

Chapter 1

What Are the Colleges of Distinction?



Colleges of Distinction owes its origin to parents who accompanied their children through the college-search process, who were surprised at the difficulties they encountered trying to get beyond the “brand-name” institutions to find the colleges that offered the best undergraduate educations, and then—through the next four years and beyond—were pleased to see the growth their children experienced at the “hidden-gem colleges” they had discovered. In collaboration with academic professionals, these parents have created *Colleges of Distinction* as a way to help students and parents find colleges they might not have otherwise considered, but which might be exactly the right college for them.

Every featured college is unique, but they all share key characteristics:

- Their students are bright, motivated, and engaged.
- Their classrooms are interesting, exciting places to explore and learn.
- They offer their students vibrant campuses and communities.
- And, they turn good students into well rounded, successful citizens with the capacity to contribute to their communities, their nation, and their world.

If this sounds like what you are looking for in a college, then you are the student (or the parent of a prospective student) for whom we wrote this book.

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Our goal, with *Colleges of Distinction*, is to help you get beyond the advertisements and the rankings to find colleges and universities that consistently provide a remarkable undergraduate college experience and produce successful graduates.

These are schools that get praise from high school guidance counselors across the country, as well as from college admissions officers, professors, students, and satisfied alumni. So why haven't you heard of them?

The truth is, many schools are famous for reasons that have nothing to do with the quality of their educational programs. They may have big-time football or basketball programs. They may be known for the path-breaking research conducted by scientists who never actually teach. Or, they

may be recognized for the quality of their Ph.D. programs and medical schools.

The colleges in this book may not receive that kind of publicity, but employers and graduate schools know that *Colleges of Distinction* produce real winners.

How do they do this?

They welcome students who demonstrate both academic promise and community involvement. They keep classes small, so professors get to know their students as individuals, not numbers. They encourage athletics and a wide range of cultural, intellectual, and social activities, but they help students keep it all in balance with their studies. They encourage their students to get involved with their own communities, as well as exposing

them to the global community.

Year after year, they do a great job. And, looking back, their graduates say, "This might not be the right college for everyone, but it was exactly right for me."

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You'll find many small, private, liberal arts colleges in this book. Schools of this kind have long been recognized for their focus on personal attention and student engagement. There are public universities in this guide as well, proving that these institutions can be just as personalized as their private counterparts. There are also single-gender schools, historically Black colleges, engineering schools, Christian colleges, and more.

Why do we call them Colleges of Distinction?

They may be modest about it, but these schools have just as much history and heritage as the better-known, brand-name colleges. What's more, they have a proven record in four key areas:

Engaged Students

GPA's and board scores are important, but *Colleges of Distinction* look for students who will be engaged outside the classroom, as well as inside it. These students compete in sports, do volunteer work, conduct independent research, and study abroad. They are not just thinkers, they are doers.

Great Teaching

Professors who teach in *Colleges of Distinction* know students by name and are committed to seeing them succeed. They're experts in their fields and they are dedicated to teaching. Their students learn in environments that encourage lots of reading, writing, research, and personal interaction. Their students learn to analyze problems, think creatively, work in teams, and communicate effectively.

Vibrant Communities

Colleges of Distinction provide a rich, exciting living-and-learning environment, both on and off-campus. They offer a variety of residential options, clubs and organizations to satisfy every interest, plenty of cultural and social opportunities, and avenues for leadership, character, and spiritual development. Whether they are in rural or urban settings, they provide ways for students to be involved in the life of the surrounding community.

Successful Outcomes

Colleges of Distinction have a long record of graduating satisfied, productive alumni who go on to make their mark in business, medicine, law, education, public service, and other fields. In terms of the return they offer on investment, these schools are outstanding educational values.



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As different as these colleges may be from each other, among people “in the know” they all have outstanding national reputations. We hope you benefit from finding out more about the best-kept secrets in college education today.

Finding the right college is one of the biggest decisions you’ll ever make. It ranks right up there with choosing a spouse and deciding on a career. Finding the right college can change your life; getting stuck at the wrong one can leave you frustrated and unhappy.

How do students choose? How can their parents help?

So, how do high school students select the right college? And, if you are the parent, how do you help your son or daughter make the right choice?

Let’s be realistic. It’s your junior or senior year of high school. You’re busy with your schoolwork, concentrating on the SAT or ACT, fitting in school activities, and

trying to have a social life, too. Are you likely to devote a huge number of hours to carefully reading every college’s marketing materials, pouring over piles of guidebooks, studying the characteristics of hundreds of colleges and universities, and eventually making a deliberate, well-considered decision? Of course not.

According to research by the College Board, the most important source of information for students deciding which colleges to apply to is *word-of-mouth information*. They listen to advice from teachers and guidance counselors, parents and other family members, and—often most compellingly—from their friends.

College guidebooks are another source of information, and many students and parents make good use of them.

Often, of course, this process will guide you to the right college. Yet there may be excellent schools—maybe the perfect school *for you*—that no one tells you about, that you haven’t heard of, and that you

won’t discover by scanning the top 10 colleges in an annual numerical ranking.

That’s where *Colleges of Distinction* comes in.

College Guidebooks

It’s the “best” college—or the second or third or twentieth best. It ranks at “the top of the list.” It has an “excellent reputation.”

Ever wonder what these phrases really mean? Can diverse institutions really be rank-ordered using statistics? How relevant are these measurements and rankings to what is going to be the ideal college experience *for you*?

The truth is, it’s extremely difficult to quantify the quality of colleges and universities. For one thing, the very act of measuring colleges is based on the assumption that all students are alike, that they want and need the same things, and that it might be possible to create a single ideal college that would be perfect for everyone. Of course, that isn’t true.

Unlike high school, college students spend their time studying vastly different subjects. They enter college with a huge variety of expectations, hopes, and dreams. There are no SAT’s or ACT’s to measure achievement, no national “standards of learning” to compare the quality of one college with that of another. There are no published statistical measures on how happy and satisfied students are at the over 3,000 colleges in the country.

So how do we judge quality?

The Rankings and Ratings Approach

A number of widely-read guidebooks make a game attempt at comparing schools. *U.S. News & World Report's* annual “Best Colleges” uses a statistical approach that considers many different factors, all of which, they claim, contribute to the overall quality of a college. Among the factors U.S. News plugs into their statistical formula are:

- *The college's overall faculty: student ratio*
- *The number of faculty members with Ph.D.s*
- *The size of the college's financial endowment*
- *Faculty salaries*
- *SAT and ACT scores of entering students*
- *Percentage of entering students in the top 10% of their high school class*
- *Level of alumni giving*
- *Percentage of applicants rejected*
- *Student retention and graduation rates*

But can you really find the “best” school—especially, the best school for you—from statistics alone? For example, selectivity is fairly easy to measure: divide the total number of applicants by the number of applicants rejected. But if a school is hard to get into, does that necessarily mean it is a better place to learn, live, and grow? Would it be the best place for you?

And exactly what does “high selectivity” mean, anyway?

Some schools—in the Northeast, especially—receive so many applications just because of their location. Schools in other parts of the country may have equally tough



entrance requirements, but because fewer students choose to apply to them, they appear—statistically—less selective.

When guidebook editors decide which characteristics to measure, they are making value judgments that greatly affect the results—and they don't necessarily value the same things you do. For example, if ethnic diversity is important to you, does the guidebook use it as one of its statistical criteria? What about the safety of the campus (by Federal law, this information is available in the Campus Safety Office, but you won't find it in the college's marketing materials or in a college guidebook)?

And, when guidebook editors decide what to measure, they shy away from the hard-to-quantify intangibles—quality of life, actual

classroom experience, friendliness of the campus—that are vitally important in each student's college experience.

Rankings-based guidebooks provide important information. But, as a smart consumer, you should be aware of their limitations. As you thumb through the rankings, we suggest you ask:

Other Approaches

▶ Is “the best college” really the best college for you? What facts and figures made it “the best”? Are these criteria that you value highly?

▶ Do you value something that can't be measured by statistics? Are spiritual identity, classroom excitement, and active residence life programs important to you?

▶ As a student at this particular college, will you be able to participate in all the activities in which you have an interest? Do you need to be a theatre major in order to audition for a role in a play, or are auditions open to all students? Are all interested athletes welcome to try out for the college's teams?

▶ How much learning actually goes on at the college you're considering? Who actually does the teaching? Are students excited about what goes on in the classroom and the lab?

▶ In addition to college guidebooks based on statistics, there are many kinds of guides, websites, and studies, which may or may not be useful in your college search.

You Will Find:

The Inside Scoop

Some guidebooks, like *The Princeton Insider's Guide*, emphasize surveys of students and faculty members. They usually deliver on what they promise: an “inside look,” an informal and unauthorized view of the campus—things you definitely won't find in the college's marketing materials. On the down side, their editors may choose quotes for dramatic effect. One dissatisfied student's response has been known to give a false impression of an otherwise very fine school.

Expert Advice

Other guides give you “expert opinions” based on a lifetime of working in education or in education-related journalism. Loren Pope's *Colleges That Change Lives* and Jay Mathews' *Harvard Schmarvard* are excellent examples of these books. Both of these gentlemen have spent a lifetime as education journalists, and they are intimately acquainted with the college admission process. Interestingly, both writers avoid strict rankings, although both offer lists and comments on colleges they recommend.

Measuring Engagement

On the scholarly end of the scale, a few ongoing research projects attempt to do what *U.S. News* doesn't: measure the actual learning that takes place at various colleges. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), based at Indiana University, collects detailed survey information from students at many colleges and universities. Another is the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, an ongoing national study of 11 million students, 250,000 faculty and staff, and 1,600 higher education institutions. NSSE and

CIRP provide interesting and valuable data about the experience of students at American colleges and universities. Unfortunately, they do not release results for individual schools.

There Must Be a Better Way!

With *Colleges of Distinction*, we are trying to do something a little different—give you a reliable, journalistic look at schools that may

not have the biggest names in higher education, but that consistently do a great job educating undergraduate students.

Every one of these colleges excels in the four areas we have defined as most important in the college experience: attracting and supporting engaged students, promoting outstanding teaching, encouraging a vibrant campus life, and producing successful graduates. But every one of them does so in different ways.

So how did we identify the schools in this book?

First, we asked people “in the know” about colleges. We solicited recommendations from the heads of admissions at different colleges. We then sifted through this rather large list looking for certain characteristics:

- 1 Evidence of schools looking for, and keeping, engaged students.** For the most part, we avoided schools that rejected more than 50% of their applicants, giving preference to those that consider factors beyond SATs and ACTs in admissions. We looked for schools that excelled in scores tabulated by the National Survey of Student Engagement. We considered retention and four-year graduation rates. We also considered each school's rate of study abroad, internship participation, and other “hands-on” learning opportunities.
- 2 Evidence of schools that value good teaching.** We looked for schools with lots of chances for students to interact with professors and where faculty members are rewarded primarily for teaching, rather than research or publishing. Specifically, we looked for large proportions of full-time faculty, good student:teacher ratios (16:1 and below), small average class sizes, and programs that encouraged student/faculty interaction.
- 3 Evidence of vibrant campus communities.** Although we decided to accept universities with as many as 8,000 undergraduates, we held such institutions up to close scrutiny, looking for evidence that they still managed to build a strong sense of community through their residence halls, campus activities, and opportunities for student involvement.
- 4 Evidence of successful alumni.** We looked for schools with strong records of graduate school and professional school success and good results in employment after graduation. Where possible, we also considered alumni satisfaction, as measured by satisfaction surveys and rates of alumni giving.