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High school grads, set your sights 'low' for college

Colman McCarthy | May. 13, 2010

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I advise high school students not to fret or fear. You?ll get in. Somewhere. And often Somewhere University is where you will come into your own in ways you never would at a well-moated and well-endowed name school that boasts of accepting less than 10 percent of applicants and where even the maids and janitors have graduate degrees.

It?s college anxiety time in the nation?s 34,000 public and private high schools. Juniors are feeling the first trembles, many having already been hauled around on campus shopping tours by moms and dads who know that except for buying a house or paying greens fees at Pebble Beach no outlay of money matches tuition bills. They read the college guidebooks for the best buys as if paging through the latest Consumers Union report on bobblehead dolls.

For seniors, especially the bushy tails who lucked out by being born into middle- or upper-class families and are well-programmed to stay there, these are the high holy days of wondering whether the admissions mahatmas at the dozen or more colleges to which they applied are over the moon by all the advanced placement courses they aced, their thousand hours of community service, the sports, the band, editing the yearbook, studying Arabic and Mandarin, the spring break trip to the Galapagos -- ?the giant turtles were awesome? -- and writing admission essays laced with allusions to Faulkner?s *Requiem for a Nun* and the hidden messages of ?Avatar.?

Low-income high school seniors less lucky by birth, and who had jobs after school and Saturdays, are looking at state universities, junior or community colleges. Instead of the Ivies or Little Ivies, they?ll take the Poison Ivies where the main admission requirements are a C average and an active pulse. They won?t apply to Harvard, which means no risk of suffering the academic post-traumatic stress disorder that four years in Cambridge can bring on.

Which raises the question: Does it really matter educationally, socially or spiritually where the four or five -- and hopefully not six -- years after high school are spent?

When all the plusses and minuses found in every school are weighed, probably not.

It isn?t likely that the virtues and flaws of Barack Obama, who attended an elite prep school, an Ivy League university and law school would differ in any meaningful way had he attended public schools. The same for George W. Bush and his Andover, Yale and Harvard pedigrees. As with everyone else, it?s how well or not how well Obama and Bush used their time in college that shaped them, not the rarefied reputation of the places.

Who hasn?t met graduates of brand name universities who became louts or layabouts? Who doesn?t know grads of hinterland colleges who are models of personal kindness and professional excellence? Eight out of nine of the current Supreme Court justices have law degrees from either Harvard or Yale. Does it follow that their decisions are that much more enlightened than judges in lower courts who studied law at the City University of New York or the University of Arkansas?

In the academic marketplace, where high school juniors and seniors are customers and the colleges are sellers, money is more and more driving decisions. Tuitions keep rising, up and over $50,000 at some. Scrambling for scholarship money, grants and loans intensifies, as families face job layoffs and home foreclosures. Last year an estimated 10 million collegians took out loans. They will graduate with two things: a diploma, which guarantees nothing in the current economy, and a pile of debt that can reach well into five figures -- a reality that pleases the lending industry. The Center for Responsive Politics reports that Sallie Mae, Wells Fargo and other profit-driven lenders spent $60 million in the past six years lobbying Congress against enacting reforms allowing the federal government to make loans directly to students, a move that would lower the cost to families.

Except for the children of trust funds or those who are in the wills of their millionaire grandparents, I?m advising my high school students to be money-smart about college. If it matters little where you study, and it doesn?t, and if a lot rides on how well you allow your studies to shape you into a person of compassion and honor, then pick a low-cost and high-quality college -- there are thousands of them -- and save up for graduate school. And hope that a master?s, a doctorate or a law degree will still mean something after you get it.

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