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Introduction

YOUR COLLEGE ITINERARY

AS A HIGHER education scholar, a college administrator, and a parent and stepparent to four college-going students with wildly different postsecondary trajectories, I have spent the better part of two decades thinking about the effect that college has on shaping the lives of individuals, families, and communities. Traditionally, going to college in the United States has been promoted as a reliable path to upward mobility, meaningful careers, and a life well lived. In fact, public discourse and policymaking in the United States, almost uniquely among developed countries, has tended to focus on the four-year college degree as a sure pathway to the middle class, while other forms of postsecondary education like technical training and apprenticeships are sidelined and shortchanged.

When Barack Obama became the nation's 44th president in 2009, he and his administration promoted going to college as a birthright for all Americans. President Obama advocated

for policies such as a proposed free first year of college, more permanent tax breaks for tuition, more generous loan forgiveness plans, and the doubling of the Pell grant for low- and moderate-income households.¹ Yet almost two decades later, politicians and the American public are increasingly souring on the value of a college education. Recent Gallup polls indicate that for Americans from across the political spectrum (though led by conservatives), confidence in college has dropped from 57 percent in 2015 to 36 percent in 2023.² And so you may be among those who are wondering if college is right for you or doubting that it's worth the time or cost.

These feelings are valid. In recent years, the cost of a college education has continued to soar, students from middle-income families have been squeezed, affirmative action (which has helped many historically marginalized students find their way) has been overturned in the Supreme Court, student protests and their disruptions have made regular news headlines, and the so-called “culture wars” pitting conservatives, liberals, and progressives against one another have increased tensions on campuses across the nation. Today's college-aged generation is the first generation of Americans that is likely not to achieve the same economic gains as their parents' generation, in part because of the

1. Winona Weindling, “Obama's Higher Education Legacy,” *Higher Ed Jobs*, January 12, 2017, <https://www.higheredjobs.com/articles/articleDisplay.cfm?ID=1160>.

2. Megan Brenan, “Americans' Confidence in Higher Education Down Sharply,” *Gallup*, July 11, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508352/americans-confidence-higher-education-down-sharply.aspx>.

burdens of educational and consumer debt.³ Loneliness and isolation are also on the rise, and according to a recent Student Voice survey sponsored by *Inside Higher Ed*, young adults no longer necessarily see college as a place they'd like to go to meet new people. They are also less likely to value or participate in extracurricular activities than previous generations of college students. With the COVID-19 pandemic hastening the embrace of online courses and degrees, they are far more likely to complete at least some, if not all, of their college degree without setting foot on a traditional college campus. And with the advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI), they are far less likely to see the value of reading and writing, two habits demonstrated to increase critical thinking and complex problem-solving skills across a range of disciplines.⁴

Given all this, how should you think about the current situation around going to college in the US today? Let me begin by stating emphatically that I don't believe a college degree is the only path to a good life. Generations of adults before us have led fulfilling, rewarding, and meaningful lives without a college diploma on the wall, and any one of us can rattle off a list of names of extraordinary leaders and innovators in a range

3. Stella Sechopoulos, "Most in the U.S. Say Young Adults Today Face More Challenges Than Their Parents' Generation in Some Key Areas," *Pew Research Center*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/02/28/most-in-the-u-s-say-young-adults-today-face-more-challenges-than-their-parents-generation-in-some-key-areas/>.

4. On the importance of reading and writing in college, see Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

of fields who are doing just fine without a college degree. Even a recent article from the Harvard Business School, one of the most elite of higher education institutions, argues that you can land a great job without a college degree.⁵

While I acknowledge there are other paths to a rewarding and fulfilling life without a college degree, I wholeheartedly believe, and will argue throughout this book, that college can and should be a uniquely rewarding experience for anyone (including you!) who puts in the work and engages actively in all that it has to offer. And even though it is all too often described in terms of alignment with direct work-ready skills and ROI (return on investment), your time in college also *should*, and with any luck, *will be* personally fulfilling and incredibly fun. Going to college is best considered in terms of its itinerary, not simply its destination. It is a process of personal growth and development of new perspectives and ways of thinking, not just a product or an inventory of things you learned for the “real world” of work. The difference between college and a well-stocked library or any other repository of information (including YouTube!) is that libraries are chock full of information, while college requires a practice of applying that information to novel situations under the guidance and supervision of experts and in the company of other learners. The library offers a potential pathway for individual enlightenment, while the college classroom adds a collective process to learning with a particular group of peers and mentors.

5. Jeff Mazur, “You Don’t Need a College Degree to Land a Great Job,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 11, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/08/you-dont-need-a-college-degree-to-land-a-great-job>.

In other words, college is not just the library, laboratories, cafeteria, gym, residence halls, seminar rooms, and lecture halls that make up a college campus; it is the people, the setting, the period in time, the things you do both on and off campus, the way you spend your time, the issues and ideas and problems and solutions on which you choose to focus your attention. It is also the laughter and goofiness and the mistakes you will make and the bad grades as well as the good ones, the tears and anxiety, the late nights, the panic of forgotten deadlines, the way you learn to ask for help, and the initially slow but real and ultimately rewarding mastery of one or two subjects or skillsets that you discover, by design or out of pure serendipity, as you advance in your chosen area of study and toward the completion of your degree.

This guidebook is written from the perspective that going to college, and finishing your degree, is and should be unequivocally worth it. My goal is to help you achieve the confidence in college that polls indicate Americans currently lack. The way to do this is to blend a pragmatic and step-by-step approach to maximizing your college experience while also practicing a perspective that is both optimistic and engaged; such perspective will nurture the motivation necessary to make the most of all college has to offer.

This book is a practical guide to help students (and families) navigate the choices that you may encounter as you select, prepare for, proceed through, and then leave college. This thicket of choices one makes in college, added together, make up the key learning process that occurs in college over time, in a particular place and with particular peers and teachers. This is what college boils down to—a shared experience of

personal development, academic development, and professional development in a specific learning context, somewhat unique to each and every person involved. While this book is designed to be read from cover to cover, that is not required if you know which college-related issues you need to address and would rather jump straight to that chapter. I hope you will feel comfortable flipping around in the book for ideas about handling choices you have to make or events that happen to you in college.

The issues I address in this book apply most obviously to colleges that have a physical campus, rather than being fully online, and that offer four-year degrees, called bachelor's or baccalaureate degrees. That is the assumed primary audience for this book—students seeking a bachelor's degree who plan to attend college on a campus for at least some of the time, whether that plan is to attend just one college or start their journey at a junior college or community college. Many of the challenges described and topics examined throughout the book apply to students pursuing two-year associate's degrees as well. Some of the advice can be translated directly to the online learning experience, but much of the advice regarding getting to know the place and interacting with people addresses the in-person experience.

As such, the advice in this book is most designed for anyone proceeding through a brick-and-mortar college—whatever your major and post-college goals—whether you are attending a familiar institution just minutes from where you have lived for much of your life or heading somewhere far from home for the first time. The advice holds true if you are the first in your family to go to college or if your parents and

grandparents attended college before you. It holds true regardless of the prestige of the institution, its age, or how much money it has to spend. My own experience has included a variety of institutions: I attended a little-known publicly funded liberal arts college as an undergraduate, then two renowned and extremely wealthy private universities for graduate school and have taught at large and small institutions across the range of prestigiousness and levels of resources available to students and professors. I am confident that with the right approach, you can have a transformational, career-launching, high-return-on-investment experience at many types of higher education institutions. You do not have to chase the rankings to guarantee a great college experience; in fact, aiming only for the highest ranked colleges you can get into is no guarantee of a worthwhile college experience, and you may waste a lot of money in the process.⁶

It is worth emphasizing that everyone, no matter how familiar they may be with college prior to enrollment, worries whether they're *doing college right*. The learning curve is steep, the expectations are different from your prior learning experiences, and the financial stakes are high. I hope that, after you have read through this book and completed some of the exercises within these pages, you will come to appreciate that college isn't about getting it right or wrong in a specific way, but

6. In a large-scale study of economic mobility in colleges, researchers from Opportunity Insights found significant upward mobility at lower ranked and mid-tier public institutions. See Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, Emmanuel Saez, Nicholas Turner, and Danny Yagan, "Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 23618, July 2017.

making smart choices, learning from mistakes, taking advantage of opportunities to grow and change as you progress toward the finish line, and developing a mindset and capacity to keep on learning after college is over.

Over the course of this short book, I aim to provide information and tools for you as a student to select a good-fit college and then to understand how best to maximize your experiences while in college, while also preparing for life outside and after college. The book is organized chronologically (it begins prior to identifying colleges to apply for and ends with college departures) and by relevant topics that students commonly face along the way. I expect that readers are going to typically consult one or two of the enclosed chapters for each stage, which means it's unlikely you will read the book front to back all at once. Rather, I hope you can treat the book as a series of shorter, more manageable, and helpful readings that will be relevant at different points along your college journey.

This book is an invitation to a journey that, if done well, can transform your life. I do not spend much time advising you on how to navigate online courses and programs. Nor do I spend much time coaching you on how to use generative artificial intelligence. I assume that over time, every college and classroom experience will find a way to weave the use and limits of AI into the college learning process. My general advice is, if the technology improves your experience, go for it; if it cheats you out of the experience and causes you harm, then it is not worth your time. I also do not spend much time discussing how a nontraditional student's experience differs from that of a traditional student. In certain crucial ways, nontraditional

and returning students will have different types of learning experiences. However, I also strongly believe that anyone, regardless of their life stage or status, has the right and should allow themselves the opportunity to use college as a time to explore, to hone critical and creative thinking skills, to try and fail at something new, to reflect on what matters, and to be surprised by serendipity. If you are a retired veteran who is working full-time and retooling for a new career, taking the time to reflect on how a poem such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* resonates with your own life is just as meaningful, arguable more so, than if you found that poem at age nineteen. College is a place to do that. You won't find many work contexts where you are encouraged to pause and reflect and engage with difficult material, but the process of doing these things will sharpen your work-ready skills of critical thinking, discernment, complex problem solving, oral and written communication, and, pardoning my vulgarity, a strong bullshit meter.

This book is not the product and summation of a research study, although research, both my own and that of higher education scholars across multiple fields, does inform the guidance provided in these pages. My prior research with first-generation college students and students from rural backgrounds is infused in the advice in this book, as first-generation and rural students are often surprised by the conventions of college and are thus better able to point out, in hindsight, the specific hurdles to overcome early in the college transition.

This book is not a citation-laden manuscript with reams of references or long excursions into the latest research on the

sociology, psychology, economics, or human development of higher education. As a guidebook, it does not offer an extensive bibliography (but I can attest to having digested and synthesized reams and reams of higher education research before signing up as your tour guide). However, woven lightly into the chapters and at the end of each chapter through a brief “Recommended Reading” section are relevant examples of the research, literature, and creative expression that inspire and support the guidance found within these pages. The overall organization of the book is as follows:

The first chapter, “The Path to College,” introduces questions that will help you think about college and how to prepare for it in the six months or so before starting your applications. This focuses on how you can identify where your talents lie, how you can cultivate a sense of purpose and self-efficacy, and how to connect these things with career and vocational paths that you may want to explore when you get to college. And it ties those elements together with a you-centered approach to thinking about what you want and need out of your college experience, and how to mentally and academically prepare yourself to get there.

The second chapter, “College Admissions,” takes a ten-question approach to identifying good-fit colleges as you prepare to apply, as well as factors to consider when ultimately deciding which college to attend. At the end of the chapter, I offer guidance on organizing this information and using it to evaluate your options as you proceed through the admissions and selection process.

In the third chapter, “Summer Before College,” I outline actions you can take prior to setting foot on campus in order

to smooth that transition. This involves concrete actions, some of which will include working a summer job to save money for college bills and move-in necessities, and some of which will include requirements that will come from your school—like placement exams, preorientation or orientation requirements, and first-year advising. It also includes tasks like exploring the campus culture, joining first-year student social media groups, and preparing your loved ones for your departure.

The fourth chapter, “Arrivals,” offers guidance on navigating the first days, weeks, and months in college. Here I describe exercises to prepare for meeting new and diverse groups of people, familiarizing yourself with the campus and its resources; taking time to learn about the surrounding area; joining clubs to hone skills, relieve stress, build networks, and make friends; and setting a schedule to contact home. These things can be achieved even by students who have limited time due to work-study jobs, athletics, or other similar obligations on and outside of campus. I also emphasize the importance of being open to serendipity in those first few months on campus. Cultivating an openness to new experiences, especially early on in your transition to college, allows the kind of luck—meeting a chance stranger in the library, stumbling onto that one club that changes your life—that just might shape the rest of college and even beyond.

In the fifth and sixth chapters (“The Shape of Your Education” and “Inside the Classroom”), I invite you to take a big-picture approach to navigating college academics, from selecting courses and majors to performing well in class, standing out to faculty, and framing academic experiences in

ways that appeal to future employers and graduate schools. The chapters emphasize approaching academics as an opportunity for both intellectual exploration and skill building, and discourage you from considering your major as the only way to find a rewarding career. I also acknowledge the pressures that you may face from parents, family members, community members, and others to select a particular kind of major. Students often feel like they make constrained choices—they can't just major in *anything*—when deciding what academic pathway to choose in college. I discuss how to think through academic, extracurricular, work-related, and personal choices in the context of constrained choices, and how to make a good-fit decision given the many demands on your time and talent.

In the seventh and eighth chapters (“The Shape of Campus Life” and “Outside the Classroom”), I dig into the very real fact that the bulk of your time in college will be spent outside the classroom. Most students I have worked with and interviewed have concurred that out-of-class experiences ultimately shaped their post-college lives more than any course or single experience inside the classroom. Figuring out how best to spend your time, and with whom to spend it, may take an adjustment period but it is well worth putting in a concerted effort to maximize your opportunities for growth and development outside of academics.

In the ninth chapter, “Leaving College,” I review the benefits and tradeoffs associated with exiting college, either for a brief period for health reasons or during a study abroad program or off-campus cooperative work experience, or for good through transfer or graduation. I explore the advantages of

opening your time horizon so that you can take a leave of absence, if necessary. I also talk about the value of leaving your home institution for brief periods so that you can participate in exciting academic or professional opportunities offered by other universities that you cannot get on your own campus. This chapter provides you with guidance on how to find and fund other helpful opportunities at other universities, how to navigate taking a leave and knowing your rights regarding readmission, and how to make the most efficient choices regarding credit hours toward your degree. I conclude with a postscript about the future of college, which, as we all know in these uncertain times, is, well, uncertain.

It is my sincerest hope that you walk away from this practical college handbook with tips and wisdom that you can apply to any brand of two- or four-year college and thereby maximize your chances of a fulfilling, successful college experience. I am not interested in coaching you on how to maximize your prestige for prestige's sake. You can attend one of the nation's most elite colleges and walk away without learning a thing, or you can attend a college that few outside the region have heard of and come away with a profoundly transformative learning experience. The trick of having a successful college experience is not about getting into the most selective and prestigious college; it is about sustaining a curiosity, motivation, and good practices to maximize what and how you learn, and apply what you learn in college to your life and work afterward. It is also about unpacking your inner wisdom regarding your own path of transformation, whether it is a transformation into adulthood or a new period of growth later in life. Instead of just trying to get you into a great college and letting the chips

fall where they may, I want to equip you with the tools that can help you to experience college intentionally, and therefore have the best possible experience in college, no matter where you go, so that you can set yourself up for a lifetime of personal fulfillment and career success.

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