

MAKING THE GRADE

Students today cast a wide net when applying to colleges. The upshot: getting into any one school is more difficult than it was decades ago—particularly a school that has not increased class size. But a number of universities have opened their doors wider to accommodate the pool of qualified applicants.

STUDENTS ENROLLED
IN FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES
10.6 million



STUDENTS
ENROLLED IN
THE TOP 100
1.57 million

is mirrored at dozens of the most desired American colleges. At Northwestern University, for example, the acceptance rate fell from over 40% a quarter-century ago to under 13% in 2014.

What has happened at these top schools is straightforward. More high-quality students are applying—from both overseas and across the country—as globalization and the Internet have shrunk distances. At the same time, the sizes of these schools' student bodies have stayed more or less the same.

There is some good news, however, if you're willing to broaden your view of what constitutes a prestigious school—and if you're willing to see the benefits in a school beyond prestige, such as unique courses, extracurricular opportunities and real diversity on campus. The key to

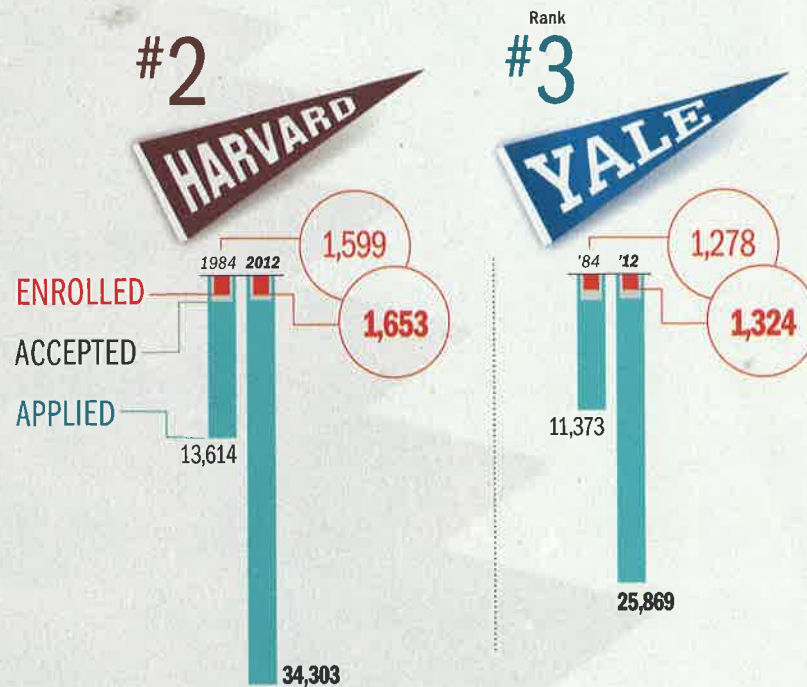
measured in large part by its acceptance rate—became synonymous with its worth. Part of the blame can be placed on *U.S. News & World Report's* annual ranking of American colleges, which began in the 1980s and has grown in influence since. It factors acceptance rates into its evaluation of schools, and that metric has become a source of bragging rights for colleges, which seek to bring their rates down by ratcheting up the number of young people who apply.

Another factor is the sheer ease of applying to schools in the digital age. Students aren't typing each application individually. And beyond that, they have the Common Application, a single electronic form that they can submit, along with specific supplements requested by particular schools, to most if not all of the colleges in

Young people have become accustomed to applying to schools almost reflexively, and schools have become invested in the sheer number of applications they receive. When Swarthmore College noticed a 16% drop in applications in 2014, it investigated the reason and concluded that its requirement of two 500-word essays, in addition to the standard one, had turned away would-be applicants. So Swarthmore, whose acceptance rate rose to 17% from 14%, is replacing the two supplemental essays with only one, of just 250 words.

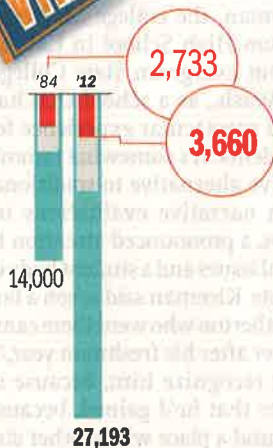
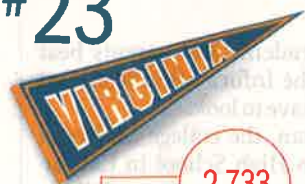
The Real Odds for You

IN THIS ENVIRONMENT, THE DIFFICULTY of gaining admission isn't even fully captured by those breathtakingly low acceptance rates mentioned at the beginning of this piece. Those rates don't represent



Traditional elite schools
whose enrollments
have held steady

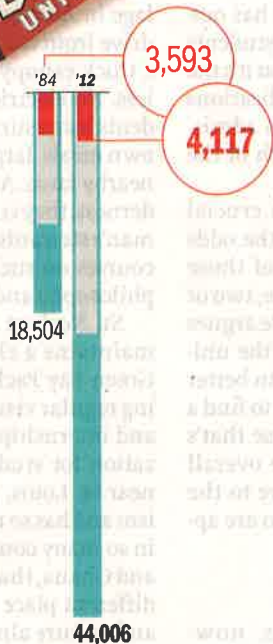
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Highly regarded schools that are taking in more students

attended the school, and it's taking significantly more than 7.3% of star athletes. So it's taking significantly less than 7.3% of brainy klutzes whose ancestors went to public colleges or didn't go to college at all.

In 2011, Michael Hurwitz, who was then a doctoral candidate at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, looked at more than 130,000 students who'd applied in the 2006-07 academic year to be admitted as freshmen to one or more of 30 highly selective colleges. He found that among students with seemingly equivalent grades, test scores and other qualifications, legacies had a 23.3% better chance of admission than nonlegacies. If students were primary legacies, meaning that a parent rather than an aunt or a grandparent had gone to the college in question, they had a 45.1% better chance.

of those ranges, you're looking at as many as 55% of students who were probably given special consideration at admissions.

The fact is, there's no straightforward, unbiased assessment of worth being made. For one thing, such an assessment is impossible, because worth is wholly subjective. For another, a given school may be using its applicant pool to microcast its student body. It may want some kids—but not too many—who dabble in amateur filmmaking, an oboe player for an orchestra that's been hankering for one, somebody from Idaho and somebody from Alaska, a few Farsi and Hindi speakers to complement all those kids fluent in Spanish and Mandarin. Is the institution concerned about dwindling student interest in and support of a particular department? If so and the department is philosophy or art history, a

pany that helps students make decisions about education, told me, adding that any contention to the contrary is "smoke and mirrors." But Katzman, who previously founded the Princeton Review, isn't looking at Stanford or, for that matter, any school in the Ivy League. He is looking at a bigger picture—a broader group of colleges and universities that may not be ranked in the top 10 but are ranked in, say, the top 100 and regarded as superior.

Katzman notes that while the Ivy League hasn't seen any remarkable expansion in the number of undergraduates it can accommodate, many other schools—for example, the University of Michigan; the University of California, Berkeley; and Boston University—have grown significantly over the past 30 years. And during that time, many large schools

Sources: NCES; U.S. News & World Report; Noodle Education

With some elite schools getting bigger and some bigger schools getting more elite, in other words, the growth in the number of “elite” spots available has outpaced the population of qualified students applying for them. (Remember that it’s the explosion of the number of applications per student that is driving down admissions rates more than the growth of the actual pool of students.)

Katzman, however, makes a crucial clarification: he’s talking about the odds of getting into one or another of those schools, not of getting into the one, two or four that your heart was set on. He argues that if you apply widely within the universe of selective colleges, you’re in better shape than you were decades ago to find a school that will take you, because that’s the mathematical reality of the overall number of available slots relative to the number of young Americans who are applying to college.

Taking Yes for an Answer

ACCEPTING THIS AS GOOD NEWS, HOWEVER, probably means widening your lens in terms of what counts as a “good” education—which, by the way, is something attainable even outside the top 100 schools in the country. Parents and students look for some imagined jackpot, and in their tunnel vision they’re not seeing any number of out-of-the-way opportunities and magical possibilities for four stimulating years that none of us ever get back.

Did you know that there’s a New Jersey school with a behavioral-psychology course that takes place largely among the land and sea mammals at the Six Flags Great Adventure amusement and safari park? It’s Monmouth University, in West Long Branch, and a few years ago a psychology professor there, Lisa Dinella, took her own children to the park and realized that the trainers’ testimonials about animal behavior had significant overlap with her campus lectures. So she devised a new class at Monmouth that includes weekly

program every fall called the Adirondack Semester, and it’s for a small group of students who elect to live in a yurt village in Adirondack Park, about an hour’s drive from the campus. There’s a lake and a thick canopy of pine trees, but no wireless. No electricity. No Chipotle. The students learn survival skills and make their own meals, largely with provisions from a nearby farm. And as they adapt to the wilderness, they contemplate its meaning and man’s stewardship of it through a menu of courses on such topics as environmental philosophy and nature writing.

St. Norbert College, in De Pere, Wis., maintains a close relationship with the Green Bay Packers football team, including regular visits to the campus by players and internships with the Packers organization for students. Webster University, near St. Louis, emphasizes internationalism and has so many residential campuses in so many countries, including Thailand and Ghana, that a student could study in a different place with a different language and culture almost every semester. It also had the top-ranked collegiate chess team in the U.S. in 2013 and ’14.

I could fill 10 paragraphs this way. I could fill 40 or 400 or an entire book. Despite all the challenges facing higher education in America, from mounting student debt to grade inflation and erratic standards, our system is rightly the world’s envy, and not just because our most revered universities remain on the cutting edge of research and attract talent from around the globe. We also have a plenitude and variety of settings for learning that are unrivaled. In light of that, the process of applying to college should and could be about ecstatically rummaging through those possibilities and feeling energized, even elated, by them. But for too many students, it’s not, and financial constraints aren’t the only reason. Failures of boldness and imagina-

tion by both students and parents bear some blame. The information is all out there. You just have to look.

Alice Kleeman, the college adviser at Menlo-Atherton High School in California, singled out Evergreen State College, in Olympia, Wash., as a school that had proved to be a spectacular experience for one of her students. It’s somewhat famous as a progressive alternative to traditional schools, with narrative evaluations instead of grades, a pronounced attention to environmental issues and a student body of nonconformists. Kleeman said when a boy from Menlo-Atherton who went there came back to visit her after his freshman year, “I almost didn’t recognize him, because of the confidence that he’d gained, because he’d finally found a place where other students shared his interests and where people weren’t judged in the same way they’re judged in the college admissions process. He had friends. He stood up straighter. He had a whole new image of who he was because he’d chosen a college that was a really great match for him. If you’d picked him up and dropped him into Harvard or Stanford, it just wouldn’t have worked.”

Real Values

WHAT ALL OF THIS MEANS IS THAT IF you’re a parent who’s pushing your kid toward one of the most prized schools in the country and you think you’re doing him or her a favor, you’re not. You’re in all probability setting up your child for heartbreak, and you’re imparting a questionable set of values.

If you’re a student who is desperately attached to a handful of those schools, you need to pull back and think about how quixotic your quest is, recognizing the roles that patronage and pure luck play. You’re going to get into a college that’s more than able to provide a superb education to anyone who insists on one and who takes firm charge of his or her time there. But your chances of getting into the school of your dreams are slim. Your control over the