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Beyond the Folklore

A Strategy for Identifying Quality Undergraduate Colleges

Clifton F. Conrad

"Quality...you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof... But for all practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously, some things are better than others...but what's the 'betterness'?... So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding any place to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it?" (Pirsig 1974, 184)

College and university quality—what it is and how to identify it—is a preoccupation of many prospective college students and their parents, high school counselors, and college admission personnel. Regardless of class, race, and gender, it is no longer enough for a growing number of individuals simply to attend college: matriculating at an institution of unmistakable quality is the overarching concern. Traditional college choice considerations such as cost and location remain important to most students, but quality is *au courant* and is likely to stay that way.

In response to this concern, and in the absence of more concrete indicators, a body of folklore or conventional wisdom has evolved about how to identify "quality" colleges. This

folklore has been shaped by many sources: the lay public, the media, counselors and college admission personnel, college and university faculty, and leading graduate schools. In particular, it has been informed by an outpouring of popular literature that includes rankings of undergraduate colleges, college guides, and opinion pieces.

The folklore about institutional quality has assuaged the need for understanding in the absence of more authoritative information. Yet, a growing body of scholarship and research on college quality, much of it published in the past ten years, raises some serious questions about the adequacy of conventional wisdom. Drawing upon this literature, the aim of this article is to examine the folklore, reveal some of its limitations, and suggest a framework for assessing college quality that may help counselors, students, and parents make more informed explorations of prospective colleges and universities.

My approach is two-fold. *First*, I critique five key myths which are embedded in the folklore and which are responsible for much misguided advice. *Second*, I explore the scholarship concerning quality in undergraduate education, suggesting ways to assess whether various "criteria and indicators" of quality are present. My thesis is that, at best, the myths about quality

are only partly or conditionally true and, at worst, are wrong-headed—and that questioning the conventional wisdom and developing a better strategy for selecting a college are paramount.

THE MYTHOLOGY

Myth 1: The Higher the Prestige—The Higher the Quality

As far back as the antebellum colleges, elite colleges and universities have fostered the belief that there is a one-to-one relationship between prestige and quality. Perhaps not least because college is viewed by many as a vehicle of upward mobility, the public—with few exceptions—seems to accept the validity of this proposition. To wit, most of us assume that such prestigious institutions as Harvard, Yale, and Stanford provide the finest undergraduate education in the country.

While this myth undoubtedly has some truth, there is nevertheless something pernicious in blindly assuming that institutional prestige is

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inextricably linked to high quality at the undergraduate level. To begin with, some prestigious institutions earn their reputation largely on the basis of factors that may have little impact on the quality of undergraduate education. These factors, such as the presence of world-renowned scientists, high student selectivity, a prestigious research faculty, and a substantial endowment—do not necessarily translate into a high-quality undergraduate program. Indeed, they tell us little about the caliber of exchanges between students and faculty, the quality of peer interactions, and the vitality of student life. Contrary to conventional wisdom, many lesser-known colleges and universities—though lacking the trappings of prestige—successfully focus their full energies and resources on developing and maintaining integrity in the undergraduate experience. Finally, it often

happens that institutional reputations—even if earned—linger longer than deserved (Webster 1981).

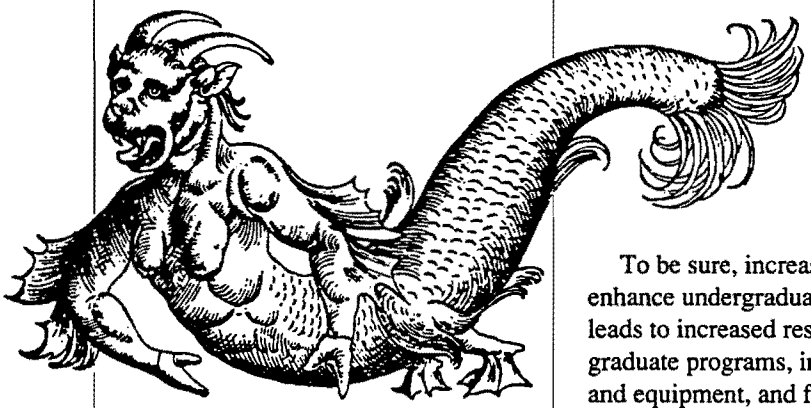
Myth 2: The Higher the Ranking—The Higher the Quality

Fueled by a seemingly insatiable public curiosity, college rankings have achieved national visibility in recent years and, judging by the public response, the "ranking myth" or "ranking game" (Dolan 1976) has made a significant contribution to the folklore on college quality. In brief, three types of college rankings have received widespread attention in the media. *First*, "objective indicators" rankings—such as the one on admission "selectivity" annually published by *USA Today* (Ordovensky 1987)—rate colleges on the basis of such quantifiable indicators as standardized test scores of entering students and the percentage of applicants accepted for admission. *Second*, "reputational rankings" rate colleges on the basis of the opinions of "experts;" the premier example is the ranking by college and university presidents that was published in *U.S. News and World Report* ("America's Best Colleges" 1987; Solorzana 1983). *Third*, "multidimensional rankings" rate colleges on the basis of diverse indicators. For example, *Changing Times* (Henderson 1988) rated colleges in terms of such "objective" information as price and student selectivity, as well as the subjective judgments of "education experts."

All three types of rankings have been justly assailed in the scholarly

literature. Among other criticisms, objective rankings fail to examine what colleges actually do to educate their students (Webster 1981, 24); reputational rankings suffer from numerous methodological shortcomings as well as an exclusive emphasis on opinion (Conrad & Blackburn 1985b; Webster 1981, 1986); and multidimensional ratings tend to compound the disadvantages of objective and reputational rankings (Webster 1986).

Regardless of how rankings are developed, the primary emphasis is on rank-ordering institutions rather than on evaluating them against a normative



standard of quality. Consequently, rankings amount to little more than an institutional pecking-order which reveals little about the quality of teaching and learning, the vitality of the institutional environment, and the richness of the undergraduate experience. In short, they provide a dubious foundation for making judgments about institutional quality.

Myth 3: The Higher the Cost—The Higher the Quality

High college tuition costs are commonly believed to reflect robust institutional quality. In all likelihood, this association is rooted in societal beliefs regarding relations between the quality and the relative price of consumer goods, i.e., "you get what you pay for." This myth is reinforced by the fact that the most prestigious colleges have historically been the most expensive.

In recent years some elite colleges and universities appear to have exploited this myth, sometimes raising their tuition markedly above the rate of inflation. Emulating this strategy, a growing number of less prestigious institutions have witnessed a jump in the student applications by dramatically raising their tuition. Michigan's Kalamazoo College successfully adopted such a strategy, prompting President David Breneman to reflect that "increasingly—rightly or wrongly—we are seeing price as a statement of who we are" (Evangelauf 1988, 29).

To be sure, increased tuition can enhance undergraduate quality if it leads to increased resources for undergraduate programs, including facilities and equipment, and for faculty and student services. In many institutions, however, additional tuition revenues have been channeled primarily into high-cost graduate programs. Moreover, rapidly rising tuition is likely to result in a student body that is drawn increasingly from a narrow socio-economic band of the relatively well-to-do. In turn, student diversity may be undermined—through exclusion of low-income, minority, adult, and part-time students—even if higher tuition costs are partially offset by increased student aid for particular groups of students. Perhaps most important, there is no compelling evidence that an increase in institutional resources assures quality (Anderson 1985). Among others, Howard Bowen (Bowen 1980, 166-167) has noted that the "affluent institutions could perform as well, or nearly as well, with less money and that many institutions could achieve greater results with the same money." There are some things that money cannot buy and an active commitment to quality is one of those things.

Myth 4: The Greater the Student Selectivity—The Higher the Quality

Those colleges and universities that are the most selective are commonly believed to offer the best undergraduate education. Limiting access—whether by requiring high standardized test scores, high grade point averages, or other restrictive criteria—evokes in many an image of quality. This myth has been reinforced by several highly selective colleges which, in recent years, have imposed even stricter standards for admission. A prominent symbol of supposed excellence, especially in independent institutions, is the ratio of applicants admitted or, alternatively, the percentage of students "excluded." For example, a recent article in the *New York Times* purports to show how the Military, Naval, and Air Force Academies are "improving" by comparing their exclusion percentages with similar figures from Harvard, Stanford, and Michigan (Halloran 1988).

What relationship does student selectivity have to undergraduate quality? On the one hand, strict admission standards tend to attract highly able and serious students who can significantly enhance the intellectual environment of a campus. On the other, whether students actually use their abilities and talents to good advantage is always problematic (Pace 1980, 1984). Moreover, strict admission standards can narrow the diversity of the student body, since students from affluent, opportunity-rich backgrounds have long held the edge in test scores, grade point averages, and other selectivity measures. High admission standards especially tend to discrimi-

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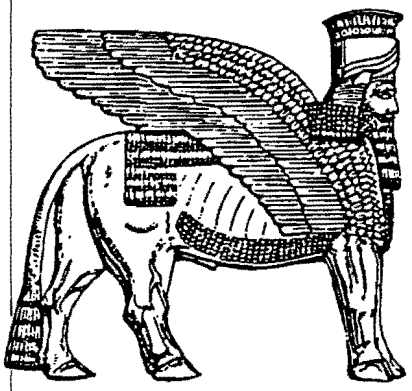


nate against minorities, students from academically weaker high schools, and late-blooming students (Conrad & Eagan 1989). Finally, the emphasis on student selectivity tends to minimize the importance of more important factors, such as the curriculum in an undergraduate institution. As noted by Arthur Levine, "Extremely selective schools may offer students poor programs, and some open-admissions institutions provide first-rate curricula" (Levine 1982, 17).

Myth 5: The More Highly Regarded the Graduate School—The Higher the Quality

Putting aside liberal arts colleges and non-doctoral public institutions, it is widely assumed that institutions with highly regarded graduate programs invariably have first-rate undergraduate programs. Not infrequently, the research achievements of a graduate faculty propel an institution to public prominence and, in turn, cast a favorable light on the undergraduate program. At first glance, the logic behind this myth seems reasonable. Leading graduate institutions invariably offer a wealth of resources: prestigious faculty, excellent facilities and equipment, breadth and depth in program and course offerings, and diverse cultural and social and recreational opportunities. Motivated and resourceful students, it is presumed, can benefit enormously from such an environment.

On the other hand, more than one scholar has suggested that high quality graduate schools may have, at best, a modest association with high quality undergraduate education (Astin 1980; Conrad & Blackburn 1985b). To begin with, many undergraduate students are simply overwhelmed by the size and diversity of most leading graduate institutions. Moreover, because faculty attention is usually focused on grantsmanship, graduate students, and research, the teaching of undergraduates is often given low priority and left to less experienced graduate teaching assistants. One study found that the typical undergraduate student in a major research university, with the best libraries as well as the most distinguished scientists and scholars, does not gain as much as a typical student in a liberal arts college (Pace 1984).

A STRATEGY FOR CHOOSING HIGH-QUALITY UNDER-GRADUATE COLLEGES: INSIGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE

These "myths" about college quality represent only part of the folklore about colleges that circulates freely in our culture. Not all of the folklore is false or misleading—much, in fact, may be based on accurate perceptions—but the subjective nature of quality makes it difficult to know the difference and discern the genuine from the spurious. Because the assessment of "genuine" quality is based largely on individual inclinations and needs, no single strategy or plan can be generally prescribed. The fit between schools and students rests on such a substantial number of factors that the attempt to assess them is daunting. Nevertheless, due to the risk of misinformation if folklore alone is consulted, a broader, more analytical and grounded framework for determining quality is needed.

Even while acknowledging that quality has multiple meanings and is difficult to evaluate, we all recognize that some colleges and universities are of higher quality than others. But wherein lies the "betterness" and how can we identify it? In place of myths and potential misinformation, I propose a two-part strategy that is adapted in large measure from the scholarship and research on quality in higher education. Some of the sources contributing to this strategy include: reviews of the literature on departmental and institutional quality (Conrad and Blackburn 1985b; Kuh 1981; Lawrence and Green 1980; Tan 1986; Webster and Conrad 1986), and studies of the quantitative characteristics of high quality programs (Astin and Solmon 1981; Conrad & Blackburn 1985a, 1986); and related scholarly papers (Astin 1980; Conrad and Pratt 1985).

While requiring considerably more effort than the folklore approach, the strategy I propose promises to put the process of college selection on firmer ground. This strategy is based, *first*, on the use of multiple criteria and indicators to evaluate institutional quality and, *second*, on the use of information drawn from multiple sources. Although the two parts of the framework are often overlapping, they are treated separately below. Figure one provides a summary of the strategy advanced here.

My thesis is that, at best, the myths about quality are only partly or conditionally true and that questioning the conventional wisdom and developing a better strategy for selecting a college are paramount.

Part One: Examine Multiple Criteria and Indicators

Above all, the literature on quality in higher education suggests the importance of using a number of criteria and indicators in concert to assess institu-

STRATEGY FOR ASSESSING UNDERGRADUATE QUALITY

Part 1: Criteria and Indicators

Faculty

- Educational Background
- Professional Involvement
- Faculty-Student Interaction
- Scholarship
- Involvement with Students
- Teaching Effectiveness

Students

- Student Quality
- Student Diversity
- Peer Interactions
- Student Effort

Curriculum

- Integrity
- Balance
- Continuity and Integration
- Student Feedback

Learning Resources

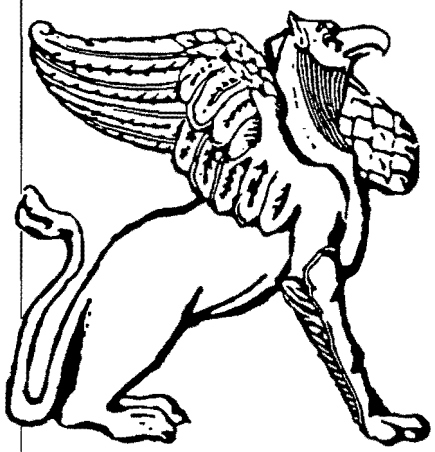
- Facilities
- Computer Access
- Learning Resource Centers
- Accommodations to Special Needs
- Laboratory Equipment
- Library Support
- Student Support Services

Environment

- Campus and Classroom Environment
- Cultural and Social Opportunities
- Academic/Social Balance
- College Character
- Living Arrangements
- Recreational Opportunities
- Challenge and Support

Part 2: Sources of Information

- Acquire Factual Information
- Network
- Review Interpretive Sources
- Visit Several Campuses



tional quality. To be sure, there are inherent difficulties in isolating specific criteria and indicators, yet the many studies in this area have shown that a constellation of factors contribute to overall institutional quality. To base attendance decisions on only a few easily identified traits may mean that others, which could have greater impact over the long term, may be overlooked.

Unfortunately, the literature focuses as much on departmental quality as institutional quality, and on graduate as well as undergraduate education, confounding its direct applicability to college choice. Moreover, though there is general agreement in the literature, there is modest disagreement among scholars regarding the relative importance of various criteria and indicators for judging institutional quality. Nevertheless, from the perspective of one who has personally explored the intricacies of quality in higher education, there is no better way to approach it than to consider as many criteria and indicators of quality as possible.

The following discussion suggests what to look for in identifying quality colleges and reflects my interpretation of the literature, as well as my own research and reflection. It is not meant to be a practical guide for students, parents, or counselors on how to determine the presence or absence of the traits. Many traits are difficult to ascertain even during personal campus visits or interviews, much less from catalogs and promotional materials. In general, however, the more traits that are present, the higher the quality, though it should be kept in mind that "institutional quality" and "individual fit" are two different matters.

The literature on quality in higher education recognizes five broad criteria—faculty, students, curriculum, learning resources and environment—along with related indicators, for identifying high quality undergraduate colleges. Each is elaborated below. In part, these criteria will be presented as questions, of the sort that

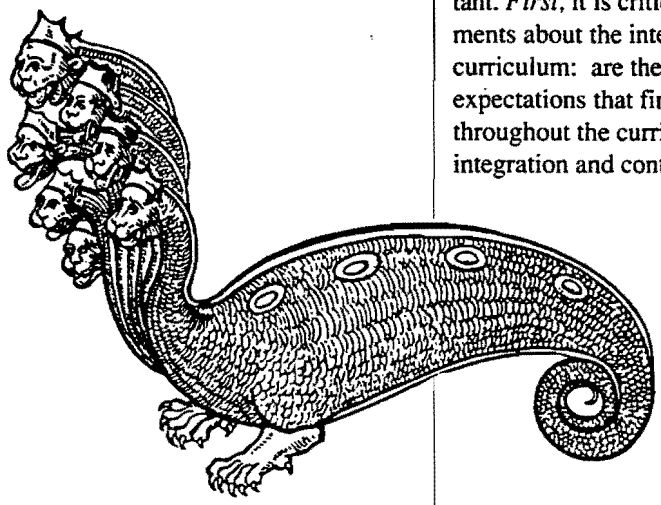
counselors and prospective students might ask in the analysis of a given school.

Faculty

The overall quality of the faculty is one of the most important criteria in assessing institutional quality, and several clusters of factors should be considered. As a point of departure, it is instructive to look at faculty backgrounds and expertise. To what extent have the faculty earned advanced degrees, pursued continuing study beyond the doctorate, engaged in scholarship and research that is likely to enhance their instruction, and been active in their profession? More important, it is critical to consider the degree and character of faculty involvement with undergraduate students.

These factors, such as the presence of world-renowned scientists, high student selectivity, a prestigious research faculty, and a substantial endowment—do not necessarily translate into a high-quality undergraduate program.

Are faculty actively engaged with students not only in the classroom, but also in extracurricular encounters, departmental and campus-wide activities, and informal events? Finally, and perhaps most important, what is the overall quality of instruction? Are the faculty committed to providing meaningful courses, and do they employ a stimulating repertoire of instructional techniques for promoting student learning and development? What about the quality of student advising?



Students

Because the overall quality of the undergraduate experience is shaped partly through interactions between and among students, the character of the undergraduate student body is an important criterion for assessing institutional quality. Several factors deserve consideration, beginning with student quality. Indicators of previous academic achievement—such as scores on standardized tests—provide an indication of the quality of students who are currently enrolled. To what extent do students display intellectual competence, curiosity, resourcefulness, and integrity—both in the classroom as well as in their informal interactions with other students?

Student diversity also can greatly enhance the richness of the undergraduate experience, and it is another factor to be considered. To what extent do students represent diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, political, and economic backgrounds? Finally, and not least important, it is essential to look at student involvement and effort. Do most students seize the various opportunities provided for their personal and intellectual growth? Are students committed to maximizing their growth and development during their undergraduate years?

Curriculum

While there are numerous features of the curriculum that deserve consideration, four factors are especially important. *First*, it is critical to make judgments about the integrity of the curriculum: are there shared values and expectations that find expression throughout the curriculum? *Second*, integration and continuity in the curriculum are important considerations. Are there integrative experiences expected of all students, such as core courses, team-taught seminars, and clusters of interdisciplinary courses? Are sequence and continuity evidenced throughout the curriculum, both in the major and general education? *Third*, is there curriculum balance between specialized and general education, professional and liberal education, the humanities and the sciences, the affective and cognitive development of students, and classroom and experiential learning? *Finally*, are students provided with systematic and informative feedback concerning their learning and development?

Learning Resources

Resources for learning are easily overlooked, but they are also important to consider in selecting a college. The most obvious factor, of course, is facilities. Both in qualitative and quantitative terms, how adequate are classrooms, laboratories, libraries, residence halls, student unions, athletic and recreational facilities, theaters, and art galleries? A second factor is equipment: are there well-equipped laboratories, and to what extent do students have access to computers? A third factor concerns such learning resources as libraries and learning resource centers. How adequate is library support and, no less important, are there individualized learning opportunities in resource centers offering

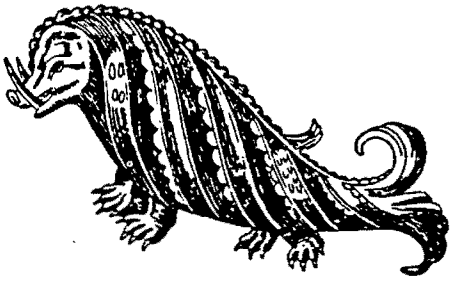
appropriate equipment, learning materials, and staff assistance? A fourth factor concerns student support services. Are adequate support services available, such as career counseling and advising? Finally, as appropriate, special needs should be considered. Are there institutional accommodations for such special needs as child care, transportation, health services, and physical handicaps?

Environment

Although it requires effort to evaluate, the quality of the environment is one of the most important criteria in choosing an undergraduate college. Four clusters of factors find mention here. As a point of departure, it is instructive to consider campus, classroom, and living environments. Since learning opportunities for students do not end at the classroom door, to what extent do the various micro-environments of a campus contribute to student learning and development? For example, is there private space for studying throughout the campus? Cultural, social, and recreational opportunities provide another set of indicators of the collegiate environment. For example, does the college environment provide exposure to the visual and performing arts, diverse cultures, and alternative religious, social, and political points of view? In addition, it is important to look at the balance in various aspects of the collegiate environment. In particular, is there a judicious balance between academic and social life, between individuality and community, and between student challenge and student support? Finally, it is critical to evaluate the overall character of the undergraduate environment. Does the collegiate culture promote vigorous and stimulating exchanges among students, faculty, and administrators? Is there a sense of excitement about learning, about ideas, about the fundamental significance and importance of the undergraduate experience?

Part Two: Gather Information from Multiple Sources

This broad range of indicators of institutional quality, though often difficult to identify, can help provide a framework for examining a prospective college. A second, companion part of my strategy for college choice also arises from the literature on quality, though more indirectly. In many of the studies on college quality, researchers probed widely to elicit evidence of quality, and to determine the views on quality held by stakeholders—students, faculty, administrators, employers, and the public. Their approach involved the use of multiple sources of information to cross-verify their findings about quality, based on the realization that the reliability of their findings depended on agreement across several sources. Accordingly, the same approach is recommended for individuals seeking information about prospective colleges.



Not all of the folklore is false or misleading—much, in fact, may be based on accurate perceptions—but the subjective nature of quality makesit difficult to know the difference and discern the genuine from the spurious.

In selecting a college, most people either rely on the folklore, or at best, base their decision on quite limited information. Single sources of information, no matter how seemingly valid the source, fail to provide enough information to make an informed decision. In particular, basing decisions on hearsay—that is, folklore—about a school's reputation may prove unwise, because institutional reputation and prestige may be undeservedly enduring. Thus, it is critical to gather information from multiple sources, providing a student's inquiry with multiple perspectives. Following are several strategies for acquiring information on the criteria and indicators of quality discussed above.

Acquire Factual Information

As a point of departure, it is invariably useful to secure basic information directly from colleges: catalogs, brochures, program descriptions, and the like. To be sure, this information will reflect institutional bias, but institutional documents can nonetheless provide useful information on faculty, students, curriculum, and learning resources available to students.

In addition, there are a large number of college guides that publish factual information usually furnished by colleges and universities themselves. Among the more comprehensive and useful of these guides are *Peterson's Annual Guide to Undergraduate Study*, *The College Handbook*, and *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*. In providing primary information on many of the criteria and indicators discussed above, they offer a preliminary foundation for comparisons between various colleges.

Review Interpretative Sources

There are a growing number of college guides that go beyond factual descrip-

tions and attempt to evaluate institutional quality. These include The *Insider's Guide to the Colleges*, *Selective Guide to Colleges*, and guides aimed at specific audiences such as *The Black Student's Guide to Colleges* and *Everywoman's Guide to Colleges and Universities*. On the one hand, these guides offer interpretations of the quality of the undergraduate

experiences at various institutions and they can provide illuminating observations on the texture of campus life, including such indicators as faculty involvement with students, teaching effectiveness, balance and integrity in the curriculum, and learning resources. On the other hand, they sometimes display infuriating prejudices that distort as much as they illuminate. Still, they represent multiple perspectives and sources of information and merit consideration.

Network

The advantages of networking as a college choice strategy have been vastly understated. With few exceptions, most college-bound students and their parents know individuals who are at least somewhat informed about various colleges. Friends and acquaintances can sometimes offer valuable insights into the various indicators of undergraduate quality. More substantively, however, there are a large number of professionals who conscientiously attempt to educate themselves about the strengths and weaknesses of different institutions. Finally, and not least important, recent graduates can be a valuable source of information and perspective, especially in regard to overall integrity of the academic program, the quality and diversity of the environment, and the character of the student body. Of course, just like the college guides, one must carefully weigh the information and interpretations provided—they are inevitably prejudiced. Still, when networking is coupled with the other strategies noted above, it can be a powerful instrument for probing further into undergraduate quality.

Visit Several Campuses

Given the investment required for a college education, it is imperative that prospective students visit at least two or three institutions before making a final decision. In contrast to many other sources of information, campus visits provide a significant opportunity for students to make their own judgments about the quality of the undergraduate experience. Through discussions with students and faculty, including visits to campus gathering places as well as classes, prospective students can glean a wealth of information and from a variety of perspectives. Making a thorough investigation, however, is hard work, and considerable preparation is needed to help students and parents find out as much as possible. Only after in-depth visits to several institutions are prospective students likely to acquire the comparative perspective that is needed to reach judgments about institutional quality.

CONCLUSION

When something is not well understood, a folklore usually develops that fulfills the need for understanding. The folklore about what constitutes quality in undergraduate colleges has evolved gradually to meet such a need. While there is some truth in this conventional wisdom, embedded with the folklore are myths, including the overarching belief that high-quality colleges can be easily identified through a handful of signposts, that stand up neither to critical analysis nor to the scholarly literature on quality. As professionals concerned about helping people make informed choices, we are well advised to resist the temptation to rely heavily on conventional wisdom.

Instead, we can suggest a framework for self-directed inquiry that (insofar as is practical) is built around the active search for multiple indicators of quality drawn from a variety of perspectives. The growing scholarly literature assists in this process, and can help prospective students achieve a better balance between the myths about quality and a more realistic understanding. Adhering to a college search strategy more grounded in the findings of academic research is not easy, but such a framework can both inform and empower individuals in their efforts to make one of the most important decisions of their lives. ■

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Clifton F. Conrad is a professor of higher education at The University of Wisconsin-Madison. He previously taught at the University of Arizona, the College of William and Mary, and the University of Denver. He received his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Kansas, and a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan.