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Life's Biggest Decisions

EDUCATION

Which University Should I Attend?

Where you study could be just as important as what you study.

Posted July 8, 2024

Reviewed by Michelle Quirk



KEY POINTS

- Choosing the right university involves finding a good fit with academic, social, and physical dimensions.
- Graduates from higher-ranked universities often earn more and end up in more powerful positions.
- High-ranked universities offer many advantages, but personal effort and ability are crucial for success.

Harvard University often **tops the list** when it comes to prestigious institutions. With the **highest number of Nobel Prize winners**, Pulitzer Prize recipients, and Fields Medalists, it's a beacon of academic excellence. Graduating from Harvard is undeniably beneficial, offering numerous opportunities and a robust network. However, gaining admission is highly competitive, with an acceptance rate of only 3.6 percent.

college counselor. In extreme cases, there have even been instances of fraud.

If you have decided to pursue higher education—the topic of [this post](#)—choosing which university is a monumental decision that can shape your future in profound ways. With numerous factors to consider, the process can be both exciting and overwhelming. So, if you're offered a place at Harvard, should you go?



Source: Created by Microsoft's Copilot Image Creator

University Ranking Is Not Everything

There are several benefits that come from attending a high-ranked university. For example, selective universities often have better facilities and instructors, which can improve edu-

...that graduates from higher-ranked universities performed better. However, the improvement was tiny.

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A significant concern for many university students is their grade point average (GPA), which can impact their job prospects. It turns out that **GPA's are not standardized** across universities, and grading standards vary. Surprisingly, graduates from higher-ranked universities often benefit from **inflated GPA's**, which can give them an edge in the job market when applying for their first job out of university. This is often a hidden benefit of attending a high-ranked university.

When crunching the numbers, graduates from more selective universities tend to earn more after entering the workforce. For example, in the United States, attending a college with a 100-point higher average Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) score is associated with approximately **7 percent higher earnings later in life**. However, this simple analysis ignores the fact that those who attend more selective universities tend to be more capable to begin with. When we look at those who were accepted and rejected by a comparable set of universities and had comparable SAT scores to start with, the correlation between university ranking and graduate in-

...meaning more than attending selective universities are to networking opportunities and other factors.

When it comes to earnings, it seems to matter less which university you attend and more what you bring to university: cognitive ability, motivation, and good habits. In other words, if you could get into Harvard, but choose not to go for some reason, then you'll probably do great anyway. That's what happened to Richard Nixon.

The Importance of Matching

Richard Nixon was born into a poor family. Nixon was offered a scholarship to attend Harvard but **chose to attend Whittier College instead** due to financial constraints and the need to support his family. Despite this, he excelled academically and went on to have a successful political career and served as the 37th president of the United States. Nixon's story highlights that success is not solely determined by attending an elite university.

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Nixon's choice is an example of "undermatching," where a student attends a less selective university despite having the credentials for a more prestigious one. This can occur for various reasons, including financial constraints and personal preferences. About **40 percent of students are under-**

graduates were compared to non-matched peers.

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Conversely, "overmatching" refers to students attending universities where a student's academic credentials are below the average. About **25 percent of students are overmatched**. Research has found that this can lead to **lower self-esteem** and a **higher likelihood of dropping out**, which is particularly problematic for equity-based scholarship recipients.

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Both undermatching and overmatching underscore the importance of finding a university that aligns well with your academic level and personal needs.

Beyond Academics

Choosing the right university involves considering factors beyond just academic reputation. Social and physical environ-

the following:

- **Academic:** Average grade point average, campus intellectual climate, class size, and academic facilities.
- **Social:** Recreational opportunities, social life, student body diversity, and support services.
- **Physical:** Geographic location, campus safety, aesthetics, and affordability.

To make an informed decision, follow this three-step approach:

1. **Identify Key Factors:** Determine which academic, social, and physical factors are most important to you. Some people may consider the tuition fee the most important factor whereas others may place a higher emphasis on the social life and networking opportunities.
2. **Evaluate Universities:** Visit campuses, speak with current and former students, and review alumni evaluations. Consider resources like the [Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey](#) for aggregated evaluations. And do not be shy about contacting professors. Many will even let you sit in one of the lecture rooms to get a feel for what a real class is like.
3. **Enroll in the Best Fit:** Choose a university that best matches your priorities. Reflect on advice on [how to make a good big life decision](#) such as avoiding making a choice based primarily on feelings of obligation to others. After all, you're the one who is going to commit yourself for several years.

Take-Homes

the university's academic, social, and physical characteristics.

Second, while attending an elite university can offer certain advantages, success ultimately depends on your individual effort. Ideally, study at a university where your cognitive ability is not extremely different from that of your peers.

Otherwise, have a plan to deal with the potential psychological challenges.

Third, although attending the most selective university you get accepted into is a decent choice heuristic, attending a physical university is not for everyone. Online degree programs are becoming increasingly popular and **online learning** can be as effective as traditional formats, with **high levels of student satisfaction**.

If you'd like to see how your own big decisions compare to those of others, complete the survey [here](#) and also check out the data.

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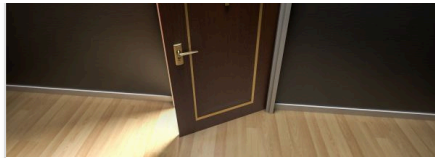


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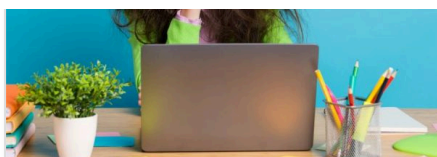


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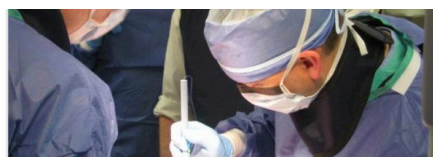


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