

Choosing elite school still a smart move

It's not often I take issue with Thomas Sowell. A senior scholar at Stanford's Hoover Institution, a world-class economist and a prolific author, he's forgotten more about public policy than I'll ever know. He gets things right every time. Until last week.

On Oct. 25, in this very spot, he implied "prestigious" colleges were a waste of time and money. I beg to differ.

I actually know something about selective schools. My daughter has applied to one. My son is pursuing a joint program at two. I was denied admission at three (heartbreak), and I've been a student or on faculty at four (pure joy). Whether I like it or not, my biggest disappointments and greatest successes have been connected with elite institutions of higher education.

For purposes of discussion, let's agree that the schools we're talking about are those that accept a third or fewer of their applicants. There are maybe two dozen of them in America, depending on whom you talk to.

Colorado Springs has the only one in the Midwest. It's a military academy on the north side of town. Maybe you've heard of it.

Most people don't know how unusual these schools are, because the huge majority of American colleges accept all or nearly all of their applicants.

So let's be absolutely clear: This discussion is not about getting into college. Everybody gets into college.

But the facts show that the 25 most selective schools in America attract a disproportionate number of America's best students. They also charge the most money. Room and board at one of these schools will run you about 45 grand a year. Professor Sowell is right to ask if it's worth it.

Sowell complains that elite schools get prestige from research and that undergraduate education is the neglected stepchild. To hear Sowell tell it, you'll pay thousands of dollars in tuition only to be taught by graduate students. Not so.

Responding to critics like Sowell, elite institutions are focusing more and more on undergraduate education. I'm reading a book by Mark Hauser, a Harvard professor who has won awards for excellence in teaching. Stephen J. Gould, his former colleague and arguably the most eminent biologist of his



OPINION
BARRY FAGIN
Contributing columnist

day, always taught undergraduates. Closer to home, my son is well into his sophomore year and has yet to take a class taught by a graduate student. I don't think his school has any.

Even back in the Dark Ages, all my classes were taught by professors. We were particularly proud of our physics Nobel Laureate who always taught freshmen. Today, the school is raising money to hire more faculty and drive undergraduate class size down even further. Go online and see what the average class size is at any name school you care to pick. I think you'll be quite impressed.

The real value of a selective college, however, is not the faculty, although of course that's important. The real value comes from the people sitting next to you. If you are at or near the top of your class, and you earn admission into an elite school, you will, perhaps for the first time, engage with students who are smarter than you. That is really, really important.

Yes, the odds of getting in are long, less than 10 percent in some cases, even if you've pegged the meter on the SAT and have straight As. And yes, it is expensive. The best schools, however, are now rich enough to offer need-blind admission. Once you're in, they want you, and will work with Mom and Dad to make it happen.

Don't "shotgun" your application by picking a bunch of big-name schools and hoping for the best. Focus your college search by finding one or two "reach" schools that appeal to you. If you can, pay them a visit. Talk to an alumnus or alumna.

Yes, you will risk disappointment. That's how you know you're reaching for something worthwhile. Nor can you achieve the extraordinary if you do not aspire to it. A world-class education stays with you forever. It is a life-transforming experience, an investment my parents made in me and that I am grateful to be able to make in my children. So if you're a high school senior, talk to your parents. Perhaps they feel the same way.

Then go for it.

Fagin, of Colorado Springs, is a senior fellow at the Independence Institute. His column appears on alternate Thursdays. Readers may e-mail him at barry@faginfamily.net.