

Choose college that fits, not one meant to impress

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Daniel Wubah, president of Millersville University.

One of my former colleagues believes March is the most unpredictable month. Among the reasons: College basketball and college admissions.

March Madness is billed as one of the biggest, most exciting and most fun events in all of sports. The NCAA Division I men's basketball tournament is a single-elimination tournament of 68 teams that compete in seven rounds for the national championship. The penultimate round is known as the Final Four.

This time of year is also a time of madness for high school students and their families, waiting to find out the outcome of the college admissions process. It's when you hear back from universities to see where your student has been accepted.

As the father of two college graduates, I know it's a hectic, crazy time because everyone wants the best for their children. The eight Ivy League schools — Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton and Yale — had a total of 281,060 applicants for the class of 2021. Less than 10 percent were admitted.

Earlier this month, our nation witnessed a college bribery scandal in which wealthy families were caught paying millions of dollars to guarantee their children's admission into our nation's elite universities. Those kids got in through the "side door."

A recent article in The New York Times suggests that "these efforts are mostly a waste of money, and that the seized opportunities would have actually helped other students much more."

In 2014, economists Stacy Dale and Alan Krueger (who died tragically March 16) published an analysis of the benefits of attending a highly selective college. According to the Times, they found that "after statistically controlling for students' SAT scores, economic background and college ambitions, the long-term financial returns are 'generally indistinguishable from zero.' Students who are poised to succeed tend to do so even if they don't get into the Ivy League."

Clearly, there is the possibility of achieving excellence without elitism.

While you are waiting for that "right" acceptance letter or maybe your child hasn't applied yet, I'd like to suggest that a good fit for your child is one of the most important factors for selecting a college. The college needs to speak to both the heart and mind of your child. Do the values of the college match the values you've instilled in your child?

From my years in academia and raising two daughters, I've come to believe that there are important questions that can help students select a college that is a good fit.

Does it have the major your student wants? What are the placement rates and career outcomes of that major? Does it have the athletic or intramural program in which your student participates? Does it have clubs and organizations that will bring out the best in your student? Will the teachers be graduate assistants or full-time professors?

You also may want to consider if you're pushing your student toward a decision that is driven by your own sense of what is the best college for your child. Some parents hover around their offspring whether they are at school (including university) or at work. They run interference and solve problems for their children — and now we've learned some parents will even take illegal actions to push their kids ahead of others. Parents nowadays try to serve as buffers for any glitches — from low marks to low salaries — their kids may face.

By letting children learn to deal with their own problems, however, and allowing them to make their own choices, they will have the requisite skills to navigate through college and life beyond.

I suggest you let go of the drama playing out in the national media and let your student determine which college is a good fit for him or her. Stop looking at name brands and instead, look at campuses holistically and listen to your child. Will your child be happy? Will he or she feel a sense of community? Will he or she be able to find a career?

Ultimately, our children's future lives will be greatly influenced by the foundation they build in the college they choose. We are blessed with different types of colleges in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and in our region more specifically, and parents should not overlook them as they send their students off to the next stage of their lives. For some students, none of the local colleges will be a good fit and that is fine. But it is not a stretch to say we have colleges here that are not elitist, but are certainly excellent

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