

What's the Use of College?

By *Bradford F. Lewis, Ph.D.*
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Cleveland, OH - As millions of young adults head off to college I am reminded of a disagreement that my father and I often have about the utility of college. Like most Americans my father has been misled about the primary function of colleges and universities. Whenever we see some public official (or private one) do something inane, my father exclaims, "You would think a college educated person would know better." To which I respond, "Pops, college doesn't make you smart."

What is ironic about this exchange is that my father, who is one of the smartest and most well-read men I know, never finished college. I on the other hand spent most of my adult life in college: eight years as a student and ten years as a professor. So, I've met enough college educated people to conclude that college doesn't make you smart. This, however, never seems to convince him.

To win the disagreement I sometimes remind him that he never went to college, but he has been able to advance himself over many of his college-educated peers. "Yeah, well what's your point?" he might grumble.

"My point is that college doesn't make you smart."

To which he responds with a defeated sigh, "Well it should."

So for my father and those of his generation that sometimes get caught living in the world that *should be*, rather than in the world that *is*, I've decided to share a few myths and realities of college and also to provide five guidelines that will help students to maximize their college experience.

The first myth of college is that the longer you go, the wealthier you will become. College is not a place where you go for four years to become a millionaire later in life. Despite the fact that college marketing programs and admissions officers sell a four-year degree as a vehicle to wealth, the world's wealthy are not wealthy by having gone to college. Forbes magazine publishes a recurring issue in which they profile the world's wealthiest people. They call the list the Forbes 400. In the October 2005, issue eight of the top twenty wealthiest people (40%) had no degree higher than a high school diploma; and four of the top five wealthiest people (80%) were college drop outs. Similarly, the authors of the book, *The Millionaire Next Door* point out that because college graduates spend at least four years in college making debt rather than money, they begin their working lives four years behind their peers and tens of thousands of dollars in the hole. While college graduates do earn slightly more than non-college graduates for

doing a similar job, that difference in income is not great enough to warrant taking on great debt. This leads us to guideline #1, *be frugal*. Avoid student loans wherever possible. Do not accept credit cards or other lines of credit for unnecessary items. There are untold thousands of college graduates who are mired in debt accumulated during college for frivolous expenditures. Avoid this situation at all costs.

The second myth of college is that it prepares you for the workforce. Despite the fact that college marketing programs and admissions officers sell a four-year degree as a vehicle to a great job, only in rare instances do four-year degrees correspond to great jobs. In this respect, students who earn engineering, education, and nursing degrees are in luck. However, students who earn degrees in business management, chemistry, English, finance, history, professional writing, safety management, anthropology, biology, criminology, entomology, geology, philosophy, plant pathology, psychology, family and consumer sciences, neuroscience, soil science, wood science, legal studies, liberal studies, religious studies, social studies, women's studies (you get the point), will have greater difficulty.

Unless students in majors such as these plan to pursue master's or doctoral level work, they are often compelled to work "out of field." Instead, most employers invest substantial amounts of time, money and other resources, preparing entry level employees to do a given job. They spend even more resources training established employees for improved performance and advancement.

This leads us to guideline #2, *plan your career path*. After having identified "what you want to be when you grow up." Talk to "grown ups" in that line of work to find out what the best academic preparation is for that type of work. In many career fields, the discipline a worker studies in college is incidental. In other fields background knowledge of a different disciplinary area is extremely advantageous though not necessary. For example, a journalist with background knowledge in genetic engineering has a unique advantage over the average journalist. The idea here is to be proactive and thoughtful in mapping a career path. College plays a very small role in preparing you for the workforce.

I can hear some hostile dissenter now. "Well Mr. Smarty Pants, if college won't help me to earn a million dollars and if it doesn't prepare me for a job then what is the degree for?" I'm glad you asked. The first reality of college is that, if we complete it successfully, the best we get from it is a credential. This credential (which most people call a degree) is simply a ticket that allows us to begin doing something. A nursing degree would allow a person to begin a nursing practice. An engineering degree would allow a person to begin working as an engineer. A psychology degree would allow a person to begin studying more psychology at a higher level. The degree is simply a credential, nothing more and nothing less. As such it is a starting point. It is for this reason that the ceremony closing out one's college experience is called "commencement."

Understanding that the four-year degree is only a credential helps to make the next guideline more sensible. Guideline #3 is *don't let school interfere with your education*. I first heard this admonition from a professor I had in graduate school. (I later learned that the quote is attributed to Mark Twain). During my first year as a doctoral student, I passed this professor on my way to class. He told me to join him as he was on his way to a lecture given by a Nobel Prize winning

physicist who was visiting the university. “No,” I declined graciously. “I have a class to attend. To this he smiled and said, “Don’t let school interfere with your education. Class will be there next week with the same book and the same instructor. This physicist may never come this way again.” Thousands of students spend the greater part of their college lives with their heads buried in books. They miss out on campus events, lectures, plays, the development of friendships, parties, travel abroad and most of the educationally rich experiences that college life has to offer. In the end, they get the same credential that everyone else gets, nothing more and nothing less.

The second reality of college is that it is the best social networking institution available. It’s better than First Fridays, better than FraserNet, better than church, even better than MySpace. Why is college better? The networking that takes place in college is better for several reasons. One reason it is better is because it does not feel or look like networking. It is place where genuine friendships (or at least associations) can be built without the specter of ulterior motives. Few college students would wonder, “Is this guy trying to be my friend simply to get my money?” While I realize there are exceptions, for the most part college students do not have any money. They do not yet have positions of privilege. They do not run powerful corporations. In fact, even if they did, their peers (other college students) are not typically in positions to take advantage of that money, privilege and power. For this reason, the relationships built during college tend to be more genuine. Another reason college networking is better is because in one place each student has access to thousands of people who will one day be well positioned in nearly every imaginable walk of life. It is not unreasonable for a college student to look up 10 years after graduation to realize that he has personal relationships with four professional athletes, two attorneys, three journalists (one of whom writes for a national publication), four college professors, three engineers, a federal lobbyist, and tens of other professional people.

What does this reality mean for today’s college student? This reality leads to guideline #4, *build a strong social and professional network*. One of the best uses of a students’ time is building strong genuine relationships with fellow students and maintaining consistent communication upon graduation. In this sense joining social organizations is important; volunteering for campus events is important; spending time in a friend’s dorm room in good conversation and uproarious laughter is important; going to movies together is important; visiting one another over spring break and during the summer is important. More than just being important, these types of activities are as important as (if not more important than) getting straight A’s. After 14 years of life post-college, no one has ever asked me what my grade point average was. However, I often rely on the friendships and associations I built while in college.

The third reality of college is that it avails us of opportunities that most people will not likely see again in life. Most college and university campuses have radio and television stations, offer study abroad programs ranging from one month to one year, have intramural sport teams, offer regular theater performances, have student governance associations, and have a wide range of clubs and interest groups. The beauty of these offerings is that students do not need any special training or certification for most of these offerings. All that is needed is an interest and a willingness to learn.

That being said, guideline #5 is *Carpe Diem* - Seize the Day (or seize the opportunities). For those who have not been there yet, I will tell you that life does not offer many opportunities to

spend four months over seas. What is more, for most adults if the opportunity were there, responsibilities such as work, children, the house, car note, etc. would make it difficult to take advantage of the opportunity. Similarly, most working adults work very hard to find extra time to join sports teams, take martial arts, or try out for and perform in a play. Indeed the freedom that college students enjoy and the availability of unique opportunities makes it an ideal time in life to learn new things, meet new people, and have rich, new experiences.

So, while college may not make you smart, a smart college student can certainly make the most out of her college experience. As September gets underway, I encourage parents and students alike to make smart choices. Approach the college years not as a four year race to be ended quickly, but as an opportunity to establish a foundation for long-term success.

Author Note: Bradford F. Lewis, Ph.D. conducts research on the teaching and learning of science. His work includes explorations of students' worldview and science career attainment. He is also author of *The Greatest Gifts a Parent Can Give*.