College: Commodity or Community?

October 6, 2006

When it was time for me to pick colleges, our family flew to Cambridge, Mass. and went on the tour of Harvard University. It's a grand, elegant campus, the school has a singular reputation, the neighborhood is one of the most interesting in the world. And yet, on the college tour, this isn't what they told us. They mentioned a bit about John Harvard and the 1700s but spent most of their time telling us how great it was they had "shopping week", where you could try out different courses for a couple classes.

The other month, I visited the University of Chicago. Chicago has a worldwide reputation as a tough-minded school. It seems like every field has a "Chicago School" of thought and the University's former presidents are responsible for things like the Great Books. But you wouldn't know that from the tour — the only time actually studying was mentioned was when one kid said he'd heard the University had a nose-to-the-grindstone reputation. "Well," the tour guide said, "you can work hard if you want," and then went back to talking about the sports program. ("Whenever I feel like exercise," the University's president once said, "I lie down until the feeling passes.")

It was as if the entire admissions program had been through a focus group, every bit of individuality shorn off. They put their self-description through a series of tests and only the generic things that every student finds themselves agreeing with survived the ordeal. "Oh no," they now insist, "we're just like every university. We want to let you be you." But why go to a University for that? I can be me at home just fine.

No, the real reason I want to go to a University — and the reason, when you get right down to it, everybody else seems to be interested in as well — is the people. I want to go to a place filled with people like me, but smarter; a place where you can't help but learn.

The key phrase there is "people like me". What I want to know is what the culture is like. To unfairly overgeneralize, people at Harvard are snobbish, people at Stanford are lazy, and people at MIT are nerds. But (with the possible exception of MIT which actually sells "nerd pride" clothing) none of these places advertise this fact. After all, advertising your individuality alienates some of the focus group. In fact, that's exactly the point!

And yet, somehow, the cultures remain. It's not clear to me whether the university itself has a culture (perhaps passed down by the older students and professors) and whoever attends simply learns to conform or whether there's a secret bulletin I'm not getting about which university each kind of person should

go to. I suspect the former, since I've heard that even houses at Harvard, to which students are assigned randomly when they arrive, manage to develop a culture of their own.

So how to decide where to go?

There are some people who say that if you go to a large enough university, you'll be able to find a subculture of people you can get along with. At MIT, for example, a complicated "rush" system at the beginning of the school year allows incoming freshman to sample a variety of dorms and then floors within that dorm to find the place they belong. The dorms apparently put on lavish shows to communicate their culture to the incoming students and people seem fairly happy with where they end up.

MIT is a bit of a special case, of course, but some insists that similar subcultures exist at every college, you just have to seek them out. Perhaps that's true, but even so, what's the point of the university then? There's a subculture of people I can get along with right here; I want to go to school for something a little more concentrated.

Colleges need to drop the focus-group-enforced blandness. As Malcolm Gladwell would put it, people don't want ten varieties of bland tomato sauce to choose from. Some people love mild and some love extra-chunky. Trying to appeal to both only makes the experience worse for everyone. It doesn't seem like you should have to go to college to realize that.