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US Higher Education: More Options than McDonald's Menu

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US Higher Education: More Options than McDonald’s Menu

Abstract
Students searching for the perfect university must value the diversity on offer and be aware of the complexity it brings, says Alan Ruby.

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The young man next door is shopping for a college place. He, like thousands of other middle-class American teenagers is facing the challenge of sorting through the myriad choices that are on offer. Some universities are actively recruiting him because he is a good athlete with good grades and an affluent zip code, which means that he probably will not need financial aid, such as a discount on tuition fees.

Unlike first-generation college aspirants he has a surfeit of advice and information. His parents have both advocated the colleges they attended, which has ensured that those two places have been eliminated from his longlist.

Father and son have done a few college tours to see what the campuses are like, to listen to what is in effect a sales talk given by a current student, and to talk to admissions staff. Thankfully for the sanity of both they have not embarked on the two-week, 20-plus college tour of the North East corridor that I occasionally encounter during the summer.

The scale of choice seems alien to those from smaller countries or from higher education systems with less diversity.

In the US, there are about 7,000 post-secondary education and training institutions, and 4,700 of them award degrees. A quarter of these are public community colleges offering mainly two-year programmes. There are more than 680 public four-year colleges and universities – including regionally focused institutions that concentrate on first degrees and professional preparation, and some large research-oriented universities that offer degrees at all levels.

But the greatest diversity is in the private non-profit sector, which includes elite research universities such as Princeton, liberal arts colleges such as Haverford, faith-based institutions such as the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, and Villanova, an Augustinian university with a great basketball team. There are also single-purpose institutions such as the Curtis Institute of Music and places offering distinctive learning experiences such as Drexel University’s cooperative programme, which requires at least one six-month employment placement. All these examples and many more are within an hour’s drive from our neighbourhood in the art museum district of Philadelphia.

Sorting through the various options is more daunting than the 100-plus items on the McDonald’s menu. And there is certainly more at stake and a lot more money involved. As a result a whole industry has developed that includes counsellors and coaches who, for a fee, guide potential students and their parents through the university selection process. There are significant commercial players in the market including Hobson’s, an education software and services company that is part of the dmg :: information group, a division of the Daily Mail and General Trust. It owns the popular College Confidential website, which hosts discussions forums and displays university and course reviews.

Choice and diversity in higher education opportunities are highly desirable. They increase the possibilities of individuals finding the learning experiences they want. But they carry complexity and managing that complexity has a cost. That cost falls most heavily on those with the least information and least capacity to pay. The low-cost alternative is to look to ranking schemes and that is one of the motivations for the federal government’s latest proposal to rank universities on graduation rates and accessibility. But these measures, if ever perfected, will not displace the American middle-class rite of passage that is college tour season.