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A Mile In My Shoes: A Website for First- Generation Immigrants

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Abstract:

As globalization and immigration increases year by year, the question of what makes a good education and opportunity becomes more and more prevalent in the immigrant community. This project examines Pell grant rates, graduation and admission rates, and default rates among colleges as well as their social and cultural pros and cons. The final product of this research became the beginnings of a website that compiles this information together in an attempt to create better transparency and accessibility in the higher education process.

Keywords: Common data set, default rate, Common App

Introduction:

After 6 hours of scrolling through an endless succession of Forbes' lists, the blue light emitting from the computer finally made my eyes go numb. Lists of most beautiful campuses, best libraries, top in the nation all flashed before my eyes, producing no one final answer of the perfect school for me. I logged back into Common App, a website dedicated to being a one stop shop for storing all of your high school information so that you focus on the writing sample portion of applications while it sent your grades to the school of your choice. I turned to my mother, surrounded by crumpled legal pad sheets covered with numbers that held my academic career in their hands. Loren Pope's *Colleges that Change Lives* laid face down on the dinner table, defaced in highlights and post-it notes. "So what now?" my mother asked me, desperate. I did not have answers for her. I had no answers about anything but I did have many questions. How do I know what really factors into my education? Does it really matter if my school is pretty or not? Am I going to be the only person like me around? It's been 4 years since that night. In that time, I found a school I liked, got in, and got a job in the Admissions office as a tour guide. I met several families with similar stories to mine and some living on the complete opposite end of the spectrum. While I had answered questions for myself, it seemed that nothing had changed in my time at school. It was still hard to figure things out without any help. My junior year, I came across the Common App page once again. It laid out several schools within a specific distance and GPA ranges but really focused on the numbers. That got me thinking, why don't they provide more? Are there websites that provide more? After several pages of Google, the short answer was no. As my dad always taught me, if it doesn't exist then create it yourself.

Building a Website:

So, now here I am, knees deep in college application rules and admission numbers trying to answer questions such as: How do we ease the college application process? How do we make college accessible for others? Simple. We give people the tools they need to make their own decisions, but more educated. The application of this however, is not as easy. Higher education was created with one population in mind, white upper to middle class men. While the times have changed, the system has not changed with it. While schools nowadays are no longer single-gendered, LGBT+ inclusive, and racially inclusive, the new biggest population to consider is international and immigrant students. Within the college application process, there are a million and one things to consider. For someone like me, who had never been through the process and did not have connections that had been through the process, I was lost in sea of application fees, GPA ranges, standardized test scores, interviews, even weather patterns. Overall, there was so many components to consider but no clear path in which to start, no lexicon or explanations available, no roadmap to lay the most important parts out. Every student is different, with different wants and needs. Colleges promote this all the time. However, the influx of immigrants in America pursuing higher education is increasing faster than most schools can handle.

In fact, in a survey done by U.S. News, 43% of Soka University of America's student population identified themselves as an international student, under the official federal definition, the highest out of all Liberal Arts Colleges. When it comes to federal documentation, "international students" and "non-residential alien" hold the same definition which is "a person who is not a citizen or national of the United States and who is in this country on a visa or temporary basis and does not have the right to remain indefinitely." While there are still similar struggles that both of these populations face such as the inability to get an off-campus job and lack of access to benefits such as healthcare and social security. However, an international student that is here on a student visa can receive financial aid while an undocumented student cannot. This combined definition of two culturally different populations creates the idea that all those that attend college have similar, if not identical, needs. An idea rooted in the higher education system's refusal to acknowledge the new generation of higher education seekers. This concept of grouping populations together leaves undocumented students in difficult positions since they're sold a dream that doesn't exist for them. A "non-residential" could receive aid from their school but that only truly includes international students, yet schools still accept undocumented students and allow them to enroll. The best thing that schools can do, in order to create a safety net for their

students, is having more on campus job options with decent pay. Throughout my time at college, I've met and bonded with several other first generation immigrants who live off of on-campus jobs and play a big role in helping keep their schools running.

Since this website is created to be a cumulative representation of not only individual stories I've heard before but also the families I have come across in my time during college, there are several different variables at play when it comes to determining what makes "a good college good." Arguably, the most important would be the default rate, something that is not always available on schools' websites. The default rate is the percentage of students that were written off missing several payments. "Default rate" is a phrase that I did not stumble across until my junior year, at the start of this website's creation. It seems weird that someone would have spent almost four years in college just to not understand such a big part of the commitment that is higher education. The federal default rate is 11.5%, if a school is higher than that, it means that too many of their students are struggling to pay off their students loans. For those that fall under the non-residential alien category, this is crucial since schools are not federally required to provide financial aid for them, a living landmark of higher education's tendency to lump student populations together. This is not to say that all blame lies in hands of higher education, there is blame to be held on the federal level as well. Protections for these immigrant populations don't exist because higher education was never intended for them. In order for colleges to melt years of oppressive barriers, there must be more transparency as well as more consideration for all student populations and their challenges coming into college.

Higher education's lack of transparency exists in all spaces of the application process. In an attempt to create more transparency, the Common Data Set Initiative was launched. The Common Data Set Initiative is an effort by higher education data providers and representatives for the College Board, Peterson's, and U.S. News & World Report to compile data on two and four year institutions. While this is definitely a step in the right direction, it has no federal backing, which means no accountability. Several schools participate in this initiative but do not post the compiled data on their sites or do not update the compiled versions when needed. Common Data Sets hold very important information including breakdowns of student and faculty populations by race and ethnicity, which can be very desirable for students that prioritize representation when looking at colleges. Most, if not all, colleges post their net tuition price, alongside their average student tuition. Seems as transparent as it comes, right? Well what colleges fail to acknowledge is the "average tuition price" number does not include all students. In fact, a closer look at the common data set for any college shows that there is an entirely separate section and final number for "Average tuition for 'non-residential aliens'" altogether, meaning that non-residentials

are actually paying, usually more, than an average student, something that is not presented directly on a school's website. These are factors that often end up getting missed by students even though they are very important. For many students, these factors are the deciding factor between going to school and not, some students are fortunate enough that these factors don't matter as much and they can choose a school based on the name.

Conclusion:

One of the most unique things about living in society like the United States is that names get you everywhere and anywhere, we can see it when applying for jobs, meeting others for the first time, and especially choosing a college. During interviews, questions are answered with more questions or vaguely on purpose as an attempt to lessen or eliminate anything that can be seen as a con. Numbers are what keep colleges running and in order for people to keep their jobs, they need to recruit as many students as possible. Big 5 schools and Ivy Leagues don't need to worry about numbers because their names will always save them and attract students that prioritize post-graduation opportunity. The best things for students to do before committing to a school for four years is to do extra research. While school websites are a good start, typing in "[school's name] common data set" is the best way to get the extra needed answers. Lucky for me, I already found my home away from home. 4 years is a long time, finding out if a school supports you in the right ways is always more important than GPAs.

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