

Making College Years Count



Years back, a college degree, which only a subset of society pursued, was the route to employment. If you obtained a bachelor's degree, then you were almost guaranteed a job upon graduation, and that job was typically the stepping stone to one's career. Times have changed. During the 2017-2018 school year, colleges and universities are expected to award some 1.9 million bachelor's degrees and 790,000 master degrees, and 20.4 million students will attend American colleges and universities for the first time, all of which means that competition for jobs among college graduates is fierce. A degree no longer guarantees a job; rather, it is the price of admission to even be considered for a job interview. Given the competition, what makes students stand out? For starters, college graduates with strong communication skills – both written and verbal – who are flexible, driven, employ creative

and critical thinking, and are accountable rise to the top of the crowd. How do employers measure those skills? At the onset, well written resumes and cover letters, in addition to strong writing samples (80% of corporations assess writing during hiring, according to CollegeBoard). Then there's showing up to interviews on time, being dynamic, engaged, and prepared – which involves research prior to an interview – followed by well written and personable thank you notes to interviewers post meetings. In short, candidates with strong soft skills, self-awareness, in addition to any necessary technical skills are typically the ones who get hired.

One size does not fit all

It's no coincidence that students are flocking to colleges and universities. Young adults are told all too often from well-meaning family, teachers, and employers that they need to complete a college degree to get a good job. In my experiences in the classroom over the past decade, though, students were becoming skeptical – a lot of them weren't convinced that a college degree was their ticket to success. Many had family members and friends who were doing just fine running businesses without college degrees. Still, the statistics are clear: students with a bachelor's degree earn 84% more over a lifetime than high school graduates. So perhaps in the long run, college is the best investment – but only if students are willing to devote themselves to their pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement during their time in college. And for those who are not willing to invest, there's good news along the lines of career and technical education: the U.S. has 30 million jobs that pay an average of \$55,000 annually and don't require a bachelor's degree.

How to make college a winning proposition

For college to be a valuable precursor to careers, students need to take relevant courses. That's easier said than done considering that many students don't know what they want to do after college, which creates a domino effect: without knowing what career they seek, they don't know what to major in, which means that many students take random classes. They show up to classes and receive passing grades, all the while waiting for a subject to engage them before they chose a major. Other students are dead-set on their career path, only to discover that they don't like the classes that lead to that career path too much. Which leads them down the road of *now what?*

While college provides a great opportunity for exploration, many students miss the occasion. With most students taking five classes, working part-time jobs, and trying to maintain a social life, all while struggling to get their course work done, it's easy for one semester to blend into the next with no real decisions being made. For the typical college student, there is not a lot of time for thoughtful hours of brainstorming or soul searching about what they want to do, let

alone time for internships that don't pay a salary. There's that, and the fact that most students feel that they will have time to figure it out when they graduate college; after all, everyone tells them they are young and don't need to rush. Only once they graduate, many feel panicked to get a job – any job! – and get on with their lives and out of debt.

If students leave college in four to six years and don't know what they want to do, let alone how to figure it out, college is a failing proposition. What is happening during those four-plus years if students graduate clueless and confused about what comes next? College is the time for young adults to consider and explore their options, take on internships and apprenticeships, and get clear on what they love to do and determine if they can make a living doing it. If not then, when?

It's a huge debate these days if college is in fact preparing students adequately for careers. I'm a firm believer that the college experience needs to better align with the career experience for it to offer value. It's often up to professors to adjust the curriculum to highlight relevant career skills in the classroom. At the least, professors can address soft skills regardless of what subject that they teach, to include problem solving, collaboration, leadership skills, communication, and flexibility.

It's more than just not making time for exploration, though, that hurts students. All too often, students show up to classes expecting to be taught. College, however, is a two-way street. Students need to be active learners and engage with the subject matter by reading course materials as well as doing their own research. They need to make time to meet with professors, and when necessary, tutors, too. Learning occurs when students take on the responsibility of practicing and applying the knowledge they acquire in the classroom out into the world.

Ideally, college is a think and action tank, complete with a diverse set of students, and professors, many of whom are experts in their respective fields. It is a time to ask questions, learn about careers, and plot one's career road map – with the awareness that it may change a few times along the way. College is the time and place for students to plan, focus, and take on internships to experience what it's like to work in various industries and functions.

Steps to be an active student include the following:

- 1) Find a mentor – someone who is willing to share and encourage you to investigate various options.

2) Choose a major early on – this will save you time and likely money. Seek help from a knowledgeable advisor or career coach. Ask yourself what you love to do, what you want to keep learning about and the environment you work best in. Take a few classes in your major tract and consider if you are interested and enjoying the course of study. If not, work with an advisor to explore other options. Don't wait – make it your priority to explore various paths to find what's right for you. And keep in mind that according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, only 27% of college graduates are working in a job that relates to their major – so what you major in is not critical if you are gaining skills and knowledge that are transferable.

3) Get to know your professors – they are typically experts in their field and may help you to make relevant connections for your career path.

4) Secure internships for junior and senior year. Internships are the quickest route to figure out if a career or company is a good fit for you and as they are typically short, and they enable you to try out a few paths over the summers and winter holiday break. Internships enable students to explore and experiment when it comes to industries and careers, and may help students to plan and plot for the knowledge, skills, and experience they need to earn a job in their career of choice.

5) Join clubs that are related to majors, industries, or specific job functions. It helps to surround yourself by like-minded people, and you may make a few friends who become future colleagues, too.

6) Ask questions – of your professors, advisors, mentors, bosses.

7) Research careers early and often during your college years. Consider [The Muse](#), [Roadtrip Nation](#), [LinkedIn for students](#), and [Glassdoor](#).

Tips for success in college and beyond

If students want to succeed, a key is to be able to articulate one's skills. A lot of students work part or full time while pursuing their degrees, all with the goal that they save money to pay their bills. What students don't always realize is that they gain valid experience – customer service, leadership, accountability, flexibility, and how to manage shifting priorities, as *in now I'm at work, now I'm in class* – from these part-time jobs. While working as a waitress or in a retail store may not be particularly relevant to a job as an engineer, students should reflect on what skills they obtain from these jobs and share them with potential employers in a thoughtful way. Often, these skills can help to differentiate students when it comes to getting hired.

Mindset matters. For me it always comes back to Dr. Carol Dweck's mindset research. If a student gets stuck in the cave of thinking they don't have the innate talent or capacity to learn or excel in a subject, they construct dead ends in their lives. A growth mindset – which is simply a way of thinking and being in the world – asserts that hard work, study, and an open mind is the ground work necessary for one to succeed in any area of life. It negates the concept that those with innate talent are the only ones who will succeed in a specific area and provides students the power to work hard in pursuit of their own success.

Choose your classes, your mentors, and your friends wisely. According to Dr. Meg Jay, author of The Defining Decade: Why Your Twenties Matter, “80% of your life's defining moments take place by the time you are 35-years old,” which makes your 20's extremely valuable! Do not waste your time as a college student by believing you have time to figure it all out. According to Dr. Jay, your brain caps off its second and last growth spurt in your 20's, as it rewires itself for adulthood. Use this time to develop into the amazing human being you aspire to and are capable of being.

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