

Are Students Choosing The Best College Or The One With The Best PR Campaign?

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The Apple logo, the Nike swoosh, McDonald's golden arches, Target's bullseye. Words aren't even necessary to identify some of the most well-known and popular brands in the world. But are Apple's products really superior? Will those Nike tennis shoes make you a better athlete? Or do consumers subconsciously base their purchases on savvy advertisements?

Moreover, if that theory works with these products, could it also shape how students and their parents choose a college?

According to a recent [TrendKite report](#) by David Moore, public relations drives enrollment at colleges and universities. The number of times the school is mentioned in the media—coverage of athletic and alumni programs, media interviews with faculty and staff, social media shares, and using political polling programs—can raise a university's profile, which in turn can increase applications.

Moore is a marketing and PR expert, so he's understandably pleased with these findings. But should parents and students be happy about the possibility that they're being subconsciously manipulated?

How Instrumental is PR?

Michael E. Chadwick, owner of Chadwick Financial Advisors in Unionville, CT, believes the image a college sells is more powerful than what the school actually delivers. Chadwick says he sees firsthand the advantage that schools such as the University of Connecticut and Yale have over the other universities in his state. “UConn and Yale are the local stars or big boys in the college arena and the press they get is insane, and the image they portray is a brand in and of itself today.”

Despite that, Chadwick notes that there are students attending other schools for a small fraction of the price who may end up getting the same type of job. “If you’re going to be a teacher, it’s the same pay regardless of where you went to school,” says Chadwick.

“The marketing that hits these kids, sometimes beginning in eighth grade, is nuts today—the kids are looking for ‘an experience’ today that includes luxury living, studying abroad, and tuition has been increasing at 10% annually for decades, but something has to give since the current path is unsustainable.”

While Chadwick feels that many students (and their parents) will pay a lot more for a college just as they’ll pay significantly more for a fashion item, he’s encouraged that other students are using “common sense” when selecting a college.

Fortunately, there is help for students and parents choosing schools based on other criteria, such as the best return on investment. Robert Franek, senior VP and publisher of the Princeton Review, tells GoodCall that he spends close to 70% of his time on the road making presentations to college-bound students and their families. “I consistently hear them asking tough, insightful and at many times previously taboo questions when considering if a prospective college will actually be the best-fit for them.”

According to Princeton’s College Hopes and Worries survey, 41% of respondents choose a college that will be the best overall fit, and 41% choose a college with the best program for the student. “In my experience, college-bound students and their parents have become ever more thoughtful and direct about asking questions regarding best fit: academic-fit, campus culture-fit, financial aid-fit, career services-fit, etcetera,” Franek says.

However, Hans Hanson, founder of CollegeLogic, which helps connect students and colleges, warns against minimizing the role of public relations. Hanson does not think that PR drives enrollment; however, he says, “It does serve to drive college revenue in conjunction with enrollment stats.”

Hanson explains that colleges with lower acceptance rates are viewed as more selective. “And this drives up their college ranking, which drives a higher price of tuition, which allows them to offer less scholarships for attracting students, which allows them to keep more of their money.”

Hanson continues, “For example, if a college accepts 5,000 applicants from 15,000 applications, they have a 33% acceptance rate; if the college’s PR programs generate 10,000 additional applications, then the acceptance rate lowers to 20%, their ‘selectivity’ rating improves, while the school receives an additional \$700,000 in application fee revenue.”

While Hanson does agree that students and their families choose schools based on other factors, such as campus comfort, geographical preferences, education needs and affordability, he does believe that PR plays a role in persuading parents to select a school that they can’t afford. “Colleges have entered the business of ‘financialization,’ whereby they are offering parents loans in place of financial awards to falsely make parents believe they can afford the college and marketing and PR help engrain this mistaken thought into the parents of America.”

Practical Tips for Choosing a College

So how can students and parents ensure they're not choosing a college based on hype, media mentions, and a slick public relations campaign?

Mike Moradian, executive director of HonorSociety.org, tells GoodCall that students and parents have to put in the time to conduct their own research instead of relying on media presence. And he offers 3 specific tips:

- Students need to know what they need in a school. Career goals, location, financial assistance, accreditation status and extracurricular activities are among the many aspects to consider.
- Professional networks can help students better understand themselves. Many students may not know what exactly they want to do. The best way students can create paths that are right for them is to be around others and join organizations and social groups, meet with career coaches, or shadow people in a given field of interest. Networking also helps build long-lasting, meaningful relationships.
- Once individual needs are defined, students can research schools and set the criteria that work for them. The focus should always be on the student's goals first. Only then can he or she make the best choice.