

THE PUBLIC IVYS

A Guide to America's Best Public Undergraduate Colleges and Universities



RICHARD MOLL

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To my nephew Tom

a representative of the brightest
and best of a college generation

and

to Guidance Counselors throughout
the high schools of America—our most
unrewarded and overworked professional group

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Introduction: The Time Has Come

Every spring the mails bring nasty, sometimes venomous, letters to college admissions directors and deans from a handful of the rejected candidates' shout-before-they-pause fathers. The mails also bring plaintive, often moving pleas from the kids assigned to the waiting list, and a tiny handful of thank-you's from the admitted. Also in the mailbag are gracious, rather effusive notes from the secondary schools—particularly the private ones—recording the recent college admissions season's successes, thanking the college at hand, and urging a visit to the school in the fall to smile at the upcoming batch of new seniors who will soon be mounting at the starting gate.

The letters from power-play dads and earnest teenagers will probably never change. (Mothers seem to be most active prior to the announcement of the colleges' decisions. Thank God for the mothers, who so frequently chair the family's college search with patience and intelligence.) But the letters from the secondary schools are changing. Because the times are changing. A little prep school in Michigan says it all with the following observation in its annual spring message to colleges: "One notable difference in this year's college placements was due almost entirely to economics and may call for a new category on our placement list: 'Accepted at first choice college (usually private and more selective) but attending another that costs less.' I have no doubt whatsoever that you too are painfully aware of this trend and share our real concerns."

The message is clear: even the parents with ready cash are wondering if Olde Ivy is worth two to three times the price of a thoroughly respectable public institution. Granted, most parents of the highest-achieving high school students seem willing to kill to put the money together for Stanford,

Yale, Amherst, Cal Tech, and a little club of other high-prestige private institutions. But that list of colleges isn't very long now and is shrinking fast. Twelve to fifteen thousand dollars for a second- or third-level private college is considered out of the question by more and more Americans, given the competing demands for their dollar today. Although students pursue admission to the most costly private universities to "know they could have gone," more and more often the matriculation deposit is paid at the less expensive public institution of similar quality and rising prestige.

The *Chronicle of Higher Education*, every college administrator's *New York Times*, has been repeating this theme. A headline on page one in the spring of 1982 read: "Swing from Private to Public Colleges Noted in Applications for Fall." The article said there would undoubtedly be a further increase in the population of college students in the public sector, which already enrolled 78 percent of the total. In the same journal, half a year later: "Private Colleges Report 16,000 Fewer Freshmen." "The largest, most pervasive losses of first-year students were at less selective liberal arts colleges. . . . It is clear that the sluggish economy, combined with federal cuts in student aid and the threat of deeper cuts, is forcing new students to abandon their plans to attend independent colleges. Instead, they are postponing their higher education or, more often, are opting for less expensive, government-run institutions." Not long after, in the *Chronicle*: "40,962 Fewer Students Enrolled at Private Institutions This Fall; Early Data Show 27,506 More Students at Public Colleges."

The news crept out of the academic journals and into public view. Front page, *New York Times*, September 1982: "Aid Uncertainties Spur Enrollment in Public Colleges: Private Universities Lag." The article said "Some public colleges have been flooded with late applications from students who suddenly found they could not afford to attend their first-choice private colleges. And some private colleges are still soliciting applications long after the deadline to try to keep their enrollments at last year's levels." Several weeks later, the *Times* continued: "Most admissions directors interviewed said that they had not yet had time to track down where the missing students (who had paid deposits for fall enrollment but did not matriculate) went, but most assumed that at least some went to public institutions where the costs were lower. The movement of some middle-class students from private to public colleges has been apparent for the last year or so . . . 'About 60 percent of our students have usually gone to private schools,' said Luis R. Fritsche, a counselor at Great Valley Senior High School in Walvern, PA. 'This year the figure dropped to 40 percent. More students are ending up at Penn State, West Chester and other public institutions.' "

A quickened drift from the private to the public sector of higher

education because of price, a perceived decline in financial aid, and an uncertain economy, is not the only barometer of the times. There are deeper problems affecting enrollment in academe. A seminar announcement in 1982 from the American Association for Higher Education carried this banner: "THE ENROLLMENT CRISIS"—followed by a jolting summary:

- "A 23 percent drop in college-aged people will occur over the next 15 years.
- Even small enrollment decreases will produce large college revenue reductions.
- 100 to 400 colleges and universities will close because of enrollment problems over the next 20 years."

These factors obviously create anxiety among admissions officers, who now know all the dreary demographic predictions by heart. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* predicted that "by 1994, there will be at least 37 percent fewer graduating high school seniors than in 1980 in such Northeastern states as New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Connecticut. The number will plummet 45 percent in Rhode Island and 59 percent in Washington, D.C. Mid-western states, including Michigan, Illinois and Ohio, also will be hard hit with declines exceeding 30 percent."*

But the "baby bust" that produced this bleak situation created subtleties of perhaps even greater consequence. One is that the sharpest decline in births during the post-baby-boom period was among affluent whites, and every highly selective college in America is predominantly white. To maintain even the percentage of teenagers who *now* proceed to college would require increased attendance by blacks, Hispanics, and other under-represented minorities. Although that movement has accelerated since the late sixties, current cuts in federal, state, and institutional financial aid threaten to reduce the number of minority students attending colleges and universities.

Many institutions hope to fill the gap created by too few "traditional" students by admitting an increasing number of older students, particularly re-entry women. Clearly, there are many older prospective students—women whose education was cut short by marriage and family, men and women who need re-tooling to respond to changing job demands and a changing society. But colleges need two to four part-time enrollees to make up for the loss of one full-time student, and only the urban institutions have the potential to develop this "new" student body. In addition to these demographic woes college admissions officers face declining budgets in these

**Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 1982

tough economic times. No wonder their outlook grows grimmer each year.

Meanwhile, out in the marketplace, today's teenagers have pulled an about-face. The high school seniors of the eighties seem to have different values from their counterparts of the sixties and seventies. They are not demonstrating against a war; they are busy preparing for high-tech employment. Going to college to develop marketable skills is an obsession. Students have moved to the right politically. Altruism has moved down the scale of priorities, making big money has moved up. Studying the humanities and social sciences is considered a luxury; to survive, one majors in engineering, business, or computer science. According to the College Board, whose Student Descriptive Questionnaire is filled out by 90 percent of the students taking the SAT, the freshman class of 1983 could be described as follows: most students, but especially women, want high-paying jobs and technological training; they plan to avoid the liberal arts and low-paying fields such as art or teaching. The College Board also noted that computer science as an intended major had tripled in popularity since 1978, and women in 1982 accounted for over half of the intended business majors. This is a 36 percent increase in a decade.

A list of best-selling books on campus published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* gives further insight to the new teenager. Gone from the college bookstores' best-seller lists are the familiar titles read by the earlier generations of students: *The Greening of America*, *Future Shock*, *The Prophet*, and the how-to pop psychology books like *How to Be Your Own Best Friend*. In their place are *The Official Preppy Handbook*, *101 Uses for a Dead Cat*, and *What Color Is Your Parachute?*

Different times, indeed! An extraordinarily practical generation of prospective college students who, instead of the customary question about what percentage of students get into graduate school, ask admissions officers about the average starting salary last year of the graduating seniors in computer engineering. There is a dramatic decrease in the number of high school graduates, particularly the ones most likely to attend college full-time. Also, these students express a genuine apprehension regarding the merits of America's long-established bent toward a liberal arts education. And there is among many parents a reluctance or inability to sacrifice, as their own parents often did, for expensive college costs.

Directly or indirectly, all of these changes contribute to the growth and importance of the public college sector. Among a number of unique idiosyncrasies of the eighties, an accelerated turn to public education, particularly among America's "established class," will surely have the longest lasting consequences. This turn of events has had repercussions inside academe, often in quite sensitive areas. The Reverend Timothy S. Healy, president of Georgetown University, was explicit in an address to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities:

There are two areas where tempers are fraying thin between public and private colleges. . . . The first is the most obvious, to draw and keep students. As the long foreseen drop in the age cohort begins to bite, it can stir real panic. . . . Private institutions will claim that they are in an unfair competition, since the tax supported public colleges can attract students at low rates, while privates must peg price close to cost. So they will labor to make public colleges raise tuition, or to change the flow of public dollars into tuition support programs for private colleges. . . . The second area where rub begets resentment is access to the private philanthropic dollar for public institutions. . . . Private colleges feel that philanthropy is their bag and that foundations, corporations, and individuals ought to limit their gifts to institutions that do not receive substantive help from state and local governments. Public colleges deny this vehemently.

While these new rivalries stir officialdom, fresh traditions are taking root in the healthier-than-ever public sector of higher education. One development has been inevitable: the emergence of a national pecking order, a perceived hierarchy of who is best among public colleges and universities. As in the private sector, with its reputed “best”—the Ivy League, the Seven Sisters, and a handful of others—an elite in the public sector has evolved, relatively unnoticed. These Public Ivys are beginning to surface.

Educators have yet to develop a cogent, fair method of ranking colleges. The nation’s perceived “best” colleges in the private sector are those in the Ivy League. Yet, this fraternity of eight (Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Yale) was not elevated as the result of accrediting agencies’ careful scrutiny. Instead, the Ivy League officially emerged as a sports league, inaugurated and named surprisingly recently—in 1954. There are some curious members of this elite club, all of whom profit enormously from the halo effect of the league’s title. Take Cornell, for example. Cornell is a strange amalgam of private and public. Some divisions are state supported, some are privately supported. Cornell’s admissions policies, not to mention its administration and funding, are quite different from one segment to the next. Rather than Cornell, why aren’t Johns Hopkins, Duke, Rice, or Stanford in the Ivy League? These institutions seem closer to Yale and Harvard in tone and purpose. It is odd indeed that an athletic schedule along with a little tradition has promoted a public consensus of “the nation’s best.”

The Seven Sisters seem to have emerged from oral tradition alone. Granted, they share early beginnings, a common purpose of creating for women the quality of education that men could find at Harvard, Yale, or Princeton. But why seven, particularly now that the league has been aborted

by Vassar's coeducation and Radcliffe's near-disappearance into the conglomerate called Harvard? Why—then or now—not Connecticut College, Wheaton, Skidmore, or Mills as part of the elitist Sisters? Perhaps as a reaction to the questionable yet popular acceptance of the Ivy League and the Seven Sisters as the top of the nation's pecking order, more than a few attempts have been made through the years to rank colleges. But there is little agreement on what the criteria can and/or should be.

A typical approach to ranking colleges is to decry the competition's criteria and conclusions first, and then proceed to make strongly stated conclusions based on equally questionable methodology. For example, the combined prefaces to the *Gourman Reports: A Rating of Undergraduate Programs in American and International Universities* (1967, 1977, and 1980) set an inviting stage with high-sounding language, but it is fuzzy at best:

Past and recent studies have not helped us to gain a better judgement on the very serious questions about our undergraduate institutions. . . . I record here that surveys or books based upon ambiguous evidence continue to produce the false images among schools. The myth supplies the emotional and volitional drive that gives the institution a cohesion and enables it to put its energies into play. The false image has been handed down throughout the decades in order to persuade the public to preserve the reputations of the respective schools. . . . Many surveys in the past and present have deliberately eschewed a "sophisticated methodology framework" in favor of a "simple analytical account," but this does not deal adequately or in any depth with numerous interconnected issues of procedure and policy which have to be faced and dealt with by the decision-makers in the colleges and universities.

The author then reveals his own broad categories of criteria: "standards and quality of instruction," "scholastic work of students," and the like, and proceeds to rank institutions. But the listings—by discipline, by athletic/academic balance, et cetera—are somehow noteworthy by their exceptions. William and Mary, Middlebury, Barnard, Wellesley, SUNY-Binghamton, Davidson, Vassar, Colorado College, Connecticut College, and Bowdoin, for example, are nowhere to be found. How could these stellar colleges fail to make a single list? The author's answer: they hadn't been reviewed and rated! "Too small," said he.

And there is the sensational approach to rating colleges, certain to capture headlines. One author ranked colleges by the percentage of grad-

uates who had made the Social Register. Sure enough, the papers picked it up, and there probably were more than a few believers.

All efforts to rate undergraduate education have not been sensational and/or ill-advised. Perhaps the best example is the extensive research conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute in Los Angeles. Its president, Alexander W. Astin, has become a near-celebrity with his articles, lectures, and talk show appearances, as the national recorder of each new American college freshman class's personal and political values, aspirations, social and family background, and academic strengths and weaknesses. His annual "student characteristics" announcements are widely anticipated and always dependable.

Equally well-publicized have been Astin's college and university ratings based on student selectivity. But there has been a problem: Astin and his cohorts have featured standardized test results as *the* insight to the quality of a student body. His college ratings, therefore, are generated by the ratio of high-scoring students (on the SAT or equivalent tests) to the total student body. Astin first ranked institutions in 1965 on the basis of the college destinations of National Merit Scholars (always chosen with a heavy bias toward SAT performance); in 1973 and 1977 he broadened his review to include average test scores of an institution's entire freshman class. Although his tabulations were broadly publicized and considered a badge of success to the "winners," there was sound criticism of his methodology. The influential dean of admissions at Stanford responded in 1979: "This Astin survey makes test scores more important than they actually are. In fact, a forthcoming survey of several major private institutions indicates there are very few schools where test scores are the most important factor in admissions. This is particularly true for the most popular schools. Any one of the top 20 schools in the nation could 'stack' its ranking on the Astin-Solomon scale simply by using test scores alone as the basis of admission."

Whether or not it relies too heavily on test scores, the Astin report always gives parents and educators something to think about. Fortunately, researcher Astin and his colleagues seem never satisfied with the criteria utilized in their previous study. They try to create ways to more accurately judge undergraduate institutions. One of their latest surveys incorporated "reputational" ratings by faculty members across the land who were asked to judge departments of other universities in their own academic disciplines. Most prior studies indicated that faculty rather automatically gave high points to the undergraduate programs of institutions famous for their *graduate* offerings in particular disciplines. Astin commented in an article in *Change Magazine*: "This finding suggests at least two conclusions: either those institutions that excel in graduate education also provide exemplary

training at the undergraduate level, or a strong halo effect is operating. If the latter is true, raters *assume* that the most renowned graduate schools also provide an excellent undergraduate education, even though different characteristics might contribute to successful bachelor's level experiences."

Indeed, Astin and his research staff found the "halo effect" to be very strong in influencing faculty rankings of undergraduate programs. The questionnaires included a number of institutions on the business school list which didn't offer business at all. Princeton emerged in the top-ten-of-the-nation winners for business as a result of the faculty vote, even though a major program in business at Princeton doesn't exist!

One other Astin discovery in the 1977 report was perhaps predictable:

It is also worth noting that every (most selective) institution is privately controlled and operates a residential undergraduate program (many have required residence for freshmen). The fact that no public institutions are among the most selective in the country is no doubt attributable in part to the large size of most public institutions. While it is probably true that the top students in many large public institutions are just as intellectually capable as the best students in the selective private colleges, the low end of the ability distribution is almost always larger at the more widely accessible public institutions. Thus the *average* score (selectivity) is inevitably lower at most public institutions.

My prediction is that Astin's findings regarding public versus private college selectivity will soon be dated. Brown, Williams, Princeton, Duke, and their small band of first cousins will remain highly selective. But the runner-up list of highly selective private colleges will be nudged aside, one by one, by the quickly rising prestige of the public colleges—a small group of publics, that is. Price will play a prominent role in this changing of the guard, but other factors, like the vogue for technical training, changing perceptions of what "prestige" is all about, demographic trends, and transparent quality of offerings, will also figure strongly.

It is probably obvious by now that my bias leans toward the more subjective analysis of institutions. No one characteristic or conglomerate of objective characteristics—percentage of Ph.D.s on the faculty, endowment per student, mean SAT scores of entering freshmen, starting salaries of graduating seniors, or number of Nobel Prize winners—can substantiate a "best" rating when people and places and funds can change abruptly.

So how do we rate or recognize the best institutions? Which of the growing number of significant public institutions are working their way up to "Ivy"? And what does the designation "Ivy" connote? For starters, a

great deal of prestige. Second and inseparable from the first, a presupposition of exceptional quality in programs, teaching, facilities, and total undergraduate experience. Third, a crowd attempting to storm the front gates or very selective admissions standards. Fourth, an avowed mission to develop the “whole person,” usually via liberal arts emphasis and a consequent de-emphasis of vocational programs and skills. And finally, the resources to match ideas with materials and manpower, and then maintain the quality.

In short, what “Ivy” has come to mean translates into the following criteria for nominating a comparable public school list: (1) admissions selectivity; (2) a quality undergraduate experience and importance accorded the liberal arts; (3) money, from whatever source, to assemble personal, academic, and physical strength—and the resourcefulness to manage funds wisely; (4) the prestige, the mythology, and the visibility that enhance the place and the name.

Let’s consider the criteria in detail.

1. Admissions selectivity (particularly for freshmen)

Study after study indicates that the most selective institutions are the most prestigious, and those that muster greatest alumni loyalty. Thus, concentration on freshman admissions becomes key. But this is a frustrating area to review, and apples are often inescapably compared to oranges. Some selective public institutions use objective data (test scores and grade point averages) exclusively, while others combine the objective with the subjective (personal strengths, recommendations, and essays). Some have severe quotas for out-of-staters, while others welcome large numbers of out-of-staters to assure “balance.” On the whole, though, the Public Ivys share high SATs and even higher high school GPAs, large out-of-state contingents, disappointingly low ethnic diversity, and a surprising degree of subjective analysis in the admissions process.

2. A quality undergraduate academic program and experience, and the importance accorded liberal arts

This is another difficult area to judge conclusively, particularly in the larger institutions. A faculty roster can be impressive indeed, the percentage of Ph.D.s high, the national awards exhaustive. But are the famous professors in the classroom? If so, can they *teach*? Whom *does* an institution put up front? Scholars good at titillating undergraduate minds? And how about class size? If a genius is up front who has the natural knack of clearly and inspiringly translating complicated equations or theories to students,

who cares about class size? Granted, the availability of personnel and facilities for individual guidance in the academic arena is important. Perhaps it is “environment for learning,” then, that is more important to assess than which institution has won the most Guggenheim Awards and how many hours per week the winners teach undergraduates.

But “environment for learning” can hardly be charted; it has to be felt, experienced. It is the result of a magic mix of accomplished scholars creating atmosphere; an inherently curious student body, with just enough individual assistance in the learning process to promote the self-confidence to proceed; the physical resources to comfortably accommodate and equip all phases of the process; the staff, both academic and administrative, to keep all the parts meshing; and the peripheral environment (housing, extracurriculars, fun spots) to provide appropriate relief (but not near-total distraction, as winning teams or an exciting city can sometimes do). The whole package is compromised, it seems to me, if core areas of knowledge are eliminated or minimized, if learning missions are dictated by that which “prepares” one for a specific goal—to be a career officer or a career nurse or a career anything—and if there is the promise and/or expectation of rewards or success. Elitist or not, this view of Ivy tilts toward the priority of learning, not living.

3. Resources

Economic times are tough all over, but particularly for higher education. The taxpayer’s revolt that started with Proposition 13 in California has become contagious. The resulting nationwide cutback in educational funding, state by state, has reached epidemic proportions. And the problem does not stop with the states. Significant federal revenues have been cut by the Reagan administration. An editorial in the June 1982 issue of *Nature* records the consequences of budgetary retrenchment in higher education accurately:

The easiest response is to conserve fuel, cut down on office staffs and maintenance, defer new building or expensive new computers or other instruments, to shave the number of faculty evenly across the board—and to avoid fights. But that does not maintain quality. To maintain quality a school must cut out the fat (weak departments) or do away with tenure—both of which can lead to embittered fights on campus and also lawsuits. Another course is to raise tuition fees at state schools above the traditional nominal level. But while this raises revenue, it discourages applicants and contradicts the very idea that state schools are meant to

embody high quality education for everyone. None of these remedies is pleasant, let alone conducive to an unperturbed environment for study.

Let's step back for a moment to consider the magnitude of higher education in this country, all of which costs money. There are approximately 3,000 institutions of higher learning in the United States.* Some of the most *costly* majors that colleges offer continue to be, or are becoming, very popular: computer science, premedicine, all forms of engineering. The faculty must be well paid and nurtured; between 1970 and 1980, however, faculty salaries did not begin to keep pace with inflation, as "real" salaries dropped 21 percent while teaching loads and layoffs increased. The student body, in our "accessible" public school system, must be financed according to financial need: roughly 50 percent of those who attend college qualify for federal and/or state aid on the basis of need. The heart of the university is research, involving both students and faculty; the federal government funds 69 percent of all basic research in America, over half of which is conducted on college campuses. (The federal investment in campus-based research in 1979 totaled \$3.6 billion.) Good research and sound teaching require top equipment and laboratories; one-quarter of the existing campus plant-space in the United States needs renovation now, at an estimated cost of \$50 billion.

Despite this compelling scenario of legitimate need, money for higher education is drying up at both the federal and state levels. Student charges—tuition/board/room—are skyrocketing, therefore, as public funds for higher education fail to keep pace with inflation. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "The energy-rich states and some growth-oriented Sunbelt areas were able to keep up with double-digit inflation, but for most of the others it was a losing race. Among the hardest hit were Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, where the housing slump has affected the lumber industry, and Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, where reduced automobile production has caused widespread factory layoffs. The largest gains were in states rich in oil, gas, and coal: Alaska, Wyoming, Texas, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Montana, and Louisiana."*

The resources of a state university from within its own public boundaries are mercurial, depending on a myriad of political and environmental circumstances, most of which can change almost overnight. And often state legislatures vote budgets for higher education that are several months

*The data in this section was reported in the American Council of Education's *Higher Education and National Affairs* newsletter, November 12, 1982

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