

Shopping for the Right Fit

Patterns of College Choice in the Postsecondary Market

While claims that “one size fits all” may be objectively true, the reality is that one size does not always fit all well—particularly when it comes to college choice. In developing its market taxonomy for postsecondary education (*The Landscape, Change*, November/December 1997) and Collegiate Results Survey (CRS), the Institute for Research on Higher Education (IRHE) directly challenged the notion of institutional uniformity by categorizing institutions according to the type of education they provided and the students they served. This approach had the advantage of allowing the classification of differences and the gauging of norms across a spectrum of U.S. higher education institutions, as well as the ability to compare and contrast student characteristics in different segments of the higher education market.

On the other hand, the research focused primarily on collegiate outcomes and on a look backward at institutions’ accomplishments and students’ experiences. The CRS, in particular, did not indicate whether responding alumni had intended to pursue the type of education they received when first shopping for an institution. To gain this perspective, the IRHE team set out to examine the responses of college applicants to see if their educational aspirations and institutional choices indeed mirrored those of graduates from the same market segments.

And the team had an ideal data set from which to work: Peterson’s *BestCollegePicks.com* Web site, which uses a modified version of the CRS and IRHE’s market taxonomy to match college applicants’ various criteria to appropriate institutions. The site afforded a unique opportunity to examine differences between the Core and the Medallion/Name-Brand markets—this time, not from the perspective of alumni but from that of shoppers in search of a suitable college. This *Landscape* reports the results of an analysis of responses to the *BestCollegePicks.com* survey, examining shoppers’ institutional choices and helping to determine whether these prospective students share the characteristics of graduates from their market segments.



A Perfect Match

The CRS is one of two widely respected national surveys—the National Survey of Student Engagement is the other—seeking to promote an understanding of educational outcomes at the baccalaureate level. Designed to capture the activities, preferences, and values of young alumni, the CRS questioned graduates about their post-baccalaureate education and lifelong learning, occupations and income, job skills, personal values and activities, and confidence in their skills and abilities. Its ultimate intention was to help colleges, universities, and potential students and their families gauge the outcomes of an undergraduate education obtained at a specific type of institution.

With the help of NCPI researchers Robert Zemsky and Susan Shaman, both of IRHE, the CRS and market taxonomy were adapted to serve as a primary engine driving the *BestCollegePicks.com* Web site, which uses a prospective—rather than retrospective—version of the survey to

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Chart 1.
High School Students' Highest Educational Aspirations,
by Market Segment.

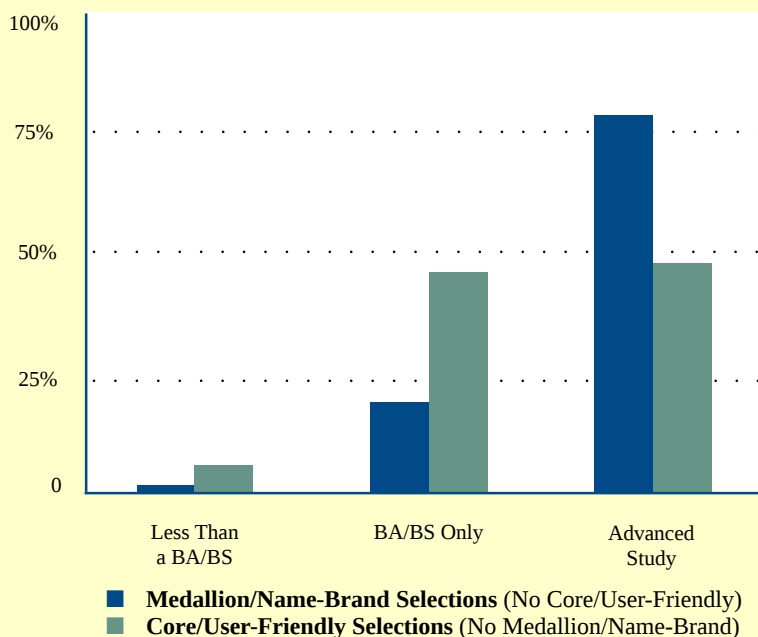
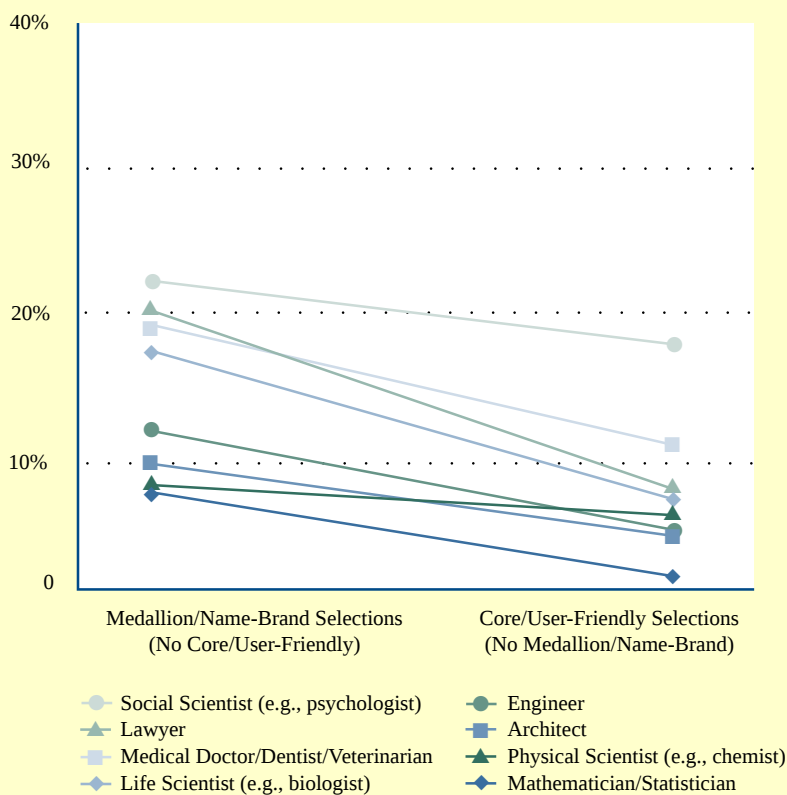


Chart 2.
Occupations More Often Selected by High School Students
Selecting Medallion/Name-Brand Institutions.



match student shoppers with colleges that have been proven to deliver educational experiences that fit the goals and aspirations these students hold. During the matching process, high school students not only complete the new survey but also select a series of “college groups” (a set of friendly monikers for IRHE’s market segments) representing institutions of interest. In addition, students designate desired tuition levels, enrollment size, and geographic location. The engine then generates a list of prospective institutions whose alumni profiles best match the aspirations of the user and the shopper’s enrollment, tuition, and geographic selections.

Hindsight and Foresight

As previous analyses have shown, alumni from institutions in the Core of the market tend to have educational aspirations, occupational goals, and personal profiles different from those completing a Medallion/Name-Brand education. Do these patterns hold for high school students seeking prospective institutions in those segments?

According to the *BestCollegePicks.com* survey, the educational aspirations of students matched to the Core and the Medallion/Name-Brand segments are indeed in stark contrast. As shown in Chart 1, students who aspire to attend Medallion and Name-Brand institutions overwhelmingly plan to pursue graduate school after college. Those in the Core are as likely to see the bachelor’s degree as a terminal degree as to continue to attend school after graduation.

As might be expected—given their educational aspirations—shoppers interested primarily in the Medallion/Name-Brand segment claim they are interested in professions that require the most education (Chart 2). Thus, aspiring Medallion/Name-Brand students are twice as likely as aspiring Core students to show interest in becoming lawyers; they are more than one and one-half times as likely to

want to be medical doctors, dentists, or veterinarians. Although the overall percentages are small, they are more than four times more likely to aspire to be mathematicians (7.8 percent versus 1.8 percent).

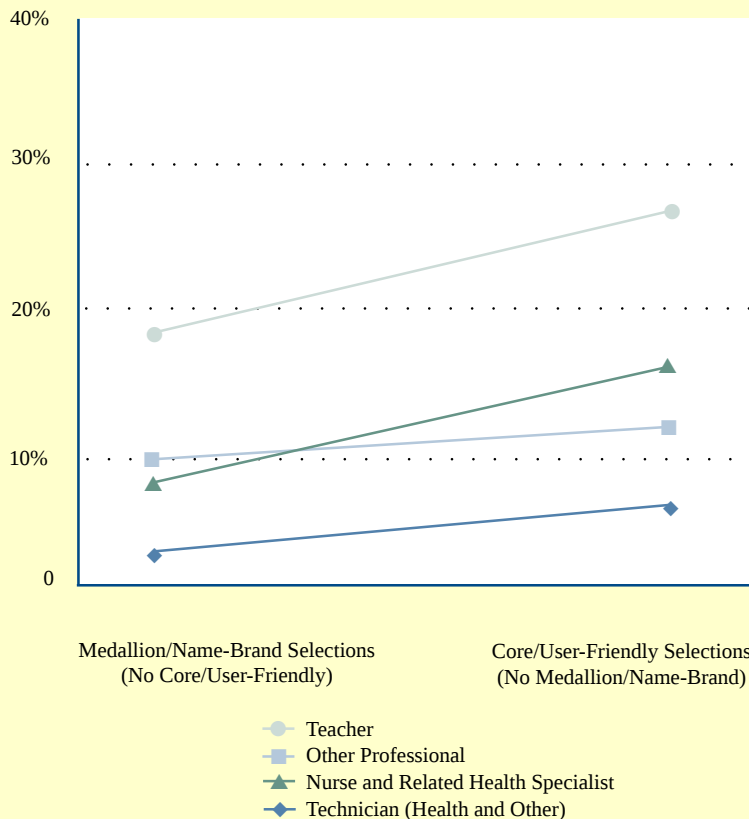
As Chart 3 shows, collegiate shoppers seeking to enroll in Core institutions are more interested in teaching and nursing than their counterparts focusing on the Medallion segment. Yet some professions appear to be equally attractive to those students seeking a Core and those seeking a Medallion education. In particular, a large proportion of students expressed interest in the creative professions—writing, art, and performance. These prospective college students were apt to be looking for an educational experience in either segment.

The *BestCollegePicks.com* survey also asked students to indicate the level of importance they place on a set of personal values and acquiring specific job skills, as well the confidence they possess in a range of abilities. Their responses to these questions again revealed differences between those students who were considering Core and User-Friendly schools and those who concentrated their choices in the Medallion/Name-Brand segments.

Each index for a Personal Value, Ability, or Skill—for example, the Personal Value of Civic and Community Engagement—was scored on a three-point scale. Those students strongly inclined toward the value or skill were assigned a value of 2, those moderately inclined were assigned a value of 1, and those not inclined scored a zero. Thus, for a total of 13 indices, the maximum cumulative score a student could achieve was 26, the minimum, 0. The analysis demonstrated that the students who limited their collegiate choices to the Core and User-Friendly segments had lower cumulative scores than did students in the Medallion/Name-Brand segments.

Chart 4 pinpoints exactly where the Medallion students outscored the Core

Chart 3.
Occupations More Often Selected by High School Students
Selecting Core/User-Friendly Institutions.



respondents. As the graph shows, students leaning toward attending Medallion/Name-Brand institutions scored higher than Core/User-Friendly shoppers—and often significantly higher—on all indices except one. The exception was the Job Skills index Client/Customer, which is expected, given that the career choices of many Core/User-Friendly graduates include teaching and nursing, and sales and marketing.

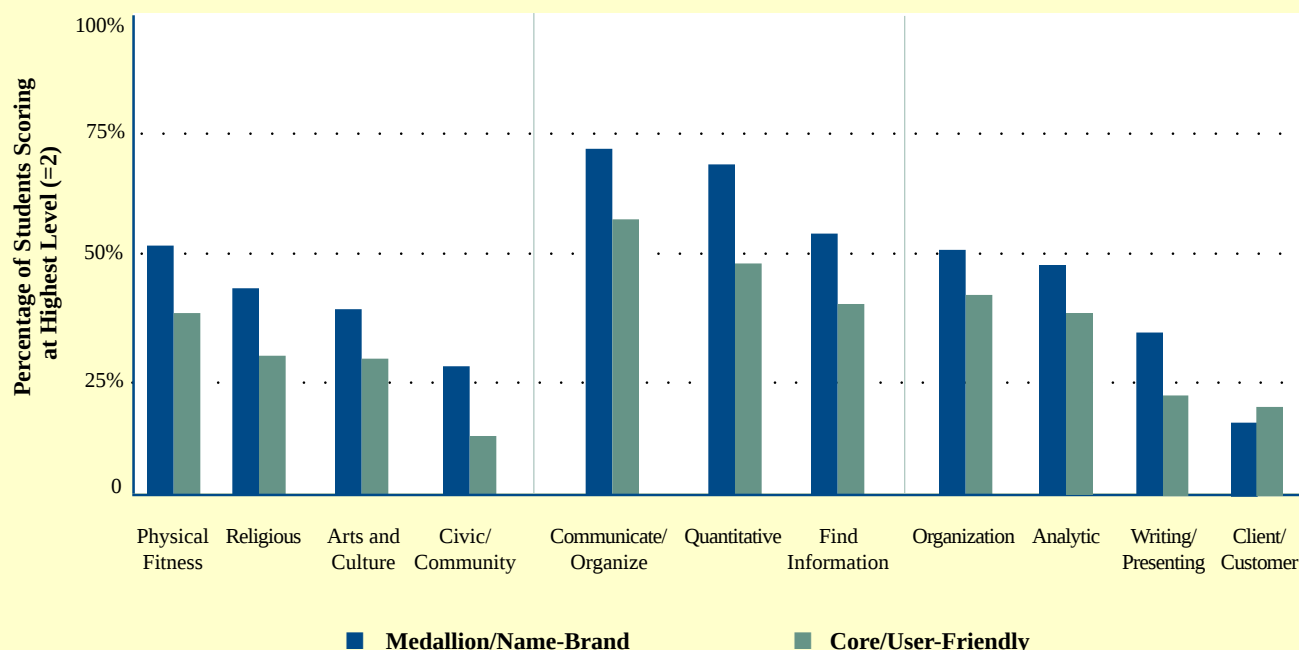
Findings derived from the analysis of *BestCollegePicks.com* data support prior analyses emerging from the CRS. Shoppers aiming for Core institutions expressed career aspirations that were similar to the careers actually held by alumni of Core institutions. Their rankings on Values, Skills, and Abilities indices were also

similar to those of Core alumni. The significance of these findings is that students interested exclusively in Core or User-Friendly institutions closely resemble the alumni of those types of institutions, and differ in predictable ways from graduates in the Medallion/Name-Brand segment.

Perspective

This study also included a series of focus groups, whose findings provide an interesting postscript to the data analysis. Conducted with high school seniors, college seniors, and college alumni in three different cities, the focus groups were intended to gain an understanding of what high school students bound for institutions in different segments are seeking from their college education.

Chart 4.
High School Students With High Scores on Various Indices, by Market Segment of Selected Institutions.



As with the online responses, high school students in the focus groups who were bound for Core and for Medallion institutions demonstrated consistently different goals and aspirations. For example, those who expected to attend Core institutions tended to see college as a necessary step in preparing for a career. Their collegiate goals focused on obtaining a credential and getting a good job. Students aiming for Medallion institutions also considered college to be a path to achieving career goals—but aspired to enter professions such as law and medicine, which require continued education after college. College was step one on their career path, with graduate or professional school an assumed second.

However, what most distinguished the students bound for Medallion institutions was their anticipation of “passion” in engaging academic pursuits—intellectual challenge, diversity of ideas, cultural diversity,

and networking. Medallion-bound students, more than others, claimed that high school was not sufficiently rigorous academically, although many were certainly busy with all manner of co-curricular activities.

Overall, this study raises additional research questions with which to examine the sorting process that draws students who are attracted to certain professions to enroll in either the Core or the Medallion segment. Do students with the most distinguished high school records follow a self-fulfilled prophecy of achievement? Do most students in Core institutions lack the confidence in their ability to compete for graduate and professional school admissions?

Clearly, answering questions of “how and why” was not an objective of the CRS or *BestCollegePicks.com*. Rather, these tools were designed to provide a descriptive profile of young alumni—and, now, of collegiate shoppers—and the institutions they choose to attend. Through one lens looking back

six years and a second peering into the near future, IRHE was able to identify the skills, abilities, confidence, and values common to graduates of particular institutions, distinguishing not only particular campuses from one another, but pinpointing whole segments within the postsecondary market. □

Release of Public Use File for CRS Dataset

A public use file is available for all researchers who are interested in working with CRI data at www.irhe.upenn.edu/research under the heading “Postsecondary Education Outcomes Survey.” The data are available as SAS transport and text files. The ZIP archives include the data and relevant documentation. To access the data and documentation, download and unzip the archive you wish to use. Open the “readme.txt” file for a list of the files and documentation included. The public use file is made available through the support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.