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My sloppy approach to picking a college, and why it worked out in the end



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As a journalist, I have long been obsessed with how to find the best college. I was not good at this myself.

I realized my first week at the first college I picked that it was not for me. The school I transferred to my sophomore year was bigger and more famous, but the teaching and the atmosphere weren't as good as I had hoped.

We should appreciate that this great adventure of choosing a college will often be messy and incomplete. Those of us who decide which school to attend are usually teenagers, many of us not sure who we are or where our lives are going.

It was at my second college that I discovered the most important learning for me was not in classes, but at a seedy little off-campus building occupied by the student-run daily newspaper. I acquired skills there I still use today. I also met a working-class girl with a sly sense of humor who became the most important person in my life. She beat out all competitors, including me, for the managing editor job at the newspaper. Then she married me the day we graduated.

Some people say picking a college is just as important as picking a spouse. I think that's wrong. It's more like buying a house. It is a major investment, to be sure. But if you decide the rooms are too small or the neighborhood too sketchy, it's relatively easy to find another place. And whatever school you settle on is going to have some pleasant surprises.

I grew up in northern California. My family could afford a private college because my father, who did not have a bachelor's degree, got a good federal job as a technical writer through his World War II Army service. My parents let me make all the college decisions and never pointed out my many mistakes.

That first college I attended was Occidental. It remains a fine school on a sunny hillside not far from where I live in Southern California. I went there because I was obsessed with China. I decided I would become the first U.S. ambassador to the People's Republic and establish a golden era of amity between our two countries.

Oxy, as it was called then and now, had a much-publicized diplomacy and world affairs department. I also loved the lively political atmosphere at the school. We first-year students had deeply serious debates, late into the night, about who should win the 1964 presidential election, President Lyndon B. Johnson or Sen. Barry Goldwater.

My problem was my negative reaction to the head of the diplomacy and world affairs department, a former State Department officer. My first week of college, at a tea at his house for newly enrolled students, he made no attempt to thrill us with the big issues we were going to explore. Instead he warned us that we would never succeed as diplomats if we ever again committed the cardinal sin that all of us were guilty of — failing to respond formally to his invitation to that gathering.

I also discovered — one of my worst mistakes — that Oxy then did not have Chinese-language classes. So I transferred to Harvard. I liked the big name. I was drawn to the image of the recently assassinated President John F. Kennedy. He had been a government major, so I became one, too. Sadly, the courses in that department were dull. Also troubling was the absence of any debate over the presidential election. Goldwater fans were numerous in Southern California but not in Massachusetts.

The student newspaper saved me.

I loved that trash-strewn place from the beginning. I enjoyed having my first attempts at news writing torn apart by staffers, some of them younger than I was. For decades I believed that newspaper was the reason I chose Harvard, but I recently discovered that was a false memory.

While going through old files as we prepared to sell our house, I found a copy of my transfer application. It said nothing about any interest in journalism. I was just one more confused college student who didn't know what he wanted until he stumbled upon something on campus he found irresistible.

I also discovered over the years that I would probably have learned just as much about my trade if I had chosen a different school with a similarly lively college paper. At The Washington Post I have gotten to know several colleagues better than I am at what we do who attended big state schools, such as the State University of New York at Buffalo. There's a detailed explanation of why selectivity should not be key to your college selection in my 2003 book "Harvard Schmarvard."

Pick the college that seems best to you, but keep in mind you are not going to understand fully what that school can do until you have been there for a while. College rankings are popular, but our deepest insights about our chosen school come from participating in what is happening on and off campus. It is clear to me now that our country is blessed with one of the most exciting collections of higher education institutions imaginable, an underappreciated plus to being an American.

When you get to the school you picked, start looking around. You may miss the best stuff in the beginning. Who knows what I would have found if I had stuck with Oxy? But you will eventually stumble on something wonderful that grabs you and won't let you go.

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