



Does the College You Attend Predict Success?

by John T. Brentar, Ph.D.

The recent news of college admission fraud has been jarring to a number of people both in the field of education and among families. Although many people have suspected that influence (such as family legacy) can impact admission to specific colleges, the extent to which some families tried to game the system has been surprising. One of the parents was quoted as saying that he wanted "a roadmap for success as it relates to (our daughter) and getting her into a school other than ASU!" This raises the question posed in the title: Does the college you attend predict success?

Intrinsic Advantages

A 2017 survey conducted by *The Harvard Crimson* found that the incoming class of 2021 was made up of over 29% legacy students (i.e., those who had a parent or grandparent who had also attended the university). They also found that applicants with a Harvard legacy were three times more likely to get into the school than those without. Legacy students' odds for admission were more favorable than students who had GPAs of 4.0; earned 2400 on their SATs; or held top leadership positions on newspapers, sports teams, or student councils. Family wealth was also positively correlated with admission.

Wealthy students are most certainly overrepresented at elite universities. Based on analyses of anonymous tax filings and tuition records, *The New York Times* reported in 2017 that 38 colleges across the country had more students from the top 1% of the income bracket than the entire bottom 60%. Approximately one in four of the wealthiest students attend an elite college—universities that typically cluster toward the top of annual rankings. In contrast, less than one-half of 1% of children from the bottom fifth of American families attend an elite college; less than half attend any college at all.



Under Pressure

A feature story on **CBS Sunday Morning** on March 17, 2019 highlighted the extent to which students feel that they must attend a top-tier college. The segment focused on **Alexandra Valoras**, a 17-year-old high school junior who organized and planned her life based on her perception that her success hinged on admission to **Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)**. This goal was a self-generated definition

of success and not one supported or voiced by her parents. However, her parents were proud of Alexandra and her accomplishments. They described her as "a happy girl, so motivated and so just full of life." She was also a straight-A student, class officer, and a member of the robotics team.

One morning, after making her bed and cleaning her room, Alexandra walked to a highway overpass and jumped. What her parents, teachers, counselors, and friends did not know was that she was haunted by inner demons. Her parents found amid her belongings two journals comprised of "two-hundred pages of self-loathing and despair." One entry said, "What will get me into MIT? Valedictorian, first robotics captain, 100 plus hours service award, model U.N., attend both conferences, win."



While setting high goals for oneself is not intrinsically harmful, guidance counselor **Scott White** noted that "There's no balance on these goals. Not every person can reach them. Whether that child can reach them, it's sort of unknown. But if she did, there would be another goal beyond that. You know that and I know that." White added, "We have a culture that makes kids think that if they are not perfect, they are less than good."

Academic Achievement

Had she lived, Alexandra may or may not have gained admission to and ultimately graduated from MIT. But what we can say with reasonable certainty is that her choice of university would likely have had little bearing on her future success. That would have depended on Alexandra herself.

A study conducted at Rice University found that a student's sense of belonging, growth mindset, and personal goals and values are important predictors of success once a student is enrolled at a university.

One of the researchers, **Dr. Fred Oswald**, reported that these three competencies were important predictors of students' college persistence and success as measured by grades, retention, and graduation. He defines sense of belonging as the extent to which students feel that they belong in college, fit in well, and are socially integrated. Approximately 85% of studies measuring students' sense of belonging demonstrated a positive impact on their college GPAs.

Growth mindset is defined as the college students' beliefs that their own intelligence is not a fixed entity, but rather a malleable quality that college can help improve. Seventy-five percent of the studies measuring students' growth mindset showed that it had a positive impact on their college GPAs.

Establishing personal goals and values linked to a future outcome or achievement in the future was the third critical variable. Approximately 83% of the studies measuring personal goals showed this characteristic as having a positive impact on students' final course grades.

Beyond University

The reason Ivy-League graduates generally do better than state-school graduates is not because of their Ivy League education. The critical predictors of success are intrinsic factors such as talents, motivation, and intelligence.

In his book, "Everybody Lies," **Seth Stephens-Davidowitz** affirms that the college a student attends may not matter in terms of future success. He points to a paper published in 2002 by two economists, **Stacy Dale** at **Mathematica Policy Research** and **Alan B. Krueger** from **Princeton University**, which found that elite colleges "tend to accept students with higher earnings capacity."

Dale and Krueger gathered data on thousands of high-school students: where they applied to college, where they were accepted, where they attended, family background, and income as adults. They looked specifically at the 1995 earnings of individuals from similar backgrounds who had been accepted by Ivy-League schools and were college freshmen in 1976. They compared those who did attend Ivy-League schools to those who went elsewhere and found that the two groups had similar incomes later in life, which supports the assertion that students who are equally talented will do equally well regardless of alma mater. In 2011, the researchers studied an even larger sample by reviewing the 2007 earnings of about 19,000 adults who were freshmen in 1989 and found similar results.

Interestingly, and by contrast, the outcome for students from low-income families appears to be different. A 2017 study conducted by **Raj Chetty** and associates at the **National Bureau of Economic Research** found that that low-income students appeared to reap greater benefit from attending an elite university. Specifically, they found that lower-income students at an elite school have a "much higher chance of reaching the [top 1%] of the earnings distribution" than those at an excellent public university. Therefore, saying that one's choice of college doesn't matter requires a more nuanced interpretation. Although low-income students often face significant hurdles in being accepted by a top-tier college, once accepted, it might just give them an extra edge towards future success.