

COMMON GROUND SPEAKER SERIES  
FRANK BRUNI - 11/16/16

*Q: Do you know where Condoleezza Rice went to college? She was the first African-American U.S. Secretary of State and the first woman National Security Advisor under President George W. Bush. She was also the Provost of Stanford University from 1993 to 1999.*

*A: The University of Denver.*

If that answer surprises you, you are not alone. In his best-selling book, Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be, Frank Bruni, a bestselling author and a columnist for the *New York Times*, shows that the Ivy League has no monopoly on corner offices, governors' mansions, or the most prestigious academic and scientific grants. Through statistics, surveys, and the stories of hugely successful people who didn't attend the most exclusive schools, he demonstrates that many kinds of colleges—large public universities, tiny hideaways in the hinterlands—serve as ideal springboards. And he illuminates how to make the most of them. What matters in the end are a student's efforts in and out of the classroom, not the gleam of his or her diploma.

**REASONS FOR THE BOOK:** Bruni's book was born during the annual height of the admissions process, as another March ended and the chatter among many of the adults around him grew predictably heavy with the words *acceptance*, *rejection*, *safety school* and such. The intensity of the parents' reactions to the schools' decisions always stopped him short because, as Bruni writes in his book, "it attaches a make-or-break importance to a finite circle of exalted institutions that isn't supported by the evidence".

**REASONS FOR THE MANIA:** Bruni sees the mania as having many roots, the strongest amongst them is that everyday people now seem to worry about their 'brands' and in which everything imaginable is subdivided into microclimates of privilege and validation. At the amusement park, you can do general admission or a special pass or an even fancier package that puts you instantly at the front of every line. On airplanes, it's no longer just first class and coach. For a surcharge, there's more legroom. For frequent fliers, there are exit-row seats, early boarding and first dibs on the overhead bins. It's not just shoes, handbags and SUV's that signal your status. It's a whole lot else, and colleges have climbed higher and higher up the list - against all reason, and, Bruni argues, with endlessly hurtful consequences.

**PROOF THAT WHERE YOU GO IS NOT WHO YOU'LL BE:** Bruni researched recent winners of the MacArthur Foundation "genius grants" and learned that the two dozen geniuses anointed in 2013 included undergraduates from SUNY Purchase, SUNY Albany, Louisiana State, Villanova, DePaul and the University of California, Santa Barbara. In 2014, the geniuses graduated from the University of Kansas, the University of Cincinnati, Coker College, the University of Illinois, Columbus State University and the University of Maryland. A deeper analysis of the alma maters of all the geniuses, referred to as "Fellows", shows that 20% graduated from institutions with acceptance rates of over 50 percent. The important trait of institutions that had produced a disproportionate share of Fellows were liberal arts colleges. Liberal arts colleges are distinctly American institutions, typically small, that focus on undergraduate education.

Looking at the earning differential between those graduating from the Ivy League and other schools, graduates of elite colleges had earned 7% more over their lifetime than graduates of the

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non elite schools. Bruni then looked at the subset of those who had not gone to an elite school though had applied. The differential in earnings disappeared! Something about the moxie of people who were ambitious enough to apply to elite schools transcended the earning differential.

**WHAT IS THE POINT OF COLLEGE, ANYWAY?:** Anthony Carnevale is the director of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. He, like Bruni, is frustrated by the premium that so many families place on the supposed luster of a first-choice college and by the breathlessness with which kids approach the admissions process. According to him, "college is supposed to prime you for the next chapter of learning, and for the chapter beyond that. It's supposed to put you in touch with yourself, so that you know more about your strengths, weaknesses and values and can use that information as your mooring and compass in a tumultuous unpredictable world. It supposed to set you on your way, and if you expect it to be a guarantee forevermore of smooth sailing, then you've got trouble infinitely greater than any rejection notice".

**WHAT DOES MATTER:** Bruni searched for commonalities, themes, ways of thinking and strategies for behaving that departed from a lockstep striving for the school with the 'best' name. What he spotted was:

- an openness to serendipity;
- a nimbleness in adapting to change;
- a willingness to shoot off in a new direction;
- and an attention to the particular virtues of the landscape right around them rather than an obsession with the promised glories of the imagined terrain around the bend.

**GREAT EDUCATIONS ARE NOT PASSIVE EXPERIENCES; THEY'RE ACTIVE ONES:** When young men and women turn to Condolezza Rice for guidance, asking her 'How do I do what you do?' meaning, how do they become secretary of state. She tells them, 'So here's how you do it - you start as a failed piano major'. Rice entered the University of Denver to study piano. Once there, she learned that she was good, but not great, or maybe great, but not quite great enough. So, midway through her time there, she went on the hunt for a new field of study. She wandered into a course called 'Introduction to International Politics' taught by Josef Korbel, a sixty-three year old Czech refugee who had founded Denver's Graduate School of International Studies. Corbel was also father of Madeleine Albright. The rest of the story is female secretary of state history.

Rice emphasizes to her students at Stanford that they need to use college as the time to recognize that special combination of what they love and what they're also good at. Rice also stresses the transcendent importance - all too frequently overlooked - in how fully students throw themselves into the college experience and how much they demand and extract from whichever institutions they attend.

**SOMETHING TO DO FOR YOUR HIGH SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN:** In his book, Bruni shares part of a real letter written to a high school senior by his parents. The letter was given to him before he started hearing from the colleges to which he applied - Yale, Princeton, Brown and Lehigh University. The letter is included in his book because Bruni feels the fact that his parents felt compelled to write it says as much about our society's warped obsession with elite colleges

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as it does about these parents' warmth, wisdom and generosity. And, in Bruni's words, "I share the following parts of it because the message in them is one that many kids in addition to their son need to hear:

*Dear Matt,*

*On the night before you receive your first college response, we wanted to let you know that we could not be any prouder of you than we are today. Whether or not you get accepted does not determine how proud we are of everything you have accomplished and the wonderful person you have become. That will not change based on what admissions officers decide about your future. We will celebrate with joy wherever you get accepted - and the happier you are with those response, the happier we will be. But your worth as a person, a student and our son is not diminished or influenced in the least by what these colleges have decided.*

*If it does not go your way, you'll take a different route to get where you want. There is not a single college in this country that would not be lucky to have you, and you are capable of succeeding at any one of them.*

*We love you as deep as the ocean, as high as the sky, all the way around the world and back again - and to wherever you are headed.*

*Mom and Dad*

These very words, in Bruni's perspective, prove that their son has something so much more essential and nourishing and lasting than whatever he's going to get on whichever campus becomes his home, because that's only his temporary home. His parents have given him his real home, the one he had before college and the one he'll have after.