Ivy League or Also-Ran? Does It Matter?

By TOM REDBURN

The long march is almost over. This week, my daughter, like countless other high school seniors, will choose which college she will attend in the fall. Does it make a difference where she goes?

It does to us, of course. But within the economics profession, there is a vigorous debate over whether highly selective and highly expensive colleges — like most of those to which our daughter, Emily, applied — confer any real benefit in later life.

Recent research by Alan B. Krueger, an economics professor at Princeton University (can't get much more selective than that) and Stacey B. Dale, a senior researcher at Mathematica Policy Research, a consulting firm, suggests that it does not. They found that students who chose a school with lower admissions standards over a more competitive school earned incomes just as high as those who attended the elite college.

A fat paycheck isn't everything — far from it. But what that means, Mr. Krueger explained, is that a student accepted at the University of Pennsylvania, a prestigious member of the Ivy League, would be just as well off going to Penn State, which some people know more for its football team than its academics. Most intriguing, the research found that even students rejected by a highly selective college did as well as those who attended it.

"The best school that turned you down," Mr. Krueger said, "is a better predictor of your future income than the school you actually attended." It's the person, not the place, that matters: students who apply to schools for the ambitious are ambitious enough to do well just about anywhere.

So what does this mean for parents? First, it's supposed to be comforting; you can console your child that the rejection letter from Brown doesn't really hurt.

And it suggests a cunning strategy: Apply to Harvard or Yale but then go to the college that offers the best deal. That's partly a joke, but I wouldn't be surprised to see a lot of second-tier colleges — the kind that offer generous merit aid to talented students — using Mr. Krueger's theory to persuade high-school graduates to choose, say, Denison or Lewis & Clark, over Williams or Stanford. No doubt there's some truth to that argument for some students.
Now, like most fathers, I think I know what's best for my daughter. Funny how she has her own ideas, though.

As she culled through the acceptance letters, I thought Wellesley, the most prestigious name on the list, would push her the hardest to succeed.

"All girls," she replied. Exactly. No boys to distract her.

What about Pomona College in Southern California, where my wife and I met?

"It never snows," I told her.

"Too far away," she said. "I'd never see you."

What parent can argue with that?

For her, the choice has come down to two colleges. The well-known and nearby Wesleyan University, in Middletown, Conn., is a classic New England liberal arts college that prides itself on its diversity. It usually attracts several students every year from her high school; one of her best friends already goes there. Carleton College, a hidden jewel in the Midwest, is more obscure, but it has a better program in math, which she loves, and is close to Minneapolis, where her favorite aunt lives with her family.

WE'RE fortunate that she has such good colleges to choose from and that we can afford to send her anywhere she wants to go. But this also makes clear that the choice of a college is about a lot more than how much money our children will earn in their future careers.

For one thing, what about those who choose a lower-paying but socially valuable career like teaching over something like public relations or investment banking? Are they to be treated as less successful than the class goof-off who mostly drinks and parties but ends up making a lot of money after taking over a car dealership?

Beyond that, many parents care a lot about the academic atmosphere fostered at the colleges their children attend. We want bright faculty members who will challenge them to think harder, and we hope that they will meet interesting people and develop richly satisfying lifelong friendships.

And other academic research, somewhat counter to Mr. Krueger's, still suggests that having lots of smart, motivated fellow students in a concentrated place provides something immensely valuable.

"We're coming up with hard evidence," said Gordon Winston, an economist at Williams College, "that being surrounded by other bright, demanding students has a real effect on academic performance."

In the end, both sides of this economic debate point to one common conclusion:
find a challenging college that's a good fit. As a parent, I want what's best for my children. But the decision should be up to them.