

**ABOUT
CHALLENGE
SUCCESS**

Challenge Success is a non-profit organization affiliated with the Stanford University Graduate School of Education. We partner with schools, families, and communities to embrace a broad definition of success and to implement research-based strategies that promote student well-being and engagement with learning.

A “FIT” OVER RANKINGS

Why College Engagement Matters More Than Selectivity

Based on the Challenge Success survey data of more than 100,000 high school students across the country, we know that the college admissions process can often be a top source of stress and anxiety for students. While many schools, counselors, and parents encourage students to focus on finding the “right fit” college, this advice can be difficult to follow without a better understanding of what “fit” means and what matters most — both for learning and engagement in college — and for life outcomes beyond college.

This paper reviews and synthesizes key research in order to address many of the important questions and concerns we hear from students, parents, and schools about the college admissions process: What do college rankings really measure? Are students who attend more selective colleges better off later in life? What is “fit” and why does it matter?

What the research shows:

RANKINGS ARE PROBLEMATIC. Many students and families rely on college rankings published by well-known organizations to define quality. The higher the ranking, the logic goes, the better the college must be and vice versa. We find that many of the metrics used in these rankings are weighted arbitrarily and are not accurate indicators of a college’s quality or positive outcomes for students.

COLLEGE SELECTIVITY IS NOT A RELIABLE PREDICTOR OF STUDENT LEARNING, JOB SATISFACTION, OR WELL-BEING. We explore the research on whether attending a selective college predicts important life outcomes and find no significant relationship between a school’s selectivity and student learning, future job satisfaction, or well-being. We find a modest relationship between financial benefits and attending more selective colleges, and that these benefits apply more to first-generation and other underserved students. We also find that individual student characteristics (such as background, major, ambition) may make more of a difference in terms of post-college outcomes than the institutions themselves.

ENGAGEMENT IN COLLEGE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHERE YOU ATTEND. Colleges that provide ample opportunities for students to deeply engage in learning and campus community may offer the key to positive outcomes after college. For instance, students who participate in internships that allow them to apply what they learn in the classroom to real life settings, students who have mentors in college who encourage them to pursue personal goals, and students who engage in multi-semester projects are more likely to thrive after college.

There is no question that the college admissions process can be stressful. We hope that this paper prompts students and families to examine what college success means to them and to question common assumptions about college selectivity. A good fit is a college where a student will be engaged — in class and out — by what the college has to offer. With over 4,500 colleges in the United States, there are many schools from which to choose. We encourage students and families to look beyond rankings in the college search process, and instead to seek a school where students can participate fully in academic, civic, and social life in order to thrive both during the college years and beyond.

Download the full paper at www.challengesuccess.org