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Choosing public higher ed for the right reasons

John B. Simpson, president of the [University at Buffalo](#), writes here about public education. U-Buffalo is the largest and most comprehensive campus in the 64-campus State University of New York system.

By *John B. Simpson*

High school juniors and their parents at the start of their college hunt will inevitably hear a lot of talk about how many families are choosing state schools over private ones in today's economy, chiefly due to the difference in cost. While a lower price tag can be a good incentive to consider public higher education, it should not be the only factor.

We tend to think in our society that if we pay more for something it must be worth more.

While this may be valid, generally, one place it is not necessarily true is higher education. You can get a superb education at a quality public university — just as you can at a quality independent university or at a small elite liberal-arts college.

There are a lot of considerations in picking a college, and families are likely to find that some factors lose their importance as the selection process advances while others take on new significance, including the size and location of the campus, urban or rural setting, quality of faculty, diversity of majors and educational programs.

In fact, if any high school seniors are still not sure where they are going in the fall, they should review all of these factors again before making a final decision. Make a grid on paper to compare cost, financial aid offered, and other factors that are important to your student and to your family.

First, I would urge parents and students to consider the quality of the institution. The excellence of the faculty and programs, and the level of experience and achievements on campus, should be foremost. This transcends large, small, public, private or any other dimension.

Get in touch with the admissions office. Ask them about stellar faculty, and seek out a few specific examples of people who have been recognized within their field for excellent teaching and research. Also ask about award-winning programs.

In addition to speaking with the "official" sources, look to the unofficial channels. Talk to friends and colleagues, teachers and others who may have gone to these institutions.

Look at social media: What are people on Facebook saying about this campus?

All of this can provide helpful anecdotes, and—just like the official info you receive from the campuses—should always be consumed with a grain of salt. After all, everyone's experience is a little different. Make this part of your homework project as you help your student figure out what kind of things he or she really wants.

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When my own children asked me for my thoughts on whether they should attend a large university or a small college, I offered my input based on what I knew about their interests and about higher education.

I told them both that they should go to a large university, because of the variety that is available on a research university campus. The professors are there because they want to be, and part of being a faculty member is teaching, and part of it is scholarship. These are the people who are making the conversation and pointing the way, rather than people who are talking about what others do. There is great value to being exposed to this cutting edge of inquiry.

I also served as a professor at major public research universities for most of my adult life. I took teaching seriously, and I enjoyed it. My colleagues did as well. There was no doubt in my mind I was a better teacher because I was aware of everything that was going on as a scholar in my field, and my scholarship was improved by my commitment to teaching.

Can your son or daughter find great faculty members and navigate a large university? It has never been all that hard, and today's technology makes it easy.

Does your high school senior want to go to a big university because they think they can disappear there for four years? If so, they are considering this type of school for the wrong reason. You can help your student understand that even a large public university is a collection of smaller learning communities.

It may be true that a small private college may offer or even demand greater one-on-one supervision of each student, and that type of environment may be a good fit for your son or daughter. However, what can be gained by the lack of planned and programmed daily involvement with a student's life can be very enlightening and empowering. This provides enormous freedom to explore the breadth of what's available intellectually on a larger campus, and it helps young people to mature.

Many new community outreach programs and hands-on public service initiatives that enable students to "do good" as they learn have become popular among students on private college campuses in recent years. These programs have been part of the mission of public universities for decades. No one does them better, deeper or with more of a lasting impact than public research universities, which are truly in service with the public.

Here's the last thought I offered to my own kids: if you really want to get the most out of a research university, you have to be a little motivated and a little aggressive. You have to seek out what you need, put some effort in to identifying what you think you want to pursue and then get to know the relevant faculty members. You will find, almost without question, that those educators will give you the world.

*Follow my blog all day, every day by bookmarking [washingtonpost.com/answersheet](http://www.washingtonpost.com/answersheet) And for admissions advice, college news and links to campus papers, please check out our new **Higher Education** page at [washingtonpost.com/higher-ed](http://www.washingtonpost.com/higher-ed) Bookmark it!*

By Valerie Strauss | June 24, 2010; 11:44 AM ET
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