For Success After College Graduation, HOW Students Go to College Matters More Than Where They Go

Every year, high school students and their parents spend much time, effort, and money on the college search. By comparison, they spend very little time focused on how they will spend their undergraduate years while in college. Yet a series of decisions starts the moment they secure their spot in the freshman class. From choosing a major and courses to finding internships—these choices increasingly play a much larger role in life after graduation than where they go to college.

Young adults no longer have as clear or straightforward a career path as previous generations did. Many end up drifting aimlessly through their third decade of life, according to a national survey conducted for the book, There Is Life After College. Twenty-somethings nowadays transition into adulthood in one of three ways: they’re either Sprinters, Wanderers, or Stragglers.

The biggest difference between the Sprinters (those graduates who launched right into a career or transitioned easily into graduate school) and everyone else was how they navigated their undergraduate years. Sprinters took on less debt, focused on rigorous majors (the liberal arts or STEM), and engaged with their professors and in experiential learning opportunities (such as internships).

Interviews with students who drifted through college with little direction were more likely to become Wanderers afterwards. Half of Wanderers weren’t sure of their major when they entered college, and only 47% had an internship. After graduation, just one in five were employed in their field of study (compared to 97% of Sprinters).
Meanwhile, Stragglers often took off time from college or went part time. By their mid-twenties, 99% of them still hadn’t earned a college degree. This shouldn’t be a surprise given that there are 12.5 million twenty-somethings with some college credits and no degree, by far the largest share of adults who leave college short of a degree.

No matter where students choose to go to college, once they’re actually on campus, they should chase after experiences—whether undergraduate research, study abroad, or internships—that will arm them with interpersonal skills. Diving deep into the toughest courses and activities provides the challenge to work hard and learn from the best professors and peers. Such experiences will provide the most thorough preparation for the challenges, complexity, and ambiguity of the work world after college.

“A necessary and thoughtful contribution to the conversation on the role our colleges and universities play in preparing students for young adulthood. Everyone who has an interest the development of today’s college students and tomorrow’s leaders should read it.”

—Dan Porterfield, President of Franklin & Marshall College

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