

The Real, Hidden Truth About College Admissions

By [Frank Bruni](#)

Our political leaders may or may not be worthy of emulation, but there's no doubt that they're successes in the strictest sense, having summited the professional peaks that they intended to scale. Which colleges set them on their ascents?

Kevin McCarthy, the highest-ranking Republican in the House, graduated from the Bakersfield campus of California State University. Hakeem Jeffries, the top Democrat, got his bachelor's degree from Binghamton University, a branch of the State University of New York.

Chuck Schumer, the Democratic majority leader of the Senate, went to Harvard, one of the hyperselective schools at the center of an intensifying anger about the admissions practices of elite institutions. But Mitch McConnell, the Republican minority leader, went to the University of Louisville, which accepts roughly three out of every four applicants.

The acceptance rate is roughly the same at President Joe Biden's undergraduate alma mater, the University of Delaware. At Vice President Kamala Harris's, Howard University, it's about 35 percent — a competitive situation but not crazily so.

The people at the pinnacles of private enterprise have similarly diverse educational pedigrees. Among the chief executives running the top 10 companies in the Fortune 500, only two were undergraduates at American schools with current acceptance rates under 20 percent (Harvard and Boston College). One was educated in Britain and one in India, and the remaining six hold bachelor's degrees from the University of Arkansas, Texas A&M, Auburn University, the University of Nebraska, the University of Colorado and the University of California, Santa Cruz.

I go through all of that in the service of the obvious, which — sadly — needs constant stating and restating: Highly selective colleges are hardly a prerequisite for, and have no monopoly on, lofty careers.

That gets somewhat lost in the discussion — especially impassioned in the wake of the Supreme Court's ruling against affirmative action and in the midst of [a fresh challenge to legacy admissions](#) — about who gets into the most storied colleges and how. The intensity of emotion enveloping that conversation partly reflects and corrosively perpetuates the belief that the shimmer and exclusivity of the undergraduate institutions that students attend exert some magical, make-or-break influence on their futures. That belief is bunk.

Undeniably, the Harvards and Stanfords of the world have — and confer — significant advantages. Their resources are extravagant, and their alumni networks extraordinary.

The same goes for the institution where I teach, Duke, which now accepts roughly 6 percent of its undergraduate applicants. During my two years on Duke's faculty, I have watched many of my students leverage its reputation and its reach into plum jobs immediately upon graduation.

But I've no idea where those students will be 10 or 20 years down the road. I'd bet good money that a sizable percentage of them will realize that they followed somebody else's script rather than writing their own and change careers. I also know that in many cases, their professional beginnings had a whole lot to do with privileged life circumstances and significant talents that Duke didn't create but rather validated.

And I am beyond certain that their professional futures — and, more important, their fulfillment and contentment — will be determined less by where than by [how they spent their college years](#). And perhaps the greatest tragedy of all the drama around college admissions is the degree to which it obscures that transcendent truth.

Nothing that I've observed at Duke or that I've discovered in many years of reporting on higher education has impressed me more than how differently students approach college, with widely divergent benefits. There are students who greedily and gratefully sop up what their professors can teach them. I've watched them bloom. Others do the bare minimum, cementing habits that will haunt them. I foresee their stagnation.

There are students who spot the most exciting programs and niftiest perks and sprint toward them. They're honing the best kind of opportunism. Others never pause long enough or look intently enough to notice the bounty before them. They're honing the worst kind of wastefulness.

Where, in all the chatter about the Ivy League and all the debate about meritocracy, is the necessary attention to that? I've been [asking that question and beating that drum](#) for almost a decade, and I've seen too little erosion of the myth that no crossroads in a young life has as much consequence as the one that leads to an exclusive private college in one direction and a much less selective public institution in the other.

So, ever hopeful, I collect and scatter contradictions to that thinking, corrections of that assumption.

Jack Smith, the special counsel whose work just led to another indictment of Donald Trump? [His route](#) to Harvard Law and to a heroic role in the preservation of American democracy ran through the State University of New York at Oneonta.