

A New Way To Look At Colleges: How To Discover The Reality Behind The Dream

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A NEW WAY TO LOOK
AT COLLEGES:

How to Discover the Reality Behind the Dream



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If you are at the beginning of the college selection process, opening this volume may be your first serious attempt to find out what's ahead of you. More likely, you are already a veteran who suspects that there is no end to the things people want you to look at before choosing a college. There on your table or desk are books, brochures, magazines, and all the mail that started arriving the day after you registered for the SAT or the ACT. Whether you are a beginner or a veteran, your task is to narrow your choice of colleges and universities to a manageable few, submit your applications, and then make your final choice. My job in the next few pages is to explain how this process works and what you might consider as you get yourself organized to make that decision. Here goes!

WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON?

Choosing a college has become a serious business that annually engulfs high school seniors (and increasingly

juniors and sophomores), their families, and friends. Now it is your turn. What do you need to know, and when do you need to know it? What kind of information will really help you make this decision when you are alternately told, "This is the most important choice of your life," and "Don't sweat it, you can always change your mind later." What do you need to know about the colleges and universities you are considering? What do you need to know about yourself? What do you need to know about how you might turn out if you choose one institution instead of another? What will you be like six or seven years after you graduate from that college?

To begin, let's look at the college choice process itself. As colleges have become more expensive, this process has gotten both more complex and more competitive. The basic script goes as follows: consider the colleges and universities to which you might apply, get your credentials in order, take (and score your best on) the right tests, write a compelling admissions essay, and ask the right people to write your recommendations. If you get a chance, go visit the colleges and universities you are considering and check out what goes on in the classroom and laboratory, spend some time in the library, and talk with students and faculty members.

Once your applications are submitted, it will be the institution's turn to go to work. An admissions committee, often composed of faculty members, will read your essays and letters of recommendation, will look at your transcript, will consider if you could make a special contribution to the institution by playing in the orchestra or on the basketball team, and will take into consideration whether or not members of your family are graduates of the institution. Then, they will render judgment. If you are one of the lucky ones, you will get a "fat" envelope on or about March 1. Otherwise, you will get a thin envelope that contains a short but nicely written letter wishing you good luck at some other college or university. At that point, you will be expected to make your decision, choosing from among the colleges and universities that have chosen you.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SCREEN

All along, a lot of other activities have occurred just out of your sight. The process actually begins when college admissions offices across the country begin their annual

search for new applicants. They will buy lists of names of high school students with the kind of interests that their institutions think are important or with given grade point averages or high SAT or ACT scores. You know you are on these lists when you start getting mail, each piece proclaiming the virtues of the mailing institution. (It has been wryly observed that what these mailings have most in common is the impression that at or near the center of every college or university is a body of water that can be best viewed from one of the

verdant hills surrounding the campus.)

You will be visited in your high school by a seemingly endless stream of assistant deans of admissions, many of them recent graduates of the institutions they represent, each extolling the virtues of their college or university. Once you show an interest—that is, you become an "inquiry"—you will get even more attention, possibly a phone call, certainly more printed material, and most likely a Web site address where you

can check out the institution on the Web.

Later, if you apply and are admitted, the wooing will begin in earnest with invitations to visit the campus, to talk to faculty members, and to attend local events so you can meet the other students in your area who are considering the institution. At the height of this activity, if not before, you will come to understand that the institution wants you possibly more than you want it! You will discover that the institution is, in fact, selling itself. The admissions officers you have been working with want as many potential students to consider their institutions as possible. Their job is to get you to apply and, if you are admitted, to persuade you to choose their institution over someone else's.

KNOWING THE MARKET

What's going on? The answer is quite simple: higher education in the United States is a \$150-billion-a-year enterprise. Colleges and universities are special institutions devoted to student learning and scholarly research; they are also enterprises that require revenues—in your case, the tuition you will pay. Even the most famous, most prestigious, best-endowed colleges and universities depend on tuition revenue to pay their faculty, operate their facilities, and field their sports teams. No students, no revenue, no institution!

What does this make you? Both a learner and a consumer, both a student and a customer. Each of these roles carries opportunities and responsibilities. As stu-

dent and learner, you will be responsible for much of what happens to you. In college, even more than in high school, faculty members assume you want to be there, that you understand that doing the work is the key part of learning. As consumer and customer, you have to know what you want, have to be able to distinguish a quality product from one that looks good but doesn't really measure up. Indeed, as a consumer, you have a special responsibility. The range and quality of products available to you is primarily a function of how good a shopper you (and all the other students choosing a college) are—how informed, how demanding, how ready to say, "I'll take myself elsewhere if what you offer is not what I want, not of the quality I expect, or not offered at a price I can afford."

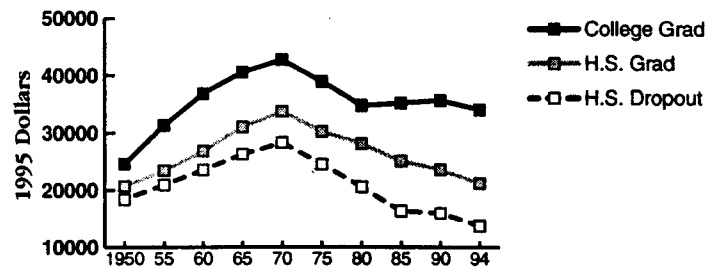
THE LAW OF PRICE AND DEMAND

Once you understand that the admissions process is also a market process, then the basic rules become clearer. The first is simply that the net price (that is, the tuition minus the financial aid package) an institution charges reflects how many young people like you are likely to apply to and choose that institution. In general, the harder an institution is to get into, the higher the tuition it charges. Most institutions that are truly selective will also be truly expensive. Keep in mind that prestige is the major driver of demand, and what you require from your college may not be exactly what a particular prestigious "brand-name" college has to offer to its students.

You already know that each year a college education gets more expensive, and it has been doing so for a long time. The trend for the last twenty years has been one of constant tuition increases, with college tuition charges increasing faster than almost anything you or your parents are likely to buy—faster than the cost of an automobile, a cable television subscription, a dinner in a restaurant, or a movie ticket.

And why did prices increase? Because the demand for higher education went up. Thirty years ago, most young people went directly to work. Today, most young people first go to college. The surprise is that going to college is not the guarantee of higher salaries and incomes it once was. The figure on this page charts the incomes of young men aged 25–34 over a twenty-five-year period for three groups: college grads, high school grads, and high school dropouts. The figures are in constant dollars, which means that they are based on what things actually cost in each of the years.

These statistics provide an insight that brings us back to the college selection process and why you are



Annual Earnings (Constant Dollars): Men, 25 to 34

Source: Samuel Stringfield, "Attempting to Enhance Students' Learning Through Innovative Programs," in *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 6 (1995), p. 68.

reading this guide in the first place. What you and countless high school juniors and seniors before you have figured out is that choosing the right college means selecting the path that will enable you to graduate prepared for the kind of occupation that best suits you at an income you desire, confident in performing complex tasks, prepared for a lifetime of learning, and strengthened with a coherent system of personal values.

THE RANKINGS

As college has become both more important and more expensive, choosing the right college has become an increasingly contentious as well as uncertain process. No wonder you want more information—information that is unbiased and that meaningfully compares the institutions you are considering with one another. What you want to know is where's the quality, where's the excitement, where's the best. Where do they have what you want? For any other major—and indeed not so major—investment or purchase, you could consult a host of guides that report on how well the product fared: how it was used, how it held up, whether or not it met acceptable standards, and what its buyers thought about the product after using it for a while. The first question an experienced consumer would likely ask when confronted with the decision you are about to make would be, "Where's my *Consumer Reports*?" What you would want to learn about is product reliability and customer satisfaction.

Before you pay all that money, you want to know what you are buying! And that's what the rankings give you. Right? Well, yes and no. What the best-known rankings measure is not quality but the three "Ps": price, prestige, and pedigree. If nothing else frames your college choice, price, prestige, and pedigree are not a bad proxy for quality, although all you are really being told is how hard it is to get into a particular institution.

You also have to be careful with the popular rankings lists. They pretend to be a precision that most of us who study higher education would find laughable if students and parents didn't take the rankings so seriously. There is probably no real difference between a number 1 and a number 10 ranking or between a number 20 and a number 35. Indeed, the rankers' search for precision leads them to constantly change their formulas, which produces results that often defy explanation. In any given year, my own institution, for example, rises or falls six or more places in the rankings. When the news is good, we wonder what we did to suddenly get so much better. When we drop in the rankings, we are equally puzzled as to how we suddenly went so wrong. The answer is that we didn't do anything. We like to think we are constantly improving the quality of our undergraduate education, but we understand that improvement takes time, that our reputation today is likely to be pretty close to our reputation tomorrow or our reputation yesterday. Keep this in mind when a "hot school" tells you it just jumped ten places in the rankings.

FRAMING YOUR CHOICE

So what do you have to go on? A lot of good descriptive information about the colleges you are considering, much of it coming from the institutions you are looking at, some of it from the handful of reliable college guides that have well-deserved reputations for doing it right. You will also find what I call the gossip and specialty guides that identify the "best party schools," the "best jock schools," the "best buys," and a limited number of "hidden treasures," colleges that are much better than their competitive rankings suggest.

Then you have the advice and testimony of a host of people who care about you—your friends, parents, perhaps older brothers or sisters or cousins, your high school counselor, and teachers—and who may or may not know very much about what kind of college will work best for you. Talk to these people, listen to what they have to say, but most of all, listen to yourself as you ask your questions and explain what you are looking for in a college. Often,

“What you want to know is how close a particular college or university is to the target. Graphically, it helps to think of a bull’s-eye.”

the purpose of good conversation is as much to find out what's on your mind as it is to listen to others.

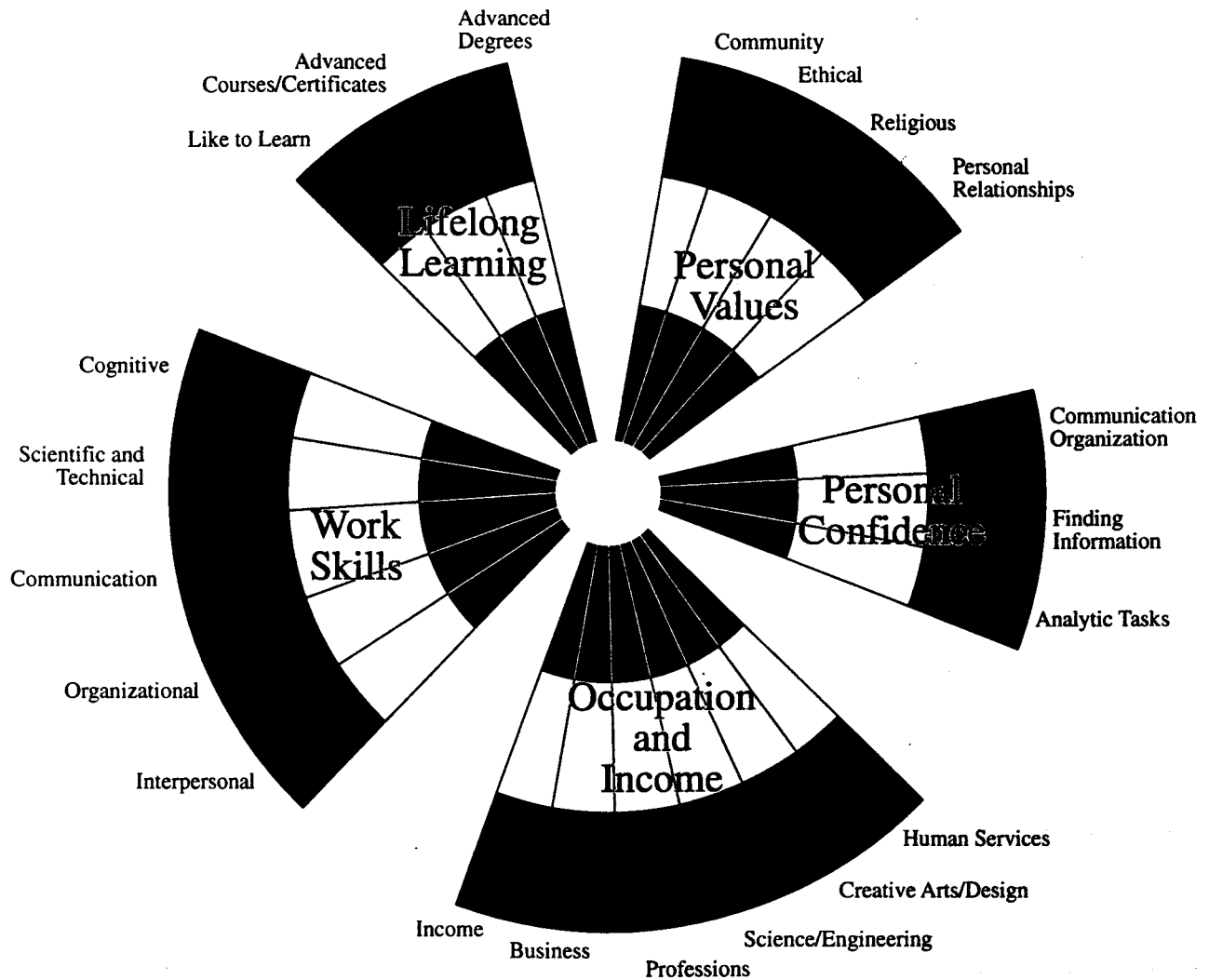
If at all possible, visit the institutions you are considering. Get the feel and taste of the campus. Attend classes. Talk to students. Wander about on your own—it's the closest thing to a test-drive as you are going to get.

If you get a chance, try to find a sample of more recent graduates of the institution, people roughly ten years older than you. Ask what they are doing now. Do they like their jobs? Do they have the right skills? Did their college education serve them well? What did they learn while in college? How much of it do they remember? How much do they use? What do they wish they had learned but did not? Are they likely to go on for further schooling or to get an advanced degree? Do they see themselves as lifelong learners?

Finally, don't be embarrassed to ask them what values are important to them today. College is ultimately about acquiring and testing a set of values—life perspectives, really—that will shape what you do for a long time to come. Where are you likely to find a sample of recent grads to talk with? Start by asking the admissions office if they have a list of recent grads you can talk to in your area. Often, the development office or the office of alumni affairs is a good source of names as well.

IN SEARCH OF BETTER CONSUMER INFORMATION

My suspicion is that not many of you will take me up on the recommendation to ask recent graduates about their college experiences. You just can't imagine asking somebody these questions, and what would you really do with the answers if you could get them? I am, however, quite serious about the importance of the perspective of the recent graduate. At the Institute for Research on Higher Education, we have used this perspective to begin speculating as to what a really relevant consumers' guide might look like—one that focuses on product value and reliability. And our answer is that one way to choose a college is to ask, "How am I likely to turn out? What am I likely to be doing, say, six years after graduation?" The answer, as you now probably suspect, lies in the experiences of recent graduates of each institution.



Target: College Attribute Categories

Working with the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement and Peterson's, we have begun testing a new way to use the experiences of graduates of an institution as a basis for a new kind of consumer information. Our testing has included random samples of graduates from fifteen colleges and universities from all across the country and all across the market. While only a few of you will actually be considering the colleges and universities that participated in the test, what their graduates told us can assist you as you think about college.

DISTANCE FROM TARGET

When considering colleges and universities, it helps to think about the set of attributes that represent your ideal or target. What you want to know is how close a particular college or university is to that target. Graphi-

cally, it helps to think of a bull's-eye—as in, “Of the attributes important to me, how often does College A as opposed to University B hit the bull's-eye?”

We used the bull's-eye image to help us determine the important questions we wanted to ask recent college graduates. We finally settled on five types of questions that focus on:

- the values recent grads said were important to them now that they had graduated from college
- the complex tasks they felt confident performing
- their current occupations and annual incomes
- the job skills they needed and used at work
- their involvement with lifelong learning

We next identified the key values, performance confidences, occupations, income, work skills, and indications of lifelong learning. The target above

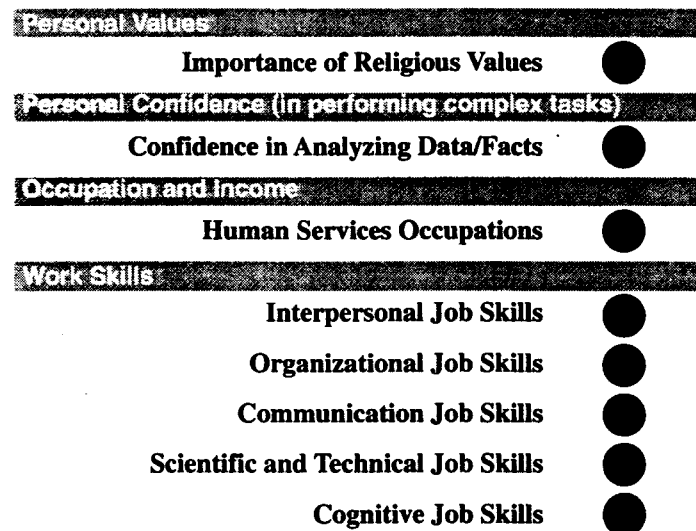
graphically represents these five "type" groupings and their component attributes.

Only colleges and universities are likely to be interested in how their graduates scored on all twenty-one attributes: where their graduates hit the bull's-eye, and where their graduates were either in the middle area of the dartboard (not so bad) and where they fell on the outer rim (cause for concern). Potential students, on the other hand, will probably be interested in what areas and how many times a given institution hit the bull's-eye. Using the data from our pilot institutions, we can represent exactly how that information from typical institutions might appear.

One "Name-Brand" College, Eight Bull's-Eyes

Below is the list of attributes for which the graduates of one of the United States' name-brand liberal arts colleges hit the bull's-eye. In all, the graduates of this institution collected eight bull's-eyes.

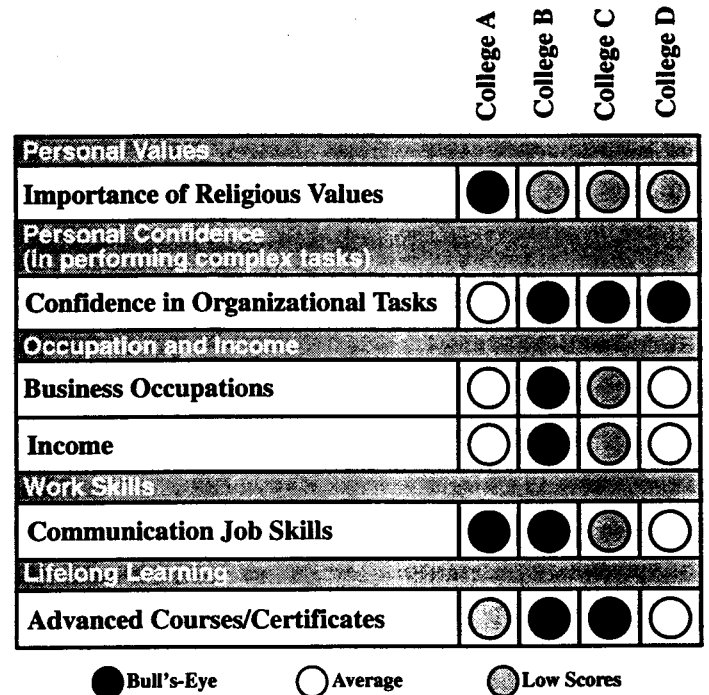
College A's Areas of High Scores (Bull's-Eyes)



That's the static measure of the college. What you would really like to know is how this college stacks up against the other institutions you are considering in terms of the attributes and characteristics you think are most important. What you really want to do is construct your own rankings, for which *you* get to define what constitutes quality. Suppose, for example, that you are interested primarily in liberal arts colleges and are thinking of a possible career in business, but you also come from a strongly religious background and want your college years to strengthen rather than diminish the importance you attach to your religious values. Imagine that you have narrowed your choice to four

liberal arts colleges and wish to rate their graduates against the key categories you have selected: importance of religious values, confidence in performing organizational tasks, business occupation, income, communication job skills, and earning postbaccalaureate credits and certificates. Below is a ratings chart that shows how the four colleges you are considering compared with each other.

Liberal Arts Colleges Compared for First Student



How did your four liberal arts colleges compare? On five of the six attributes you chose as important, College B hit the bull's-eye. If your personal ranking of the institutions was a simple score card that reported who got the most bull's-eyes, then College B was the clear winner.

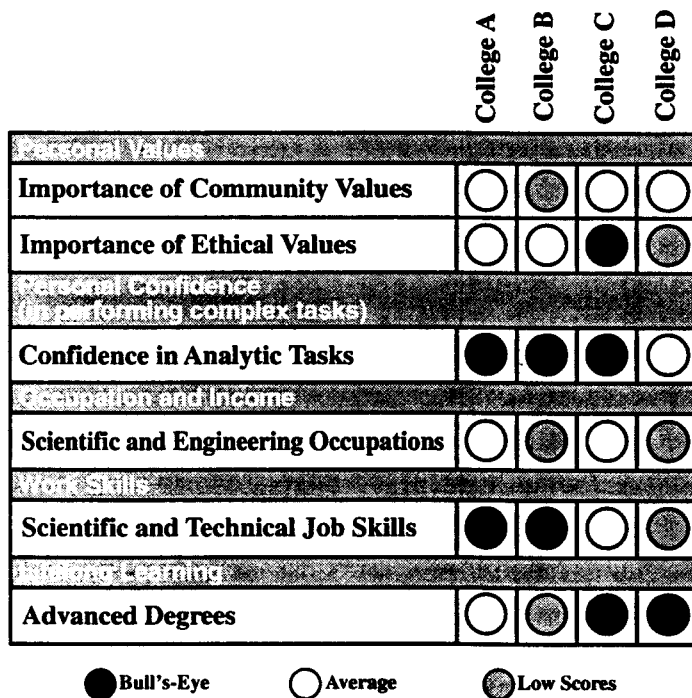
Alas, real choices are seldom that clear-cut. You said religious values were important to you, but the graduates of College B generally reported that religious values are not very important to them. Perhaps religious values were not very important to them as high school seniors; perhaps they became relatively less important to them while in college. We cannot know for sure, but their diminished importance to the graduates of your target college is a reason to pause and look again at the chart.

What about College A? Fewer bull's-eyes but solid in terms of business occupations, OK on income, really good on communication skills. You would find that this college was particularly good in providing its

graduates with the work skills they used on the job. How do you choose? Not from these comparisons alone! You will want to visit the schools, get the feel of the campuses, and talk to students and faculty members. Now those conversations will be better informed. You will know what to ask, what to look for. You will feel more comfortable asking these important questions because there are relevant answers.

Let's take another example. We can compare the same four liberal arts colleges, but this time we want to rate them as if you were interested in a possible career in science.

Liberal Arts Colleges Compared for Second Student



Remember, these are the same colleges as were in our first example. Given the change in what we are interested in, however, the top-rated choice now would probably be College C: three bull's-eyes and solid in everything else. The fact that its graduates were not concentrated as much in the sciences as some other colleges might encourage you to extend your search to other liberal arts colleges that scored a bull's-eye for Scientific Occupations. Or you might think that the graduates of this institution go on to advanced degrees, use science and technical skills on the job, and have the kind of attachment to ethical values that you think is important in a world being changed by science and technology. The fact that many of their graduates go on to do things that aren't

science related may be a plus, since you may not want to attend a college that specializes in just science and engineering education. Again, the purpose of the comparisons is not to let a chart make the decision for you but to help you think through what you really want.

These two examples also shed some light on the rankings and their shortcomings. Actually, in the popular rankings publications, the highest-ranked college among the four we have been considering is College D, currently more prestigious and pricier than the other three, and it is harder to get into. In many areas, this institution does a superb job and scores lots of bull's-eyes, but when the criteria for determining the overall ranking of these four colleges were customized, as in our two examples, then other choices emerged.

Public Universities: Credible Choices at a Good Price

We need to also say a word about price. The tuition charged by these private liberal arts colleges ranges from about \$16,850 to about \$23,250, which raises the possibility of finding a less costly public alternative. You could consider four public institutions in your own state using the same criteria you used for rating the graduates of the four private liberal arts colleges. Let's consider the last example of a student interested in a career in science: the same six criteria now applied to the graduates of four public universities yield the chart on the following page.

Here, the Universities C and D have the most bull's-eyes. For this set of ratings criteria, Universities C and D have as many bull's-eyes as the best of the liberal arts colleges. The public universities' most glaring weakness is probably the fact that relatively few of their graduates go on to advanced degrees. My guess is that there is a feeling at these institutions that when you graduate, you are finished in the sense of being ready for the job market.

We could continue with more examples, but the three charts already presented make the basic points I think can help you make your college decisions this year even without access to the new kind of consumer information we are developing.

Scholar, Know Thyself

Knowing how the graduates of a particular college or university turn out is helpful. Armed with that kind of information, you can more easily imagine yourself as a

**Public Universities Compared
for Second Student**

	University A	University B	University C	University D
Personal Values				
Importance of Community Values				
Importance of Ethical Values				
Personal Confidence (in performing complex tasks)				
Confidence in Analytic Tasks				
Occupation and Income				
Scientific and Engineering Occupations				
Work Skills				
Scientific and Technical Job Skills				
Lifelong Learning				
Advanced Degrees				

Bull's-Eye Average Low Scores

graduate of that institution—whether or not what it offers is, in fact, what you are looking for.

Knowing what you want does matter. Understanding what you want and possessing good information about the colleges and universities you are considering means you don't have to depend on the rankings to tell you which are the best institutions. Nor do you need to use a definition of quality that assumes one model fits all. More interesting, and I think more fun, is using your own definition of what constitutes a "best institution" and then applying those criteria to the colleges and universities you are considering. It is not wrong to rank

institutions, but it is wrong to rely on someone else's scoring system for determining which is the best place for you.

It would also be wrong to rely on any set of charts or scores to determine the college or university you ought to attend. Having access to the outcomes that characterize the graduates of specific institutions will stimulate purposeful discussion: among those who are searching for the best institution for themselves; between those future college freshmen and their parents, teachers, and guidance counselors; and between the student shopper and recent graduates of the institutions under consideration. In the end, what will likely prove most important is your visit to the campus—but when you arrive, you will know what to ask of whom.

Good luck! I don't envy you the task, but I confess to being a little bit jealous of your ability to chart a course that, if done right, will open the world to you or, to use that time-honored slogan of another educational institution, let you become all you want to be. For our part, we are going to continue to develop more and better consumer information—asking an ever-widening circle of college graduates to report on what they are doing and the kinds of jobs they have, their further education, the values they hold important, and the kinds of tasks they feel confident performing. Starting next year, graduates in the classes of 1992–94 will have a chance to use the Peterson's Web page to tell us about their experiences since leaving college. And, in about ten years, it will be your turn. So please do us the favor of connecting to CollegeQuest.com sometime in 2009 or 2010 and let us know what happened to you. We will use that information to guide other high school seniors as they travel the road on which you are now embarking.

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