FIRST PAGES

DREAM SCHOOL

Finding the College That's Right for You

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WHO GETS IN AND WHY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In reporting on high school and college students over the years—and with two teenagers of my own at home—I've come to appreciate that time in life when we make more mistakes than we care to remember. I'm always glad that I didn't grow up in an era of smartphones where every moment of my life could be traced and recorded and then shared with the world.

With that in mind, names of students and their parents throughout this book have been changed. All other details of their lives are true, except for those that would reveal identities. For example, you'll notice that, in a few cases, I didn't mention the name of a college a young adult attended because doing so could identify them given the small size of the school. In such circumstances, I tried to give readers a sense of the *type* of college. Every person in this book identified with a full name explicitly chose to be.

INTRODUCTION

When I first met William, a high-achieving teenager from the Midwest, he rattled off stats most high schoolers would dream of: a 4.0 grade-point average, a perfect 36 on the ACT, a three-time debater at nationals, a lab researcher at a Big 10 university. The college counselor at his high school encouraged him to place a bet on the most selective school he could get into. He deliberated between three top 20 universities—Northwestern, Stanford, and Columbia—and just before early-decision applications were due in November of his senior year he put all his chips on Columbia. Applying early decision meant that, if he were accepted, he was committing to going no matter what. "I knew I wanted prestige," he said. "I knew I wanted to go to school in a big city."

A month later, while he was working the register at his retail job, the acceptance email arrived from Columbia. It felt akin to holding a "winning lottery ticket," he said. It's an analogy I've heard often over the years about admission to highly selective colleges, and it's an apt one. The year William was admitted to Columbia, it rejected the vast majority of applicants: some 58,000 out of 60,000.

But soon after William arrived in New York in August 2022 for his first year of college, the high of his win started to wear off. During the

college search, he'd been enamored of the brand name. Now elements of the Columbia undergraduate experience he hadn't really paid attention to began to surface.

A class he wanted in the psychology department had a waiting list so long that he likely wouldn't get in until he was a junior or senior, if at all. A professor he'd hoped to do research with on addiction didn't allow undergraduates to work in his lab. Instead of building a collective community of first-year students, Columbia's core curriculum, William told me, amounted to "collective suffering." The pace in the humanities was so fast that he never had a chance to thoroughly think about the books he was reading.

More than anything, the "true colors of the student body started to come out," he said. "I realized that a lot of people were there exclusively for their studies, to land an internship, to work in a lab. That was the number one priority [rather than] making friends, maintaining friendships, and being a kid, or really having a college experience." When exams came, the libraries were packed. "No one was off enjoying the lack of classes at the end of the semester," he told me.

By winter break, he was already thinking of transferring to the University of Minnesota. His mom worried he was taking the easy way out. "This was a hard ticket to win, and so once you leave, you can't get it back," she said. In a conversation before he returned to New York for the spring semester at Columbia, his mother reminded him, "You'll need to figure out what story you're going to tell because people will want to know." Few students leave Columbia on their own, she told him. Indeed, the year before, all but fifteen freshmen returned for their sophomore year.

William ultimately gave up his "winning ticket." When I caught up with him in the spring of 2024, he was thriving as a sophomore at the University of Minnesota. He told me he finds his courses just as challenging as at Columbia, even if the size of classes is larger and he doesn't know his professors as well as a result.

On the flip side, he's able to work in a research lab, and his family's yearly tuition bill has been cut in half. But the biggest difference, he

finds, is his classmates. They are as bright and curious as those at Columbia, but their "primary focus is building meaningful connections," William told me. "There's not this feeling that if at any given moment you're not doing something quote-unquote productive then you're either lazy or just not progressing in life."

My conversations with William stayed with me as I met other teenagers and their families who craved the ticket to the elite education he'd won. Although one-third of college freshmen transfer each year, William made an uncommon choice: He traded an Ivy League school ranked thirteenth in the nation by *U.S. News & World Report* for a big public university ranked some forty spots lower.

William got a taste of his dream school and then realized it wasn't worth it.

My last book, *Who Gets In and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions*, was a peek into how colleges make *their* decisions. This book is a companion, focusing on how you should make *your* decisions about college. For my last book, I spent a bunch of time inside admissions offices, talking with administrators and others to pull back the veil on what seems like a secret system, especially at selective colleges. This book, though, doesn't put the colleges at the center. Instead, it's about how you should make your decision among a much broader set of schools.

We approach the college search as if there is a dream school, a single choice, a perfect match for us. There isn't. There are more than 3,900 colleges and universities in the U.S. If you exclude two-year colleges and those institutions focusing on a single purpose such as the arts, music, or theology, we're still talking about 1,700 schools. If you take out small colleges—those more like the size of a typical high school, with fewer than 1,000 students—we're left with a universe of around 1,200 campuses.

With so many options, research suggests that uncertainty clouds the judgment of both colleges and applicants, making it impossible to find that perfect fit we hear about during the college search. A group

of economists who researched the idea that students and colleges are trying to match with each other concluded that teenagers are "ignorant of the types of colleges" that would be a good fit for them. Meanwhile, researchers found "colleges evaluate students, trying to gauge the future stars, and often don't succeed." Countless factors affect how students and colleges sort through the process, and no teenager or admissions dean can adequately explain their decisions without them seeming any less arbitrary than their choice of cereal in the supermarket.

So why did I call this book *Dream School* if I'm suggesting there's no such thing? Because the dream isn't about a single name or a universally understood brand like the Ivy League. It's about finding a place where you can thrive, learn, and become the person you're meant to be. It's about considering a range of colleges that fit both your personality and how you like to learn. Do you want a small school in a college town, an urban university with ample city life, or a big public flagship where football on Saturday and Greek life are the main attractions? What about academics? Do you want a pressure cooker like William experienced at Columbia, where every day felt like a competition, or more of a balanced vibe like he found at Minnesota?

This book is for anyone worn out by the endless messages we hear about the value of an "elite college." My hope is that in the chapters that follow, you will find comfort and satisfaction in stepping away from that mindset (and stress) as you discover what really makes a "good" school for you. I'm not saying you shouldn't have aspirational picks on your college list, but too often I've seen eighteen years of academic or athletic striving turn into another endless sprint, first in the pursuit of the college brand, and then in landing the coveted job offer.

Here's the thing: Most of us don't know what a dream school would be (or even why it's a "good" school in the first place). We tend to let others define that dream. Perhaps it's our TikTok feed, with stray clips and hidden algorithms pulling us toward certain campuses and experiences (check out #RushTok, if you haven't already, to see what I'm talking about). Or it could be the names scrolling across the ticker

on ESPN, making us think there are only a few dozen universities out there. Or maybe its family ties and stories from relatives about their alma mater at Thanksgiving dinner. In my interviews with parents for this book, I discovered that nostalgia plays a huge role in encouraging our kids to replicate our own college experiences—often on the same campuses.

Unfortunately, what defines a dream school for many families is simply the signal it sends to others. College rankings claim to identify the "best schools," but in reality they're mostly creating a shorthand for managing brands. ("T20" or "T25" is an abbreviation you'll see often in Reddit threads and Facebook groups to describe top schools.)

Go ahead, admit it: One reason you want your kid to go to Yale or MIT is so you can tell others that you're sending your kid to Yale or MIT. Much of the hype over college is about kids trying to make their parents happy or parents trying to impress their friends. That's the wrong way to select a school.

My hope after you read this book is that you'll brag instead about how your kid got accepted into an honors college at a big public university, an acceptance that came with a huge scholarship and a study-abroad grant. And down the road maybe you'll even be able to boast about your matriculating son or daughter earning an industry-certified credential in Adobe that will be a gold star on their résumé and end up getting them their first job.

When a student thinks there is only one dream school, one perfect fit, that single choice comes to dominate their college search. Yes, they'll still apply to five, ten, twelve schools. But more often than not, they're simply variations on that top choice or schools added for good measure, not true backup plans. There really isn't a Plan B. So, when Plan A doesn't work out as expected because the student doesn't get in, can't afford it, or it's a bad fit like it was for William, most families are left without a viable alternative.

I didn't write this book to make you give up on Dartmouth or

Amherst or Michigan and "settle" for something that feels like "second best." Rather, I want families to consider other colleges beyond the small group that sucks up all the attention. Our fascination with elite higher ed is understandable, even if it's indefensible.

We're a nation of strivers. Given the opportunity to own an elite brand—Cartier, Ferrari, Hermès, for example—most of us would jump at the chance. However, the landscape of elite higher education has shifted in ways that look wholly unfamiliar to Gen X parents who went to college in the late 1980s and 1990s—and now have kids who are applying. Not only is it nearly impossible to get in, as I'll outline in Chapter 1, but that entry ticket might not matter in life as much as we think, as I'll tell you in Chapter 2.

Still, for those obsessed with getting into a top school, this book will provide an Option B, in case things don't work out as planned and, for the rest of us, show how to widen the aperture of the college search from the very beginning. It will become your playbook for finding *your* dream school.

By pulling together data in novel ways and combining it with insights from three decades of covering higher education as a journalist and author, I've developed a practical framework for finding a good college. It starts by discovering what you value and what you need out of college when you graduate, no matter your major. And then I help you reverse engineer that by finding the campuses during your college search where you'll discover your people as an undergraduate, connect with faculty and advisors, get the job outcomes you want, and do it all at a place with the financial resources to invest in a student experience where you won't sit on the sidelines for four years.

I'll name names throughout—and list seventy-five colleges in the appendix that are what I call the "New" Dream Schools—but this is not another rankings guide or a *Colleges That Change Lives* book. And don't skip right to the list in the back. The list is more of a rough guide because I don't know what's important to *you* or the unique qualities *you* might bring to a school. There is no Easy Button to push or algorithm that yields an answer. That's why the book itself gives you the

know-how and leads you to the tools to help you find *your* dream school.

We've been led to believe that elite colleges are something special. Perhaps it's because we *think* prestige is what the majority prioritizes in education. But when you dig into surveys of parents, you see that we all overestimate the importance of gaining admission to colleges with "the best possible reputations." At the same time, we underestimate what the public thinks education should be about: helping students develop "the skills and values needed to build decent lives in the communities where they live."

For this book, I conducted two surveys of more than 3,000 parents in all about how they defined a dream school, the pressures they felt within their family and their community to pick the right school, and what they were willing to compromise on if their child received a scholarship from a college deeper in the rankings. In the surveys—conducted with the assistance of a former pollster at UCLA, who for eight years conducted large nationwide studies of college students, as well as a researcher at Harvard's Graduate School of Education—two findings in particular struck me as significant in how parents are rethinking the pursuit of prestige in higher ed:

- First, college is mostly about the job afterward. When asked to name the most important attributes in a "good" college, the top two responses related to getting a job. No. 1 was the availability of experiential learning, such as internships and research projects. No. 2 was the job placement of graduates. The prestige of a college ranked fourth, just below the strength of a specific major or program. This explains why so often in my conversations with prospective families they'll lead with the reputation of a school within the university (the Kelley School or the Maxwell School, for example) before ever mentioning the name of the university itself (Indiana or Syracuse).

- Second, prestige isn't worth *any* price. For the parents at every income level in the survey, hands-on learning and job placement trump prestige. Even at the highest income level in the survey ($250,000+), more than a third of parents said they'd compromise "a lot" on prestige if a school cost them half as much as their child's dream college because they received a generous amount of merit aid. It used to be that upper middle-class and affluent parents were willing to pay anything for a degree from a top college. They still are, but the list of schools they consider worth the cost is getting smaller, as I'll outline in Chapter 4. (Just to note: this isn't a book about paying for college. For that, I recommend Ron Lieber's *The Price You Pay for College*.)

Nevertheless, social pressures around going to college—and going to the right college—are real. We tend to think that the sticker on the rear window of our car says something about our parenting, and so the college search becomes this pressure-filled pursuit at all costs. Only 16 percent of parents in my survey said it was important to *them* that their children attend a prestigious college; 27 percent said it was important to *their children*. Then they were asked how they thought others in *their community* would choose. And that's where it got really interesting: 61 percent thought prestige was important to *other* parents.

Whether they think attending a prestigious college is important for their own kids or not, they often feel an achievement pressure that rises in middle- and upper middle-class neighborhoods where families try to cling to their place in the economic pecking order through the college their kids attend. These same places also tend to drive the national narrative about college. If we think everyone in our kid's high school wants to go to Cornell, Berkeley, Williams, or Georgetown, we think we need to as well—even if these highly selective colleges, which accept fewer than 20 percent of applicants, represent a tiny fraction (100,000 students) of the more than 15 million undergraduates in higher education.

Do some parents, even in affluent communities, ignore this "Ivy League or bust" feeling? Of course. But they often feel they're in the minority, and social pressure makes it harder to voice that view. When your neighbor is loudly proclaiming that they're doing everything to make sure their child has every opportunity, you might feel like a mediocre, uncaring parent when you say those highly selective places don't matter. But my survey shows that parents are increasingly willing to compromise on brand name—for the right reasons. If a campus really wants their kid, helps them fit in, is focused on fostering purpose, and launches them into a life of meaning . . . and, oh, helps them find a good job—if it can deliver all that—the sticker on the car window matters a lot less.

This book got its start soon after my last one was released. It was still in the early months of the pandemic, and as I talked with high school students, their parents, and counselors over Zoom, I noticed questions and comments about whether elite colleges were worth north of $300,000 for four years.

One meeting, with parents in Southern California in the fall of 2020, surprised me because they lived in the type of communities where it's expected kids are going to UCLA or MIT. That night, they didn't question the idea of going to college, but they did ask how to find a good experience at a lower cost. "I work in big tech, and we're hiring new grads from Cal State, University of Denver, Arizona State, Santa Clara, etc.," one person in the chat wrote. "So not sure why I'm worried about paying for an Ivy." Other parents started to join in the chat—rejecting elite preferences but struggling to assert alternatives to the status quo.

As schools reopened the following year, I went to speak to students and parents in communities like Pittsburgh, Columbus, Detroit, Houston, Chicago, and Seattle. One winter night in February 2022, I visited Highland High School in Medina, Ohio, a prototypical middle-class American suburb near Cleveland. After my talk, a mom came up to

me. All the talk, she told me, is about "top-tier schools." Even when parents aren't talking about Penn and Michigan, they're talking about Kenyon and Ohio State, she said. This mom rightly pointed out that most middle-class and upper middle-class families at this high school won't qualify for much need-based aid, so they look for schools where they can get a decent discount on tuition (what's called merit aid). She thanked me for my "Buyers and Sellers" list, which I outlined in my last book and is a guide to schools that are more generous with merit aid. "But how do I figure out what's a good school on that list?" she asked me. Her question has remained scribbled on the back cover of my notebook ever since.

Parents, in the notes they sent me throughout 2024—a tumultuous year of protests on elite college campuses—asked me for help seeing beyond their own preferences, their own bias. They told me, in these moments of vulnerability, that what they thought others valued in college was not best for everyone, including their own kids. What I sensed I was observing was growing resistance against elite schools.

This book is mainly for parents. That's the "you" and "we" I use throughout because I'm a parent, too, and whether we like to admit it or not, we're usually the ones to blame for focusing too much on brand names in higher ed. But we're also the ones with more experience in making life's major decisions who need to lay guide rails for our kids and be there to nudge them or provide sage advice when needed.

This book is for your kids, too, and their counselors—they are the "you," the "we," and the "us" in the pages ahead because the only way teenagers will find the right fit in a college is if we approach this together as a team with candid and meaningful conversations about what matters in the undergraduate years and why. Only by telling our stories—which usually transcend the name of the college on our diploma and instead are rooted in the experiences we had during those years—will young people appreciate the often-repeated truth: *How* they go to college ultimately matters more than *where* they go.

As you dive into this book, you might get overwhelmed at times by the lists of to-dos I'm suggesting you undertake to really evaluate what

is perhaps the biggest purchase you'll make in life. I do realize that you can't do it all. A lot of people spend no more time on a campus during the college search than to take a tour, grab a snack, and stop for a bathroom break, before heading off to another campus to do the same. If you're lucky, you might find a connection to a college you're interested in through friends or on Facebook and Reddit groups where you can learn more even if you can't visit the career services office to learn where students interned last year, or sit in on a class, or corner a professor to see if they're keeping their posted office hours. If you only take a few of the steps I'm suggesting, that's okay. Just like going to the gym once a week is better than not going at all, doing even a fraction of what I lay out in this book can help you find your dream school.

This book starts off by describing how much admissions has continued to change since I wrote my last book and examines what an elite college degree buys you (or doesn't) in the job market. The truly elite group of colleges that we believe matters when it comes to getting a job anywhere we want is much smaller than many of us picture. We might think of the University of Chicago or Colby as elite and pull out all the stops to get in, when what is elite in reality is mostly a handful of places, like Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford.

Once we come around to the idea that we should look for something different from college, we still have a challenge in front of us: figuring out what makes a good one for you. That's what the second half of the book tackles. I'm not giving you a new set of rankings, nor a recipe with every ingredient, but instead a guide you can use to find your dream school whether that's Duke or Denison or Delaware or Drake.

In this book you'll see schools and students all over the admissions map. Expanding your lens usually depends on where you start. If you're focused on a top 25 college in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, then my hope is that this book gets you to look beyond—at least, at the top 75. If you're considering a broader range of schools already, then this book will help you make hidden-gem distinctions

among the campuses on your list. As I tell this story, you'll read about students with straight A's and 1500s on the SAT who had Ivy League dreams, as well as B-average students with 1100 and 1200s on the SAT who were late bloomers in college.

I was one of those students who ended up blooming later in college. So often in my reporting on higher ed, I think about my own college search back in the 1990s. I tossed aside any college viewbook that didn't list journalism as a major because I thought to be a journalist you had to major in journalism. My father was a high school music teacher whose salary didn't top $50,000 the year I went off to college; my mother didn't go to college and was a teacher's aide earning barely more than minimum wage. The fact that they sent three kids to college still astounds me. I applied to four schools—none at the top of the *U.S. News* rankings. I picked Ithaca College because it was close to home (120 miles) and had a well-regarded communications school. With four other professional schools as well and 6,000 undergraduates, Ithaca felt to me like a smaller version of a much bigger university, one with a liberal arts foundation, something years later I realized I needed. Most of all, Ithaca offered me a generous financial-aid package.

Hard work and a lot of luck means I now live in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., one of America's epicenters of privilege, where the talk of ultra-selective colleges is common at swim meets and at school gatherings for my teenage kids. I live among what *New Yorker* writer Jay Caspian Kang calls the "panicking class," people who fear their kids won't be able to replicate their lifestyle in affluent American suburbs like Scarsdale (New York), Winnetka (Illinois), Buckhead (Atlanta, Georgia), Highland Park (Texas), or Atherton (California). But I also know from covering higher education that my kids and most in the upper reaches of the middle class will generally inherit their parents' social class advantages anyway. In other words, they'll be fine.

When people find out what I do, they want to know how to win the game of college. This book will offer insights on that front, but more important, I want to encourage all of us to redefine what winning

means. I have a stack of best-selling parenting and education books on my shelf that advocate dialing down the pressure on our kids. Still, we struggle. It's time to take a new approach. Let's replace anxiety with excitement and make the college search a happy milestone. This book is your road map to finding a college that fits your child, encourages their growth, and sets them up for a thriving life. The quest for a good college should be inspiring, not exhausting.