

Are State Schools the New Ivies?

Applicants and institutions agree that there may not be a winner and loser in this economic climate.

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Whether or not we're in for a dramatic change in the climate of college admissions this year, one thing's for sure: It's not what it used to be. Almost a decade ago, I graduated from a public high school in Newton, Mass.—a city of more than 83,000 people. Newton has a large Jewish population, and what did many of these Jewish families have in common way back in the 20th century? An expectation that their child would attend a prominent college.

Fast-forward nine years, and what are these same parents thinking? According to a Dec. 2, 2008, article in *The Boston Globe*, when asked by her daughter's college adviser where her daughter wanted to go to college, one Newton mother "caught" herself saying, "Wherever we can afford to send her."

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

There's no question that times are changing in this recession, and the dream school with the hefty price tag you always imagined attending may not be in the cards. But from what applicants and admissions counselors are saying, we may not be seeing a rush for state schools when it comes to enrollment in the coming weeks—in fact, the playing field may be leveled by other factors.

In case you were worried that good ol' Harvard and Yale are hurting for applicants, rest assured. Students of the class of 2009 don't necessarily have to worry that these and other elite institutions will be out of their price ranges. Jeffrey Brenzel, dean of admissions for Yale University, says their early admissions rate rose 14 percent over last year, and they're maintaining their financial aid program in full. What does that mean for a school like



Yale? If your parents make less than \$60,000 combined, you go for free. "Families above that level pay on a sliding scale that still includes very generous scholarship grants," says Brenzel.

Harvard even changed its financial aid policies to make tuition more affordable across the board—adding support for middle- and upper-middle-income families. Hadas Horenstein, a high school senior from Portland, Ore., says, "I'm applying to Harvard, and it would be cheaper than my in-state school if I were to get in." But others, like Isaac Gealer, a senior from Phoenix, saw a different trend last fall. "I saw a news report stating that the number of applicants applying to Ivies is dropping," he says. "I think people are applying to more expensive schools as graduate schools. In-state schools may see a steady rise, but nothing drastic."

This theory could prove true at schools like the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. Luke David Schultheis, executive director of admissions and recruitment, says he hasn't seen "significant changes in the characteristics of those entering the class" on examination of students who were already accepted in January. But he has seen a drastic change in the local population. There have been "record-high numbers of home foreclosures, and we are now seeing more residents leave than come into the area," he says.

"These activities are unprecedented." Add to that their reasonable tuition cost of \$5,547 per year for out-of-state students, and Schultheis says they "expect to have more out-of-state students this year than previously."

Whether they end up at state schools or not, many teens say their friends applied to them in droves, and while they will have to make their final decisions based on the aid they receive (in some cases, the private schools will be the cheaper option in the end), some teens predict state schools are in for a Noah's Ark-scale flood. "Almost all my friends are applying in-state and going out-of-state for graduate school," says Isaac. This also means state schools are becoming more competitive, and, "No matter which in-state school they are applying to, tuitions are rising quickly."

PAYBACK

Judy Zodda, an educational consultant, author and owner of Zodda College Services in Framingham, Mass., says that many of her clients added a few state colleges or universities to their lists last fall, but that others were wary because "the state colleges are receiving less money from the state." She says that tuitions at state colleges are on the way up, as these colleges must make up the difference somewhere. "In fact, tuition at

state colleges this year (2008-2009) has increased at a rate of 6.5 percent, compared with 5.9 percent at private colleges," she adds. This is good for private schools looking to maintain high academic standards. Ben Tepfer, a freshman at Syracuse University, says his school "has recently added a lot of funding for students who will need more financial aid."

As state schools did, in fact, get slammed with more applicants in 2008 according to the online source Inside Higher Ed, they are experiencing new challenges for the 2009-10

school year. "The class sizes at state universities may get somewhat bigger. Many, many colleges are experiencing over-enrollment as they were unable to accurately predict those who would say yes to an offer of admission," says Zodda.

Regardless of what statistics we draw from this year's applications, we won't know the whole story until we find out where these students attend in the coming weeks. As the largest graduating class yet according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, teens will ultimately make their decisions based on where they are accepted and what financial aid they are offered. "If I have a chance to get [accepted at] my original school, then I'll take it," Isaac says. When asked how his family would meet the costs, he says, "My parents and I would need to make up a plan for the next four years."

Even with more students than ever applying for financial aid, most teens I spoke with say they still applied to the same schools they would have before the economic collapse. "I will wait to see what scholarship money I receive and then decide where I will end up next year," says Ariella Faitelson, a senior from Tucson, Ariz.

Still, other teens are in the dark about our country's economic upheaval.

"Many of my friends live in a blissful world where they don't really know much about finances. They regard college as something their parents will pay for completely," says Jeffrey Rollman, a senior from Los Angeles. Some of these teens may find they are in for a rude awakening.

Just like the parents in Newton who are no longer pushing the name-brand institutions on their children, "Those



Duke University's early apps rose 23% last fall.

Williams College's endowment dropped 27% since last summer.

parents who thought they would have enough to pay full price for college are now having to sit down with their sons or daughters and discuss the realities of their current financial situations. This is even happening in our most affluent communities," Zodda says.

This could mean it's time to step up to the challenge. "I plan to work on campus at my school to help pay for college and apply for scholarships until my brain goes numb from writing essays!" says Hadas.

Your parents may be playing their financial situation cool, but some teens are taking matters into their own hands. Jeffrey, whose college savings fell about 50 percent last fall, isn't taking his future sitting down. "I have decided that I will train as an emergency medical technician (EMT) so I can get paid for doing something I love during summers and school breaks. My parents have

always told me I should ignore cost in deciding where to go to college, but as the financial markets spin back to earth, I have realized these economic decisions are mine to make, as I will soon be an adult."

Bridgewater State College's applicants DOUBLED over last year.

THE BRIGHT SIDE

Could the economic crisis have a silver lining?

Maybe. "The trend may provide students with an opportunity to enhance their overall education without the pressure to go to a brand-name school like Princeton, Yale or Harvard," says Becky Smith, a senior from Pittsburgh.

Others may feel overwhelmed by the country's vulnerability. "I think my dreams of having a job I love won't come true

and that I may have to settle for any job I can get," says Rachel Leamon, a sophomore at Boston University. But others see this as a phase, a wave we need to ride out. "I just entered college last fall, so when I graduate in about four years, the [job] market could look completely different than it does now," says Alisha Kinman from Gainesville, Fla. "The market will always be competitive, but I'm hopeful that the economy will start shaping up by the time I enter my field of interest."

So while the graduating class of 2009 may have different reasons for being anxious about its future as those acceptance letters start trickling in, the anxiety is there all the same. It may not be, "Did I get in?" but "Did I get financial aid?" This year's incoming freshmen can try focusing on making the most of where they are, rather than dwelling on whether they're at the "right" school.

While things may have changed since I applied to college (who knew things could get *more* stressful?), one thing hasn't changed—the choices you have once you step foot on campus. Ben says you need to put yourself out there for the opportunities your school offers if you want to reap the benefits. "And if you can't see those opportunities? Make them," he says. "We are in a recession—it's up to students to be innovative in how they approach their future careers." ★

LINDSEY happens to be a graduate student herself and is just as concerned as the rest of y'all about the economy.

Resources used or quoted in this article: insidehighered.com, collegebound.net, *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*.

Tuition at state colleges increased at a rate of 6.5% in 2008.

