

Opinions

You didn't get into Harvard, so what?

By Michael S. Roth April 10

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WHERE YOU GO IS NOT WHO YOU'LL BE

An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania

By Frank Bruni

Grand Central. 218 pp. \$25

My first thought on closing this compact volume was that Frank Bruni has written an important book for a pretty small number of people. He is speaking to young men and women competing to gain admission to Ivy League and other highly selective universities in America. He's also speaking to their parents, guidance counselors, friends and teachers. Then I realized that his book also speaks to the culture of manufactured meritocracy — a culture of rankings and branding, of recruiting and rejection. When you begin pulling on the string of Bruni's concerns, you find yourself tugging against the weight of current attitudes that are eating away at the soul of higher education in this country. In fact, he has written an important book for an audience much larger than would-be Ivy Leaguers.

The title sums up its core message nicely: "Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be." Many talented high school students in this country receive exactly the opposite message. They are told to pack their résumés with activities that will impress admissions counselors; they are coached not to make any mistakes that might blemish their records; they are tutored and tutored and tutored so as to have every competitive advantage on high-stakes tests that are "standardized" in name only. It's a dismal learning trajectory: The point of high school is to get into the college that rejects the highest percentage of its applicants; the point of college is to gain access to employers or graduate programs that turn away the greatest number of qualified candidates; the point of life is to have more of the stuff that other people are unable to acquire.

What a sorry, soul-killing lesson this is: to value things only to the extent that other people are deprived of them.

Bruni tackles the roots of this lesson with example after example of successful, accomplished and happy people whose college experiences were far from the elite halls of Stanford or Harvard. Some of the most compelling stories are of people who had their hearts set on getting into some hyper-selective school. They checked all the boxes, had the grades, the great SAT scores, the community service. But still they were denied admission (because there just aren't enough seats for all the highly qualified applicants). Actually, according to a study cited by Bruni, where you apply is more important with respect to success later in life than where you end up going. And often, he finds, it's rejection by highly selective schools that turns out to be key to a person's success. Learning to deal with rejection can be a much deeper lesson than figuring out how to fit into an elite institution that has granted you access. Bruni quotes star journalist Christiane Amanpour, a graduate of the University of Rhode Island: "I don't think entitlement is good for a career."

But what families will do to gain that access! Bruni has horror stories of young people desperate to find a way to impress (or just be remembered by) admissions officers reading hundreds to thousands of applications: A kid who isn't gay writes a coming-out story for his application essay to make it seem that he had overcome familial challenges; a group of students jokes about their increased chances for college admissions if a bus transporting class leaders crashes; a young girl tries to demonstrate how much she cares about ideas by writing on her application that she urinated on herself rather than interrupt a teacher. This last example gives new meaning to grit!

"Yearning and scheming have long been part of applying to colleges," Bruni writes, "but they've turned into something darker." He describes "a swell of panic, a surrender of principle, a spreading cynicism" that has crept into the race to get into the best schools.

But whoever came up with the idea that there is a best school? Some of Bruni's most scathing pages confront the rankings systems, particularly that of U.S. News & World Report, whose listings have crept into the psyches of highly talented (and competitive) families. The magazine's rankings encourage schools to spend more and more, thereby contributing to sharp increases in tuition. They also have prompted elite schools to pursue a perverse quest to reject more students: If you are more selective, you get points in the rankings. Some top schools spend buckets of money recruiting kids to apply just to be able to reject them.

Against this mania, Bruni provides telling examples of many different kinds of schools that proved to have been just right for students who went on to do great things after graduation. Those examples include large universities and small liberal arts colleges (and not just the usual suspects) — a number of them may not have even crossed the minds of many students and their parents. So many students come here from around the world, Bruni says, because America has “a plenitude and variety of settings for learning that are unrivaled.”

I should say that I teach at and am president of Wesleyan University, a highly selective liberal arts school, and although the author doesn't write about my school in this book, he once interviewed me about my book on liberal education. I am also the father of a high school senior who has just come out of the admissions frenzy Bruni describes. The message she kept getting from peers was that she had to find the best (most selective) school possible. Calming her anxiety, her mother and I kept reinforcing the notion that there are many great schools out there right for her.

As an educator, I applaud Bruni's advice to disregard the false rankings systems and recognize that hundreds of schools across the country offer fantastic opportunities for people eager to work and learn. As a father, I am grateful for his reminder of the importance of family for students: “something so much more essential and nourishing and lasting” than admission to a college — no matter how highly ranked.

Bruni is not writing here about struggling community colleges, or about burdensome student debt, or about the dramatic defunding of great public university systems. Instead, he is addressing young people who find themselves gauging their worth by their success in a manic admissions race that makes little sense. Bruni doesn't want strong students to simply hone their skills for getting into a vaunted institution. He wants them to develop “robust and lasting energy for hard work,” to cultivate “an openness to serendipity,” and to find meaning and happiness in their families and communities.

In a world of frenetic arguments about the instrumental value of a college education, this is a humane, measured book. And in its authentic humanity, it has lessons for a very wide audience indeed.