



The Six Factors Research Shows Make for the Best College Choice

The College Research Council, which calls itself “the voice” of the students, has been researching higher education and campus culture for the past four years in an attempt to devise a better method of measuring the quality of student experience than can be ascertained from the various magazine ratings.

Over the past two years, CRC has collected data from 9,700 undergraduates at both liberal arts colleges and large universities across the country. Students were asked to say on a scale of 1 to 10 how likely they would be to recommend their school to a friend, and they were also asked to evaluate a wide array of specific features of their school. The questions they were asked included what they liked best, what they would change, how competitive versus collaborative they found the atmosphere, what their experiences were like with career counseling, course registration, and the social climate with respect to alcohol, drugs and sex.

David Kochanek, who published the findings, explains that he used the same methodology that corporations use to determine a “Net Promoter Score” or NPS. Categorizing an answer of 9 or 10 as positive and 7 or 8 as neutral, he took the percentage of 9’s and 10’s and subtracted the percentage of 0 through 6’s. As in the corporate world, he deemed an NPS of 30 to be a benchmark indicator that the institution is doing a good job. He then examined the correlation between the NPS and a multitude of other factors.

Kochanek’s findings were surprising in that he identified some schools with quite disparate NPS scores despite similar reputations and rankings by the magazines. He has not yet released information about specific schools although CRC plans to do so in the future. At present he has published only the factors found to be most highly correlated with an overall high NPS.

1. The factor correlated with a high NPS more than any other single factor turned out to be the school’s sense of community. Students who ranked their sense of community and belonging to a group as “very strong” were twice as likely to recommend their school to a friend as those who ranked its sense of community as “average.”

2. The second most significant factor was “not experiencing discrimination based on gender or race.” Students who felt discriminated against gave their schools an average NPS rating of minus 4.
3. Third most important turned out to be safety. In fact, students who said they felt “very safe” on campus even at night were twice as likely to be net promoters of their schools than those who described feeling “somewhat safe.”
4. A collaborative rather than competitive atmosphere came in fourth. Schools described as “highly collaborative” or “collaborative” averaged NPS scores in the 50’s, while those rated “competitive” or “highly competitive” averaged NPS scores in the mid 20’s. Many schools now claim to promote collaboration above competition, but some are succeeding better than others, so prospective students might be wise to investigate this beyond the promotional materials.
5. Close relationships with professors came in 5th although the researchers note that a student’s expectations affect this correlation. That, they explain, is probably why the correlation was significantly lower for students at Big Ten schools than for those at liberal arts colleges.
6. Having “at least one professor who makes me excited about learning” emerged as the sixth best predictor of a high NPS score.

Knowing how important the above factors are to ultimate satisfaction with one’s college experience, prospective students can ask smarter questions about the schools they are considering.