



parents league
of new york

the review 2018

Essential Articles on
Parenting & Education

College Has Evolved. So Should Your Search.

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The American higher education landscape has shifted dramatically over the past few decades. For one, there has never been a broader array of choices for students. While the system certainly has its challenges, enrollment in American colleges and universities has reached an all-time high, and the composition of students has never been more diverse. According to research conducted by the Institute of International Education, the United States is still the number one destination for the 4.5 million students who choose to study outside of their home country. In addition, research from the National Center for Education Statistics notes that colleges are more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse now than ever before.

Students also currently have the most curricular choices in history. While the United States Census Bureau organizes college majors into approximately 188 different categories, there are many more to choose from, and the list gets longer each day. Gone are the days when students chose from the arts, humanities, social sciences or STEM fields. Students can now major in everything from philosophy to urban studies, entrepreneurship, enology and popular culture. Society and the global economy have evolved, and therefore what students focus on in college must follow suit. In his book *The Uses of the University*, former University of California President Clark Kerr reminds us that “as society goes, so goes the university.” He argues that higher education must evolve to meet the needs of society and prepare students for a changing world.

The Shift From Majors to Skill-Building

In fact, there has never been more soul-searching on behalf of colleges and universities attempting to reinvent themselves than there is today. If we intend to serve students better, we must meet the needs of today’s rapidly evolving global society. Consider the facts that only 27 percent of today’s college graduates are working in a field they majored in and approximately a third of the jobs that today’s graduates will hold have not been created yet. In fact, research shows that this generation of young

people will have approximately 10 to 14 jobs by the time they are 38 years old. How do you prepare a generation of young people for these dramatic shifts in the marketplace?

While majors are still a traditional part of higher education's culture, colleges are strategically emphasizing skills that will put students at an advantage upon graduation. Writing, critical thinking, quantitative and data analysis, problem solving, teamwork building, diversity training, and global mindedness are just a few of the areas of focus. These are lifetime transferrable skills that employers will continue to seek in graduates. As a college educator, I believe that my job is to equip students with the skills needed to sustain them through their final job, not just their first.

A Time for Exploration

In addition, career development and postgraduate preparation programs are reinventing themselves as they prepare to serve a different generation of young people. While colleges and universities are still offering traditional career coaching, networking, resume building, and job placement services, they realize that today's graduates need more. Studies show that this generation cares deeply about finding meaning and happiness at work. They want to spend time in college thinking about what they are passionate about and how that might translate into a major and career. A recent article, "Stop Calling it 'Work-Life Balance,'" points out that this generation of young people often asks, "Is my work meaningful to me? Do I have a cause? Do I have influence, purpose and alignment?"

Colleges like my own are creating programming, courses, workshops, and experiential learning models to encourage students to use their undergraduate years to explore and to reflect on purpose and meaning. We realize that if we don't provide intentional spaces for students to do this work, we are doing them a disservice. We want to send students to college not just to earn a job, but to obtain lifelong skills, to explore how to lead meaningful lives, and to become contributing members of society. Colleges and universities all take different approaches to these goals, and finding the one that fits a student best is critical to successfully navigating the college search.

Beyond the Bumper Sticker

While those of us who serve in leadership roles at institutions of higher education find the changes in our industry exciting, we also realize that it does not make the process of searching for a college any easier. We

have an embarrassment of riches in this country when it comes to college options, and as Swarthmore College psychologist Barry Schwartz reminds us, it is the “paradox of choice” that having so many choices actually produces tremendous anxiety. More colleges than ever are doing exciting and innovative work but, for students, finding the right fit is key.

While abundant choice certainly produces anxiety, it also gives us permission to look beyond the obvious. We live in a bumper sticker culture where many families want to get their students into the “best” college with the “most prestigious” brand name so they can put the right bumper sticker on their car or perhaps share the most impressive anecdote at a cocktail reception. There is still the belief that only an Ivy League or “Little Ivy” education will help a student land “the right job” or make the most valuable connections.

My two decades in higher education have taught me otherwise. Students are most successful when they love the environment in which they live and learn. In their book *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*, researchers Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini reported that engagement in purposeful activities inside and outside the classroom made students more successful in college and beyond.

The biggest misconception in the college search is that a university’s network or brand will create student success. In fact, the students who will thrive are those who find a school where they feel most comfortable in the academic and social culture. Assuming that only one particular subset of institutions is going to create a successful graduate is a dangerous road to embark on. As a college administrator and teacher, I have seen thousands of students transfer between institutions because they enrolled for the wrong reasons. They chose brand or ranking instead of reflecting on how the institutional culture, social scene and academic life fit who they are.

This approach is not good for students, and it’s certainly not good for American society. The beauty of America’s higher education landscape is its rich institutional diversity. While the array of colleges doing extraordinary work to prepare people for successful lives has grown immensely, most parents still push their children to consider the same handful of schools during the college search process. I know parents will encourage their students to consider the obvious during the college search: majors offered, location, job placement rates, internships and—yes—even those controversial rankings. However, I also encourage them to consider factors that most often make for a successful student in college and beyond.

Academic Life

Most students don't stop to think about how they learn best. Do they thrive most in small classroom discussions or larger lectures? Do they feed off the energy of personalized faculty attention or crave anonymity? These are very different pedagogical styles, and when students select the wrong one, they set themselves up for frustration. Thinking about how a student learns best before deciding where to apply to college is crucial. It could be the difference between selecting a large research university or a small liberal arts college, for example.

In addition, most students don't realize the average college student changes his or her major three times before sticking to one. Yet, so many students choose a college because it offers one particular major. Students should leave room for the possibility that the major they select may not be the one they end up graduating with. Most students are shocked to learn that there are majors available in college that they have not even heard of yet. A significant part of the college experience includes discovery and exploration. Choosing a college that provides academic flexibility and choice increases a student's chances for success.

Finally, given that most students will graduate and not work in a field they majored in, prospective students should also consider how institutions provide the transferable skills needed to survive in an ever-changing workforce. Strong writing, analytical, intercultural and critical thinking skills don't come naturally. They are intentionally developed through different pedagogical approaches.

Student Services

Today's institutions of higher education provide more student services than at any other time in history. NASPA, an organization of college student affairs administrators, reports that more students than ever are using disabilities services, counseling centers, academic counseling, tutoring, etc. The transition to college can be extremely stressful, and learning how to navigate a competitive academic and social environment is challenging.

At some point, most students will need support to navigate their college experience, and colleges are adding services to meet the increasing demand. As students consider colleges, they should also ask about the kinds of support available to ensure their success. Will the student need special accommodations? Is the student in therapy that needs to continue throughout college? Are there medical services the student is going to need in order to thrive? These may seem like small details, but not all

colleges are equipped to support the needs of every student. Taking the time to learn about student support services on each campus is crucial to ensuring student success.

Campus Culture

Every campus has a culture. Some schools are socially progressive, others are conservative, and most are somewhere in between. Some schools attract very diverse student bodies, while others are not yet representative of the populations of the United States or the world. Some schools have a “party” reputation, while others have been labeled “where fun goes to die.” Does the student want to go to a school where it’s cool to be in the Philosophy Club or to a campus dominated by a fraternity culture? Being realistic about the culture that fits a student best is the first step on the journey to a successful college search.

One way to understand campus culture is by visiting and talking to current students. While walking around campus, take notice. What do the posters in the student center say? What kinds of speakers are the students inviting to campus? What issues are the students writing about in the campus newspaper? What activities take place on the weekends? What do students enjoy doing the most? Students will thrive in an environment where they feel they have found their social peers. Throughout my career, most students I have counseled to transfer left an institution because the social culture was not a good fit. There are so many resources available to students seeking to understand institutional culture. With websites, overnight visits, individual conversations with enrolled students and more, there has never been so much information available to help students learn about social life on a campus.

The New College Search

The college search is not easy. In fact, it’s only become harder, but that’s ultimately a good thing. Instead of deferring to rankings or reputation, students now have the tools and the power to identify exactly the right institution for them. This asks more of students and their families, but it helps them to authentically and carefully consider a mix of factors, including the academic experience, student services, campus culture and more.

With those responsibilities in mind, colleges and universities are constantly evolving to best serve the needs of individual students and families. To make the most of the college search, how students and parents approach this process should evolve as well.

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This article first appeared in the 2018 issue of *Parents League Review*.
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