

# *College Selectivity and Good Practices in Undergraduate Education*

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The academic selectivity of an institution's undergraduate student body has been the most common single criterion by which the public, as well as many scholars, make inferences about the "quality" of the undergraduate education one receives. The logic underlying this inference is not unreasonable. Students are more than the passive recipients of undergraduate education. Rather, interactions with other students constitute a major part of the educational impact of an institution on any one student. Thus, the more academically prepared and sophisticated one's peers, the greater the likelihood of students being intellectually challenged in classroom and nonclassroom interactions—or so the argument goes. Selectivity, typically in the form of average institutional SAT/ACT scores, plays a dominant, if unintended, role in elaborate public attempts to identify the nation's "best" colleges and universities. For example, the correlation between average SAT score and the ranking of the top 50 national universities by *U.S. News and World Report* is very high (nearly -.90, with 1 = highest ranking and 50 = lowest ranking). For all practical purposes, the *USNWR* ranking of "best" undergraduate colleges can be reproduced simply by knowing the average SAT/ACT scores of the enrolled students.

## **The Evidence**

A team of researchers from The University of Iowa and Indiana University analyzed data from two major studies of postsecondary students to estimate the strength of the actual relationships between the academic selectivity of a college and a range of empirically validated good practices in undergraduate education. The combined sample was over 75,000 first-year and senior students attending a diverse range of 289 four-year colleges and universities from all sections of the country. Selectivity was based on institution's average undergraduate test scores (such as the SAT/ACT) or the Barron's Selectivity Score, which combines a college's average SAT/ACT score with other indicators of the rigor of its admission requirements (e.g., percent of applicants accepted, and the like). Good practices in undergraduate education were based on student reports and included measures of: student-faculty contact, high academic expectations, active learning/time on task, cooperation among students, quality of teaching received, impact of interactions with peers, prompt feedback on academic progress, and involvement in diversity experiences. Each measure of good practices employed in the analyses has been positively linked with student intellectual and personal development during college, even when student precollege and other confounding influences are taken into account.

The results of our analyses suggested only the most minimal, and perhaps trivial, net relationships between college selectivity and good practices. With statistical controls in place for student precollege characteristics and other potential confounding influences, institutional selectivity accounted for between 0.1% to 2.8% of the variance or differences in the good practices variables. Put another way, more than 97% of the differences in demonstrated good practices in undergraduate education are attributable to factors other than the selectivity of the college one attends.

## **Implications**

Our findings suggest that, even though college selectivity is the major way in which college quality has been identified, the selectivity of an institution tells us very little about those good practices that lead to an influential and high quality undergraduate experience. This does not mean that there are no differences among colleges and universities. Some institutions may be particularly effective in fostering good practices in undergraduate education. However, it is likely a "fool's errand" to think one can identify those distinctive institutions simply by finding out how selective they are in their undergraduate admissions policies. Similarly, the results raise serious questions about the validity of national magazine rankings of undergraduate college quality that are essentially proxies for institution selectivity.

The complete paper on which this research policy brief is based can be obtained from [ernest-pascarella@uiowa.edu](mailto:ernest-pascarella@uiowa.edu).