

by Pete Caruso

Folklore and the College Selection Process Revisited

Response to “Beyond the Folklore” on page 70

Over the course of my career in undergraduate admission, I have relished the opportunity to connect with prospective students and their families during the infancy of their college search. During those connections, whether they are at a junior parent night or on our campus at Boston College (MA) where we conduct information sessions for prospective students and their families, I sometimes retell a story about the spring of my freshman year in high school. While having dinner at a friend’s house before band practice, I was present for a big family announcement; my friend’s older brother, Ted, would be attending college the following autumn.

He had narrowed it down to several choices familiar to me by *folklore* or reputation. However, after seriously considering several well-known New England colleges and universities, Ted chose Carleton College (MN). *Carleton? Where on earth is that?* my naïve mind thought. I had no idea about this wonderful liberal arts college, but my subsequent years of hearing Ted’s amazing undergraduate experience revealed more, as did my future discussion with admission and secondary colleagues familiar with the institution. Conrad’s piece, which first appeared in the *Journal* in the summer of 1989, immediately brought me back to that chilly night in Cohasset (MA). Ted identified institutional quality, above and beyond folklore, and became a trailblazer of sorts in our community.

Conrad’s strategy for assessing undergraduate quality echoes the sentiments espoused by many admission and college counseling professionals over the years at various workshops for students and families that focus on navigating the process. As transcendent as the components of the strategy are, in today’s complex admission landscape, they are tested by a number of external factors that emerged



since that time. The unhealthy reliance of families on college rankings now stretches far beyond *U.S. News & World Report*. The demographic blight that coincided with the article’s release is now a memory, peaking in the US in 2009. The explosion of technology, particularly in the arena of social media, has created a culture in the college search process that is ripe with innuendo, misinformation and personal agenda. The emergence of “demonstration of interest,” contributes to gamesmanship among students.

As I began to think about Conrad’s piece, I remember one morning this past summer when we welcomed scores of visitors for our information sessions and campus tours. The majority of those students were rising seniors, many of whom had started their college search in earnest several months before in the winter of their junior year. While these families may have acquired a working knowledge of the college selection process during that period based upon their visits and prior connections and meetings with counselors, how many of them took the time to engage in such a methodical approach that Conrad suggests? Or, do they continue to rely on folklore, prestige, reputation, rankings, etc.?

The past two years, I had the privilege of chairing the NACAC/*U.S. News & World Report* Ad Hoc Committee. We specifically engaged with members of *U.S. News & World Report* on issues of methodology, the rankings’ influence on families and the effects on best practices among colleges and universities. After surveying NACAC and connecting with various colleagues at regional affiliate meetings, we concluded with a comprehensive report that focused on themes gleaned from the feedback and contained a set of pointed recommendations for members and ranking entities. Part of the recommendations highlighted focusing methodology on more value-added, personalized weights centered around outcomes and student satisfaction and engagement.

This approach could be applied according to Conrad’s strategy for assessing undergraduate quality. However, one omission is the lack of consideration on the transcendent issue of access to need- and merit-based funding. Certainly since 1989, the rising costs of higher education may have been reflected in a more recent version of Conrad’s strategy.

I had the chance to reconnect with Ted a few years ago. He married his college sweetheart, settled in Wisconsin and was excited for his oldest daughter to start at Carleton the following autumn.



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