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Thinking Beyond College

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Every spring, high school seniors and their parents let out a sigh of relief when the college acceptances roll in and especially when they make their final choice and send off their deposit for the fall semester. The college search is over, and with it, the months and years of travel, work and anxiety.

But in researching and writing my latest book, *There Is Life After College*, I found that students, parents and counselors have put too much emphasis on jumping through the right hoops to get into college, but relatively little time focused on *how* they will spend their undergraduate years in college.

It's not good enough anymore to simply gain admission to a top college and then roll into the job market. A series of decisions that starts the moment high school seniors secure their spots in the freshman class—from choosing a major and courses to finding internships—increasingly plays a much larger role in life after graduation than *where* someone goes to college.

Sitting Back—or Taking the Wheel?

The problem is that too many students depend on their undergraduate years to spoon-feed them the experiences that will shape them for the future. They sit back and wait for professors to deliver lessons in the classroom. They participate in campus life, but too often from the sidelines. They fail to cultivate relationships with professors or staff who might lend advice and act as mentors. And they are reluctant to chase after experiences, whether undergraduate research or internships, that help them discover their passions and arm them with the interpersonal skills so in demand by employers today.

In college, “there are things you’re taught and then there are things you learn,” said Richard Settersten, Jr., director of the Hallie E. Ford Center for Healthy Children and Families at Oregon State University, who studies young adults. “A lot of what college comes down to is not what happens in the classroom. It’s about navigating life and building relationships.”

I met Settersten on Oregon State’s campus on a fall day several years ago, when he was teaching his class on critical thinking to several dozen students, mostly seniors. The classroom conversation wandered to a discussion about their own futures, what they wanted to do next in life. Many said they planned to go on to graduate school.

Settersten asked how many of them knew their professors well enough to request a letter of recommendation. Only a smattering of hands went up. Settersten wondered aloud why more of them didn't visit him during office hours, an easy way to build a one-on-one relationship with a professor who teaches sometimes hundreds of students in a semester.

“What shocked me is that they say, ‘No one has told me this before,’” Settersten said to me later. “They're seniors and they don't know how to navigate the institution.”

Now you might think, well that's Oregon State, a big public university with tens of thousands of undergraduates of varying academic ability. But this lack of engagement in college about what comes afterwards is happening everywhere. Fewer than half of college seniors in the annual National Survey of Student Engagement said they talked often with a faculty member about their career plans.

The “Soft Skills”

While a college degree remains the strongest signal of job readiness, employers are increasingly questioning whether a traditional undergraduate curriculum supplies students with the so-called soft skills needed in today's workplace—problem solving, critical thinking, communications, and working in teams.

A 2014 analysis of 20 million job ads by the workforce analytics firm Burning Glass found that soft skills appeared far more often than any technical skills in those ads. Twenty-five soft skills appeared in three out of every four job advertisements, no matter the industry. Virtually every job posting included communication, writing and organizational skills in its top five required skills. Writing skill, for example, was important even in information technology and health care jobs.

Job advertisements obviously do not describe every skill an employer wants. Rather, they are screening devices for the crucial skills a company needs and are probably not getting enough of in many candidates. The fact that so many job ads require soft skills, said the CEO of Burning Glass, Matt Sigelman, “reflects a perception that students are coming to the market less job ready with these skills.”

Sprinters, Wanderers and Stragglers

As a result, many of today's young adults—even those armed with a newly minted college degree—are unable to find the on-ramp to a career and are floundering in their 20s. A national survey of people in their mid-20s conducted for my book found that today's 20-somethings largely transition

into their third decade of life in one of three ways: they're either Sprinters, Wanderers or Stragglers.

- Sprinters move right into full-time work related to their major or go directly to graduate school with specific plans. Determination and experience are markers of Sprinters.
- Wanderers take about half of their 20s to get their start in a career. Students who drift through college are likely to become Wanderers afterwards.
- For Stragglers, most of their 20s are spent trying to get their start in a career. Delay and indecisiveness are markers of Stragglers. They often take off time from college or go part-time.

Three Determining Factors

Unlike the clear and straightforward paths that previous generations followed to a career, young adults nowadays face wide-open seas as they chart their next 30-plus years. Whether they become a Sprinter, Wanderer or Straggler on that journey depends largely on three factors that come to define their years after high school:

Don't take on too much debt to go to your dream school. The more loan debt students amass in college, the less flexibility they have when they graduate. Loan payments come to dictate the lives of 20-somethings. Salary—not fit, happiness, or career advancement—becomes the driving decision in choosing a job. Debt rules out unpaid internships that could lead to a top-notch job, for example, or living in pricey cities with dynamic labor markets that offer 20-somethings many job options.

It also reduces the chances that a new graduate will start a business. Gallup has found that among those who graduated from college since 2006 with some debt, one in five young adults said they delayed their entrepreneurial dreams because of their loans. For graduates who left college with more than \$25,000 in loan debt, one in four said they decided to forgo their plans for a start-up.

According to the survey for my book, 43 percent of Sprinters had less than \$10,000 worth of debt at commencement, far short of the \$37,000 average debt of the Class of 2016.

For many students, debt is inevitable. But too often students don't realize the impact that their decision to take on too much debt at 18 will have when they start out in their career four years later. At that point, they take a job just to pay the bills, thinking it will be short-term gig. Nearly half of new college graduates are underemployed, working jobs that don't require a bachelor's degree, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

For them, their six-month plan turns into a year, and then two years. They become Wanderers, and now in their mid-20s, they're competing for jobs with more recent graduates with fresh skills.

No wonder why the pathway to adulthood is getting longer. The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce found that in the 1980s college graduates achieved financial independence, defined as reaching the median wage, when they were 26. Today, they don't reach that mark until their 30th birthday.

"I knew it would be difficult but not this difficult," said Valerie Lapointe, a Wanderer who has been stuck in jobs she describes as "dead-end" since college graduation. "I honestly believed that I'd have more of my life together."

When I met Lapointe she was 25 and had decided that the only way to jump-start her career was to head off to graduate school. That's a common solution for college graduates wondering through their 20s, but one that comes with even more debt. Graduate school debt now accounts for 40 percent of the \$1.19 trillion of outstanding student loans in the United States.

Get as many internships as you can in college. Today employers hire as full-time workers around 50 percent of the interns who had worked for them before they graduated, according to the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University. At large companies (more than 10,000 employees) and in some industries (construction, consulting, accounting and scientific services) the share of interns who get full-time offers is growing every year, and closer to 75 percent at several of them.

One of the things that struck me in reporting the book was just how much students' outside-the-classroom experiential learning opportunities contributed to their success after college—everything from project-based learning and undergraduate research to study abroad, and especially internships.

Internships are now a critical cog in the recruiting wheel for employers and how new college graduates increasingly enter the workforce for the first time. The poll commissioned for the book found that 79 percent of Sprinters had at least one internship in college, compared with 47 percent of Wanderers, and just 24 percent of Stragglers. Nearly half of the Sprinters are employed at a company where they interned (compared with only 13 percent of Wanderers).

Undergraduates can no longer wait until the second semester of their senior year to start their job search. At many companies and organizations, if students didn't intern there, they have little chance of ever getting hired there.

Most of all, make sure you finish what you started. There are some 12.5 million 20-somethings with *some* college credits and *no* degree. Indeed, those in their 20s make up by far the largest share of the 31 million adults in the United States who left college short of a degree, according to the National Student Clearinghouse.

Now most parents who send their kids off to college think that because they finished high school that they will finish college. But only 40 percent of those who enroll at four-year institutions actually graduate in four years.

Nearly all the Stragglers in the survey for my book had failed to earn a credential by the time they were in the mid-20s. In many ways, these young adults are no better off financially than high school graduates who never attempted college at all. Employers, after all, don't advertise they want "some college." They want a degree.

While that piece of paper still carries currency with employers, it is clear that it's not the only marker of success in today's evolving and fast-changing job market.

Jeffrey J. Selingo is a contributing writer to the *Washington Post* and former editor of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. This article is adapted from his book *There Is Life After College: What Parents and Students Should Know About Navigating School to Prepare for the Jobs of Tomorrow*.

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