

## ***Why Do You Want To Go To A “Good” College?***

### **Letter To a High School Senior**

April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2000, is a day I remember vividly. The first chatter could be heard at 7:20 in the morning in our chilly A.P. Biology lab. “Yeah, I got in. Don’t think I’ll go, though.” “Me too, I dunno, I want someplace chiller.” *You fools*, I remember thinking. *You’ve been given the greatest gift in the world and you’re going to throw it away to become beach bums?* The school in question was U.C. Berkeley, on which my adolescent hopes and dreams squarely rested. Berkeley was not simply my goal, it was my *destiny*, James Earl Jones voice and all.

I was not accepted to Berkeley. With much resignation, I packed my bags for U.C. Santa Barbara, where I had been awarded a regents’ scholarship, vowing to defect to more prestigious pastures as soon as I could. With a chip on my shoulder too big for even the largest tub of salsa, I buckled down, earning a 4.0 for three straight quarters, and eyeing a new dangling carrot: Stanford. Two of my high school classmates were there now, and their stories (which were seemingly confirmed by my weekend visit) were tantalizing: diversity to match Berkeley, and privilege, opportunity, and tradition to dwarf it. This became my guiding light, my reason to overcome my natural inertia. Of course, it did occur to me that by looking so far ahead I was compromising my present experience – but that was no matter, I told myself. Someone asked, “What if you get there and don’t like it either?” “Won’t happen,” I replied, and rewrote my admissions essay for the fifth time.

I transferred to Stanford September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2001, confident that, here at last, I would achieve academic excellence, meet my future wife, and leave in June 2004 with my dream job. These, after all, were the benchmarks by which one judged the college experience; anything less and my parents would be ill-rewarded for their investment. Of course, I was going to enjoy myself, too, as long as I was at it. Fast forward a couple years, and you’d find me dozing in the third-quarter French class that I, like my apathetic friend Mike, had put off until now, but needed in order to graduate. I retained an enviable GPA, although I privately felt shame at how easily it had been earned, due to grade inflation, even if I had done fine work regardless. The idea of a future wife now seemed cruelly ironic, for reasons I won’t elaborate on. As for a job, I was grateful that the few classes I needed towards my master’s degree would stave off that eventuality.

Thankfully, the fog lifted. I realized that, while my major might not have been the toughest, I had (for the most part) performed earnestly, on top of which I could unquestionably write. True, I didn’t have a plush job in consulting or I-banking lined up, but, I reasoned, I didn’t want to, and the challenge of finding something more unusual and rewarding might be a healthy one. There would be brilliant and attractive women outside of Stanford—and how! Finally, I was leaving with a collection of friends who had absolutely lived up to—and far exceeded—my loftiest expectations. So, if you’ve been reading along, that was why I wanted to go to this college, and this is why I’m glad I went to that college. Now why do you want to get into the college of your choice?

Maybe you don’t even really want to, and it’s your parents who do. If that’s the case, I’ll refer you to Ric Masten, the poet who spoke (wonderfully) at my brother’s high

school graduation. He elicited his first of many gasps from the audience with the admonition “If you’re just being *sent* to college...don’t go.”

Maybe you want the prestige. You wouldn’t be entirely wrong, either. I knew, cynically or not, that my creative writing degree from Stanford would pull more weight with some people than the same thing from a state school. Whether those were necessarily the folks I cared about impressing is another matter, but it would be a lie to deny that it opened many doors. And, to a certain extent, this fact is often reflected in the price tag.

Maybe you feel that the people will be better. If this is the case, let me say that the concept of some people being “better” is a hateful one, even if I once believed in it. On the other hand, there is a certain talent pool that comes with the “name schools.” If I had gone elsewhere, it’s conceivable that my friends would have included a top NFL pick whose true talent was the violin, a Marshall Scholarship-winning archaeologist, or the brilliant entrepreneur I now work with, but it’s undeniably less likely.

Maybe you think that this is the kind of place where you can truly be happy. If so, I hope that it isn’t the only one, because it is also the kind of place where you can be truly unhappy. And this goes for just about anywhere you can think of. Of course, some of the happiest times of my life were spent at Stanford—but it’s important to remember they aren’t the only years of my life.

Maybe you’re attracted by the combination of strong academics and vibrant student life, the chance to live in a unique part of the country, being far from (or close to) home, the bustling city life, the quiet seclusion, the diverse student body, the unmatched library resources, the undergraduate research opportunities, the athletics, the thriving counterculture, or just the way you felt when you set foot on the campus. Amen.

They say that “wherever you go, there you are,” and I think the key word is “you,” not “there”—in other words, the person, not the place. From the first tentative draft of your personal statement to the morning of graduation and well beyond, so much of it will depend on you—and, it must be acknowledged, so much of it will be beyond your control. I don’t know you, but as of this, the fall of your senior year of high school, chances are neither of us knows just where you’ll be next year. What I can say, with any certainty, is work hard, and good luck.

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