

Stop Worrying About Your Child Getting Into College. Worry About What Happens Next.



As a college professor, former admissions officer and researcher on what happens to youths after high school, I believe the current panic over the increasing selectivity of elite schools misses the point. So much energy goes into getting into college. Many families can't see that getting through college is far more important, and that graduating prepared for adult life will be more valuable than the name arched over the top of the degree.

The good news is that college remains a reliable investment, but a degree doesn't bring as much bang for your buck as it once did. While many college graduates find work, a greater number are underemployed, which means they work in jobs that do not require a college degree and they have weaker earnings.

If graduating from college is no guarantee of success, then being admitted guarantees even less. [Only one out of two college freshmen graduate in six years.](#) It's true that elite schools have the highest graduation rates and public universities and community colleges the lowest ones. Being a college dropout, however, wherever you enrolled, is worse than never trying college at all. Universities don't refund your money if things don't work out, and employers don't pay you more for trying college.

It may seem surprising coming from a college professor, but college for all is a misguided goal. Many students thrive in college, but at least half don't. In [my research on why students drop out](#), the primary reasons include not being able to afford college, low grades or feeling overwhelmed by the social scene and freedoms. First-generation college students and young people with weak high school records are particularly susceptible to academic failure. Community colleges remain misunderstood and much maligned options. Too few students realize how many rewarding careers in medicine and technology require only a year or two of postsecondary training, and too many parents have their hearts set on their children attending a more prestigious four-year college.

Meanwhile, paying your way through college is not what it was a generation ago. Working more than 20 hours a week in college can lead to a [lower grade point average and trouble graduating on time.](#)

Even with the G.I. Bill, today's veterans are not getting through college in the numbers we hoped. Young people enlist because they lack the grades and the money to go to college. Many don't realize the G.I. Bill only provides partial scholarships, and too often, years spent in the military do not address the obstacles they faced in high school.

On the prestige factor: Experts can't decide if the Ivy League degree matters. There is no consensus on whether the University of Pennsylvania (at \$39,000 a year) or Penn State (in-state tuition of \$16,000) is the better university. Selective colleges bring bragging rights but no one can agree on whether talented students succeed because of these elite colleges, or because of the same reasons they were admitted in the first place. There is some evidence that students at selective colleges work harder since they are surrounded by their most driven peers. Also, that the Ivy League brand matters in some fields, namely Wall Street. But for most young people, elite schools don't bring dramatic returns that we can measure.

What does bring dramatic returns is making smart choices about the costs of higher education, and making the most of the time spent there.

Networking is one of the most important, but neglected elements of the college experience. "Research tells us that between 60 to 80 percent of jobs are found through personal relationships," said John Bennett, director of the Master of Science and executive coaching program and assistant professor of behavioral science at the McColl School of Business at Queens University of Charlotte. I always share the story of a student who traveled to Washington to attend an event; in the hotel's elevator, she struck up a conversation with a young senator from Illinois named Barack Obama who was also attending. Her career was started with a handshake and a business card during a chance meeting that happened only because she took full advantage of the opportunities available to her as a student outside the classroom.

As valuable as those opportunities can be, they need to be chosen with open eyes. The denial about college debt is staggering. When I ask my first-year students if they know how much they will be paying in loans when they graduate, only a handful raise their hands. Negotiating a financial package before you enroll is crucial. A financial aid officer may not have the same incentives to get you more money six weeks from graduation. More students should consider commuting to school to help reduce costs. Mastering the finer points of beer pong may not seem worth the price tag when you are living at home with your parents at age 28.

In an economy where young people struggle to find well-paying jobs, manage debt and leave their parents' homes, it is more important than ever that students fully understand the cost of their education and are invested in their choice.

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Motherlode is featuring "Parenting After Senior Year" this week. Come back all week long for more on college and other options, and read [Far From My Tree](#), [Choosing a Scholarship Over a College Name Brand](#), [College Admissions Season: When the Answer Is No and Not Every Parent Chases College Prestige](#).