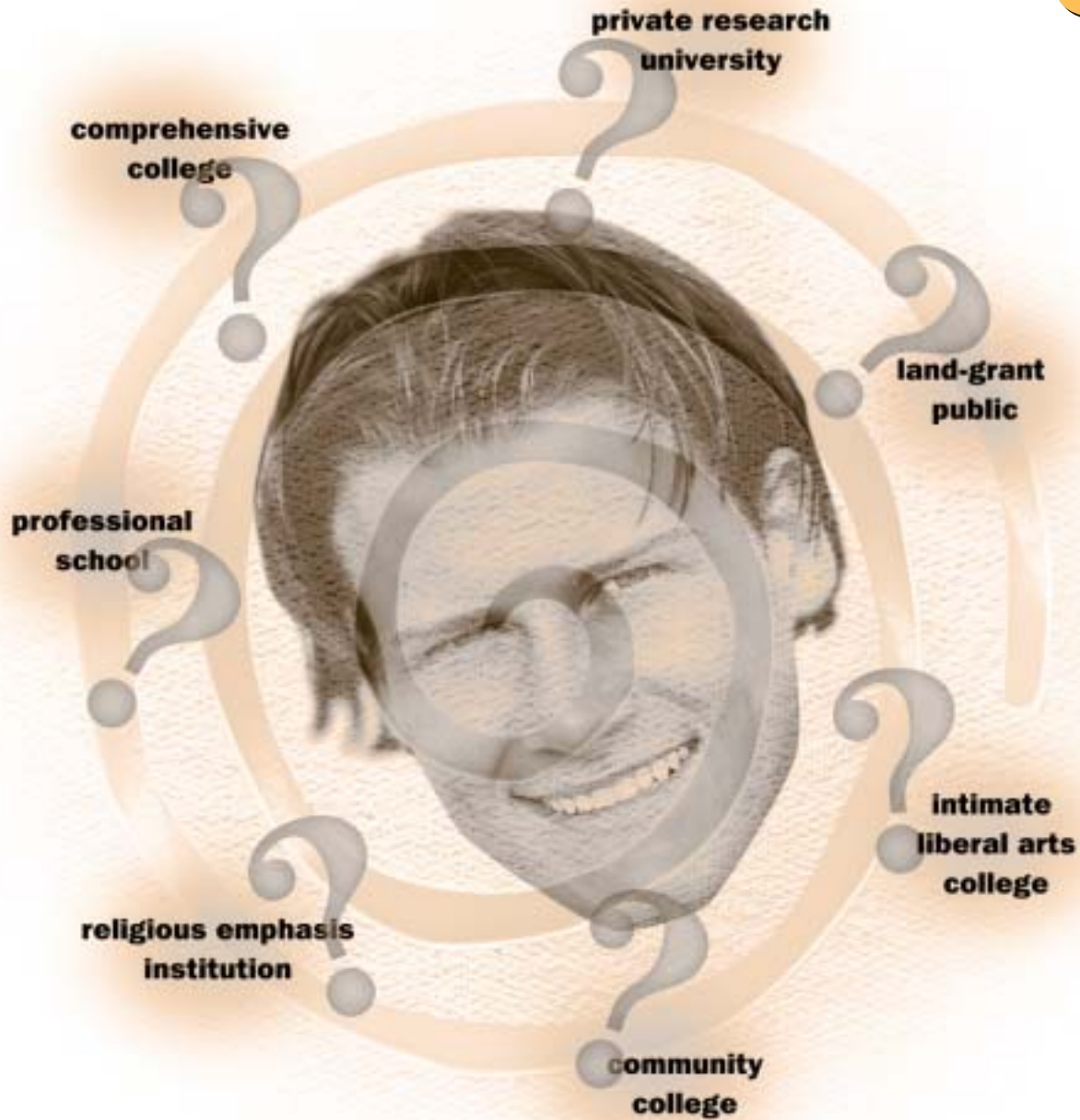


The Best College




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quantitative analysis, strategic positioning, and branding. CRANE creates research-driven, values-based transformative branding and communications programs for a diverse group of clients. Ginger Pyron and Jennifer Joseph, CRANE's senior editor and senior consultant, respectively, also contributed to this article.



or the Best Fit?

by Patti Crane



Every year the college rankings in *U.S. News & World Report* raise voices disparaging the rankings' methods, validity and contribution to status-driven consumerism. Now, voices are rising against a September 2002 *Worth* magazine article, which ranks preparatory schools not according to the quality of education, but merely on which schools appear to be the major feeders for Harvard, Princeton and Yale. All of this fuss over rankings—whether flawed, limited or simply fallacious as in the *Worth* article—loses sight of the fact that our national tendency to over-rely on college rankings jeopardizes one of the finest features of the American republic—our country's amazingly varied higher education system. Rather than supporting this system, the rankings threaten to undermine it. They condition us to think in terms of hierarchy rather than suitability.

In our work with institutions in Europe, Africa, Canada, and Mexico, we see how most nations tend to measure students' academic achievement largely on the basis of their scores on a single comprehensive exam. Neither students nor their parents have much say about the next educational step. In some cases, the system even chooses for them.



The American system of education, in contrast, is rich with choice. Think of its sheer range: private research universities, land-grant publics, intimate liberal arts colleges, comprehensive colleges, professional schools, religious-emphasis institutions, and community colleges. Our students are free to consider all these kinds of institutions, free to apply to any school simply because they believe it *fits*.

Higher education is America's number one export. The world still lines up at our door or online to buy a college education. The variety of choice, combined with the high quality of instruction and resources, is the envy of the world. Even people who disagree with our foreign policy or question our values willingly send their children to the United States for an American academic degree.

The rankings, focusing only on factual attributes, miss the power of the match between student and institution. Worse, they limit our collective imagination, our ability to see the opportunities that speak instantly to a best-fit student.

A small college in rural New Hampshire, for example, has recognized its genius is educating “experiencers,” people eager to *do* things rather than only think about them. Franklin Pierce College (NH) offers such students unexpected options—a semester-long group Walk Across Europe; coaching in how to facilitate community dialogue about local issues; and a chance to conduct opinion research, such as the polling resulting in the only accurate prediction of the 2000 New Hampshire presidential primary. Could any rankings system convey the effect of such experiences?

What about the intensely academic Catholic student, who could head for the Ivies, but would miss the nightly Mass celebrated in every dorm, a tradition that distinguishes the similarly rigorous University of Notre Dame (IN). Can rankings capture such a culture?

comprehensive college

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professional school





Imagine the satisfaction of a high-achieving young engineer who finds at Calvin College (MI) not just exemplary academics, but a pervasive commitment to world renewal that gives even a senior engineering project—the building of a low-cost, battery-powered air conditioner for a missionary in Nigeria—immediate, meaningful utility. Where in the published lists of comparisons can he or she learn about that sense of purpose?

In our work as communications counsel to colleges and schools worldwide, we see it every day. When a student enrolls at a college for the right reasons, life-changing experiences happen.

Let's not forget how we as Americans ideally do things. "The pursuit of happiness" isn't just about gathering enough money to buy what you want. The pursuit also gives you the freedom to be who you are, to create the person you want to be and to select a college or university that helps you to do both.

Families looking at colleges should exercise this freedom of choice. Look closely at college materials and Web sites. Browse the shelves of guidance counselors' offices, with an eye to fit rather than status. Ask not just for an official recital of a school's "core values," but for stories that illustrate them. In the stories, rather than in the assertions, are the deepest truths.

Perhaps a student's best-fit college, the one with values and attributes matching his or hers, is on the other coast, is in a state he or she has never visited or is only a short drive from home. Once the match is certain, so is the student's motivation and likelihood of success and happiness.

Someday we would like to see *U.S. News & World Report* request nationwide nominations for a new category: the top 10 best-fit stories. We will be ready with our submissions.

