

Look mama, I'm in the ivy leagues

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Is every school really the same?

College ... just the word itself evokes so many emotions and thoughts. There are so many things to consider when choosing the right school, and with the education system seemingly ripping off families, college sometimes does not even seem like the right option, let alone going to a private, Ivy League institution.

When you hear Yale, Cornell, or Harvard, you say, "Now that's a good school," or "That's my ticket to the world." Whatever the case, these schools along with five other colleges have had a tremendous impact in the lives of thousands of students, many of them starting their career off getting paid anywhere from \$52,000 to \$65,000 a year. According to payscale.com, the average Ivy Leaguer is making well over \$100,000 a year mid-career.

In contrast, state college graduates in 2009 were making anywhere between \$34,000 to \$60,000 while most were making under \$90,000 mid-career. So, what makes an Ivy League school so special, besides the average career pay? According to Princeton's website, the Ivy League was established in 1945, when the presidents of Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Yale entered into an agreement to play intercollegiate football and uphold certain academic standards. Thus the Ivy League was formed.

Now, with an impeccable reputation and a following that mimics fantasy football fans, the eight schools are windows of opportunity for thousands of students and even families. Some local residents who attended an Ivy League school share their stories about culture shock, the pros and cons, and challenges they have had throughout their experience.

Malena Jackson was born in Miami, Fla. and was raised in Birmingham, Ala. She earned her bachelor's degree in journalism from Tennessee State University. While seeking jobs, after graduation, her credentials were being questioned.

"Without fail, I would be sitting in an interview with the news director and the question, 'So where is Tennessee State?' would always come up," she said. "After being asked this question repeatedly, and still not getting the job, I began to research a graduate program that everyone I meet, no matter what industry they were in, would know and respect." That is when she decided to go Ivy League. She enrolled at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University four years after receiving her undergraduate degree.

"My first year of graduate school was not as hectic as I thought it would be. I'd say the biggest challenge for me was not being the most brilliant student in the class, everyone was brilliant, it seemed," Jackson shared. "I was truly amazed about the great expectations that the journalism professors put on the students. I lived and breathed Columbia. Good enough was never good enough." Jackson was in a position many find themselves in, when they go back to school, starting and raising a family. She was not atypical because according to selu.edu, most graduate students in 2009 fell between the age of 22 and 49.

So, while Jackson was studying hard, she was working hard at home with her husband raising a family. The couple had two children while was in her program.

Remember House Party II, when Kid left for college? Everyone was so proud, he was the one getting out of the hood. He was the first one with the chance. But there was also a little bit of hating going on by folks who didn't know success like Kid. Jackson also experienced a bit of "hating" in her circle.

Although she has a supportive family, there was always the challenge of sharing her success with them, and even some friends.

"I was the first on both sides of my family to graduate from undergrad, not to mention an Ivy League institution," Jackson wrote in an e-mail. "I could feel the tension between my mom and me because she always felt inadequate not having a college degree. When I graduated from Columbia, I'm sad to say that I lost touch with many friends, because that sort of accomplishment became too much

for them to handle. I once read that your success often brings out the fears in others. It's lonely at the top, and I respect that, but it's not going to stop me."

And she's working it. Remember how she couldn't land employment in her field post undergrad?

Well, after Columbia, she got a job as a production/administrative assistant for a public television station in Virginia. She currently runs her own marketing and hospitality-training firm in Valencia, Calif. With all the money spent, and friendships changed, Jackson does not look back.

You can visit her blog and read her story at www.familytravelsuite.com.

Pasadena native, Kalia Waits-Smith recently graduated from Cornell University in May. She also received her undergraduate degree from UCLA in 2003. She chose Cornell, after going to a city-sized public school; she wanted to try something more concentrated. Her experience at Cornell definitely changed her mind about public schools.

"Although I received a top-notch education from UCLA, I can definitely see the benefits and opportunities provided by private schools. The career support, recruiting opportunities and alumni connections are worth the investment," Waits-Smith explained.

Despite being a part of the Ivy League fan club, the new grad also shared that Cornell was not without its own challenges.

The Ivy Leagues pride themselves on rigorous studies and high academic standards. Waits-Smith, had to compete against high achieving students and deal with a first semester of mediocre grades.

"I struggled in my courses throughout the first semester, so one of my biggest success was finally getting B+s and As," she said. "It was a matter of figuring out how to study, and reaching out to professors to get more academic support." It was hard, and definitely a lifestyle adjustment, moving from the West Coast to the East, going from a public school to a private, but she said it was worth it.

Now that she has graduated, Waits-Smith is currently a part of Education Pioneers, a fellowship program that equips graduates and students to be top-notch leaders in the world. She will also be working with the Pasadena Unified School District in urban education reform.

Those considering an Ivy League, go for it. Both ladies agree that going to one of the big eight institutions is possible. So, do not be afraid to apply.

Jackson recommends that interested students attend the information sessions and network with other Ivy League students, teachers, counselors and alumni. She also reminds that the only competition is yourself.

She also shared some of the benefits of going to an Ivy League: Recognition from peers and employers, advancement in any career, intellectual development, the network and alumni connections.

The downside of Ivy Leagues include the higher tuition cost (especially in grad school), scholarship funding is limited, and the academic process is demanding. However, the possibilities are endless for those who create the opportunity for themselves, and it does not hurt to have an institution with a name that can't be denied.

<http://www.ourweekly.com/features/look-mama-i%E2%80%99m-ivy-leagues>