

A Message to High School Students, their Parents, their Teachers, and their Counselor: The
Myth of the “Best” Schools

Joel Kupfersmid, PhD

The senior year for high school students and their parents can be an exciting time and a time of anxiety. For many, much anxiety focuses on the college application process. Some believe it is imperative to enroll in one of those colleges considered elite or “one of the best.” Often this thinking is that an elite school will provide a better education than a non-elite one. Also, admission to a prestigious school will have others in awe of the student and their parent’s. Or, as I call it, they will hear from others an “ooh-aah” response. This thinking is misguided.

The Myth of a Better Education by Prestigious Colleges

I co-authored an article distributed to over 25,000 high school counselors. The article is titled “College Cachet: Is it Worth It?”

We used the rankings by *U.S. News and World Report* as our measure of college prestige. We first examined the criteria used to determine if a college is elite. The measure given the most weight is college administrator’s and high school guidance counselor’s opinion of each college’s “reputation.” These individuals evaluated over a 100 schools. But it is unlikely they know the educational quality of more than a handful of schools. *U.S. News* did not provide the judges with any criteria of educational quality. Nor did the magazine provide any information on these colleges. There was no measure used by *U.S. News* that assessed students’ learning even though measures exist.

We then asked do these “best” schools enhance their students’ learning over those in non-elite schools? This issue is the one most relevant for attending an elite school. To address this question, we examined tests scores of students who chose to advance their education.

For doctoral programs applicants take the Graduate Record Examination. For medical schools students take the Medical College Admission Test. And for law school applicants it's the Law School Admission Test. Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini analyzed scores on these tests. They compiled scores for graduates in over 200 colleges. They report there is no relationship between students' scores and the prestige/ranking of the college attended. A non-profit organization affiliated with Stanford University reached the same conclusion.

Next, we asked whether students in elite schools experience better teaching. Pascarella and Terenzini researched this area among 76,000 freshmen at 271 colleges. They found no relationship between good teaching and the prestige of the college. John Braxton collected 115 tests in three subjects from 40 colleges. He found little difference between schools in the types of questions asks on these exams.

Next we focused on whether graduates from prestigious schools make more money. Stacy Dale and Alan Krueger compared the earnings of about 2,000 pairs of students when matched by occupation. There was no difference between graduates of prestigious colleges versus graduates of schools ranked near the bottom by *U.S. News*.

It's the quality of the student, not the college attended, that determines how much is learned. Likewise, this too applies to how an individual performs on the job after graduation. For those who believe they will get a better education at an elite school, they are mistaken. That is not to say that going to an elite school will result in a poor education. It will not. Rather, the education at the "best" schools is comparable to those not placed in this category.

The “Ohh-ah” Effect

The “ooh-ah” effect is real. Many believe attending a prestigious school means one is very smart and will be smarter when they graduate. As noted this may be true, but it has little to do with the prestige of the school one attended.

There is a cautionary caveat about enrolling into a prestigious school. Psychologists have discovered a “Frame of Reference” effect or the “Small Fish in a Big Pond” effect. That is, students often judge their abilities in comparison to those in their environment. This effect is evident in elementary school through college.

One’s self- concept is a risk when a top-of-the-class senior attends a college where all were at the top of their class. Now as a college freshman, this student may only be average when compared to his/her peers.

What if this same individual enrolled in a college where the majority of students have average academic abilities? Being above average, they again will be near the top of the class. They will feel good about themselves. They become the “Big Fish in a Small Pond.” Big fish in small ponds feel better about life than small fish in big ponds. For most, it is best to be the big fish, even if in the small pond.

There are two reasons for enrolling in a college with high social prestige. First is the “Ooh-ah” factor. If the cost is not prohibitive, then these schools provide social recognition without much sacrifice. Second is if the student receives a “full ride” and the price for other incidentals is minimal.

The main message is that there are many great colleges. All provide good educational opportunities. Yet, it's the students themselves who have the most influence on the kind of education they'll receive.

Joel can be reached at: psychdoc22@gmail.com