



March 5, 2014

Should you choose a college based on happiness rankings?

A new study found that the “happiness rankings” put out by The Princeton Review make a difference on where students enroll in college.

The study, published in Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis and reported by Inside Higher Ed, found that applications rose by 2.9% when a college made the top 20 list for “happy students.” On the other end, applications dropped by 5% for colleges that made the list of “least happy students.”

These happiness rankings, put together by surveying students on how happy they are at their colleges, matter more than some thought. But should they?

Yes and no, according to writer Kevin Roose of New York Magazine and Dr. Karen L. Pennington of Montclair State University.

Happiness rankings: a good determiner for your own happiness?

Roose, who graduated from Brown University in Dec. 2009, didn’t put much weight into academic rankings that placed Brown in high regard. The first thing that stood out with Brown, for him, was what his friends told him.

“I chose Brown because I knew people who went there and loved it,” said Roose, the author of *Young Money* and *The Unlikely Disciple*.

One college ranking did stand out to Roose, though, but it wasn’t the kind of ranking that has students each year flocking to Ivy League schools. It was Princeton Review’s happiness ranking, which has for several years ranked Brown as having some of the happiest students in the country.

“I loved that,” Roose said. “I think it appealed to my sense of wanting to be somewhere where I wanted to be happy.”

Though Roose does think Brown helped him in his writing career, that’s less of the reason why he loved his experience there. His instinct, which led to him placing stock in his friends’ opinions of Brown and happiness ranking, turned out to be right: Roose was happy at Brown — academically, socially and emotionally.

Sometimes, as in Roose’s case, happy students (whether they’re your friends or strangers from happiness rankings) can be a good determiner for your own happiness at a school. But the happiness rankings themselves shouldn’t be the deciding factor, according to Pennington.

The importance of campus visits

Pennington, the vice president of student development and campus life at Montclair State University, said

that rankings (whether academic or happiness) should be a preliminary motivator to choosing schools to apply to. But what will really help you determine if you'll be happy at a college is visiting the campus when school's in session.

"Take time to explore the campus and see if you fit in," said Pennington, who recommends both an official campus tour and wandering around on your own. "We know if a student visits a campus, they're more likely to want to apply there or go there because they get a real feel of the campus."

Brennan Barnard, director of college counseling at The Derryfield School, wrote in a New York Times article that making the most of a college visit involves wandering off on your own, talking with strangers, reading the school's newspaper and spending a night on the town.

The objective facts of a school paired with your own experience lead to a more balanced, informed decision, according to Pennington.

It's more about the journey than the destination

Regardless how you view happiness rankings, Pennington wishes students wouldn't make college decision purely based on what it will get them after graduation.

"College is not only about a destination, it's also about the journey," Pennington said. "It's like taking a road trip. If you take a road trip and finally get to the destination but it was an awful experience because of traffic and a flat tire, that's what you remember about the trip, not the destination."

"I think it's the same for the college experience. If you have that good atmosphere, you feel happy, you feel comfortable; then getting the degree is a much more meaningful experience because you're able to see that all those experiences supplement and round out what you're learning in the classroom."

The consensus seems to be this: happiness in college matters. You're there for four or five years (sometimes longer), and who wants to be miserable that long?

And while happiness rankings, as the study above pointed out, do seem to make an impact on some student's college choice, maybe it should only be a nudge to visit the campus and get a feel for if you'll personally be happy there.

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