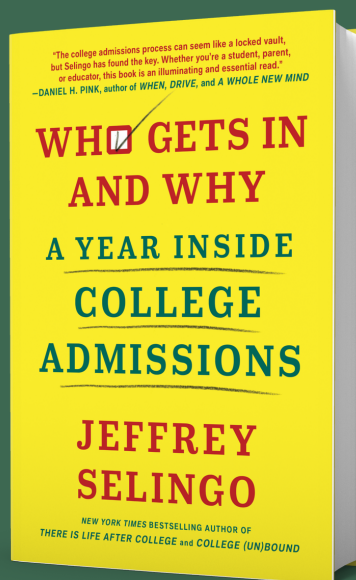


## Discussion Guide

# Who Gets In and Why

by  
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## INTRODUCTION

Getting into a top-ranked college has never seemed more impossible, with acceptance rates at some elite universities dipping into the single digits. In his research for *Who Gets In and Why*, journalist and higher education expert Jeffrey Selingo was allowed to “embed” in three different admissions offices—a selective private university, a leading liberal arts college, and a flagship public campus—where he closely observed gatekeepers as they made their often agonizing and sometimes life-changing decisions. He also followed select students and their parents, and he traveled around the country meeting with high school counselors, marketers, behind-the-scenes consultants, and college rankers. While many Americans have long believed that admissions is merit-based, rewarding the best students, *Who Gets In and Why* presents a more complicated truth, showing that who gets in is frequently more about the college’s agenda than about the applicant. In a world where thousands of equally qualified students vie for a fixed number of spots at elite institutions, admissions officers often make split-second decisions based on a variety of factors, such as diversity, money, and, ultimately, whether a student will enroll if accepted.

## TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In the Introduction, Selingo points out that the majority of colleges have a seat for most of their applicants. Why then do we focus so much of our attention on the more selective schools (such as the Ivy League) when it comes to discussions about admissions?
2. Chapter 1 is focused on the marketing of colleges. Why do you think Selingo chose to start a book about admissions with marketing? What surprised you most about the ways colleges pitch themselves to students? How important were the schools’ marketing materials in putting together your own college list? How does a college’s marketing influence choices for your child/student?

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3. Higher education is intertwined with prestige, a word that has been bandied about by students and parents for years when referring to the standing of colleges in a hierarchy (page 56). These days when we talk about top colleges, we tend to label them as elite institutions. What do you think the difference is between an elite college and a prestigious institution—are they sometimes the same?
4. In Chapter 2, Selingo puts colleges into two categories—buyers and sellers—and encourages families to think about the financial fit of a school when compiling their list. Does this resonate with you? Why do you think students and families focus so much on the academic and social fit of college early on in the search, and consider the financial fit only later in the process?
5. Consider the story of Northeastern University’s rise in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings just as the list itself was gaining prominence (pages 67-79). Discuss whether it’s still possible for schools to achieve big jumps in the rankings like in the way Northeastern did. How important should the rankings be in the college search?
6. Among the three high school seniors Selingo follows in the book—Grace, Nicole, and Chris—whose story did you find most interesting, and why?
7. Selingo describes the formula and numbering system that colleges use to rate applicants as appearing “precise enough to land someone on the moon, but in reality is mostly amorphous” (page 85). At schools where seats are scarce, which factors should matter most to getting in, and why?
8. Chapter 5 discusses the various “hooks” that some students may have in the admissions process—such as athletes, legacy applicants, racial or ethnic minorities, children of donors, etc. Do you think anyone should be given an advantage in the admissions process? Why or why not?
9. Selingo observes on page 163 that in admissions decisions, “the unit being evaluated was less often the applicant than the applicant’s high school.” With students applying to college from so many different high schools with varying degrees of course offerings and grading, how should admissions officers compare applicants from different high schools?

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10. Consider the “shaping the class” process described in Chapter 8 (see page 205). What do you make of the argument put forth by colleges that they are trying to build a community even though what they are offering are invitations to a class that many students end up turning down?

11. Admissions is built on the idea that it matters where someone goes to college, not how they go. Do you believe that it is the individual or the school that is what ultimately shapes one’s success in life?

## ENHANCE YOUR DISCUSSION

1. As a group, share a story about your own college search, or tell one important thing you wish you would have known.

2. The conclusion lays out various ideas for reforming college admissions. If you had the opportunity to design a selection system from scratch, what would it look like?

3. What did you learn from this book that has shaped how you and your child/student will engage in the college search?

