-arts colleges that exalt the undergraduate experience in a way that the big schools can't rival. And if they hope to go on to grad school? Getting good grades at a small school looks better than floundering at a famous one. Think they need to be able to tap into the old-boy network to get a job? Chances are, the kid is going to be doing a job that doesn't even exist now, so connections won't do much good. The rules have changed. The world has changed. You have a sign over your office door: COLLEGE IS A MATCH TO BE MADE, NOT A PRIZE TO BE WON.

"In my generation," says Bill Fitzsimmons, the dean of admissions at Harvard, "America wasted a lot of talent." Applying to college was less brutal mainly because "three-quarters of the population was excluded from these types of schools." Now 62% more students are going to college than did in the '60s, when Fitzsimmons was a Harvard undergrad, and while many of them head off to state universities and community colleges, the top schools are determined to tear down barriers to entry for the brightest of them. Admissions officers from Harvard, Yale and Stanford weave their outreach tours through low-income ZIP codes and remote rural areas, starting new summer academies for promising candidates and waiving their tuition if they do make it in. Harvard's class of 2009 included 22% more students from families who earned under \$60,000 than the class of 2008. Like many other colleges, Harvard also gives some preferences to well-connected applicants like legacies (the children of alumni), but Fitzsimmons says his school is making a statement with its broader outreach. "The word has gone out that if you are talented, the sky is the limit," Fitzsimmons says. "If we don't take advantage of that energy, America will languish."

The math is simple: when so many more kids are applying, a smaller percentage get in, which yields the annual headlines about COLLEGE ADMISSIONS INSANITY. Princeton turned down 4 of every 5 of the valedictorians who applied last year, and Dartmouth could have filled its freshman class with students with a perfect score in at least one SAT subject and had some to spare. But in the meantime, partly as a result, partly in response to all kinds of social and economic trends, the rest of the college universe has shifted as well. The parents may be the last ones to come around--but talk to high school teachers and guidance counselors and

especially to the students themselves, and you can glimpse a new spirit, almost a liberation, when it comes to thinking about college. "Sometimes I see it with families with their second or third child, and they've learned their lesson with the first," observes Jim Conroy, a college counselor at New Trier High School in Winnetka, Ill. Their message: while you may not be able to get into Harvard, it also does not matter anymore. Just ask the kids who have chosen to follow a different road.

### Small Is Beautiful

The apostle of the alternative way is a white-haired, bespectacled former education editor of the New York Times named Loren Pope, whose book *Colleges That Change Lives* is the best-selling admissions guide, ahead of *A Is for Admission: The Insider's Guide to Getting Into the Ivy League and Other Top Colleges*. He lays out all the ways in which the past 30 years have smiled on smaller schools. With rising prosperity, their endowments have grown. The number of Ph.D.s doubled from 1968 to 1998, meaning a deeper pool of professors to choose from. And in some ways the small schools gained an advantage over their prestigious rivals: after Sputnik, many colleges became research universities, "and smaller has been better for undergraduate education ever since," Pope says. "At big research universities, professors spend more time researching than teaching."

In a kind of virtuous circle, the "second tier" schools got better as applications rose and they could become choosier in assembling a class--which in turn raised the quality of the whole experience on campus and made the school more attractive to both topflight professors and the next wave of applicants. "Just because you haven't heard of a college doesn't mean it's no good," argues Marilee Jones, the admissions dean at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an outspoken advocate of the idea that parents need to lighten up. "Just as you've changed and grown since college, colleges are changing and growing."

Once students start *Looking Beyond the Ivy League*--the title of another Pope book--they see for themselves the advantages that can come with an open mind. They find a school that lets students work with NASA on deep-space experiments, or maintains a year-round ski cabin or funds a full year of traveling in the developing world. Schools once derided as "safeties" stand taller now, as they make the case that excellence is not always a function of exclusivity. Some kids end up getting into Harvard and then turning it down because of the \$30,000 tuition or the lecture-hall class sizes or because in the course of the hunt they conclude that they would fit better elsewhere. And in making their choice, they get to make their own statement about what is important in an education, and even teach their parents some lessons.

### Investing in the Future

Given the changes in the economy as well as the academy in the past 20 years, advocates for smaller schools argue that they give students a sharper competitive edge. "What most parents are concerned about is providing the best security for their child," says Gay Pepper, head of college guidance at Greens Farms Academy, a private school in Westport, Conn. "Some see going to a brand-name college as providing that security. We have to shift that thinking. A college that is right for the student is the best form of investment."

There's growing evidence to support that claim. The *Quarterly Journal of Economics* published a study in 2002 showing that students who were accepted at top schools but for various reasons went to less selective ones were earning just as much 20 years later as their peers from more highly selective colleges. Much of the old-boy networking value has diminished in an increasingly performance-based economy: only seven CEOs from the current top 50 FORTUNE 500 companies were Ivy League undergraduates. In an economy in which people typically change jobs seven or eight times and new fields open up all the time, Pope notes, "connections won't do a whole hell of a lot of good. It's your own specific gravity, not the name of the school, that matters."

For students aspiring to go to graduate school, the more personalized education offered at small schools can often provide the best preparation. Pomona College sent a higher percentage of its students to Harvard Law in

2005 than Brown or Duke. The academic might of these less fabled colleges was never a secret, but it's becoming more appreciated than ever before. "Most of the good, small schools were church related to begin with, and it was bad form to beat your chest and brag," Pope says.

James Sanchez, 21, from the dusty high-desert town of Española, N.M., is a senior at Davidson College in North Carolina and an aspiring neuroscientist. He figured that at a bigger school he would have been lucky to spend his lab time washing beakers for the star scientists. At Davidson, where there are no grad students, Sanchez's senior thesis is an integral part of a larger three-year study of memory and learning in rats that may offer new insights into Alzheimer's. His professor anticipates that the research will be published in a top-shelf neuroscience journal, and says that Sanchez will be listed as a co-author. That's a rare honor for an undergraduate, and Sanchez thinks it has given him a boost in his applications to medical school.

Students see a strategy: choose intimacy and attention now, and reach for the world-class research university for grad school. Ashley Rufus, 19, gave up a coveted spot on Harvard's waiting list in favor of Truman State University in rural Kirksville, Mo.: "It started out as a financial issue," says Rufus, who got a full ride to Truman. She loved Harvard when she visited, but she hated the idea of eight years of debt if she were to go on to medical school. Truman was closer to home, had a student-faculty ratio of 15:1, and its graduates have a "very impressive" rate of acceptance to medical schools. Carla Valenzuela, 18, who graduated in the spring from Martin Luther King Academic Magnet school in Nashville, Tenn., applied to 13 schools--and wound up picking her last choice. She turned down Amherst, Wellesley and Dartmouth in favor of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Part of the draw was being near a big city; part was the offer of a Meyerhoff scholarship, a prestigious, four-year grant for talented high school students studying science and related fields. All 52 Meyerhoff scholars from the class of 2005 went on to graduate schools, 45 of them to M.D., Ph.D. or M.D.-Ph.D. combination programs.

"If I wanted to work right after college, I would have gone to a more 'name school' like Dartmouth," Valenzuela says. But she hopes to become a doctor, so she did some research. "I definitely looked at the medical-acceptance rates of each college and how strong their pre-med programs were, and that helped knock out a lot of colleges." Students with clear professional goals will pay more attention to the reputation of a single department than the whole university. Among the artistically inclined, the Rhode Island School of Design has always been pre-eminent, but schools like the Savannah College of Art and Design, Emerson College and Northeastern University are now attracting kids specifically for their arts curriculums. Gabriel Slavitt, 17, who this spring graduated from Crossroads School in Santa Monica, Calif., says his stepsister "basically flipped out" when she heard he was turning down Brown University in favor of Washington University in St. Louis, Mo. He admits that he applied to Brown for the name, but he concluded that its arts program was not as strong. "For what I want to study, it doesn't mean anything to me to be around students that are going to help me get a job later in life, business students and the like."

### Make Me a Match

To see what a more ecumenical approach to college hunting looks like, you have only to drop in on Pope's Colleges That Change Lives tour, a kind of low-key Lollapalooza for freethinking colleges that are looking for liberated students. Last year more than 600 people attended each of the sessions in Chicago, Houston, San Francisco and Washington. In a crowded Manhattan hotel ballroom, Maria Furtado, director of admissions at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., grabs the wireless microphone in front of a crowd of more than 500 parents, students and college counselors and happily shatters conventional wisdom. "Every spring and every fall, this is what you will see and hear in the media: 'No one gets in anywhere,'" she says. "Gloom and doom. Well, we're here to tell you that people get in everywhere!" She polls the crowd: What percentage of kids do you think get into their first-choice school? One guess is 5%; another is 20%. Furtado beams and announces slowly, so as not to let the Good Word slip out too carelessly: "79.8% of first-year students are at their first-choice school."

Other studies say the number is closer to 70%. But whatever the exact figure, if you want to be one of them, Furtado says, "you have to be brave and bold and explore a school you haven't heard of before." That shouldn't be hard for this crowd. As a group, the kids are unorthodox, outspoken late bloomers. "They're very bright, but they didn't discover it until they were juniors or seniors in high school," says Goucher College president Sanford Ungar, who makes the point that those who find their way to a place like Goucher can be more creative than their highly polished peers. "They haven't been flattened by steamrollers in high school," he says. "They haven't been so bruised in the application process that they are incapable of creative thought. Many kids have been so overgroomed by their parents and others."

Elizabeth Pantone, 17, listens closely as admissions officers make their pitch. She's an aspiring writer in an intense Westchester, N.Y., school, who is both pushing against the culture and admitting that she's working harder now in hopes of aiming higher. Her dad, meanwhile, has been trying to meet her halfway, since no matter what she does she's not likely to make it to the schools he originally had in mind. "It's been quite an education for me," he says. "I was thinking name brand in the beginning, but now I really believe in this match idea."

This can be a slow process, educating parents. "After Colleges That Change Lives came out, I got letters from all around the country from mamas saying 'You saved us,'" Pope says. "Well, more mamas need saving." At Brookline High School in Brookline, Mass., headmaster Bob Weintraub estimates that fully 1 in 3 of his students' parents went to Harvard. That means one of his many jobs is defusing the tension they promote. On their own, students set up a wall by the counseling office where they post their rejection letters. They call it the Wall of Shame, but it's a great way for them to realize they're not alone in having their Ivy dreams dashed. "It's a community of the rejected," jokes Weintraub.

At freshman orientation, Weintraub includes a plea for parents to check their college anxieties at the door. "Their kids are just transitioning into high school," he says. "They're going to be exposed to drugs, sex, lots of changes. Can we just deal with the developmental issues first?" By the time they enter the college hunt, many kids have been conditioned to treat the process more as a race than a romance, a test of who comes in first, not what will make them happy. "You ask students what they want," says Rachel Petrella, a counselor at California's La Jolla Country Day School, "and they say, 'What do you mean, What do I want? What do I get? I've been working for four years without daylight. I'm supposed to go to the most selective school I've earned, right?'"

Actually, no. And thus begins their higher education about higher education. "The more sophisticated kids who take on the search as a research project, they are getting past the prestige," says Petrella. Students see that schools like Vassar, Lehigh, Colgate and Dickinson really care about the quality of undergraduate life, she says. Since many counselors will advise the more anxious students to apply to at least nine schools (three stretches, three matches and three safeties), students run spreadsheets rating various criteria on a scale of 1 to 10, from the food to the student-teacher ratio to rates of acceptance into grad school. And then there are the unquantifiable assets. At Davidson, townspeople and professors bake cakes for the winners of the freshman cake race and students boast that scattered around the campus are dollar bills held down by rocks, tangible evidence of an honor code so entrenched that if a dollar falls on campus soil, it stays there until the owner claims it. Kenyon in Ohio includes a paragraph in its acceptance letter that is entirely personal to the particular student: good job on the essay, nice season in basketball. The big schools can't do that--"and it's making a difference," says Sharon Merrow Cuseo, dean at Los Angeles' Harvard-Westlake Academy. "I think of my students as cynical consumers of college propaganda, but they love that personal touch. They come in and say, 'Jeez, look at this note they wrote me. It's good to be wanted.'" She can map the change in priorities based on the school's spring 2006 college tour. Five years ago, they just did the northeast. This year the group, after visiting a campus or two in New York, split into two parts. The first went south to University of Richmond, Davidson, William and Mary, and George Washington. "People are starting to understand that a lot of the Southern schools in general are great," she says. The second broke north into Canada to visit McGill University in Montreal and the University

of Toronto. Cuseo calls Canada "the new frontier."

## Who Needs Consultants?

So how do the private consultants fit into all this? As many as 1 in 5 applicants to private four-year colleges get some kind of independent coaching, which can range in price from \$469 for Kaplan's three-hour consultation by webcam to \$36,000 for four years of hand holding offered by superconsultant Michele Hernandez. Although consultants are easy to caricature for sanding down and varnishing a nice, raw kid, admissions officers insist that they can see past the polishing to the real human being beneath. How useful counselors are may depend as much on the attitude of the client as the approach of the counselor. "Some of them are very helpful and are helping students learn how to tell us about themselves," says Lee Stetson, dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania, in a rare defense of the breed. "I don't think it's fair to say they're all negative."

For better or worse, working with a consultant forces students to decide who they are as they shape their self-portraits and what sacrifices they are willing to make in the course of their college search. Emma Robson, 17, a junior in Westport, Conn., found herself wrestling with a consultant who tried to spike her favorite activity of the entire year, her seven weeks at a summer camp on Moose Pond in Maine, where she and a bunch of girls she has known since she was 10 sing campfire songs and canoe and make lanyards. Many of her classmates will be spending their summers racking up achievements, while Robson will be collecting and recollecting, in a very old-fashioned way, memories. "Camp is very dear to me," she says, and she's prepared to give up whatever edge a more intense summer might give her. "It's a time I get to recharge from a pretty stressful school year. If I spent the summer taking extra classes, I would just be worn down by the time school starts."

If parents see college admission as the culmination of years of investment--the homework showdowns and soccer shuttles--it's not hard to find kids like Robson who see it as their deliverance. "I don't really want to continue all this hypercompetitiveness," says Greg Smith, 18, a senior in Charlotte, N.C., who cringes as he notes how, when history projects were announced at his high school, there was a literal footrace to the library to be the first to get the key books. He won a Morehead scholarship to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, a full ride offered to the very top students. It was not only the money but also the feel of the place that drew him. "The Ivy Leagues just seemed like a very intense four years where I'd get more of the same that I've been through here," he says. "There's such a seek-and-destroy mentality." Others seek out schools like Sarah Lawrence, which has no required courses and few exams but rather research papers and essays. Or Hampshire, where students focus on projects instead of courses and receive detailed evaluations rather than grades.

College students this spring watched the flameout of Kaavya Viswanathan, the prepackaged Harvard prodigy who published a best seller at 19 and had been exposed as a plagiarist by 20. That's not the way things are supposed to unfold. College is supposed to be about the Best Four Years of Your Life, "the love of learning, the sequestered nooks, and all the sweet serenity of books," not to mention pizza and football and long, caffeinated nights of debate and confusion and discovery. All that families have to do to succeed, say veterans of the admissions wars, is let go of some old assumptions and allow themselves to be pleasantly surprised by how much has changed on campuses across the country in the past generation. That ability in the end may be the admissions test that matters most.

•Submit questions for M.I.T. admissions dean Marilee Jones at [time.com/jones](http://time.com/jones)

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