



Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Over the last few decades, Americans have turned college admissions into a terrifying and occasionally devastating process, preceded by test prep, tutors, all sorts of stratagems, all kinds of rankings, and a conviction among too many young people that their futures will be determined and their worth established by which schools say yes and which say no.

That belief is wrong. It's cruel. In *WHERE YOU GO IS NOT WHO YOU'LL BE*, Frank Bruni explains why, giving students and their parents a new perspective on this brutal, deeply flawed competition and a path out of the anxiety that it provokes.

Bruni, a bestselling author and a columnist for the *New York Times*, shows that the Ivy League has no monopoly on corner offices, governors' mansions, or the most prestigious academic and scientific grants. Through statistics, surveys, and the stories of hugely successful people who didn't attend the most exclusive schools, he demonstrates that many kinds of colleges—large public universities, tiny hideaways in the hinterlands—serve as ideal springboards. And he illuminates how to make the most of them. What matters in the end are a student's efforts in and out of the classroom, not the gleam of his or her diploma.

Where you go *isn't* who you'll be. Americans need to hear that—and this indispensable manifesto says it with eloquence and respect for the real promise of higher education.

Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania **Details**

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From Reader Review Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania for online ebook

Connie Mayo says

Required reading for all parents of high school students. The affluent tier of this country has gone crazy for college pedigrees, and it just doesn't punch your ticket like you might think. PLEASE let this book be an indicator of a trend toward more level headed thinking!

Christopher Lawson says

√ THE WHOLE THING DOESN'T MATTER AS MUCH AS YOU THINK

WHERE YOU GO IS NOT WHO YOU'LL BE goes against everything you've been told about college—i.e., do anything you can to get your son or daughter into the absolute BEST university you can. Getting into a top university is like the ultimate report card. When you get that "A" it means, "You have arrived!" So, take practice SAT tests, hire tutors; talk to alumni--in short, DO ANYTHING! Try for Harvard or Yale—or maybe Stanford. Of course, one need hardly mention the lowly community colleges. That's for those who don't want to succeed.

This modern thinking is utter folly, explains Frank Bruni. First of all, you need to see that your value as a person is NOT the same as the school you attend. For one thing, it is simply a lie to connect top achievement solely to top universities. That is empirically untrue, shows the author. Instead, achieving your goals is a matter of perseverance, character, and drive of the individual—those are the keys, not the name of your alma mater.

The author cites numerous public figures—including presidents, many of whom went to second or even third-tier schools (I had not heard of many of their schools.) Ditto for top corporate executives. Of course, some CEOs indeed went to ivy league schools, but many did not. Ditto for honorees in science. The author concludes that “there's no pattern” to achievement and the school. It's a “patchwork.” The author also notes that the admittance process plays favorites in all kinds of ways, for example, athletic prowess.

The big danger in our falling victim to this line of thinking is that we start BELIEVING IT as a fundamental precept of our life. We allow a huge chunk of our life to get tied up into something that is simply FALSE.

√ WHERE YOU GO IS NOT WHO YOU'LL BE is a real wake up call to change how we think about American education--and more--how we think about what really matters in life. The lesson is simply this: The whole thing doesn't matter as much as you think.

C says

Excellent Point: There are pockets of excellence in many colleges, some obscure but most are easy to find.

Expand your search beyond the highest-ranked colleges.

Good Advice: Make the most of your college experience by following your passion and joy. Work with a mentor.

Boring Stories: How famous people experienced their college years (as if they were my role models! Who cares!)

Bad Analysis: The author, an English major, should avoid using numbers to compare the relative success of Ivy League colleges vs "ordinary" ones. His analysis is shallow and plain wrong.

Terrible Journalism: The author has a slant, albeit an honorable one, to relieve applicants of the stress and mob hysteria surrounding the admission process. So he gives anecdotes from selected individuals to support his bias. I would rather read a well-reasoned debate on the pros and cons of the Ivies and their ilks versus the rest. I loathe what I get from him: a one-sided screech.

Kristen says

Wish someone recommended this book during Andrews sophomore or junior year in HS. Would have saved us all a lot of grief. A must read for any poor sucker about ready to enter the lions den unarmed.

Donna says

I believe the premise of this book is that your college choice doesn't dictate how successful you will be in life and that colleges don't determine worth. Now with that being said, I think that some colleges can open up opportunities to their students that others cannot.

I have three kids in college, next year it will be 4. Some of my kids love school and thrive in that environment and go to well-known universities and I have one that hates school and would just shrivel up in that high pressure environment. This one is in community college working at a slower pace. Every child is different and there is a perfect fit for each of them. It doesn't have to be a frantic, self-esteem busting experience. Find what works for your child.

Kris Gallagher says

A must-read for both parents and students as they enter the college search process. Bruni effectively debunks the ratings game and deftly describes what really matters to students and their future lives (not just careers).

Lisa says

I am fascinated with universities and colleges and where kids decide to go to school, how they hear about schools, and the quest to get into the "best" school. When I was deciding on my own secondary education I

didn't have this mentality at all. I was lucky enough just to continue my education and then even better, to go on to graduate school. I attended two public universities, both which got me where I am today and I am grateful for the education. The title of this book is apt and it is exactly what Frank Bruni explores from different perspectives. The race and sheer madness that kids and parents put themselves through to get into Ivy League schools is a shameful and I hope my kids never feel the pressure from anyone to go to the best school.

The US News & World Report top colleges list is wrought with ratings problems but we all read it and believe it. Bruni attacks this error and others with good research and examples. Geography and what a student makes of his/her time and the effort exerted while in college are huge determinants of future success and job availability as well as salary.

A very good book that I'm glad I read before my family hits this time in our lives. I'd love to read more books similar to this one. I simply find the search and college admissions process intriguing.

Kav (xreadingsolacex) says

I think the premise of this book was great - the pressure to go to the *perfect* college is one many teens suffer from and dissecting that is important. However, I found the book very repetitive and it wasn't really a read I enjoyed the process of reading.

Note: It brings up eating disorders and self-harm without a trigger warning, so be aware of that.

Carol Storm says

Lots of happy talk about kids who don't get into Ivy League schools and turn out to be wonderfully successful and dynamic individuals. No real talk about what undergraduate life at an Ivy League college (or any college) is really like. No binge drinking, no drug abuse, no sexual abuse, no racism, no ethnic prejudice, no class prejudice, no sexism, no rape. The perpetually upbeat author wastes no time on legitimate concerns about making a living, instead kids are "playfully" ridiculed for missing the point of what a college education is "really" all about.

Frank Bruni is a genius at giving the impression that he's questioning the system but without ever following through to the point of actually challenging or offending anyone in power. For example, he points out that star athletes and "legacy" applicants, the sons and daughters of rich alumni, actually have a much better chance of getting in to certain schools than minority students on financial aid. But the problem doesn't end there. Once on campus, poor and minority students are reminded every day by faculty and fellow students that they're only there out of charity, not because anyone really wants them around. Whereas for athletes and legacy kids it's different. Faculty members actually care what happens to them -- or at least they pretend to. The possibility that most faculty members at most colleges don't really care about undergraduates as people is never acknowledged, or even hinted at. Bruni just wants to keep smiling while he tells his uplifting stories.

One may smile and smile and be a villain.

Fredrick Danysh says

Where You Go does a good job of debunking the myth that you need to attend an Ivy league school to be successful in business or government. A less prestigious school can be just as good according to the author. Success depends more on ability and effort. The book is a good read for high school juniors and seniors thinking of attending college and their parents. This was a few advance read, review copy.

Eva Thieme says

As the parent of a high school senior about to go off to college and having to make a smart choice as to where to go, I found this book incredibly timely. It sends a message I thought I knew yet need to hear again and again: that for some reason we value the brand name of a university, the "elite factor," much higher than it should be valued if we rationally looked at all the factors important in school choice.

Frank Bruni is so talented in getting this message across. He presents us with dozens of resumes of well-known people we admire who went to what he calls the "unsung" alma maters. Howard Schultz, Chris Christie, Condoleezza Rice, and Christiane Amanpour get a mention, among many many more. He shows, again and again, how countless success stories are forged by such things as hard work, a winding instead of a straight path, often one littered with obstacles and setbacks, by an intense passion for something, anything, by "an openness to serendipity that sometimes gets edited out of the equation when you're blindly accepting the marks that your parents and your peers have all agreed on..., a willingness to shoot off in a new direction and an attention to the particular virtues of the landscape right around them rather than an obsession with the promised glories of the imagined terrain around the bend."

It is sentences like the above, even if he's preaching to the choir, that made this book worth it for me.

Bruni also takes apart the U.S. News and World Report college ranking that has risen to bible status yet is a very faulty predictor of university excellence at best, putting way too much weight on selectivity and admission counselors' opinions and giving rise to myriad ways universities can game the system to improve their rank. He reveals some fascinating studies linking later success not only with average SAT scores at schools attended but at schools one was rejected from.

He also points out the dangers of exerting all this pressure on our kids from the seventh grade onwards, all geared to setting them on the path to greatness as defined by which college they get into. "My fear is that these kids are always going to be evaluating their self-worth in terms of whether they hit the next rung society has placed in front of them at exactly the time that society has placed it." Let alone the fact that we might create "contrived mannequins" who assemble their record and even their life in a way they think pleases an admissions office at an elite school rather than pursuing their interests and passions.

I loved the parts where he points out the ridiculousness of the kind of resume polishing kids and parents are driven to, even as early as pre-Kindergarten. A mother is worried her son doesn't have enough "enriching" experiences on his college applications and asks an admissions consultant if perhaps he should be made to build a dirt road in India or Africa. "If Yale might be impressed by an image of her son with a small spade, large shovel, rake or jackhammer in his chafed hands, she was poised to find a third-world setting that would

produce that sweaty and ennobling tableau."

There is one caveat: If by reading this book you're looking for absolute proof that an elite school isn't necessary for your success, especially if you define success by one day running a Fortune 500 company, you won't find it. In fact, the numbers presented show rather the opposite. Yes, not the majority of top CEOs come from Ivy League schools, but a large enough number do, so as to overrepresent these schools substantially when compared to the total number of alumni produced. This book isn't about numbers, it's about how we value education. By the label that society places on it, or by what learning we ultimately get out of it.

Critics might also say it's too narrow of a book, and that's a valid point. It's really only targeted at those middle and upper class kids (and their parents) who have no doubt they will go to college, and probably to grad school too, and it's designed to make those feel better who don't get into their top choice, as well as give those who do the confidence to turn down the most ridiculous offers and go with a lower-priced one that is bound to get them just as far in life without bankrupting the entire family or saddling them with huge debt. And yes, it's really just an extensive collection of essays on the topic of college admissions, as one reviewer pointed out. But they are excellent essays full of information and thought-provoking tenets, and they are woven together seamlessly by Bruni's talented hand.

If you're not in the college admissions game, you might skip this book. But if you are, you should not proceed without it.

Amy says

An expanded op-ed that didn't need to be.

Catherine says

I really loved *MOST* of the message of this book.

The angst that many student feel about gaining admissions to the 20 or 50 "lottery schools" is counter-productive and harmful. Students can certainly get a great education at any number of colleges that aren't hailed by US News and World Report as the "Top" colleges. I have visited a number of campuses that have a huge impact on students without being hyper-selective. I love those campuses and encourage my students to explore the opportunities and advantages of attending a school that accepts more than a tiny fraction of their applicants.

I take issue with the flip side of his argument, which is that the students who do win the admissions lottery and end up at very selective campuses are somehow ill served by their experience (see Chapter 8, "Strangled with Ivy"). Some students do not take full advantage of being a part of their Ivy/near Ivy campus. Some are humbled and undercut by the challenge. But, as many students are transformed by their experiences at a super-selective school as are transformed by their experience at a less selective school. Isn't this the point? That, in fact, what you do once you get on campus is exponentially more important than where you go?

William says

I have spent my entire career working in college admissions, mostly at highly selective institutions. I do like this book, or at least what Bruni is trying to get across, and I even recommend it to families with kids heading into the college admission process. While it is essentially a synthesis of information readily available elsewhere, I am not aware of any other book which has pulled all this together, and that is a plus for Bruni. I also know a number of school counselors who are urging their families to read it. All that being said, I just wish it were better. As other reviewers have pointed out, this reads like a collection of columns. It also reads to me like the kinds of book Bruni decries which are making money over the current anxiety over admission to the most competitive colleges.

The elephant in the room is the author seems as obsessed with the Ivies as he complains that affluent families are. As someone else has pointed out, that 20-30% of the eminent achievers he documents on six or seven lists are graduates of Ivy and/or Ivy-type schools is way beyond the share of college goers who attend institutions of this type. And he undercuts this point by including data showing that 40% of two entering classes at Yale Law came from Ivy League undergraduate educations. (And that was way too many lists to make the same point over and over). I also wish he had made it clear which schools he was including as he compiled these statistics; the Ivies, yes, but what are the others?

A similar point where I think he contradicts himself is when he (correctly, to my way of thinking) criticizes families having their children build community service resumes, but earlier in the book had expressed great approval of a student's extracurricular involvement which included "100 hours of community service." The kid, by the way, sounded like a terrific guy, but, sadly, the resume Bruni includes did not sound competitive to me for the uber-selective schools to which he was applying. And, as a side note, I have always been saddened by people counting their hours of community service. It seems to me to undercut the spirit in which serving others should be approached.

One of my questions about the success of alumni of the most selective schools is the extent to which their undergraduate education contributed to their success. When these schools have admission rates below 15%, they are enrolling students who will be likely to be successful in life whether they attend these schools or not. I have long wondered how the "value added" might be assessed.

I do consider it constructive that he makes it clear that fewer than half the places in the entering classes at the most competitive schools are actually in play for a student without a "hook" (athletics, legacy status, etc). So if a school has a 5% admit rate and you do not fall into a target group, the actual chance for admission is under 3%. I part company with Bruni when he says that in addition to the six preferential categories he lists, there are many other students who have access to "pull" which results in their admission. This is documented by a quotation from a single independent educational consultant, and based on my thirty years in admissions work, it is simply not accurate. Those cases do happen, and in a very few schools may be more common, but by and large, they are rare.

Speaking of independent consultants, they are represented in this book by three people, and the two I have heard of are priced dramatically beyond what almost all other college consultants charge.

Bruni's discussion of the Krueger-Dale study is appropriate, but there are a number of other studies which contradict their findings. Similarly, while I respect and tend to agree with Deresiewicz's criticism of Ivy League undergraduates (and I did attend one of those schools), a lot has been written which takes issue with his views and some of it is compelling. Both discussions are a bit glib and could have been more accurate

and thoughtful.

The central point Bruni is making is such a good one, though, that the book does become important. A student can be successful wherever he or she enrolls at the undergraduate level. And there is a downside to any institution, even the Ivy League, if it does not match the interests, needs, learning style and community ethos appropriate for the student. While I think he overdoes what others have referred to as “Ivy bashing,” I do think the elite schools come in for too little critical analysis, since they are not the best match for every superior student.

I suppose in the end my difficulty with the book is that it misses the ethos of professional admissions. His criticisms are often on target, but they are oversimplified. I found it a bit odd that the admissions professionals he quoted (including me) are almost all no longer working in the field, and no admissions dean was included in the acknowledgements. But the book is not intended for those of us who have struggled with these issues in our work world. It is aimed at the educated (and, dare I say it, affluent) college-aware public, and probably serves their needs reasonably well. While I am disappointed in the book, and do not feel what Bruni sets out to do can be done in a work this short, I am happy to recommend that people read it.

Kara Bachman says

Nice wake-up call for those spending tremendous time and resources on reaching for the ivy league. Eye-opener of a book that dispels the myth that ivy league schools CREATE greatness. The author essentially shows -- and backs it up with data when need be -- how graduates of elite schools succeed because of advantages they had in place BEFORE ending up there, and because of social connections made, and NOT because of the quality of the education.

Bruni essentially explains how kids who aren't from an advantaged background who somehow make it into the elite schools would have succeeded in life regardless where they graduated from, simply because they are the types who are so driven, and this holds throughout life. SO ... for a truly intelligent, driven student, the school perhaps does not matter as much as people (the high-priced universities trying to recruit) would like you to believe.

Interesting to see a list of top U.S. CEOs and realize many more than I'd imagined went to state schools and places that are quite mundane.
