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Class Struggle



Using the Pessimist's Paradigm in College Selection

By Jay Mathews

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During our family's search for the perfect college for Katie the high school senior, I looked for the best qualities, and not the flaws, in each school. This is typical of me. I was raised by a cheerful couple who did not see much point in noting blemishes or fearing the worst. They passed on a gene for optimism that leads me to assume, sometimes wrongly, that the milk is not yet sour, the car still has plenty of gas and the Redskins will turn their season around.

T. H. Carter, a very conscientious parent in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., had a touch of that trusting outlook during his first child's search for a college. But the experience turned out so badly--his son transferred after just a year--that he vowed never to do it that way again.

So his daughter Sumi, a senior at Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Prince George's County, and he have adopted a different approach to the college search and have found a number of useful sources of information, including some intriguing if acerbic websites, that Pollyannas like me would never consider. Call it the Pessimist's Paradigm. For those of you who are still looking for a good school, or will be doing so eventually, I want to share the Carters' view of the darker side of undergraduate education.

"In a very competitive market place," Carter says, "most colleges have marketing specialists in their admissions department to sell their schools. Every college wants to put its best face forward. So every glossy college brochure looks wonderful. Autumn leaves. Smiling college students. Classes outdoors under trees. U.S. News & World Report rankings. It is mostly crapola."

He considers the U.S. News list "a beauty contest where only college presidents vote." I would not go that far. The list measures some objective criteria, but as my colleague Amy Argetsinger pointed out in a revealing [Post story](#) on Sept. 14, ratings by college administrators get the heaviest weight in the U.S. News system, and college administrators who want to rise in the ranking have taken to lobbying each other, even giving gifts, in hopes of getting friendlier reviews when the U.S. News survey comes around.

"Even visiting a college or staying overnight can be deceptive," Carter says. "The schools only use the most positive and most successful students as campus guides, so their opinions are uniformly positive. The schools put on the Ritz when prospective students

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are expected, upgrading the food in the cafeteria, planting extra flowers, painting dorms and generally cleaning up."

I found some entertainingly candid campus tour guides when I accompanied Katie to some colleges, and I don't think there is anything wrong with tidying up for guests, but Carter's basic point is irrefutable--this is big business and the colleges are no more likely to advertise their problems than we here at The Post are likely to announce on the front page how many factual, analytical and grammatical errors we committed the previous day.

So how can we innocents keep from being fooled? The Carters recommend a website called studentsreview.com, created by MIT students and full of youthful insider advice. "It is a very interesting site and has helped me in determining which school is best for me," Sumi Carter says. "It has also helped me eliminate a couple of schools that were on my list. It is very interesting to see what the undergrad students think. I was considering Rensselaer [Polytechnic Institute, in Troy, N.Y.], but after searching the site and looking at comments I changed my mind and decided to look elsewhere."

The Carters emphasize that they are not looking just for problems, and that they found many positive reviews on studentsreview.com. I tried it and liked it, although some schools did not get enough reviews to allow the reader to draw any valid conclusions. I checked out the small liberal arts college at the top of my daughter's list and found two very short, glowing student reviews and one longer and very negative one from a recent graduate. The critic said he hated the political climate, but he seemed to have remained there for several years for reasons he did not discuss.

Here are some other quick student comments found on the website: For fun, I looked at schools that graduated recent U.S. presidents:

Whittier (Nixon) – The faculty is "friendly, helpful, encouraging, challenging" but unless you have a car "don't even bother attending."

U.S. Naval Academy (Carter) – "A very cut and dry place. Either you know your stuff or you do not."

Yale (the Bushs) – "A wonderful place" but "students tend to be nerds and are often spending sunny days in the library."

Georgetown (Clinton) – The gym "is an eyesore" and being in the library "is absolutely depressing" but "my peers are just as intelligent as my professors."

The Carters are also big fans of the Princeton Review's annual college guide, "The Best 345 Colleges" (2003) and its top-20 lists based on student surveys that identify schools where "Professors Make Themselves Scarce" (University of North Carolina-Greensboro got the booby prize in that category) or "Long Lines and Red Tape" (University of Massachusetts-Amherst scored highest.) Carter said he discovered, too late, that the college his son escaped, which looked good on the U.S. News list, was rated number two by Princeton Review in the "Least Happy Students" category and number four in "Professors Suck All Life From Materials."

There are a few other guidebooks that report bad news, with helpful details. I like the "Unofficial, Biased Insider's Guide to the 320 Most Interesting Colleges," and not just because it is a product of Kaplan, Inc., part of The Washington Post Co. that has employed me for 31 years. Here, for instance, is what co-author Seppy Basili, Kaplan vice president for learning and assessment, says in that guide about Rensselaer, the school Sumi Carter removed from her list after checking with studentsreview.com:

"Brains and Greeks, no liberal arts, and there is a 3:1 male/female ratio. Try dating a critical reactor (if you haven't already)."

Basili says one of the most important sources for his guide, co-authored with Trent Anderson, are student newspapers. "They are up-to-date and unfiltered by the college's public relations team," he says.

The Carters and I agree. Many of my relatives and friends, as well as me, have worked on college papers. We were always eager to demonstrate our courageous objectivity with stories about frequently absent faculty members, cruel dormitory proctors and obfuscating university publicists. T. H. Carter recommends stopping by the office of the campus newspaper if a school is at or near the top of your list and "ask for the dirt--school scandals, stories done on professors, campus crime, date rape, corruption in the administration, misuse of student fees, campus controversies, minority complaints against the school and administration, drug and alcohol use and abuse, etc."

The Carters discovered many lesser known student websites that exist, like underground newspapers of my college era, to make university administrators miserable. T.H. Carter described them as usually "snide, cynical, anarchic, uncensored, sophomoric, R-rated and generally negative--as in warning fellow students away from a particular professor." Some come under the name dailyjolt.com.

There is one at American University, benladner.com, and one at Cornell, hunterrawlings.com, that the Carters found useful. (The fashion seems to run toward naming such sites after the university president.) The Carters also consulted thefire.org, featuring alleged campus free speech violations exposed by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, the subject of one of my [recent columns](#).

Every campus has its unhappy stories. There is no need to obsess over them if, on balance, the school serves your needs more than any other place on your list. Sumi Carter has the right attitude about looking for the negative. She says it inspires more careful thinking about what makes a good college. "Many of my friends simply want to go to a big school with a reputation and ranking," she says. "However, they do not realize that a name and some positive comments may cause them to live an unhappy college life."

Since this is still my column, I insist on ending with a positive note. Despite her high standards, Sumi Carter found seven schools that, although not perfect, she has enough confidence in to risk paying an application fee. They are Vassar, Haverford, Williams, Susquehanna, University of Maryland-Baltimore County, University of Pittsburgh and Johns Hopkins.

I am certain that many more colleges can survive close examination by even the most diligent young Devil's Advocates. So go check out the reports of evil campus cops and rancid dining hall butter and lumpy dorm mattresses, but try to keep an eye open for a little good news, too.

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