

CHANGE YOUR FILTER

February 8, 2018 by [Rick Clark](#) – Director of Admission at Georgia Tech

Last week, a friend I grew up with sent me an article ranking [Decatur](#) the #1 Place to Live in Georgia with a note: “Come a long way, brother.”

I hear that. When I grew up in Decatur, it was... fine. Great place to get your car fixed, some good burger options, and the standard churches, recreation centers, schools, and city services of most places.

My street was divided— half the houses were in the city limits of Decatur, and half were in the county (DeKalb). As kids, we did not think much of it other than the city sign made good target practice for an array of launched objects. Adults agreed (not about the sign, but about the six to one, half-dozen the other idea of perceived quality).

When I went to college in North Carolina nobody heard of Decatur, so I would simply say I grew up a few miles east of downtown Atlanta.

Destination: Decatur

Today is a different story. The standard three bedroom, two bath houses that once filled Decatur are largely gone. It is tough to find anything coming on the market for less than \$500,000 and new construction can approach seven figures. People petition for annexation and move to town just for the schools and quality of life.

Several of the old gas stations have been converted to gastropubs or boutiques with vintage garage doors. Some of the guys working at these establishments have beards that are just as impressive and hats just as dirty as the guys back in the day, but instead of an oil change and tire rotation, they’re charging \$30 for tray of fries (frites, actually) with assorted dipping sauces. During and after college, when friends would come to visit, we never chose to go out in Decatur. Virginia Highlands, Midtown, and Buckhead had the lion’s share of good dining, shopping, entertainment, and nightlife options. Now when friends visit there is no reason to leave this two-mile radius. And typically they’ve already read a review of a local restaurant, microbrew, or other shop they want to check out.

The bottom line: things have changed dramatically. You cannot apply the same filter you did 20 years ago—or even five years, for that matter. Decatur is a destination now. The schools are highly desirable, the shops and restaurants are well-regarded, and the demand for housing is at an all-time high. Even the city sign is nicer.

Destination: College

If you graduated from college before 2000, the changes in college reputation, brand, selectivity, and culture can be equally dramatic. So if you are a parent just starting to screen and review college literature in the mail, or if you are planning your first college tour for this spring, here are

a few quick takes:

“Number 1 Place to Live”

“The University of X? Where the kids from our school went if they could not get into...?”

“If you drove slowly down Main Street with your window open, they’d throw a diploma in.”

“On Tuesdays people were already tailgating for Saturday’s game.”

Yeah, yeah. I know. I’m telling you, Decatur was a little sketchy. Even as a kid, I remember looking askance at the lollipops the bank was handing out. The University of X? Yep. Because that college town is getting written up in major national magazines as a great place for food, family, culture; they have invested heavily in student support and programs; they had students win international competitions for research and prestigious scholarships and fellowships. Change your filter. X may be the absolute perfect match for your daughter, so don’t dilute her excitement or willingness to consider it with your outdated stereotypes.

“Gas stations turn into gastropubs.”

“He has a 1460. He’ll get in for sure.”

“They gave me a summer provisional admit offer and I was able to stay if I did well.”

“I wrote a two-word essay: “Go” followed by their mascot, which I misspelled, and they still let me in.”

I hear you. 1460 is high. It is impressive and noteworthy and nobody is taking that away from him. And you are right, 25 years ago there was room for “creative admission” practices at colleges that now admit less than one of every two applicants and carry waitlists well over 1,000 additional students. There was a time when it was all about numbers. Hit a mark, cross a threshold, clear the hurdle. We all appreciate simplicity, and I’m no different. The good news is many colleges are still operating the same way. But check your filter before you make any assumptions. If anywhere in the school’s literature, website, or presentation they use the word “holistic,” 1460 is now part of a sentence and a conversation, rather than an integral part of an equation. And your two-word essay still makes a good story, but they are reading closely now and will expect true introspection and reflection.

“\$30 frites”

“Tuition was less than \$1000 per quarter.”

“I paid my next semester’s bill with the money I saved from my internship.”

“I was able to pay off all of my student loans within five years of graduating.”

The truth is you have as much of a chance buying a new house in Decatur for \$200 as \$200,000 in today's market. And as you begin to research college costs, you'll likely have some eye-popping, heart-stopping, head-shaking (hyphens, they're infectious) moments. **Don't** let tuition or overall cost of attendance keep you from visiting a school or encouraging your son or daughter to apply if they've determined it is a good match academically, geographically, and culturally. **Do** check out their published Net Price Calculator and start reading up on reliable sources about the school's financial aid packages and program.

"My Hometown" (cue Bruce Springsteen)

"I have been buying football tickets for the last twenty years."

"There should be spots held for families who have multiple generation connections."

"Don't y'all care at all about preserving tradition? We've been bringing our kids there since they were in diapers."

You loved your college experience. You love your kids. You see them both enjoying and benefiting from going to your alma mater, and you see a shared college experience/alma mater as another connection in your relationship. Valid, and reasonable. I don't hate you for it.

But one of the biggest tragedies I see is the reaction of alumni whose kids do not get in because they view it as a personal affront against their family. I implore you—commit to **not** letting this be your story. University of Washington, Washington University, George Washington, Mary Washington, Washington and Lee? Maybe you went to a school named after another president, or a state, or direction. Whatever. Wanting your son or daughter to go to your alma mater is not wrong. But it's also not guaranteed. And the decision certainly won't be connected to how many games you or your family have attended over the years. In fact, fewer and fewer schools consider legacy in their admission process.

Start with the assumption they will not get in or they will not choose to go there even if they do. Then ask yourself what other schools are solid academically, affordable, and are helping students achieve their goals. You need to fall in love with your son or daughter's choices (not the breaking curfew ones or even the dating ones necessarily, but the college choices). All of them. Even if it was your alma mater's biggest rival. Eighteen years > four years. You love your kids. Now fall in love with their other college choices.