



“Private and Prestigious” Do Not Necessarily Equal “Perfect Fit”

Jaimie Hoffman

*Associate Lecturer, University of Wisconsin La Crosse
Student Experience Specialist, Noodle Partners*

Julissa Garcia

*Graduate Admission Coordinator
University of Southern California*

Selecting the right university can be a very nerve-wracking experience for students, parents, and families. Let’s face it - without even adding in any other variables, this is a significant financial and time commitment, and for us, as first-generation college students, the confusion and weight are compounded because no one paved the way for us. On top of this, society infiltrates us with the message that the absolute best universities are the “private, elite.” We attempt to demystify the difference between public and private universities, share the general characteristics of each, and then discuss the most important factor in selecting the right university: fit. While we will reference some research, we also share this information from our own experiences attending and working at both public and private universities.

Defining public and private

The main difference between private and public universities is how they are funded; public universities are created and funded by state governments whereas private universities are established and funded by people not in government. An example of a public university is CSU Channel Islands, and University of Southern California (USC) is an example of a private university. Some private universities are non-profit and some are for-profit; non-profit universities answer to a board of trustees who are not financially vested in the university and are focused on the goal of educating students and helping them earn a degree. For-profit universities have the primary goal of making profit and they answer to owners and shareholders. While high quality, for-profit universities might exist, there are many for-profit universities that have poor reputations for supporting student success and graduation. Therefore, we highly recommend that prospective students and their parents carefully review for-profit universities before applying; and feel free to reach out to a trusted higher education leader to get help guiding you in this

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Jaimie Hoffman and Julissa Garcia

process. For the rest of this article when we discuss private universities, we are referring to non-profit only because we believe for-profit institutions should be considered separately.

Differences between public and private universities

Public and private universities not only differ based on the source of funding, there are other general differences that are worth considering. Know, however, that these are generalizations. The differences do not apply to all universities. In fact, later, we will talk about some of our own experiences at these universities and how the generalizations may or may not fit.

Funding

Tuition at public universities is usually lower (if students attend college in the state they reside) because the government covers part of the cost to educate students. Since the cost of attendance is increasing overall in higher education, funding and available financial aid are an important consideration for individuals entering college.

Research suggests that with increased cost of attendance, students and their families are becoming savvy in making their decisions. They are not just selecting the “elite, private” university. A 2013 survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA found that students often choose to enroll in their second or third choice because they received more substantial financial aid awards at these universities.

Our experience.

When we were students ourselves, we experienced the high cost associated with attending private universities and the vast differences between the financial aid offered at both types of institutions. Julissa attended a public university with lower tuition for her undergraduate studies; her financial aid award covered most of her costs and allowed her to focus on her education instead of working endless hours to pay tuition. She attended a private university for her graduate degree and, even with a substantial scholarship, she had to take out large student loans and work a considerable number of hours to cover the cost of tuition.

Class Size and Demographics

Many public colleges have larger class sizes than private colleges. On the one hand, the larger class sizes can make it difficult to connect with peers and faculty. On the other, there is often more diversity at public universities so students may have more chances to connect with peers who can ease their transition and support their success. Checking out the general class size and student to teacher ratio is fairly easy to do.

The number of non-traditional students entering universities is higher than ever before; more students who identify as first generation, low income, transfers, part time, veterans, or other minoritized identities are attending college. This is crucial not only to the diversity of the campus, but also an indicator of how welcome a student will feel as they enter and navigate the university. Students tend to enroll on campuses where they are more likely to see others like themselves. The amount of support from trusted others that students receive during these years leads to increased personal development and allows students to thrive and persist to graduation.

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Jaimie Hoffman and Julissa Garcia

Our experience.

Various aspects of class size and demographics impacted our experiences. For instance, Jaimie is a first-generation college student, attended a private undergraduate university, and was not surrounded by many others with a similar background. This made it difficult for her to navigate the university environment because there were many things she did not know and was afraid to ask in fear she would be viewed as an outsider.

Options for Degrees & Involvement

Since public universities are usually bigger, they often have many more majors for students to choose from which means students are likely able to pursue the major they want. Also, public universities, due to their larger size, often provide a larger quantity and greater variety of involvement opportunities in campus life. Through engaging in campus life, students often join sub-communities within the university where they feel like they belong which helps them complete their degree. Private colleges have fewer majors and often have strong communities and campus activities; they are just not as significant.

Our experience.

One of us attended a small, private university to study music as an undergraduate student to be a middle school music teacher. Julissa selected this institution because it was close to home and relocating further away from her family was not an option. Unfortunately, since the university did not offer a degree specifically in music education, she did not end up feeling adequately prepared for a career in teaching. When she attended graduate school to gain additional preparation, she chose a very large public institution that had a robust education program for music teachers.

About The “P” Word

Many of the universities that are considered “prestigious” are private universities but there are state universities known as leaders in various disciplines, or as “flagship” universities in the state. Having said that, it is important to consider what prestige really means. The US News and World Report puts together rankings of the “best” universities but the process they use to calculate the rankings does not consider elements of institutional fit that we feel (and research shows us) are very important, especially for people from marginalized backgrounds. For instance, the rankings do not include consideration of things like the feeling of community and inclusiveness on the campus, how many programs are offered, tuition costs and financial aid availability, location (or distance from home), and involvement opportunities. Both of us have attended or worked at what some would call “prestigious” institutions and struggled to feel like we belong. So, take it from us, prestige does not necessarily equate to a good fit in university choice.

Our Recommendation: Focus on Institutional Fit - Not “Public or Private”

As we attempted to point out above, public and private universities have different characteristics and some of those may be more important depending on the student's priorities, values, goals, and personality. The key in selecting the right university is selecting the right fit. Research around college choice shows that students whose values and beliefs fit with that of a university were satisfied with their choice of college and ultimately succeeded. Consider using the following strategies to find the right institutional fit:

Allies for Education 2017, 1, 1

<https://journals.library.csuci.edu/ojs/index.php/afe>

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Jaimie Hoffman and Julissa Garcia

1. Reflect on and Prioritize Educational Goals

Take some time to sit down, talk about, and list the student’s values, goals, and priorities. Think about such things as major choice, cost, campus culture, diversity, co-curricular activities, intercollegiate athletics, location, campus size, distance from home. Students should try to envision themselves on the college campus and consider what would make them happy, feel included, and successful.

2. Research and Collect Facts

Utilize the Internet to collect important information about potential university choices, particularly pertaining to the student’s values, goals, and priorities. The National Center for Education Statistics offers a search engine called the College Navigator that allows individuals to search a variety of variables to find and compare universities to find the right fit. Once top university choices have been identified, it is also useful to consider reaching out to alumni and/or current students to ask about their experiences. Sometimes looking through university-related social media pages or groups can also paint a clearer picture about the experience.

3. Visit the Campus

If resources allow, we highly recommend visiting the campus -- if not before applying, then at least before making a final decision. Much like dating, there is a synergy or connection that individuals should feel when they visit a campus that is a right fit for them. This campus is somewhere they will devote a significant amount of time, and a place many will call home. Seeing it in person is optimal.

In conclusion, make an educated decision, don’t just follow the allure of “prestige.”

About the Authors

Julissa Garcia has served as a student affairs professional for the last six years. She is committed to serving the local community and empowering students to achieve their educational goals. Her expertise is in early academic outreach, program development, financial aid, and the college application process. Julissa’s career interest is in providing resources and educational opportunities to non-traditional student including first-generation, transfer student, and student veterans. She is excited to spend her career effecting change in education after graduating from the Educational Counseling program at the University of Southern California (USC).

Dr. Jaimie Hoffman has worked across the higher education landscape for over twenty years. Her expertise includes assessment in higher education, student affairs administration, development of college student leaders, inclusion and equity, and use of technology inside and outside of the classroom for advancing student learning and engagement. Dr. Hoffman’s research interests engage a lens toward inclusive excellence and international perspectives. Her research interests include equity and inclusion in higher education, assessment in higher education, and leveraging technology to advance student learning and meet student needs.

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Jaimie Hoffman and Julissa Garcia

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