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Choosing A College

by Marien Helz

It's well known that a college education is one of the biggest investments that we make. High school counselors have gotten better and better at helping parents and students make the right college decisions, and colleges are getting better at attracting the students who are a good fit with their institution. Still, too little attention is paid to the fact that if a student and a college are not a good fit, the student transfers. It is quite common now for students to transfer, but when they do, in the best cases, they usually lose at least some credit which translates into losing time for them and losing money for their parents. There is an aspect of selecting a college to which not nearly enough attention is paid; that aspect is environment.

I was struck by this when I picked up a small book about Harrison Ford. I normally don't spend time reading about celebrities, but I usually get the magazines with articles about him because I went to the same college he did at the same time. Our pictures are on the same page of the year book. This little profile about him recorded more about the college I attended than I had thought there would be and somewhat more than I wanted to remember. Ford apparently described his time at the college as unhappy. I would describe mine, especially the freshman year, as excruciating. Ford asserted that it was not the college's fault that he was unhappy there. I insist that it was not the college's fault that I was not happy there. Ripon is a beautiful college nestled in rolling hills in the dead center of Wisconsin. Seeing it makes you think of all the ideals you may have imagined about what college ought to look like. There was a TV show that I saw in my childhood called, "The Halls of Ivy." In front of the academic buildings, there was a rock with the inscription, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Ripon College looks like just such a place. It's a great place for dedicated faculty who want to focus on students and on their own academic reflection. The faculty there was excellent and very dedicated.



The book about Ford stated that he entered the college because it was known that it was easy to get into. I didn't know that, and had applied to five different colleges, most of which were not easy to get into, and I was accepted at all. Ripon was my first choice. I have life long friends from my days there. One has been a researcher at Los Alamos National Laboratories, has traveled all over the world in work for the Lab, and now is a trustee at Ripon. Another of my friends went on to get a master's degree in physics and founded and runs a national business.

Considering that I have life long friends from the college, really liked the faculty, and was successful enough to graduate from the college in only three years with a double major, it would be logical to question my assertion that the college was a bad fit. Most students who aren't happy in the college which they choose, transfer thus losing time and money. My unhappiness at the college was the primary reason that I was on scholastic probation the first year and could no longer get into any of the colleges that had accepted me the year before. When I hit campus in the fall of my sophomore year, I was so unhappy with my situation that I scoured the catalogue and figured out exactly how I would be able to finish in a total of three years even though I had lost credit in my freshman year. Most students who find themselves in such a circumstance are not able to do that, and the number of students unhappy with their college choices are very high now with a far higher per cent transferring than did twenty-five years ago.

When choosing a college, many feel a need to focus on faculty. Although the faculty are important, with the job shortage in higher education and many good people unemployed, most colleges, even the ones generally considered lower level, have very good faculty. Since a large

number of students change majors, choosing a college on the basis of an excellent department in the anticipated major isn't necessarily a recipe for a successful match. I had never imagined that I would major in philosophy when I was going to college, but Dr. Tyree, mentioned by Ford in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, was one of the professors who made my time at college meaningful. Tyree admired excellence in any area. If you were one of the students he favored, it didn't make any difference in the usual ways: you didn't get a break in grades; you didn't get to hand in an independent study paper late even if you were carrying twenty-one credits and had written several other major research papers for him in the same semester. The primary advantage of having Tyree's favor was the nebulous one of being admired by a brilliant man who for some unknown reason had faith in you and expected you to do well in your life. Ford was one of his favorites; another was Al Jarreau; yet another was the star quarter back. I, for some reason far less clear to me, was another. There were a number of excellent professors at Ripon, and there are at most colleges, but that wasn't enough to make the experience all that it could have been.

As stated above, environment is the element that has to be considered more carefully than it is. Environment must be distinguished from atmosphere which can be misleading. Atmosphere deals with the general look and feel of the campus. Environment, however, is everything from distance from home to dorm life. The faculty is certainly an important aspect of environment; however, especially in the first two years, most students will spend, at most, twenty hours a week around the faculty. The part of the environment that a student has to spend 100% of her or his time around is the student body, and that is, therefore, the most important part of the environment for a student to look at. Although the student body is somewhat fluid as the years pass, it is not totally so. Colleges tend to attract a specific type of student through the years.

Hoping to help my children make better decisions than I had, I began early looking into colleges with them. We began touring campuses by my eldest's junior year in high school. There were certain things that gave an indication as to the nature of the students who chose to go to a specific college. For example, one very high level college had graffiti and debris all over the dorms, the students complained in a bragging sort of way about how miserable they were with all the work they did, and there was a general attitude of superior sneering. For people who like living this way, that's fine, but some people like living in an aesthetically pleasing surrounding, and that's fine too. The latter would not be comfortable in a setting full of graffiti and litter.

At another fairly prestigious college, every student guide had stories about an actress who had once attended. Some of the stories were obviously not true, but had become part of the oral legend. You couldn't talk with anyone connected with the college without hearing stories about this actress. My daughter was invited by a current student to a party hosted by an alumnae of the college with the purpose of encouraging prospective students to enroll. She came home furious and quite determined not to choose that college. She said that they all sat around telling *in* jokes that no one bothered to explain. Some students would not have minded that realizing that once enrolled, they would be *in* also. For students who are genuinely offended by such conduct, however, choosing that college would be a terrible mistake. After reading a news item about that college, we mentioned to our daughter that the college was in the paper, and her reply was a sardonic, "So what did Jane Fonda do now?"

Some of the situations generated by the nature of the student body are far more critical than that. Some colleges have earned the reputation for being drinking schools. Students who don't drink very much and who are unaware of the college's reputation are in for a very unhappy time. With the opened dorm policies that many colleges have, some students have had roommates who have members of the opposite sex in the room and engage in sexual activity while their roommate is trying to sleep, but is being forced into the untenable position of being a voyeur.

It is important for both parents and students to realize that there are incredible pressures on students to "fit in" when they reach campus. If there are additional pressures such as having to locate housing for themselves due to not having "guaranteed housing" (an absurd concept), fitting in then becomes a matter of survival, and students who had previously avoided being

hooked into things like drinking too much under peer pressure may not be able to avoid it due to the demands of college life. It's crucial, therefore, for them to go to a college where they can find peers who share their values.

Often, students will have preconceptions about college life that don't fit with what is real. A friend's daughter went to a medium level college in her senior year of high school to complete her high school requirements and to get ahead with college credit. Her plan was to transfer to a prestigious urban college the following year, which she did. That college was all that she had thought that she wanted. It was in a setting unlike the rural one where she had done her early enrollment work. There was a lot going on at the new place, but there were also added safety and security concerns. After trying hard for two weeks, she phoned her mother in tears, and transferred back to the small rural college where she had spent a year. Some might say that she didn't give the new college a chance. If she had stayed there, however, and had continued to be miserable, she would have lost a semester of credit and her parents would have lost a semester of tuition. In her case, realizing soon that she really liked the previous college was the best thing she could have done. She will be graduating a year earlier than she would have if she had completed high school, and she has numerous opportunities for high level jobs because of her outstanding work in a place where she was comfortable even though the college was not nearly as prestigious as the one she left. The urban environment was simply not the right thing for her.

On the other hand, some students cannot tolerate a rural environment. They feel that there is nothing to do. My son chose to go to a college in a town that makes the town of Cicely in *Northern Exposure* look like a major metropolis. The important thing was that it was he who chose it. As a parent, I would never push a choice like that on a student because if they aren't comfortable with the environment, they will not do well. My son chose to live in a *quiet* dorm even though he has never been thought of as a quiet person. He managed to be relatively quiet for four years despite doing a great deal of socializing. The important thing about the *quiet* dorm was that he was among students who were basically like him. He was not thrown into the jock/beer drinking lifestyle that existed in some of the other dorms. He managed to find a great deal to do in and outside of class that kept him happy in that very isolated college. It would not suit a number of students. As his parents, we were pleased that he was on scholarship. From the first grade, he had been an adherent to the doctrine of the gentleman's C, keeping alive a tradition that had all but died out long before he was born. It was constitutionally impossible for him to get any grade higher than he absolutely had to. In order to keep his scholarship and remain in this college that he liked so much, he had to turn his grades into a gentleman's B+ /A-. Not only did he have fun for four years, but the scholarship forced him to keep up his grades meaning that he graduated with a decent average. This would not have been the case if he had not found a number of other students who had the same interests as he had or if he had been the kind of student who really wanted an urban environment.

In every case I know of in which students are extremely happy about their college years, the main factor is other students, that largest of all parts of the college environment.

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WINTER LANDSCAPING

by Susan Johnson

Antonio Vivaldi composed his *Winter* concerto without the benefit of experiencing that season in Buffalo. But, if he had lived here, there's no question that our region would have inspired an even more dramatic composition. Blessed with weather that's as beautiful as it can be wild, we have a wealth of trees and shrubs whose elegance of form is magnified by snow, giving our gardens every right to celebrate their season of dormancy.

While for some people it may be enough to know that our cold temperatures ultimately give way to spring flowers, others insist on enhancing their winter landscape. Choosing plant material with desirable characteristics, lighting plants and statuary, and constructing living space under glass to make it a permanent part of the garden (regardless of the weather) can answer our needs for nature on even the shortest days following the solstice.

Uncommon Choices

Whether you're enjoying your winter garden from inside or out, under the sun or at night using landscape lighting, it's important to choose plant material that has a special appeal to you.

"Beauty in winter is primarily expressed through structure and form," explains Wayne Johnson of Johnson's Nursery. "Consider using unusual plants that have interesting barks, pleasing shapes, colors, and movement. These elements will enhance the garden not only in winter but throughout the year."

Dancing in the Wind

Beauty and motion can be found in a genus of plants that include the ornamental grasses. Ranging from the dainty six-inch *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Little Bunny' to the spectacular twelve foot tall *Miscanthus floridus* 'Gigantes' (Giant Chinese Silver Grass), these plants require only good soil, a sunny location, and a spring trim to thrive.

Miscanthus sinensis 'Zebrinus' (Zebra grass) is a good example of the special effects that can be achieved in winter. Growing to nearly eight feet in height, its elegant gold-barred green blades assume a graceful fountain shape in summer that proves imperturbable in cold weather. Even freezing rains in March, that temporarily flatten the grass' winter-hued amber blades, cannot keep it down. Moments after the ice melts, the entire clump springs back up to resume waving in the slightest of breezes, providing welcome movement and sound in the garden. "I used to cut my ornamental grasses back in the fall," said Miss Schwanekamp. "But, they're so beautiful that now I wait until spring so that they can be included in the lighting."

Berry Nice

Color is also achievable at this time of year. Berries on trees and shrubs are brilliant in contrast to the drifts of snow and will last through the winter if not taken by the birds. *Ilex verticillata* 'Winter Red' (Winterberry) is a lovely shrub whose female members will respond to a nearby male plant with clusters of crimson fruit along their artfully poised branches. Growing to a height of 9 feet and equally wide, this is an ideal selection for gardens with limited space.

Malus 'Red Jade' is a medium sized tree that possesses an artistic Japanese profile. The weeping habit of this unusually-shaped crabapple is accompanied by interesting bark and red fruit.

With its wide-spreading sweep of horizontal branches having showy clusters of fruit turning from scarlet to black, *Viburnum tomentosum* also has an elegant Japanese shape.

Barking up the right tree

One of the loveliest of trees in any season is *Acer griseum* (Paperbark Maple), an exquisite specimen with rich cinnamon-colored exfoliating bark that unravels in wide ringlets. Growing to 25', its exfoliating habit begins on two to three year old branches that can best be enjoyed when the tree is disrobed of its leafy summer cloak.

Familiar upright evergreens can convey a sense of protection in winter as well as provide privacy. Rarer forms of evergreens that weep or that have unusual needles, berries and cones can become living sculptures. *Pinus densiflora 'Oculus Draconis'* (Dragon's Eye Pine) is slow-growing and has gorgeous yellow-striped needles that spring straight from its branches like the points of a porcupine.

For gardeners who have the freedom of space, *Fagus sylvatica 'pendula'* (Weeping European Beech) is a splendid estate tree with picturesque curling branches that cascade to the ground. Additional attributes include its propensity for keeping its leaves long into the fall and smooth pearl-gray bark that eventually develops a deep rivulet formation.

Choose Bamboo

"Bamboo is a plant that most people associate with tropical climates," said Mr. Johnson. "However, there are at least eight varieties that can be successfully grown in Western New York."

Few other plants are as stunning when viewed against an early December snowfall as *Arundinaria graminea*, a tall frothy bamboo that reaches nine feet and retains its bright green color well into the winter. Only when temperatures fall below zero does it turn amber above the snowline where it nevertheless continues its airy performance. Perfect for screening purposes and as an elegant backdrop for Japanese anemones, this plant is aggressive in its growth behavior, needing strict barriers to keep it under control.

Let it snow

"Choosing plants for winter display also requires attention to hardiness," said Mr. Johnson. "Buffalo is rated Zone 5 on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's hardiness map but low-lying valleys to the south and east of the city are more typically Zone 4. Gardeners living in those areas have limitations on what can survive our winters. The locations of the plants are important as well. A sensitive tree or shrub planted in a protected area is going to have a better chance than one that's planted on a windy hill."

We'll all have a better chance of not only surviving the winter but embracing it if we take A. E. Housman's poetry to heart:

*And since to look at things in bloom,
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.*

Yes, if Vivaldi had lived here, his violins and cellos would have howled with that cold north wind, but there's no doubt he'd have made them dance to our bow-tied hollies bright with berries.

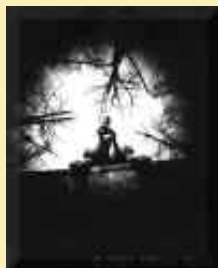
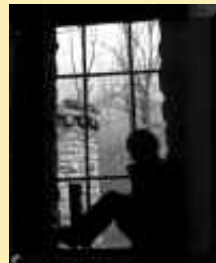
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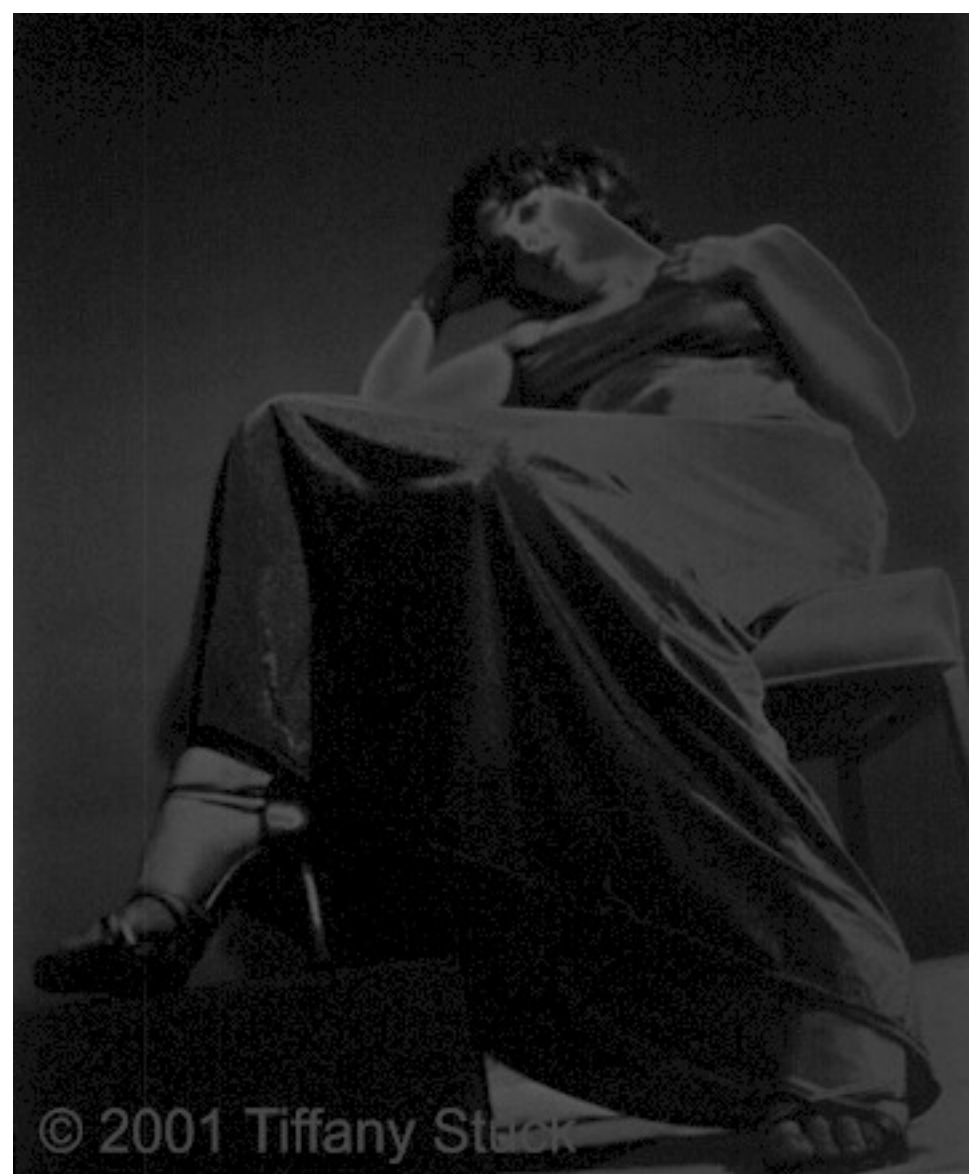
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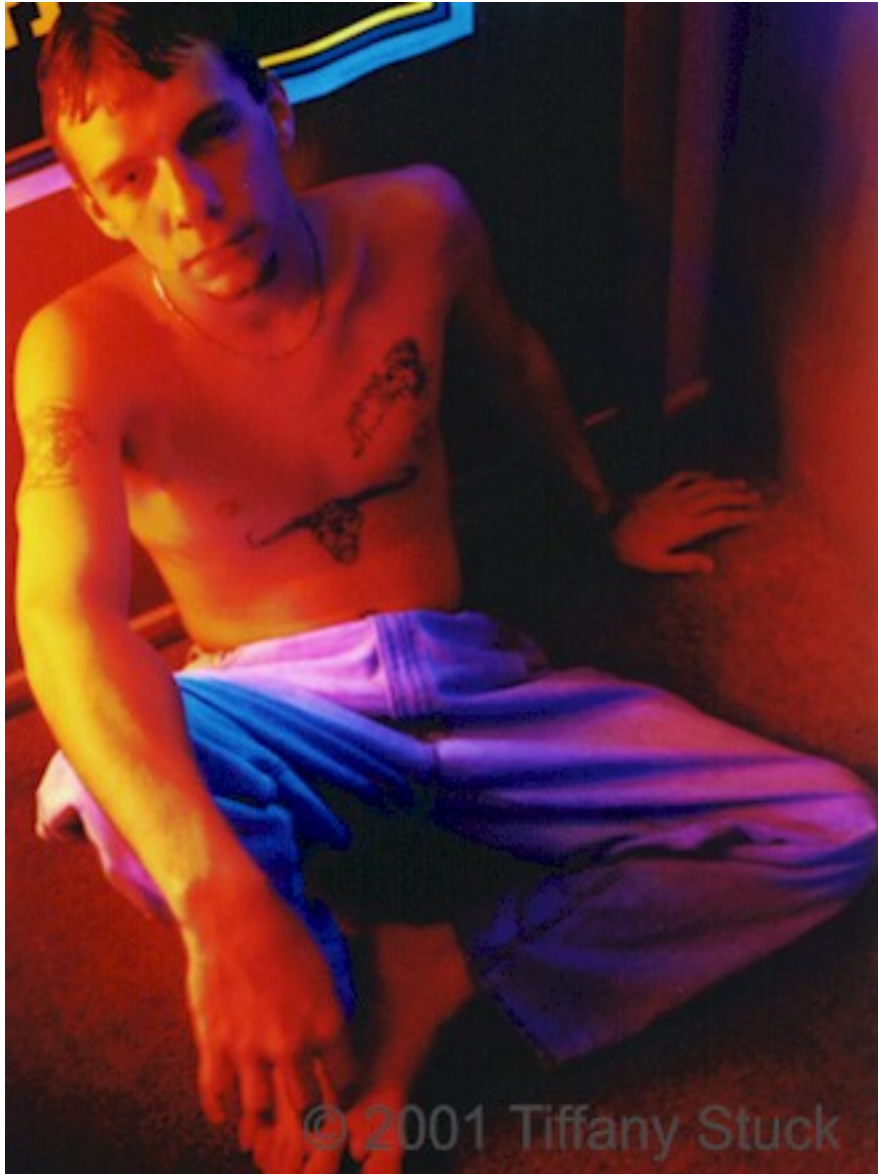




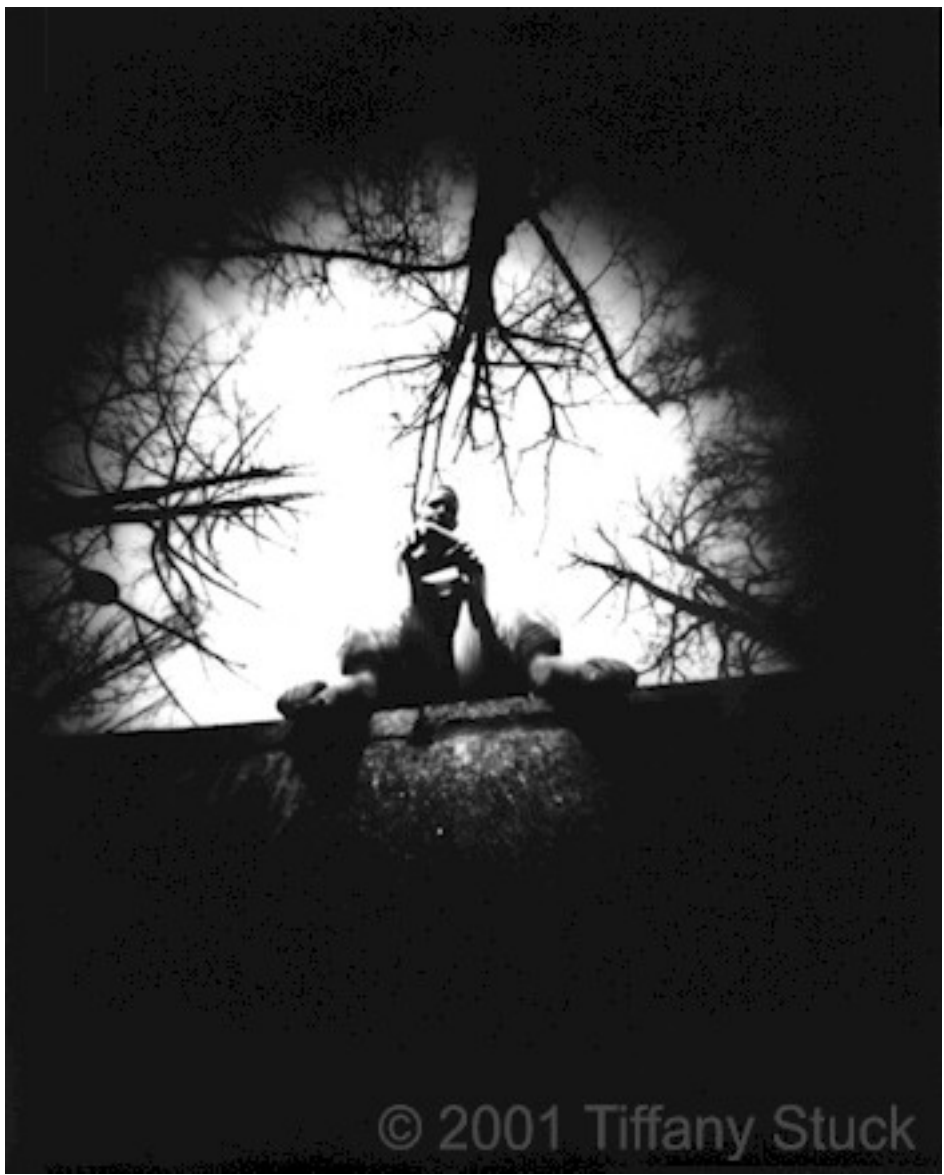
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