4 Reasons to Choose a Pricier College
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PayScale.com, the world's largest online salary database, recently released a report that showed that not all colleges are created equal when it comes to seeing a good lifetime salary return on your tuition investment. So should colleges with a low return on investment be avoided? Not necessarily. Salary potential is just one factor to consider when choosing a school. Here are a few reasons some students might opt for a school with a low financial ROI.

1. A loftier mission
"Ad majorem dei gloriam," reads the motto on Loyola University Chicago's school emblem. It translates from Latin to "For the greater glory of God." When assessing graduate success, Loyola's public relations team says, "Earnings are one measure of success." Loyola, for example, takes great pride in its undergraduate coursework that includes volunteerism.

Seattle University, also a Catholic university, focuses on "empowering leaders for a just and humane world." Jenny Graham, a graduate of Seattle University, said this of her many hours as a volunteer during college: "I think that Seattle U helped me develop the drive to be in the career that I am in." Jenny works as a legislative coordinator for the Department of Social and Health Services in Washington State. "Every day I review legislation and write policies that impact families. I feel great about my career."

2. Plenty of financial aid given out
"Financial aid can really change the outcomes of the ROI calculation," says Al Lee, PayScale's director of quantitative analysis, who led PayScale's ROI study. And many of the schools that ended up near the bottom of the list point out that they offer ample financial aid. For example, Loyola of Chicago is ranked number 314 out of 852 schools on the ROI list, but over 90 percent of their undergraduates receive financial aid.

At number 717 on our list, Willamette University ranks even lower, with a measly 6.3 percent return per tuition dollar--exactly half of what top-ranked MIT offers. Candace Hathaway's son David graduated from Willamette University last June. Regarding finances, she says, "We told him how much we would pay; then he got financial aid and worked two jobs to make up the rest." Does Hathaway regret her son's decision to attend Willamette? "No way. He loved it. He was 'Mr. Willamette.' It was where he wanted to be."

3. Graduates' career choices
The tuition ROI calculation depends largely on a person's career choices. Young people who choose service or volunteering after school, for example, leave their schools lower on the list.

Amelia Priesthoff graduated from Pacific Lutheran University with a degree in studio art. She had an academic scholarship that paid for most of her tuition; then after college she volunteered with the Peace Corps in Africa. "It was a really big growth period and a maturing experience,"
says Priesthoff. "If I could make it mandatory for every person, I would." Priesthoff notes that the Peace Corps can boost a resume for someone interested in pursuing international work. Was the Peace Corps worth it? "It was a priceless experience," she says.

4. Top areas of study
Which schools are the best deals? PayScale's study showed that in-state, engineering-focused schools offer the best bargains. But, what if you don't want to be an engineer?

From hospitality to education, many schools specialize in lower-paid careers. For example, Dan Kalmanson, the associate vice president for communications and public affairs at the University of New Haven (ranked 420 in PayScale's study), points out that UNH offers a highly specialized program in forensic science. Entering the program is competitive, and graduates are sought out by major law enforcement agencies like the CIA and the FBI. Do they earn as much as aerospace engineers? It's unlikely. But they are making a difference, he points out. "We have an Institute for the Study of Violent Groups. Every day, here on our campus, over 100 students are working on data to stop terrorism. We're proud of that."