
Making Informed Choices, for Now and Later

This concluding chapter explains that college provides a safe place to explore different career options. Students learn that switching majors, interning, working as a research assistant, and talking with professors are all excellent ways to test out majors and assess whether a career in that field is a good fit. The chapter addresses tips for changing majors, talking with parents about desired careers, finding a vocation or career path, and shaping professional identity. The book culminates with a section about how to navigate college, and life generally, with research-based decisions. Following these recommendations will ensure that students continue their journey as learners, informed citizens, and social leaders long after they finish reading this book.

In this concluding chapter, we summarize the central points of this book. First, college is a *process*, not a destination. It is important to allow the process to change students significantly, and for students to know that they should not expect to leave college with the same expectations they had upon entering. Second, college has a hidden curriculum. The explicit curriculum of college courses represents half or less of what students really need to learn during college. In addition to mastering the content of their classes, college students must also discover how to navigate choices for their adult life. That entails learning how to deal with being bored, tolerating frustration, working through what can at times feel pointless, even interacting with people that students dislike. Additionally key is learning how to have fun in safe and responsible ways, and balancing the greatest personal responsibilities and freedom that life has yet offered. College life is complicated, and it can be wonderful. College should be and often is life-altering.

STUDENT STORIES: WHAT WE EXPERIENCE

#drivingwithoutdirection: “Why am I here?” Everyone else seems excited and cruising along with what they are up to. All I know is that my parents said “go to college,” so here I am.

Since middle school, **Ellie’s** dad has emphasized the importance of going to college. “Get an education,” he’d say, “that’s the one thing no one can ever take away from you.” While in high school—where classes were mundane, and the teachers assigned busy work—Ellie dreamed of college as a magical place where things would be more interesting. Now that she is finally there, college seems like it’s just a continuation of high school. She is living at home to save money and doesn’t feel that she is really a part of the campus community. At this point, she just does not want to let her father down. Though she received some scholarships, she does not see the point in continuing to spend money on college if she does not know how to make it worth it.

#tooeasy #notchallenged: College is so easy! In my AP classes in high school I had to study so much more than I do now in college.

Tyrone went to a high school that was pretty challenging (he'll never forget that one English teacher who gave him a B because his essay references were not perfect!). He took many AP classes, had calculus, did lots of writing. Now in college, he finds that his classes are a breeze and feels under-challenged. He wonders if he picked the wrong college and is thinking about transferring. But he is not sure if he wants to start all over again at a new place.

#parallelplan #changingmajors: I made a big life-altering decision today and haven't felt this excited about school for awhile, tho it's also kind of scary moving away from what I know.

Kiersten explains her decision to change majors, walking away from her original plan: When I first came to this university, I had grand plans of becoming an investigative reporter, exposing corrupt governments and corporations. Now, I am more focused on creating financial security for myself, something that my parents didn't have. . . I am lining myself up with internships and positions that will hopefully mean a more financially stable future. That also means not working for the Associated Press like I had originally intended, although I still believe in pure, unbiased journalism.

#americandream #proudimmigrant: Living the dream—here in my first day as a college student and aiming to make my family proud.

In contrast, **Isabella** describes sticking with her original plan and explains her plan's origins:

Starting out as an immigrant here, my grandmother, along with my dad, aunt, and uncle, were very poor. She worked to provide for her children, which echoes me and my mother's situation. She selflessly worked as a seamstress here and a housekeeper there for families in the wealthy suburbs of Houston. Making

what she was making, it was impossible for her to accumulate any wealth as she could not purchase a home and she had no car . . . [Then she established her own business.] She was able to really take off in a career that she loved. My father, aunt, and uncle were able to catapult themselves as well. The dry-cleaning business owned by my grandmother was divided between my dad and my uncle. They were able to grow their businesses and accumulate wealth for themselves. My aunt took the academic approach. She was the only one who went to college and earned her bachelor's degree. She then went on to medical school and earned her Doctor of Medicine. All of my family has assimilated into the upper-middle-class culture, yet we are always mindful of our humble beginnings . . . My desire to become a doctor stems from [my aunt's] success despite the odds. I look at how she carries herself and I see the lifestyle she has, and I want that for myself.

#vocation #publichealth: God, help me to continue to throw myself into your capable hands and follow my #vocation to increase #publichealth.

Abram explains how his religious beliefs fed into his career choice:

I feel that God has called me to go into the medical field . . . My passion for nutrition and health is much of the reason why I have decided to pursue a career in the medical field. I am sickened by the scourge of chronic illness that so many people deal with in the United States . . . A few of my favorite verses that speak about the need of moderation in our lives lie in the book of Proverbs. Chapter 23 verse two speaks about the drastic need of people to exercise moderation in their eating habits. Self-control is demonstratively important for anyone who wants to have good health, regardless of the influencing factors around them . . . If people would choose to live responsible lives and say no to many

of their appetites and desires and not expect doctors they pay to give them fixes for the problems in their lives, I believe that patients' overall health would improve drastically.

#genderinstem #findingyourownway: Sometimes you just know where your destination is. "I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship." —Louisa May Alcott

Showing yet another way that career goals can be established, **Sierra** explains how experiencing paternalism fueled her passion for pursuing a career in STEM:

When I was ten years old, I told my father I wanted to be a doctor. He told me that I would be in school until I am thirty and would never settle down and get married as a result. A similar situation occurred when I was in kindergarten. I enjoyed drawing and painting and told my parents I wanted to be an artist. Instead of entertaining the idea as a normal response, my dad told me "there's no money in that." I understood that I was expected to have a high-paying job, but nothing that would interfere with my future duties of being a wife and mother . . . I was upset by the idea that I could not have a professional occupation such as a doctor, because it would conflict with expectations of domesticity, and instead chose to rebel against such ideas . . . I was not meant to be in school for too long and miss my prime to have children.

I never identified as a feminist and still do not, however, the control my father tried to exhibit over me gave me an understanding of it [feminism] . . . Being aware that I live in a patriarchal society further helped me to understand what my parents expected of me as a daughter . . . I had always thrived in math and science courses, therefore when I discovered engineering, I took an interest. When I walked into my first engineering class, I was the only female in a class of twenty . . .

I was viewed by my male peers as a weak link. I was not meeting the gender role assigned to me. I wore make-up and dressed to my gender, and this somehow made me look dumb. I was forced to work twice as hard to prove myself. I built better bridges, designed faster circuits, and got better grades.

SCIENCE: WHAT WE KNOW

What many of these student stories describe is a process called career decision-making. Jessie Carduner and colleagues (2011)¹ studied the process of choosing a major and a career and found that settling on a major and career prior to or early in college is not always a good thing. This is particularly the case when students make decisions about their major before they have acquired enough information. In addition, deciding on a career is not a one-point-in-time deal. Revisiting and revising decisions about majors and intended career paths during college equips students to navigate later changes to career plans. Conversely, in what Carduner and colleagues refer to as “multipotentiality,” many students have a variety of career options available to them. Sometimes they get stuck, paralyzed in the face of all the paths they could choose. Students need to avoid both extremes: that of making decisions too soon and being too wedded to them to learn from new information, and that of getting stuck in the overwhelming amount of possibilities and delaying decisions indefinitely. From the perspective of our navigation analogy, you do not have to have your final destination picked from the start, and you can be open to changing exactly where you end up, but you do not want to stay stuck in one place, either. You have to start by selecting a general direction to travel.

As Daniel Chambliss (2014)² states, one of the most important activities that college students need to engage in, after acclimating to the campus social world, is to begin making academic choices. Students should work on mastering academic learning only after they declare their majors,

figure out which professors they wish to continue to study with and learn from, and determine whom they should turn to for career advice. Before this process begins, however, students should prioritize exposure. The first semesters of college provide an excellent opportunity to take courses that are different from any topics that students have been exposed to before college. Learn what is available first, and do not feel obligated to choose an academic path too quickly.

As they set out to choose majors and careers, students should recognize that not all learning takes place in the classroom or on campus. In a book called *Making the Most of College*, Richard Light (2004)³ finds that learning outside the classroom (e.g., through extracurricular activities and social events) helps college students to make better, more informed career decisions. He also offers insights on which kinds of classes are most effective for student learning. Many students, he reports, learn better from highly structured classes, with many quizzes and short assignments that give students relatively quick feedback from the professor on their progress. Likewise, students benefit greatly from courses that let them make changes to assignments before receiving a final grade, learning the art of revision. This means that students might want to seek out courses with these traits, which are not always present in the large introductory sections of highly popular majors (e.g., pre-med classes such as introductory biology). While those classes are vital prerequisites, many courses in other departments can provide different types of structure and feedback that students need to make more informed decisions about their academic careers, especially early in college.

“The transition from education to work is a key developmental task of emerging adulthood,” wrote Julia Dietrich and Katariina Salmela-Aro (2016: 334).⁴ Interpersonal contexts of work and preparation for work have changed in recent decades, and the burden is squarely on students’ shoulders to seek work preparation accordingly. As students navigate college, they often need to revise their career goals, and such a change can be considered a positive sign that students are allowing college to change them. Likewise, success can entail leaving behind career goals that were not suited to a student’s strengths, or that are unobtainable in today’s

job market or given the student's social and economic resources. Most importantly, college provides the context in which students can practice handling inevitable setbacks, gaining skills that will aid them when they encounter barriers later in life.

ADVICE: WHAT WE (CAN) PROVIDE

#drivingwithoutdirection #whyamihere Actually, **Ellie's** uncertainty about her life path is not that surprising. According to Jeffrey Arnett (2015)⁵ and other life-course researchers, Ellie is experiencing at least two characteristics of emerging adulthood: instability and feeling in-between. Arnett states that some emerging adults are clearly not ready for college, but due to pressure from parents or society, they find themselves enrolled. Emerging adults can often flounder as a result, and in order to be successful they must find a connection. Ellie mulls over her current situation. She understands she is supposed to have a plan for her life, but her plan ended after "attend college." She knows she needs to update "The Plan," but she is unsure how.

If Ellie were to reach out to a caring adult in her life about this—be it a college advisor, professor, parent, or anyone she trusted to help her make changes—one of the best research-based pieces of advice she could receive would be to enroll in a smaller course. Even at large public institutions, such classes are often more available than most students know. A smaller class would help her be better engaged and facilitate making connections with other students and with the course instructor, with whom she's more likely to interact face-to-face, given the class size. While Ellie is enrolled in college and enjoys more academic freedom than she has ever had before, living at home finds her still under the same rules and expectations of adolescence. Instead of moving forward as she thought college would enable her to do, she feels stuck in place. She is ready to become an adult, but she does not know how to get started. Most importantly, Ellie can still make this transition during college, if she finds the right people to help her navigate it.

Ellie was the first in her family to attempt any schooling beyond a high school diploma. After her mother's death, her family was just her and her father. Ellie watched her father work extremely hard to provide for the two of them and is proud to claim a "working-class" background when questions about what her family does for a living arise. Ellie's father has expressed his desire for her to earn a college degree for as long as she can remember. He wants her to be financially secure so she will be able to provide for her own family someday. Ellie has her father's unwavering support for her education, but she does not have adequate social support at college. Getting connected outside the classroom and becoming invested socially, as well as academically, in her future will give Ellie the connections she desires even if she has not vocalized them. These connections will certainly aid her in discovering what motivates her and boost her chances of finding a major that sparks her interest. The most crucial thing for Ellie is to take charge of her education, to make her college experience her own. Ellie should find other students who share similar interests, academic or otherwise, and talk to them or to faculty and staff in the classes she does enjoy in order to identify some areas of study she might have overlooked. She could benefit from enrolling in courses that present different types of feedback and learning as we described earlier. Just listening to others as they talk about the value of college, or a particular major, or trying a new type of class may excite her in ways she may not have seen on her own.

#tooeasy #notchallenged In certain ways, **Tyrone** is one of the classic "overachievers" who, in high school, "labor over homework until 2:30am, after spending their afternoons and early evenings participating in a roster of activities" (Stuber 2011: 3).⁶ Since researchers find that this pattern prepares students most for elite universities, it is understandable that Tyrone is struggling over how his expectations are mismatched with the approach of the public university he attends. However, if he recognizes the importance of extracurricular involvement in facilitating the returns of college, Tyrone may not need to switch schools to find fulfillment.

Whether he eventually transfers or ultimately finds the intellectual engagement he desires at his current university, we encourage students like Tyrone to try to more fully engage with their current campus. At the

very least, this will help Tyrone to broaden his horizons, and prepare him to work in a variety of organizational settings and with people who come from backgrounds less advantaged than his own, even if he does transfer. But in the process, he may find that carving out his professional path within his current public university develops skills he does not yet possess, and that graduate school could fulfill some of his academic aspirations.

For example, if Tyrone is a pre-med student interested in serving patients, then the experiences he is gaining at his public college may bolster his ability to communicate with patients from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. For instance, patients from less affluent backgrounds may be less verbose in explaining their physical symptoms, requiring Tyrone to ask more probing follow-up questions to ensure he can provide the correct medical advice. Though highly selective universities may provide the kind of cultural status that is perceived to lead immediately to high-paying positions, public and other kinds of university settings often involve exposure to a greater range of people, with different kinds of economic, social, and cultural capitals. In all but the rarest of circumstances, professionals in any field can gain from such exposure in college.

More than offering academic credentials and a stamp of approval into high society, college also provides ways of escaping the “bubble” students found themselves in prior to college. Tyrone can rise to this challenge by stepping out of his comfort zone. He can get to know people who may not have been able to take calculus in high school, or who attended high schools that did not offer the course at all. The goal is to learn more than just what gets said in class. Maybe someday he will still decide to transfer, but for now Tyrone should take full advantage of all his university has to offer. He may like the person he becomes, and at the very least he will feel better knowing he did not waste his time experiencing new things.

#parallelplan #changingmajors Modeling some of the changes that college students need to make to their career plans as they gain new information is **Kiersten**. Students need to continually re-evaluate: Are their intended career plans the best way to accomplish their goals? In the process of interrogating their goals, students need to talk to people and do research. Kiersten likely did this, got some advice, and fine-tuned her

original goals. That is something that she should be proud of and other students can aspire to do. At the same time, in light of Kiersten's emphasis on financial security, it is important to underline that students can find financial well-being in most career paths, if they work hard and make strategic choices based on what excites them about that job. They should not change their goals simply for the sake of money. It is better to match pictures of success to passions and interests. It sounds as though Kiersten is on the right track to figuring this out.

#americandream #proudimmigrant While **Isabella** appreciates her cultural background and her family's status, she wants to improve her position, and that is an excellent dream. In fact, it is *the* American dream. It is also important, however, for Isabella to ask herself whether she is pursuing a career in medicine for the right reasons. Her socioeconomic background will shape her college experience to some degree, yet her own choices also help determine how she will end up. How truly fascinated is Isabella in a career in medicine? Does she simply want to become like her aunt or is she really excited about being a doctor herself? She should consider what a physician does day-to-day and whether that lines up with what she is interested in doing. Perhaps it does, or perhaps it is the lifestyle that attracts her. If that is the case, then Isabella would do well to consider a wide array of other options that provide similar lifestyles and socioeconomic status while fitting her specific interests more closely. Becoming a doctor is not the only route to financial security; it is merely one of the best-known.

#vocation #publichealth Like Isabella, **Abram** aspires to be a doctor, but for quite distinct reasons. Abram seems to have a strong passion for health, one related to his religious faith. The fact that he talks specifically about his public health concerns, something that attracts less attention than the general dream of becoming a doctor, is a good indicator that he is going into a field that fits his interests. At the same time, during college Abram should seek to develop an ability to relate to his future patients. He seems to attribute health issues to lack of responsibility and perhaps some deficiencies in those who struggle with poor health. Exposing himself to a wide range of students during college may broaden his empathy for people

who come from different circumstances than his own and whose health problems are not exclusively the result of poor choices. Likewise, getting to know other students who are interested in health but do not share his religious beliefs and motivations could be useful later when working in a diverse group of health professionals.

#genderinstem #findingyourownway In her story, **Sierra** also demonstrates awareness of how her background contributes to—but does not determine—her career plan. The constraints enforced on her by her family compel her to seek her own sense of self apart from these restrictions. While she describes her gender as setting her apart from others in her major, and perhaps also in her future career, her personal empowerment and her understanding of the valuable role she plays are likely to continually motivate her to succeed in the field of engineering. That is a good sign. At the same time, it would be helpful for Sierra to find others who share in her minority status. It is likely that a student group of females in STEM fields exists on campus. If it does not, she could establish such a group. Then, instead of feeling isolated in her classes, Sierra and other young women could fuel their shared passions together.

More generally, all these students need to ask whether they are fully engaging in the process of college. Selecting a major and a career path are perhaps the most important decisions they will make in college. This is the time to reevaluate preconceived notions of what to be and do, and to take ownership of where their lives are headed. The awareness these students have of how their backgrounds influence their plans is valiant and can make for excellent material to share in applications for scholarships and awards. However, young people must not feel that college and life plans are *determined* by these backgrounds. Where students come from and what they have experienced before college can inform their decisions about the right path to take in college, but students should not feel any less free to make their own choices.

Wrapped up in finding the best path for oneself is understanding that there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Someone like Sierra, who is a STEM major, would do well to pay particular attention to filling out her electives and fully engaging in other general education classes to round

out her education. This will help her to gain skills in decision-making, communication, and other “soft” skills that all careers require. On the other hand, someone like Kiersten, who has a liberal arts major, would benefit from seeking out internships and job-shadowing opportunities. Her liberal arts major may already stress soft skills, and she can round out her experience through internships—getting out in the real world, participating in specific career development opportunities, and gaining particular hard skills. In summary, students should seek to balance the two sides of the equation, reflecting on the strengths of their intended major and on what limitations they can supplement through other activities.

TOGETHERNESS: WHAT WE (CAN) SHARE

Chikako and Sierra. A student organization on campus is hosting a fall carnival event for local kids, and Chikako and Sierra are both assigned to the face-painting booth. They begin to chat while they paint. Sierra is the first to speak, asking Chikako what her major is. Chikako responds by saying “well, do you want to know my official major—the one my parents chose for me—or do you want to know my real major, the one I truly love?” Sierra says simply “you too?!” and they both laugh in front of the kids. Chikako explains that she is listed as a pre-law political science major because that is what her parents want her to do. They are both attorneys. But Chikako loves kids and wants to be an education major. That is why she volunteered for this event! Sierra knows the feeling. She is a STEM major at the moment, but deep down she really loves art, which is why she was so excited to help with face painting. Sierra also mentions that she felt better after discussing things with a career counselor, who gave her some ways to explain that a career in art can still be very practical. Chikako says that she had a similar experience when she spoke with a trusted faculty member during her office hours. They share with each other some tips on articulating their desires and plans to their parents, even though that seems like a very scary thing to do.

Camille and Kristen. At the same fall carnival, Camille and Kristen are volunteering at a booth that has giant foam building blocks for children to play with. To pass the time, and to attract more people to the booth, they start planning how to build the tallest possible structure out of the blocks. This gives way to a conversation about how they have both been doing a lot of real-life planning as well—plans that involve careers, majors, and courses. Camille says that she feels stressed because she loves so many different fields but she cannot put together a concrete plan. Kristen mentions that she felt the same way, but after going to a career fair and talking with her academic advisor, she has learned some new strategies for narrowing down her options and incorporating them into one flexible plan. She is still exploring for sure, but she feels much more in control of it all and is even having a little fun now that she can relax (because she knows she has several good career options to choose from!). Camille is very intrigued, and after chatting for quite awhile, Kristen gives Camille the contact information for that advisor.

Connor and Tyrone. Connor and Tyrone are working at the dunking booth at the carnival. They chose to volunteer together because they have become friends during the semester. Connor talks about how much he has benefited from having Tyrone tutor him. He is now getting to the point where no more tutoring is needed, and they have begun to just hang out as friends. Tyrone says that he has benefited even more, and he is grateful for the experience. He did not even think about tutoring until a faculty member mentioned it after seeing how bored Tyrone was in class. It all seems so crazy now because Tyrone wants to be a professor, which is something he may have never even considered if he had not started tutoring Connor.

TIPS: WHAT WE (CAN) DO

In this final section of the chapter, we highlight ten tips for all college students. Although these have been covered in one way or another throughout the book, it helps to restate them explicitly. We encourage students to revisit these tips in the years ahead.

1. Find yourself, know yourself, trust yourself, create yourself, become yourself

The stereotypes out there in pop culture about the college experience are plentiful. Popular movies give you a wide variety, from *Animal House* to *Pitch Perfect*, from *Legally Blonde* to *Drumline*, and from *The Social Network* to *Monsters University*. And you know what? They are all true. But they do not even come close to representing the infinite number of ways to experience college. Here is the truest of all stereotypes about college: it is a time to find out who you really are. As we learned in chapter 1, most of your classmates are discovering what it means to be an independent adult, and they are all doing it in their own way. Furthermore, as chapters 5 and 6 highlight, everyone is affected by their own unique background, and we all differ from each other in many significant ways. Everyone is experiencing college in their own way—there is no such thing as “fitting the mold,” no matter how hard you try. There is no mold into which all students fit. At the same time, everyone is facing similar challenges. This is a time to reflect on what you already know about yourself, and what might be left for you to discover. It may even feel like you are creating a new “self” at times, one that is different from how you felt before college. Your hobbies and friends may be a lot different from those you had just a few short years ago. And that is ok! Just as you might have realized as you read chapters 2 and 4, you gain confidence, over time, from understanding where you come from, where you are now, and where you might go next.

2. Explore: Embrace the experience . . .

The first thing you learned from reading chapter 1 is the concept of *emerging adulthood*. Whether you feel ready or not, you are probably faced with the challenge of figuring out your own path to adulthood. We discussed a bit more about this in chapter 4 and here in chapter 8. A necessary prerequisite to finding a path is *exploration*. Or, said differently, it is time for you to wander around a bit and see what you like and what you do not. Is this

wasted time? Absolutely not. It may feel like you are under a lot of pressure to decide *right now* what kind of adult you will be. That is indeed a daunting task. But you have time to explore your options first. In fact, your happiness as an adult may depend on whether you explore your options before committing to a path. In chapter 3, you read that college is both a credential and a process. Embrace that process to see what benefits may emerge. Step outside your box a little bit. Chapters 5 and 6 described how college can be an incredibly diverse place, full of individuals with a myriad of different backgrounds, beliefs, values, and interests. Interact with individuals who are different than you; try out experiences you would not normally try; and, hopefully, learn some things that you did not think you would ever find interesting. This process of exploration will make your college degree truly valuable—both to you and to your future employers. Just as you read in chapter 7, engaging in the campus community is key to becoming a leader. Exploration with an open mind is the first step. Embrace the experience!

3. . . . and Decide: Have some “long-term right-nows”

As you might have guessed, after genuine exploration comes soulful decision-making. Simultaneous with the exploration we just discussed is the process of making decisions, both big and small. Chapter 1 also mentioned that one of the primary outcomes of emerging adulthood is independent decision-making. College is both exhilarating and terrifying largely because it is full of decisions. All of a sudden you have the ability to choose your major, your bedtime, your relationships, your study habits, your class attendance, your leisure activities, your diet, and so on. This can absolutely feel overwhelming at first. But, over time, you may discover how wonderful this new autonomy can be. In chapter 4 we learned how important it is to develop a sense of ownership over your learning process. In chapter 7 we noted that this is also a fundamental part of becoming a true leader. Treat your decision-making with care. From books like this, and from faculty, staff, and friends, you already have a wealth of trustworthy

research, real-life experiences, and practical advice. Make sure that your short-term decisions—even things as small as whether you go to the gym, the library, or the party tonight—line up with the much bigger long-term decisions you have made, such as academic and career goals. Make good choices, learn to prioritize, and know what is important to you.

4. Experience learning

In chapter 2, we described the major role that *soft skills* will play in your future, and in chapter 3 we showed that college is, in part, a developmental process. We also described how college offers opportunities to develop more human, cultural, and social capital. Finally, in chapters 7 and 8, we reflected on how engaging in various parts of the campus community is vital to becoming a leader. What do all of these lessons tell us? That learning is important, and it happens both inside and outside of the classroom. When you began college, you may have been focused mostly on classroom learning, which is to be expected. But hopefully by now you realize that college can mean so much more. There are countless ways to develop abilities such as interpersonal skills, teamwork, leadership, multimodal communication, and multicultural awareness, just to name a few. Think big and small. Perhaps you can seek out a once-in-a-lifetime study abroad or internship experience. Perhaps you can start today with a one-time volunteer experience or by joining a student organization. These opportunities exist on every college campus and oftentimes go underutilized. Such experiential learning will increase both your long-term career opportunities and your enjoyment of the college experience.

5. Take a social science or humanities class

Perhaps one of the longest-standing objectives of most colleges is to instill the ability to ask one seemingly simple question: Why? Your professors probably want you to demonstrate this ability in the form of raw

intellectual curiosity about topics they discuss in class. Likewise, the ability to ask yourself “why?” as you examine your study skills and time management will lead to better academic performance, as you may have already learned. A much more refined version of this ability to ask “why?” will manifest as *critical thinking*, one of the most valued personal skills across the board, and one that social science and humanities classes help to develop. Both professors and employers alike covet critical thinking. Lucky for you, college is a virtually endless playground to develop that skill, as much of this book demonstrates.

Chapter 4 talks about a personal sense of ownership over the learning experience. Chapters 5 and 6 teach that college is full of unique individuals and groups who can deepen your understanding of various perspectives and worldviews. Chapter 7 illustrates that this environment provides an opportunity for civic engagement and leadership development. To make college your own personal experience, you must be intentional. Whether you become a scientist or an artist, a business owner or a politician, your journey should allow you to examine why the world is the way it is, why our society is what it seems to be, what changes you desire, and where you fit in to this big equation.

6. Make your own luck

Chapter 4 delivered one of the key takeaways from this book. Your story is *your* story. Learn to take charge of your own experience. We know from chapters 3, 5, and 6 that we do not all start from the same place or with the same resources—not by a long shot. But we all have the ability to make decisions, take action, and control where we go from here. There is no one way to be successful in college. Know yourself, and know what works for you. Remember where you come from and then focus on the opportunities in front of you. From choosing majors to refining study habits to selecting extra-curricular activities—there is no one-size-fits-all. Develop your own method of organization and planning. Study your way. Pay attention to what works and adjust when needed.

7. Make friends IRL

Social networking is great. The process of crafting a personal profile and feed and connecting with people despite geographical limitations is now part of our everyday life. But college offers something different and rare: the chance to make a bunch of new connections *in real life*. The concept of “networking” is nothing new. A common piece of advice is to connect with people, both academically and socially, who may be able to help you be successful in the future. Chapters 1 and 2 mention the process of resocialization, of learning a new culture. Chapter 3 introduces the notion of social and cultural capital, while chapters 5 and 6 explain just how diverse a college campus can be. Chapters 4 and 7 explain the importance of actively interacting with that environment. Expanding your network may seem super complicated, but it does not have to be. One bit of common-sense advice can take you a long way: Make real friends. Sometimes lost in the pressure to “network” is a fruitful understanding of what that means. Simply introducing yourself to someone probably will not mean much in the future. But if you make authentic connections with other students, faculty, and staff, these meaningful relationships may provide the foundation for what you do after college and how you get there. Sometimes a seemingly trivial interaction, like a conversation about shared interests, can lead to a long-lasting, mutually beneficial connection. Do not treat friendships as transactions. As with the first tip in this section regarding the need for exploration, you may initially feel like there is no practical purpose behind some of your social activities. But let your interests guide you. You might make a lifelong friend from joining a club, or you might meet a lifelong faculty mentor at a campus event. If you seek out new experiences and develop authentic relationships, you may be surprised by how these goals can enhance your journey both in college and the world beyond.

It is impossible to discuss social interaction among young people without mentioning how smartphones and social media are transforming it. When danah boyd (2014)⁷ conducted a study with youth, she discovered that while many interactions on social media generally mirror

long-existing social interactions, there are also key differences. As boyd describes, there are four differences that social media and technology make for social interaction, namely (1) the persistence and durability of online social expressions (meaning that comments online often remain long after a private comment to a friend), (2) the visibility of social media and the broad audience of who can view interactions that may not have been intended for them, (3) the spreadability of content, referring to the ease and speed with which interactions online can be shared, and (4) the searchability, referring to how easy it can be to find content online.

With these facts in mind, contemporary college students must manage their online presence with not only their current concerns but also their future careers in mind. Positive steps can range from “whitewalling” social media content⁸ that could be damaging to students’ reputations to beginning to build a professional identity and presence in online spaces that will be highly visible by the time students apply for jobs. In short, preparing for a career means not only gaining exposure to different topics and determining which major is right for you, but managing the way you present yourself to the outside world—and prospective employers.

8. Work hard, play hard, sleep hard

Make sure to align all your seemingly small daily behaviors with the college experience you want. Prioritize what is important to you and act accordingly. Listen to some of the tried and true maxims about successful college students and take them to heart. Go to class. Write down everything. Take care of your own health and wellness. If you are a procrastinator (aren’t we all?), then plan your procrastination: if an assignment should take an hour to complete, then allot at least two hours to do it to allow for distraction. Break big assignments into much smaller parts. If you like learning with peers, form a study group. If you like to study in absolute silence, find a good study place other than your residence hall. If you make time to study and take care of business first, there will still be time to have fun.

9. Go fail at something

Implicit in all of the advice we give in this book is that it is OK to fail sometimes. In fact, it is necessary! You cannot explore without stumbling upon experiences you do not like or succeed in. You cannot truly learn without making mistakes (and receiving some bad grades) to learn from. Knowing this can save you a lot of stress. Expect to make mistakes or fall short, and expect to forgive yourself. Equally important is to expect others to fail, and to forgive them just the same. The cruelest phenomenon on college campuses is the pressure to appear as though you “have it all figured out” or “have a plan and stick to it.” What a myth! One of the most common interview questions from both employers and grad schools involves people’s ability to handle adversity and failure. The last thing either of those groups would want is someone who pretends to never have made a mistake. Learn to fail gracefully, and learn to turn your failures into assets. This may help you approach college with passion instead of fear.

10. “There is always help at Hogwarts for those that ask for it”

Harry Potter references may be cliché, but none rings truer than the one quoted here. The characters in this popular book and movie series can always find someone at their school to help them as long as they ask. The same is true on college campuses. In so many ways, the college experience can feel difficult, isolating, overwhelming, or even impossible. Please rest assured that you are not the only one that feels this way. If there is only one lesson learned from this entire book, let it be this: you are not alone. You are surrounded by caring faculty members, advisors, and fellow students. It may not be immediately obvious amid the swirl of activity and information on a college campus, especially during your first year. But that is OK.

All you have to do is ask for help. Ask your instructors before class or during office hours (usually posted in your class syllabus). Also, you have an advisor—a staff or faculty member, depending on your

campus—responsible for giving you guidance. Find out who your advisor is and pay them a visit, even if you do not have an obvious reason. And do not forget that you are surrounded by students who face the same challenges as you. It may not come naturally to ask other students for advice, but give it a shot. You may even be able to do this online through the software used to manage your courses (look for discussion boards or direct message functions). If things get serious, know that your campus most likely has a counseling center or health clinic to go to. Also, the offices of student affairs or the dean of students can always help if you are in the middle of a crisis. Asking for help is the first step to success. All “success stories” begin with someone helping someone else. And do not forget that this works both ways. You may have the opportunity to help others yourself, so be ready!

CONCLUSION

This book addresses many key issues that emerging adults encounter during the first year of college and beyond. Chapter 1 began by illustrating how emerging adults—in a relatively new life stage—are different from entering college students of the past, and, as a result, may have different experiences than the parents or grandparents who often provide social support and advice to them. Chapter 2 put into context emerging adulthood amidst larger economic, social, and cultural trends, all while highlighting the struggles emerging adults may experience while moving, changing identities, romantic partnering and breaking up. Beginning with chapter 1, the student vignettes provided real-world examples of these experiences. Chapter 3 laid out why it is important to earn a college degree, including the gain of specific skills, knowledge, and cultural capital that remain central for navigating other life changes upon graduation. Importantly, this chapter acknowledged that where students come from—their social class background—affects the difficulty or challenges they are likely to face as they start their college careers. In turn, chapter 4

emphasized the importance of taking ownership of learning and remaining flexible to the unique experiences that different courses and majors offer as students decide what fits them best.

Subsequently, chapter 5 described the importance of resiliency in the face of challenges, especially by considering the life course as a social construction. Students, on the one hand, have the freedom to shape their experiences in college, but cannot completely control nor accept total responsibility for the social contexts that they encounter or the inequalities embedded within those contexts. On the other hand, viewing students as having no control over their social contexts takes away from the importance of students owning their own learning and of developing resiliency in the face of inevitable setbacks. This culminated in chapters 6 and 7, where the student stories highlighted struggles with race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, biculturalism, and religion, as well as uncertainty in how to become a leader and engage their wider communities. Where chapter 6 encouraged readers to harness their identity to find others like themselves and to understand diversity as another critical “soft skill” for use upon graduation, chapter 7 stressed that students should recognize their personal strengths as they look to build civic engagement and hone their leadership abilities.

In sum, the primary aim of this book is to address challenges and opportunities faced by many first-year college students. At the same time, more advanced college students may also find the book helpful. Indeed, students are encouraged to revisit this book as they continue to navigate college. The themes of the book also raise questions that are relevant to the college experience in general, including ways to balance personal agency and awareness of social influences on behavior in an ongoing way. This book aims to aid students in forming a helpful middle ground between two extremes: viewing themselves as 100% in control, or alternatively not accepting any personal accountability for college and life outcomes. Students need to be aware of the ways they are shaped by their social contexts, and the potential for negative influences there. Yet, students also need to embrace their personal abilities to navigate past issues they encounter,

remove those inevitable roadblocks along the way, and persevere in their relentless pursuit of successful pathways through college and beyond.

LETTER TO ENTERING FIRST-YEARS STUDENTS
(FROM A REAL COLLEGE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT)

Halfway through my first semester of college I now realize there are a few things I would have done differently. Both academically and socially. All of these things would make my life exponentially easier now.

I would have read my syllabus and made myself reminders to do assignments. I knew professors didn't remind you to do things in college, but it never really occurred to me that I should remind myself regularly to do things. Because of this failure, I've missed several assignments over the weeks and am seriously playing catch-up.

Socially I would have not gone out with the cute guy downstairs. While it seems like a good idea at the time, trust me, you do not want to be involved with anyone in your dorm romantically. It makes for awkward laundry room moments and ruins social circles.

That being said, make friends with people in your dorm. I can't stress that enough. I love my neighbors and we have a great relationship. Every week we have "family dinners" and half our floor goes downstairs and cooks big meals.

Also, learn when to say no. Know when it's a good idea to go out and when it's an excellent idea to stay in and study. Both are important. Additionally, cultivating a good relationship with your roommate is an excellent idea. Everything from what temperature your room should be set to, to rules on having people over should be discussed and agreed on. And be friends with them. Sleeping with a stranger for any amount of time is just weird.

—FROM, A College Student

FURTHER READING ONLINE

- Many leaders around the world majored in the social sciences or humanities and they emphasize the soft skills that higher education develops: “Educational Pathways of Leaders,” British Council, retrieved from https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/1.6_educational-pathways-of-leaders-infographic.pdf.
- In this article, sociologists advise new college students to collect mentors and friends: Wade, Lisa, and Gwen Sharp, June 14, 2017, “Collect Mentors and Make True Friends: Advice for New College Students from Sociologists,” Pacific Standard, retrieved from <https://psmag.com/education/collect-mentors-make-true-friends-advice-new-college-students-couple-sociologists-66914>.

NOTES

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