


# Higher idols

*Crazy U shows how we value college far too much and far too little* by Les Sillars



 NO ONE WHO “WORSHIPS EDUCATION has got the best out of education; no man who sacrifices everything to education is even educated.”

That’s from G.K. Chesterton’s 1923 essay “The Superstition of School.” Chesterton would have appreciated Andrew Ferguson’s *Crazy U: One Dad’s Crash Course in Getting His Kid into College* (Simon & Schuster), which describes the idol to which many high-school students and their parents offer sacrifices of time and money. Our choice of college, Ferguson writes, involves “our deepest yearnings, our vanities, our social ambitions and class insecurities, and most profoundly our love and hopes for our children.” His book shows how our culture values higher education far too much in one sense and far too little in another.

Journalist Ferguson dissects the world of college admissions with wit and common sense. He explains how the famous *U.S. News* college rankings measure facilities, cost, selectivity based on percentage of applicants rejected, reputation, and so on, but not whether students actually learn anything. Administrators treat the *U.S. News* college rankings as a misleading blight on the educational landscape but they “read it, feed it, and fidget all summer until the new edition arrives, and then wave it around like a bride’s garter belt if their school gets a favorable review.”

At its most intense the process has become, in Ferguson’s telling, astonishingly cynical and manipulative. Some schools, for example, send out tantalizing non-acceptance acceptance letters intended to keep mid-level prospects on the hook while waiting for the top students to decide. On the other side, the self-congratulatory application essays, the coaching sessions designed to inflate SAT scores, the community service that advertises a big heart—it all teaches teenagers that to get into the right college you have to create

the right persona. “It coated their every undertaking in a thin lacquer of insincerity,” he observes.

The process occasionally coated Ferguson in a thin lacquer of rage,

especially regarding financial aid. Colleges require parents to fill out a government form called FAFSA, an examination of household finances so detailed as to be “proctological,” to determine how much need-based assistance to offer. Ferguson likens this to letting a used car salesman snoop through your checkbook before sitting down to negotiate (although, in fairness, colleges have an obligation not to shower donated money on people who don’t need it).

Why does college cost so much anyway? When Ferguson researched the book last year, 224 colleges charged more than \$40,000 per year, up from a handful only a decade ago. He covers a variety of factors but the short answer is that colleges raise prices because they can. Fees go up because third-party payers (that is, taxpayers) flood the market with cash via government-subsidized grants and student loans (\$80 billion per year).

This is all driven by prospective students and parents ready to sacrifice too much for the prestige that goes with a degree from an elite college. They do all this with only vague notions of what an education should be and no idea if the institution they chose provides it. That’s crazy.

Even crazier are Christian parents and students who buy into this modern version of the superstition of school.

Regardless of whether a Christian or secular college best fits their needs, they should know what they’re getting into and take steps to support students’ faith. An excellent resource is J. Budziszewski’s *How to Stay Christian in College*, but the real solution is a Christian understanding of the purpose of education. “Education ought to be a searchlight given to a man to explore everything,” proposed Chesterton, “but very specially the things most distant from himself. Education tends to be a spotlight; which is centered entirely on himself. . . . But the only final cure is to turn off the limelight and let him realize the stars.” ☉

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