

Selecting a College

After visiting several colleges with our daughter Rebecca, we learned that, at every liberal arts college in America:

It is very safe — even if students make a point of locking the doors of their rooms when they are not in them.

Students are not competitive and don't worry about or compare grades — unlike every other college.

Students are helpful and friendly to each other — unlike other colleges.

The nearby big city is a center for cultural activities, but students practically never go there because there is so much happening on campus.

All professors are unusually accessible.

All teaching is done by professors, not graduate students, even if undergraduate teaching assistants sometimes teach language labs solo or assist with science labs.

The president of the school is friendly, accessible, lovable, and not a stuffed shirt.

How to Get Information on Colleges

If the information provided by the admissions department is, as these examples may suggest, not entirely trustworthy, how else do you evaluate a school?

To begin with, there is quite a lot information out there, online and in print, useful for a first pass at comparing schools. Some consists of objective measures, such as the average SAT score of the students — if interacting with smart fellow students and taking courses aimed at smart students are important to you, prefer schools where that number is higher. There will be descriptions of school policies that some students will see as a plus, some as a minus. My daughter, having controlled her own unschooled education, wanted to avoid a school that would choose many of her courses for her. One of the collections of information on colleges that we used¹ was written by authors who were in favor of an extensive core curriculum; their approving comments provided a convenient way of warning my daughter away from such schools.

Information about school culture is best obtained by visiting; the trick is to find sources of information that do not feed through the admissions department. We made a point of eating in the school dining hall, getting in conversation with random students. Rebecca sat in on classes. We have long been active in the SCA, a historical recreation group with chapters at many schools; where possible we arranged to talk with people from the local chapter to get their view of the school. The student running the local chapter in Northfield, Minnesota, where we went to visit Carleton, was herself a student at nearby St. Olaf's. At her invitation, Rebecca visited there as well and got a very attractive view of that school ("there's music everywhere").

I am an academic economist. One of the things I routinely did when we visited a college was to wonder around the economics department getting in conversations. That not only gave me a feel

¹ Put out by the Intercollegiate Studies institute, which was a libertarian organization called the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists back when I was associated with it, more than fifty years ago. It makes an appearance in Chapter XXX in another context.

for the quality of the economics department, it also gave a more honest picture of the school than a random parent would have gotten from a random faculty member. An economist at one of the colleges we visited commented on how hard it was to teach the economics of pollution to students who regarded pollution not as a cost but as a moral evil and were thus resistant to the idea of some optimal level other than zero.

It occurred to me that in a school dominated by left-wing orthodoxy a good economist must feel under siege, and thus that seeing to what degree economists at such schools preferred economics to political orthodoxy was a useful measure of the tolerance of its faculty for intellectual diversity. It is possible to be both a good economist and a conservative, a liberal, even a socialist. But it is impossible, or at least very difficult, to be both a good economist and an orthodox conservative, liberal, or socialist, because there are political positions included in each ideology that depend for their force on bad economics.² Investigating economics departments online preliminary to visiting some, I found only one where it seemed fairly clear that the members were left wingers first and economists second. I described that conclusion to my daughter and she decided to cross it off her list.

Most parents of students looking for a college are neither economists nor members of the SCA. But they are quite likely to have some profession, interest, special background that overlaps with those of members of the university community: students, faculty, or staff. If nothing else, most are themselves college graduates who have something in common with students and faculty in the department of their major.

One issue of particular concern to us was a school's political climate, since my daughter shared my libertarian views but not my taste for argument. One negative signal was the comment by the tour guide at one school that he thought capitalism was a good system but, so far as he could tell, he was the only member of his class with that opinion. Another was the comment by another tour guide that, although she was herself politically liberal, she wished her classes were not so consistently on that side of the political spectrum. On the other hand, the comment by an econ professor at one school that he deliberately makes politically incorrect economic points in his environmental economics class (if you want there to be more trees, don't recycle paper) and that the reaction he gets is curiosity, not hostility, was a positive signal. What we were looking for was not a school where people agreed with us — boring as well as improbable — but one where holding different views would not be a problem.

That part of our search strategy was unsuccessful. Rebecca ended up at a school where the student culture turned out to be not only left wing but intolerantly so, the prevailing view being that anyone who disagreed with the orthodoxy was either evil or stupid.³ That was part of the reason that, after her second year, she transferred from Oberlin to Chicago.

Mostly, we went to the colleges, but occasionally the college comes to you. We attended a local event put on by one of the schools our daughter was considering. It was hosted by local alumni, organized, presumably, by someone from the school's admission department, attended by potential students, their parents, and school alumni. The event included a movie produced by students, lauding the school.

² Curious readers may ask whether it is possible to be a good economist and an orthodox libertarian. For some definitions of an orthodox libertarian the answer is no, for reasons I explore in part IV of *The Machinery of Freedom*.

³ The faculty culture, to judge by her experience, was also left wing but much more tolerant.

Two things struck me. One was the effort to show what happy non-conformists the students were. The problem, of course, is that the more the school emphasizes the importance of that, the more one suspects that their sort of nonconformity is what students are conforming to. Judging by the schools we saw and what they said about themselves, the real nonconformist would have been wearing suit and tie and getting his exercise playing tennis instead of ultimate frisbee.

The other thing that struck me in the movie was not, I think, intended by its producers. One of the students, explaining how wonderful the school was, described it as undefinable — "like the square root of two."

The square root of two is quite easily defined — it is that positive number that, multiplied by itself, equals two. The square root of two is irrational, but I do not think that was how he wanted to describe his college. The actual information conveyed by that segment was that at least one student at that college was both mathematically illiterate and mathematically pretentious, and that nobody making the movie knew enough elementary mathematics, or was paying enough attention, to do a retake with the error corrected. I do not think that was the message that the school intended to give to potential students and their parents.

None of what we did added up to a spreadsheet formula that we could use to calculate a first, second and third choice. But I think it all helped.