

INSIDE HIGHER ED

A Not-So-Tidy Narrative

Students aren't going to college just to get a job -- and that matters, write Michael B. Horn and Bob Moesta.

[Michael B. Horn](#) and [Bob Moesta](#)

January 6, 2020



ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/BISCOTTO87

A narrative has emerged over the past several years that the majority of students attend college to get a job. According to the University of California, Los Angeles's annual survey of freshmen entering four-year colleges and universities, roughly 85 percent say they are going so they can get a job. That is up from roughly two-thirds in the 1970s, although down slightly from its peak in 2012.

Debates have subsequently broken out on the pages of *Inside Higher Ed* and other news media outlets about whether and how colleges should respond. Should colleges refashion themselves as pathways into jobs, or should they stand aside from the focus on economic returns and reinforce their role as paragons of a well-rounded and foundational liberal arts education?

Research we've conducted over the last several years, however, shows the narrative that students are going to college simply to get a job isn't quite so tidy. The decision-making process is far more complicated.

A simple survey misses the complexity of what is driving people's choices. When confronted with a set of possible responses, people often fill in what they think they are supposed to say -- or, in this case, what their parents might say -- even if it doesn't fully align with their reasons. Often, a set of responses doesn't contain what's driving someone to make a decision -- or it misses the multifaceted reasons why people choose something.

Rather than survey people and record the answers they check off, it's far more important to watch what people actually do. Observing the trade-offs that people make -- what they prioritize in the heat of the moment -- along with the language they use in conversation to describe their actions, provides much bigger clues as to what's causing them to attend college or choose one institution over another.

Over the course of the past several years, we've collected and analyzed more than 200 detailed stories of students making the decision to attend some form of postsecondary education with the goal of understanding what was causing them to enroll.

We discovered that people choose college for five major reasons:

- To get into their best college;
- To do what's expected of them;
- To get away;
- To step it up; and
- To extend themselves.

We're not suggesting that getting a job isn't a part of these reasons. Rather, we are saying that the explanation that students are primarily going to college to get a job is woefully incomplete.

For example, students looking to get into their best college or university often want to gain access to a network and entry-level opportunities that will lead to a good-paying job in the future. But their driving motivation is much more about getting into college, less about what college will help them do or attain. These students are swayed by everything from the opportunity to have the "classic college" experience on a beautiful brick-and-mortar campus to the opportunity to reinvent themselves among new people at a prestigious place that is highly regarded.

Students who are going to college because it's what's expected of them, to get away from another circumstance in their life or to gain acceptance by their best institution often don't really know what they want next in their life. They have big blind spots, as they don't know what they don't know. And today, few of the teenagers among them have even [held a job](#). Higher education institutions must help these students develop and deepen their understanding of who they are by supporting them in broadening their horizons, building passions and finding their current purpose. That sounds pretty close to what traditional colleges and universities have historically been offering and have viewed as their purpose.

That doesn't mean this process of self-development shouldn't ultimately result in students leaving college prepared for life and able to find good-paying jobs - given the high price tag of attendance, that's unrealistic. It's that these things can't be seen as at odds with each other in all cases.

In recent years, many community colleges have launched guided-pathway programs that attempt to redesign the entire college experience, starting with helping students identify their career goals in the beginning of the program.

They then offer clear maps that guide students through their course of study so those students do not, for example, take courses that don't count toward their degree.

For students who are looking to college to help them step it up and have some clarity around what they are looking to do after they graduate, a guided-pathway program that moves them through a clear, fixed set of learning experiences toward their desired outcome may be ideal. The choice that matters to students is which program to attend; they are happy to let the program choose the individual courses they should take once enrolled.

But for students who are going to college to, say, get away, guided-pathway programs probably fall short. Many of the institutions offering such programs still accept students into a specific "meta major" and then help them figure out which program within a cluster of options will be best. Those students are very likely unprepared to make a decision around which meta major is right for them. Instead, they would be better served by a series of short, immersive experiences in a range of fields to help them begin to understand what it is they like and don't like and what their strengths are. Offering courses that are detached from those experiences may not be enough.

Understanding this nuance may help tease apart why guided-pathway programs appear to be getting stronger results on average than traditional community college academic programs, but also why the data suggest that such structures do not work for everyone.

Our findings also call attention to a larger point. When people say students go to college to get a job, that statement ignores a significant amount of the subtleties that vary depending on a student's specific situation. It also misrepresents what is, in fact, driving many students to choose college. And it misleads those of us in higher education into a debate filled with false dichotomies that ill serves both students and our institutions.

Bio

Michael B. Horn and Bob Moesta are co-authors of *Choosing College: How to Make Better Learning Decisions Throughout Your Life* (Wiley, September 2019).

https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/01/06/pervasive-narrative-students-are-going-college-just-get-job-isnt-always-so-true?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=609a0342e1-WNU_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-609a0342e1-199133009&mc_cid=609a0342e1&mc_eid=6f67a838c9