

BEST FOR WHOM?

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"Why Not The Best?" is the title of a book by former President Jimmy Carter; it is also the rallying cry for an increasing number of students who inquire about 'best' lists when seeking employment or applying to graduate schools. And "Why Not The Best?" is certainly the operative phrase on the lips of hundreds of parents- college-bound sons, daughters, and *U.S. News and World Reports* in tow- who visit the Hanover Plain each spring.

Don't get me wrong. I have no problem with the pursuit of excellence that 'best' lists help facilitate. What I do find disconcerting, however, is the substitution of these lists for reflective thinking. In today's competitive marketplace, name-brand recognition has become synonymous with excellence and excellence has grown indistinguishable from 'best'. Best for whom, I say, and for what purpose.

The facile answer seems to be: best for popular consumption. All too often, the thinking seems to be: if the object of my employment or graduate school desire is readily identifiable, then it has to be good. If it is very recognizable, then it must be very, very good. Investigations of colleges or careers start (and end) at the newsstands where 'best lists' proliferate, rather than at the point where skills, interests, and values converge.

Forty years ago, one of my favorite thinkers and writers, John W. Gardner, issued a treatise for the Carnegie Corporation on "How To Think About College". Among other things, Gardner wrote: "The so-called 'prestige' institutions present a special problem to many parents and young people.... They are great institutions, and the young man or woman who attends them is fortunate. But their very eminence can create a problem. Too often both parents and youngsters make the unfortunate assumption that acceptance at a prestige school would constitute success, and that the necessity of attending any other would constitute failure.... Even if the young person has the ability to get into the prestige institution, it may not be the best place for him."

What Gardner detected as a trickle to be carefully monitored in 1957 has turned, in 1998, into a flood. 'Best lists' proliferate and the search for excellence follows. More and more students ask first what are the best high tech or public relations firms or law schools; the congruency of these career choices with their personalities is given short shrift. Best for whom, I ask, and for what purpose.

As director of the office which annually hosts visits from marquee-name employers and professional schools, it might strike some as disingenuous for me to propose a selection standard other than name-brand recognition. Instead of encouraging students to start their information quests with lists that hawk best firms or best graduate schools, my best lists would feature fields that utilize the skills and incorporate the interests that have been assiduously developed at Dartmouth. Titles such as "Careers for Those Who Love

Representing or Research" may lack marketing appeal but they could lead to fruitful explorations of such disparate fields as admissions or legislative work or think tanks.

Once again, Gardner says it best when he writes: " In the intellectual field alone there are many kinds of excellence. There is the kind of intellectual activity that leads to a new theory , and the kind that leads to a new machine. There is the mind that finds its most effective expression in teaching and the mind that is most at home in research. There is the mind that works best in quantitative terms, and the mind that luxuriates in poetic imagery. And there is excellence in art, in music, in craftsmanship, in human relations, in technical work, in leadership, in parental responsibilities."

The path to excellence leads in many different directions. Once a direction is determined after deliberate soul-searching, "Why Not The Best?" may make perfect sense as a marker along that path. After all, that type of introspection brought you here, didn't it?