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Higher Education
Evolution: Unraveling the
Past, Confronting Today's
Challenges, and
Empowering Student
Independence

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Dedication

*For my children David and Rebecca
And for Julie, Lev, Kye, Jeff, Rylan, and Madelyn
I love you all always and I hope I lived
by some of the advice in this book!*

*And for my students...
I loved working with each one of you through the ups
and downs, the easy times and the hard times, the
good times and the bad times. I learned so much from all of you.*

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Introduction

“Nothing exerts a stronger psychic effect upon the human environment, and especially upon children, than the life which the parents have not lived.”¹

I am an archaeologist which means I was trained as an anthropologist to work in the past. Anthropology is the study of humanity and culture—who we were and who we are. Anthropologists study culture change so I accept that things are and should be different from the higher education culture I entered in 1987. Change is hard for us humans and not all change is good. But many of the changes I have seen and continue to see in higher education are clearly not, to me, good. I see too many students in the last generation or two who cannot think for themselves, who are micromanaged by their parents, who cannot set their own goals or design and follow their own dreams. I worry about how society will function in 10, 20, and 30 years when we have generations of students who have been overly supervised by their parents. I worry about how students’ lack of exposure to problems small and large will impact them when serious issues arise. And I worry about the long-term impact this behavior has on students’ self-esteem.

The above quote by Carl Jung is one that I stumbled across while doing research for this book and it had a profound impact on me.² This book represents a synthesis of my personal journey in higher education and the insights I have gained over three decades of professional experience in the field. The transformation in how students perceive and navigate college, as well as the extent of parental

involvement, since I began working with college students in the early 1990s, has been nothing short of profound. These shifts have been monumental and, in my view, largely detrimental.

I was unable to find much in the way of scholarly research on this quotation, but people have offered many interpretations over the years. To me, it means two things. First, it is unhealthy for a parent or guardian to impose their unfilled dreams on their children. For example, if you were unable to become a doctor, forcing your child to study medicine so they can become a doctor and so you can live through them is a road to unhappiness for the child. Second, forcing a child to continue in your footsteps, whether you (as the parent) were able to live out your dream or not, is also not fair. As you will read in Chapter 1, my father's plan for me was to take over his business, it was not to attend college, as soon as I graduated from high school. He then decided I should attend college, study business, and take over his business. I cannot imagine a more unhappy life for myself than doing something I was not suited for and did not like. I will let you discover what his business was when you read that chapter.

This imposition of a parent's plan on their child, for whatever reason can also make for an unhappy college experience, and I see this repeatedly as students over the years have told me why they picked their major—their parents/guardians made them select it or they did not allow them to pursue a “worthless” major. You will read more about this throughout the book.

Not all students are micromanaged and not all students lack grit and resilience. Not all call home the second something does not go their way and, for those who do, not all expect someone else to fix the problem. Often this

response is true especially for those who enter college as first-generation or low-income students. Many of these students navigated the path to college on their own so they have some grit. These students face different issues navigating college and not all schools offer enough support for first generation and low-income students.

There are many people who, on numerous occasions, said to me, “The parents did what?” or “The student didn’t do what?” “Oh my gosh,” they respond, “you should write a book!” People who work in higher education will be less surprised by the scenarios shared throughout this book. What I share is not unique to my institution, though the stories are of course a little different depending on time, space, and the type and size of the college or university (e.g., religious colleges, small liberal arts colleges, mostly residential colleges, public or private, etc.).

This book starts with a short summary of my story—the story of someone who never felt comfortable in the world of high fashion that my parents occupied; the tenth-grade student who fell in love with archaeology and fought to follow that interest; and the story of the first-generation college student who did not realize at the time what that meant. Me.

Those stories connect and become relevant when told through the lens of my work as an academic dean for over 30 years. This work included daily interactions with students as well as administrative work for the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Virginia (henceforth, UVA). The two themes I will return to repeatedly are (1) what it means—and does not mean—to be a college student today, and (2) the harm I think parents do when they expect perfection and

when they do not allow their child the opportunity to own their college experience.

Today's college students need to be braver and bolder with their academic decisions, follow what they love, embrace failure so they can succeed, and not worry as much about the rest of their lives when they are 18 years old. Why? We are living and working longer; employers often value emotional intelligence as much or more than IQ and GPA, and people change jobs far more often than they did 20 or 30 years ago. In fact, data show that people starting in the work force now (the early 2020s) will change not only jobs, but *careers* multiple times.

It is estimated that most people will have 12 jobs during their lives. In the last year, 32% of Americans aged 25 to 44 have considered a career change. Since starting their first job after college, 29% of Americans have completely changed fields.³ The average person will change careers 5-7 times during their working life, and approximately 30% of the total American workforce will now change jobs every 12 months.⁴

Another point I will make several times is that for many students, their major will **not** be their career. Therefore, going to college should be about the education they receive, the joy of finding and studying a topic they love, of learning, and the experiences they have both in and out of the classroom. What this advice means is that someone who majors in sociology is not limited to being a sociologist and a history major is not limited to being a historian. Students should focus on choosing a major they enjoy; the job will happen even if the dream job (if one exists) does not happen at the moment of graduation. It takes some people several jobs over several years to figure out what they want to do and who they want to be.

College: A Curious Journey

I have long thought that college in America is an odd institution. It is where many, though not enough, young adults go to accomplish three incompatible and difficult tasks at the same time. First, and perhaps most importantly, they go to college to get an education. To be a successful and thriving nation, we need an educated citizenry. Second, college has become a rite of passage for many young adults. They enter as a child, albeit a grown child, and they leave, if everything goes right, as what our society defines as an adult. Third, by the time they graduate from college, or even before they begin college, many adults expect that students will know exactly what they want to do with the rest of their lives. The mounting pressure that this expectation puts on students is detrimental and it is time we do something about it. Did you know at 18, 20, or 22 what you wanted to be and do? And if you did, are you still doing it? And if you are, are you doing it in the way you imagined?

Anthropologist Victor Turner wrote extensively about rites of passage and liminality in different cultures across the globe.⁵ He described liminality as the point in time where one is “betwixt and between.”⁶ I use this terms to refer to the time between childhood and adulthood. Religions and cultures mark adulthood in different ways; many of these age milestones are marked and/or celebrated throughout the United States. They include specific birthday milestones like 13, 16, 30, 50, and 65. They also include new freedoms like voting, buying alcohol, and the less exciting, but still useful, ability to rent a car or make a reservation at a hotel. In the United States, turning 18 brings the responsibility for

males to register for the draft within 30 days of their 18th birthday. Religious and cultural ceremonies include a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* (Judaism), *Rumspringa* (Amish), *Quinceañera* (Hispanic), *Sweet 16* (American), *Sunrise Ceremony* (Apache), etc.

In the United States, completing high school, college and/or getting a job are also rites of passage. In this book, I focus on the young adults who attend college. It is a place where students spend approximately four years in liminality—no longer children, but not yet adults. However, many parents, and well-meaning relatives and guests at holiday gatherings, ask new college students what their major is and they expect an answer. This question has become shorthand for asking “What are doing with the rest of your life?”, even though there need not be a correlation. This expectation means finding a major that will get them a job and not one that is useless, like archaeology—which was my major and which I promise you is far from useless (though most of the public does not really know what it is; please do not think Indiana Jones). Their child also must be academically and socially successful. Nothing less than an A or an A+ *and* president of some type of club or organization. This level of success is a difficult task for many students.

Getting Started

The two events that drove me to sit down and start writing this book occurred in the summer of 2019. These events occurred in the midst of our new-student summer orientation program which takes place in July at my

university. Ideas had been stirring in my mind for years, but these two experiences drove me to start putting my thoughts down on paper. Neither situation was all that unique; stories like the two I will describe occur almost daily in my work as an academic dean. However, these two incidents happened on the same day, so I suppose they were the last two drops in the bucket that made it finally tip over and compelled me to get started with the process of writing.

Words of Wisdom

“...obsessing over the future squanders the present.”

-Arthur C. Brooks⁷

The first situation was one that a new colleague brought to me. She asked for advice after a conversation with a parent and then brought the parent over to me when the parent insisted on “talking to the person in charge who could do something.” The mother’s first words to me were, “You need to drop my daughter from Italian now. It’s not part of **our** plan.” The conversation continued, even as the daughter began to cry. Her mother reiterated, “This is just not part of our plan and she was misadvised. She has to be enrolled in French and it’s full.” What was the plan? An Ivy League Law School program, the same as another family member. The daughter had not yet started her first semester of college; she had not yet started the first day of classes! It was clear that her mother or family had not asked her what *she* wanted

to study, specifically what language *she* wanted to study. I doubt anyone asked her if she even wanted to go to law school in the first place. The mother was angry and dragging her daughter down into what we often call “total meltdown mode” over not being able to enroll in a class (and I will add “yet” as there was still plenty of time for the student to adjust her schedule). Her daughter was not crying over the loss of a friend, a traumatic break up, or a major illness. She was crying because the class was full at that moment or maybe it was because of the pressure(s) being placed on her by her mother.

I appeased the mother by dropping the Italian class for her daughter, mostly because someone else who wanted to enroll in the class should be able to have the space. I then advised her that her daughter could change her schedule when enrollment opened to all students at the end of orientation, in early August. While she was not appeased, she realized that she was not going to get her way. Again, this story is not unique; it happens far too often. Though I am no longer surprised by its occurrence, I remain baffled as to why any parent finds this type of intervention helpful for their child. Keep reading to hear the second story of that day.

My Experiences

I have two personal stories to share on taking my own children to college. I cannot say enough here and throughout the book that letting go does not mean that you stop talking with your children, sharing with them or (obviously) loving them. As a friend once told me, it means your role shifts

from coach to cheerleader. Students must forge their own path and learn from all the good, the bad, and the ugly that happens along the way.

When my son left for college, I cried for days. I cried before he left, I cried when I left him at school, and I cried most of the way home. I was happy for him for so many reasons, but I was also sad because I knew he would never live at home again. I knew how much I would miss him. And there were other things going on in my life that made this transition harder.

When I took my daughter to college, she told me not to cry in front of her. I made it through the day hauling her many belongings up eight flights of stairs and keeping my emotions in check. We went to Bed, Bath & Beyond, a move-in day ritual, purchased her books and a laptop computer from the bookstore, and I met her roommate. Then it was time to say goodbye and I was still able to hold it together. I got in the car, merged on to the interstate, and started sobbing. I was crying so hard I had to pullover. And then I had to both laugh and yell at myself to get it together. I thought taking the second child to college would be easier, but it was not. I pulled it together and made it home to an empty house and more tears. Eventually I realized it was okay. Not easy, but okay. They were thriving and happy and they were in college. I also reminded myself that one of my closest friends had a daughter who had just deployed as a nurse to Afghanistan. I felt ridiculous crying about my daughter starting college and, though we should never berate ourselves for the sorrow or pain we feel (it is what it is), my friend's situation gave me some perspective.

I share the following story with the parents of incoming, new students every year. After taking my son to college, I

had to go to work the next day and start fall orientation. How could I stand up before hundreds of parents and tell them it would all be okay and that they need to let go when I had cried for days? A colleague asked me how move-in day went and, no surprise, I started to cry. She looked at me and said, “Now Rachel, just imagine if he wasn’t going.” That simple sentence turned it all around for me. What **if** he did not go to college? What if he was not accepted anywhere? What if he stayed home while all his friends took off for new adventures? What if he never got a college degree? It helped me in ways I cannot describe and so I share it every year. It is okay to be sad when they leave and be happy for them too. You can be both.

Let Go!

The bottom line is that you must start to let your children go after high school (and maybe even a bit before that). If they are going to college, remind yourself that it is your child, not you, attending college. It is not your education, it is theirs. The quotation from Carl Jung from the start of this section rings very true here and throughout the book.

My children picked their own classes, they picked their majors, they found their way. I only called their school to load money on their dining cards since the credit card used was in my name. When they had questions, I gave them advice on who to ask. I never said, “I’ll call and take care of that for you.” I asked about their grades when I remembered, not because I did not care, but because I wanted them to own the

experience. Their attendance at college was never, for me, contingent upon them earning certain grades.

You may be asking, “What was that second incident that drove me to start this book?” It was a comment that a parent made during one of my summer orientation talks to the parents of incoming first-year students in UVA’s College of Arts & Sciences. My talk covered the value and importance of the liberal arts and described what a major is and should/should not be, i.e., not necessarily a person’s career field. I highlighted some of the academic opportunities we have and reviewed the many sources of help and advice that are available. It ended with my “letting go” slide. Four illustrations were displayed on this slide. The first was a cartoon image of a mother pulling her young child off a tree on the first day of school. The image showed that the approximately kindergarten-aged child does not want to leave his mother and it read “first day of school.” The next frame showed the mother with her legs wound around the tree holding on to her now older son who is trying to get away and it read “first day of college.” The second item was an image of a butterfly being released into the air. The third item was a quote I like that reads: “*The data emerging confirms the harm done by asking so little of our kids when it comes to life skills, yet so much of them when it comes to academics.*”⁸ Finally on the bottom right was another cartoon image from *The New Yorker* drawn by Charles Barsotti. This image depicts a mother chicken and her baby chick, with the mother saying, “You’re free range when I say you’re free range.” I always get some laughs as I start to talk about the importance, as well as the difficulty, of letting go. I told the audience that it was not easy for me either, but I also added why it is so important to start the process.

At the end of the talk, I would spend about 15 minutes answering questions. The last question came from a father. After telling me that I talked too fast for him to get all the details and wanting to know if my talk was recorded, his question went something like this: “How do I get into the student system to see classes and grades because I need an **electronic leash around my kid.**” These last four words are verbatim. The reaction was palpable; even the other parents were somewhat shocked at this question.

I responded, “It sounds like you missed my slide on letting go.” The audience laughed.

He replied, “Yeah, yeah, but I need to get into the system.”

I replied, “You can’t.” I then faced the group and said, “You should all have a conversation with your child about what information you expect from them. We do not send class schedules or paper grades home, so if this matters to you, then have a conversation with your child about it.” I thanked everyone for coming, smiled, and turned the microphone over to the people leading the next session.

As I walked up the stairs, I could hear the student orientation leaders talking, aghast at his comment.

“What did Dean Most say?” I heard one student ask.

“He didn’t really say that, did he?” asked another.

“Yes, he did! I was there holding the microphone, he did!” said the third orientation leader.

I then reached the top of the stairs, and they looked at me to ask what I said. I repeated my comment that he must have missed the slide on letting go. They laughed. But to me it was not funny, it was sad. I walked away thinking it was time to start writing. These two situations are accurate reflections of the kinds of parental interference I have seen increasing each year, and they are cause for concern.

How are our young adults ever going to function in the workplace when their every move is monitored? How are they going to function in life when everything has been done for them? How will they face future failures if they do not have any when they are younger? How will they learn from their mistakes if they never make any? And how will they function and make decisions when we are gone?

Many of us at UVA say the following when we talk to parent groups. We tell them that the entering class is filled with high-achieving, smart students and they have been admitted to UVA because they are capable. Almost all of our students come from the top 10% of their high school class. Many are ranked first in their class. However, the math will change now; at the end of the first semester, 50% of them will be in the bottom 50% of the class. There is usually a pause followed by nervous laughter from the audience. I usually add that this reality does not mean their children are no longer smart or just as wonderful as they were in August when classes began. These students are just as capable of being successful in the real world after they graduate. You can tell that no one in the audience wants that child in the bottom 50% to be their child.

From parents picking classes and majors, asking questions their child should be asking, calling faculty about grades, to the 2019 admissions scandal,⁹ parental involvement and interference increases and worsens every year. Chapter 5 will provide some specific examples, which are seemingly endless. They range from simple concern, which every parent has, to invasive interference that involves the university president if the parent thinks their child is not getting what they want.

What also gets worse each year are the mental health

issues, and I do not think this is a coincidence.¹⁰ I think it is related to the increase in parental interference and this too will be discussed later in the book. An American Psychiatric Association article posted in August of 2023 states, “The percentage of students experiencing mental health problems has increased nearly 50% since 2013.”¹¹ Some mental health issues are not new. Some (like bipolar disorder) seem to emerge at around the age of 20 (or earlier, according to the Mayo Clinic¹²) so that they often coincide with the start of college. Other students experience a significant increase in stress, anxiety, and/or depression that often feed on one another. Some disorders require counseling, and some require workshops that can help students learn how to manage stress, control anxiety, and gain perspective. To this end, my office created a position we called a College Life Skills Coach. She works with students one-on-one and in groups to help them learn “how to do college,” and to help them develop better time management or study skills. She can also refer students directly to the counseling center when necessary.

In February 2024, Johanna Alonso wrote an article for *Inside Higher Ed* entitled, “Counseling Centers See a Rise in Traumatized Students.”¹³ She stated that, “Nearly half of all students who visit counseling centers report *trauma*. This is a more recent and serious development. In response, colleges are changing the treatments and support services they offer.”¹⁴ This increase is also necessitating a change in the type of counselors needed, a position already in great demand. Now, both more and specialized types of counselors are needed.

The Message I Want to Convey

The two incidents that occurred during the orientation session that I mentioned above, and many similar experiences I share later in Chapter 5, served as the motivating factor for writing this book. Why this message matters so much to me is that I came very close to not being able to pursue what I wanted to study in college—archaeology. I was also a first-generation college student who did not realize what that meant until relatively recently in my work life. My story is somewhat different than many of today's first-generation college students. I grew up in a comfortable, old Philadelphia townhouse in Center City. Overall, I had a relatively easy and pleasant life. My parents did not start off wealthy, but my father ultimately ran a very successful business. However, he did not believe in giving me much financial support as he thought I needed to earn my own money. Because of this belief, I started working for him when I was seven years old. I vaguely recall getting a small allowance, but I had to earn the rest. He believed that college was a complete waste of time and money.¹⁵ I was fortunate to attend a private school for grades six through twelve, where most, if not all, students graduated and went to college. I had emotional help and support from the school to get to college, but no support at home. When I meet students whose families do not want them to leave home or whose families have specific goals for them, I understand what that feels like, though I fully recognize that no two students are in the same situation.

People often ask me what I think of helicopter parents. “I miss them,” I say. “Helicopter parents just ‘hovered,’ but now

we have Blackhawk parents or snowplow parents.” The less commonly used term is Blackhawk Parent. They swoop in and take control. Snowplow parents have been defined as:

“...a person who constantly forces obstacles out of their kids’ paths. They have their eye on the future success of their child, and anyone or anything that stands in their way has to be removed.”¹⁶

These parents are out in front, plowing a clear path, trying to guarantee that nothing goes wrong. An article from *The New York Times* explains,

“Today’s ‘snowplow parents’ keep their children’s futures obstacle-free—even when it means crossing ethical and legal boundaries.”¹⁷

Part of me understands this desire because I too am a parent. The worst pain I feel, or have felt, has been the pain of my children. I do not think this will change. I can (mostly) manage my own pain, but when my children hurt (mentally or physically), I hurt, I worry, I **physically** ache. Yet I also know I cannot fix everything and that they need to find their own way. I also know they will be stronger and that they will learn from complicated situations.

I can listen, sympathize, empathize, hug, hold, and advise. As our children get older, there are problems that we cannot and should not fix. I am far from the perfect parent, but if my job working with college-age students taught me anything, it was that I had to let my children make mistakes, and even fail, when the stakes were low—even if they felt high. I tried to do this when they were in middle and high school. They lost games, fell off a balance beam, received low grades, were hurt by friends, and even lost friends, but they learned resiliency. They learned how to manage themselves and solve their

problems, and they learned that some problems cannot be fixed. It did not mean that they could not ask for advice. But if you never confront tough times in life, then even a minor struggle, like not being able to enroll in a class, sets a snowball rolling down a mountain.

What's In This Book?

I wrote this book to help parents see why “letting go” is important and to offer some advice to students while in high school or college. Because of my liberal arts background, the focus will be on the liberal arts, but the lessons offered here can apply to anyone going to any school studying any subject. There are also lessons for those who do not go to college.

There are four parts to this book. The first part (Chapter 1) is my story where I share my experiences growing up, getting to college, and then getting to graduate school. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 (the second part) include the history of higher education, what it has become and what I think it should be, and the value of the liberal arts. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7 (part three), I share some of the situations I dealt with as a dean and advisor, offer reflections on the pandemic and higher education, and then offer some advice for students. These sections come together at different points and in different ways for the fourth and concluding part of the book—the epilogue.

There is a not-so-subtle message throughout this book. Simply put, I want to say to parents, guardians, and others, “Back off and let go!” In terms of backing off, I think many parents set the bar too high, higher than they could have

reached themselves. They expect their children to excel in multiple sports, lead several clubs, complete meaningful volunteer work, and of course, earn perfect grades in difficult classes. It is a competition with other parents that starts early. Comments like these are frequent: “Oh, your child does two sports? That’s wonderful. I mean mine does three, but we can’t all handle that, right?”; “Oh, your child has three AP classes? That is a lot. I don’t know how my child manages five, but she does.” Some children are brilliant and motivated without parental involvement, and while I hope they too are happy and healthy, I worry more about those for whom the bar is set so high—too high. Parents sometimes place an extremely heavy burden on their children who must meet these high goals. They become prizes and trophies, not happy, healthy, and well-adjusted children. They never establish their own identity and many crash when they go off to college or enter the workforce.

As for letting go, you need to let your child drive their education. Yes, your children will make mistakes and some may be financially costly, but they will not be as *emotionally* costly as if you monitor every single thing they do. More importantly, they will eventually learn and thrive and be wiser. They will be able to lead happy, successful, independent lives—something we want for all young adults.

And to all students, as you will read in the next chapter, my journey to college was not smooth. Everyone’s journey is different, but I hope the message of the next chapter will help you in some way. That message is about persevering and following your dreams while knowing they can and will change.

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Chapter 1. Overcoming Family Opposition: The Battle to Get to College and Graduate School

Introduction

This chapter offers a brief glimpse into my academic and personal background and explains much of the rationale for the advice I give to students and their families. My goal is not to say there is one right answer or one right way to “do college” or that my way is right. It is simply my story. But my experiences, combined with almost daily conversations with students for just over 30 years, have convinced me that things must change for students to succeed and thrive in college.

While my advice is relevant for students regardless of their home life and personal situations, I am more concerned with the students who have been micro-managed by their high schools and families, and therefore lack many of the skills needed to solve problems on their own. I have found that it is often the “over-protected” students who struggle more, becoming anxious when small things go wrong and when their grades are not perfect. Some of the most resilient and adaptable students I know are those who struggled and

worked hard to get to college, often with little to no support, especially first generation and/or low-income students. These students tend to be strong, determined, and used to figuring things out on their own because they have faced adversities throughout their lives. They have their own unique obstacles to face during their college years and schools need to offer more support for these students.

You now know a bit about why I chose to write this kind of book but, for additional context, I want to share some of my personal background. Specifically, how I got to college, how I made it to graduate school, and what happened for me in the world of work. As part of that journey, I will share some background on my parents' story and how I was raised. If you watched the television series *Ghost Whisperer*, the opening credits include a line from the lead character who says, "In order for me to tell you my story, I have to tell you theirs." I feel I need to tell you some of my story.

Words of Wisdom

Every student should be able to be responsible for selecting their own classes and picking their own major. A major does not always correlate with a career!

My upbringing plays a large role in why I feel so strongly about letting students who want to go to college do college on their own terms. This approach means letting students stumble, fail, get back up, and succeed or move on. It does

not mean mapping out their classes, their major, or their activities. I am sharing some of my personal background in this chapter to demonstrate why I feel so strongly about parents or guardians (or any adult in charge of a minor) letting go when their young adult goes to college, why I feel so strongly that students must make their own path, and why I am such a strong advocate for students to find their own path. This advice absolutely does not mean that a child who goes to college should stop interacting with their parent, parents, or guardians. It suggests that the relationship should change. I often tell parents that they are no longer the coach; they are now the cheerleader. So, of course, stay involved, listen, advise, interact, but please let your child, or the college student you are responsible for, find their own way, solve their own problems, and create and own their college experience. The experience will be much more meaningful for them if you do. In this process, you may need to let them fail, recover, learn, and try again. When missteps happen, and they will because we all have failures in our lifetime, your child will rely on the coping skills that they developed.

Did I know what I would be doing today when I started college? No. Did I believe I would and could be an archaeologist? To be honest, I do not know. Maybe. But more importantly, I knew it was what I wanted to study. I wanted to know more. I had to know more. I wanted to immerse myself in an understanding of the past not only to understand the past for its own sake, but also to reflect on the present and the future. I was fascinated by the possibility of learning about the lives of people who lived decades, centuries, or millennia before us by studying what they left behind. This sentiment is an over-simplification of what archaeology is but, at the time (tenth grade), that was my inspiration.

All things being equal, I had a comfortable life growing up. I lived in a very nice home, I went to good schools, there was plenty of food and nice clothes, and I was (eventually) able to go to college. Growing up in Center City Philadelphia in the 1960s and 1970s was a bit odd. I had only a few neighborhood friends and by the time I started sixth grade, I had almost none; my friends were all living in the suburbs. In fact, I had several friends that were never allowed to stay at my house because it was in “the city.” This rule had nothing to do with me or with my parents; my friends’ parents did not want them to go into Center City Philadelphia. “She can always come here,” they would say, “but you cannot go stay there; she lives downtown—in the city.”

It took several years of therapy (on and off) and some reassuring comments from relatives and family friends to help me gain some insight into my childhood, and to help me understand that I grew up in an abusive household. Based on the stories I recounted, two different counselors confirmed for me that I was a victim of abuse (more recently a counselor was convinced I have post-traumatic stress disorder/PTSD). I remember asking one counselor why I had not confronted these memories until my early to mid-thirties. When my son was about two years old, I experienced panic attacks when my parents would say they were coming to visit me in Virginia. While it was never easy before, once my children were born it became harder. I became terrified of being alone with my parents, of what could or would happen when I was with them. When I asked my counselor, “Why now?,” she replied, “sometimes you don’t realize how bad the ship you’re on is until you get off and look behind.” In other words, as a new mother, I started to see parenting and my upbringing in a new light.

When my father died, the wife of one his closest friends told me, “We were always worried about you.” Comments like this one were validation of what I went through, and it meant a lot to me. When my mother passed away in 2016, my father’s sister told me that she knew how bad things were for me when I was growing up. She also acknowledged that my situation was much worse than my younger sister’s. She said she tried to help when she could, but there was only so much that she, or anyone else, could do.

My Family: A Brief Overview

Neither of my parents attended college, which made me a first-generation college student. While there is a huge push today to admit and graduate more first-generation college students, this term was not one I knew when I attended college or even when I first started working in higher education.

My mother graduated from high school and then attended the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York to become a dress designer. She worked for several labels in New York and then in Philadelphia after marrying my father. She was quite successful, though not famous. My father’s secondary education ended after the ninth grade. When my father was young, he was arrested three times for fighting and sent to court after the last incident. My grandmother told me that the judge gave him the choice of jail or trade school; my father said jail and she said trade school. My father replied, “Okay, I’ll be a plumber or an electrician.” In turn the judge said, “Those spots are full. We have one space open—in

beauty school.” Again, my father replied, “Jail.” My grandmother issued the final word, “You’re going to beauty school.” At around age 16, he went to the Edward W. Bok Technical School in Philadelphia and became a hairdresser.

After his graduation from Bok, he joined the Marines and fought in some of the worst battles of World War II—Iwo Jima, Saipan, and Tinian. I grew up hearing about these places, though he mostly told “benign” stories; he never discussed the horrors of the war with me. He returned from the war with what we now would call PTSD. He did not want to work in his father’s junk shop which left him only one other choice—to find a job as a hairdresser.

He was incredibly successful at this profession. He met my mother in Paris at Maxim’s restaurant during Fashion Week, and they later married. She moved to Philadelphia where he opened his own salon, later merging with some other business owners to open numerous hair salons, a school, and a beauty supply company. He would help expand *Intercoiffure Mondial*, an international community of hairdressers focused on beauty and fashion, serving as its President from 1967 to 1975.

My father was an avid reader of fiction and non-fiction books and he read two newspapers a day. He traveled the world for business. However, he never came to value a formal college education and thus, when it was time for me to apply to college, he saw no need for me to attend. His plan was for me to go to work for him in his salon business. I had no interest in doing so; I had no sense of fashion, no business sense, and I was burned out by age 17 because I had worked for him in his salons since I was seven years old. All that mattered to him was what he wanted. A perfect formula for a very unhappy life for me.

By the time I applied to college, I knew I wanted to study archaeology and this only made my battle harder. Thanks to my father's friends and business partners, I "won" the battle. I was able to go to college and major in archaeology. My father's plan for me then switched a bit; I could attend college but after I graduated, I would go to work for him. I would spend the next four years, and more, trying to figure out an alternative plan and a way to break away.

My Early Years

I attended City Center Elementary School through the fifth grade; the school is now called Albert M. Greenfield Elementary School, a change that happened shortly after I left. Originally, the school was in the back of the YMCA on Chestnut Street between 20th and 21st Streets, about four blocks away from my house. After I moved on to the sixth grade, the city constructed a standalone building for the school located at 2200 Chestnut Street.

My parents were not too invested or interested in what I was doing in school. I earned decent grades, with most of my teachers commenting that I tended to talk with my friends too much. In the fifth grade, the idea of private school came up from both my aunt (my father's sister) and my father's business partner. The Philadelphia school system seemed to be declining, and they both believed I might be better off in a private school, specifically, a Jewish day school. There was only one option for public high school, Girl's High School, and it was somewhat far from where we lived. My father wanted no part of me attending a private school. According to him,

the city schools were acceptable, and he saw no reason to pay for school. I did not want to leave my current school until I learned two things about the private school: (1) you could wear anything you wanted to school, including pants, and (2) the teachers let you chew gum in class. I was 10 years old so clearly this new school was the right choice for me.

Discussions ensued and I took the entrance exam. I was nervous because by this time I wanted to go to the private school. My father remained firmly against it and my mother was silent on the issue, a trend that would continue through much of my life. Sometime in the spring, I learned that I had been accepted and by then my father's family and friends had exerted enough pressure that he was willing to let me go.

In September 1965, I began attending my new school starting the sixth grade. It was a great school and almost all my memories from there are good ones. Home was a different story; school and my friends at school became my escape.

The school was approximately 30 to 40 minutes away from Center City in Lower Merion, just outside of Philadelphia. The school did not have school busses, so we all relied on rides (which was never an option for most of us), walking (for those who lived nearby), or public transportation (my option). The day before school started my mother made the trip to school with me. She showed me where to get the first bus, how to ask for a transfer, and then where to get off and walk to the second bus. She pointed out key landmarks for me to use to navigate. We took the 40-minute ride together, got off the bus and walked to school. Then we turned around and went back home. The next day she said goodbye to me, and I walked out the door, on my own, to get to school. I was 10 years old. Anyone who knows me knows that I am

directionally challenged. Somehow that day, my first day in a new school, I found my way there and back.

The second bus I took went right up to my new school, just across the street. However, because it was in a different county or precinct, you needed a transfer pass that cost more money. This rule meant that commuters from Philadelphia and even New Jersey had to get off at the last stop before a transfer was needed. Children attending the school walked a mile to school from the last stop. None of our parents were willing to pay the extra fare for us to get dropped off across the street from the school. For most of us, the money was not the issue; our parents simply saw no reason for us not to walk. And so we did. Sometimes, when the weather was bad, pouring rain or inches of snow, the bus driver would wink and tell us to “just stay on the bus..” He would take us to the next stop, free of charge. That always made our day.

I attended my small private school for seven years through the 12th grade. I was in small classes and I had (mostly) good teachers. The class that had the most significant impact on me was my tenth grade Ancient History class; it is what resulted in my passion for archaeology. I was spellbound by the idea that you could learn about and interpret the past from materials that remained in the ground. You could, perhaps, learn about what people ate, how and where they lived, what they traded, and what tools they made and used for survival. The focus of the class was on the Old World and sites in the Middle East. While this area would not be the area of the world I would choose for my research, I was mesmerized and fascinated. A trip to Masada in Israel the following summer would lock in this interest. I loved this class, and the instructor was wonderful. I have tried to find

him online to thank him and let him know the impact he had on my life, but, unfortunately, I have never been able to do so.

My Fight to Get to College

In early fall of my senior year, I did what many high school seniors do. I took the SAT test, followed by the SAT Subject II tests, and I started applying to colleges. I have no idea what the process looked like for most people, but it was far from an easy process in my house. My father originally refused to allow me to go to college, saying there was no way he would pay for it. His plan was that I would go to work for him and take over his business one day. I did not have the same vision. I cannot tell you exactly what I saw in my future when I was 17 years old, other than a passion for archaeology and ancient history, but it was definitely *not* spending the rest of my life running beauty salons.

With the support of my father's business partner and his best friend from the Marine Corps, he finally allowed me to go to college. However, there were strings attached; I could only go to a local school where I could still live at home (**not** because of the cost but because he was controlling), and I had to major in business or education.

I remember the day I came home and announced that I knew what I wanted to study in college: archaeology. My father said something to the effect of, "I don't know what the hell that is, but I'm not paying for it." I went blank; it was a gut punch. I was devastated and I felt hopeless. I cried while I sat in my room and tried to figure out what I could do. The only alternative I could think of was to go to college, study

business or education, graduate and get a job, earn money, and go back to study archaeology later. When I told him this plan, he clearly did not care and replied that he would not allow it because I would be working for him. I wanted to run away, but I was 17 years old and had no place to go. I spent many stressful hours thinking about what I could do. All I knew was I had to figure it out.

Again, I was saved by my father's business partners and his best friend. I overheard arguments between them and my father as they tried to advocate for me. Adolf Biecker, his business partner, loved archaeology and was especially fascinated by the prehistory of Peru. We would talk about it for hours even though I knew very little other than what I learned from the few books I had read at his recommendation. I had a small glimmer of hope that he could help me, but it was weeks before my father budged. He finally said I could leave home and study what I wanted. I was elated; I had hope. Maybe I would get out.

If I had any doubts about this memory, they were confirmed by a note I sent to Madeline Biecker, Adolf's wife. I found this note after one of my parents died and I saved it. I wrote the note on a sympathy card I sent to her when Adolf passed away. I remember being so sad and I felt the loss deeply; they both had become family. The card was postmarked May 20, 1980.

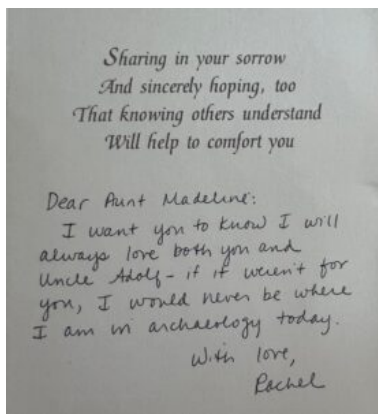


Figure 1. Sympathy card to Madeline Biecker.

By the time my father made his decision, it was early spring. I had applied only to local colleges, specifically Drexel University, Villanova University, Temple University, and the University of Pennsylvania. Drexel and Villanova did not offer archaeology at the time, but Temple and the University of Pennsylvania did. I was accepted to Temple, but not to the University of Pennsylvania. I found two additional schools with rolling admissions and archaeology programs—Boston University and Northeastern University. While I was admitted to both schools, when I looked at the cost and the programs, I decided that Temple University was the more logical choice as it would be less expensive and perhaps not anger my father as much.

Israel

A trip to Israel when I was 17 years old also became a turning point in my life. Somewhat planned and somewhat of a fluke, I lived on a *kibbutz* for close to four months, from February to June in 1972. My high school was private and somewhat progressive. It was clear to the school's administration that once students were accepted to college (and almost everyone from my high school, though not all, went to college), most of them were not motivated to keep up with their classes and homework. The school therefore created a program called the Senior Work Study Project in which each student had to shadow an adult who worked in a profession that they hoped to pursue. Students shadowed doctors, lawyers, accountants, teachers, etc. I, along with two other friends who were also interested in archaeology, secured a place at the University

of Pennsylvania's Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology. Though still battling with my father about whether I could go to college, where I would live, and what I would study, this position was exactly what I wanted to do and a silver lining to the stormy home life during my senior year of high school.

Words of Wisdom

One of the pieces of advice I have given students is to have a plan, but be willing to veer away from it if something else comes along and your gut screams "Do it!"

Despite having what was my dream plan (working in an archaeology lab), one of my closest friends, Toby Dickman, proposed another idea. She wanted to go to Israel and live on a *kibbutz* and she did not want to go alone. While I was intrigued, I was not sure my school would approve it. "Of course they will approve it," she told me, "They would never deny us a trip to Israel." We proposed it, it was approved, and we found an organization in New York that matched students with a *kibbutz* where they could live and volunteer. We were assigned to *Kibbutz Ma'anit*, near Hadera, Israel. The mystery to me is why our parents agreed to let us go. I do not recall the details; maybe it was because it was Israel, or a job, or part of the high school experience. For me, perhaps, it may have been because my father preferred any alternative to my working in an archaeology lab for three to four months.

Whatever their reasons, we were going to Israel to live and work on a *kibbutz* for almost four months.

Sometime in mid-February, my mother drove me and Toby to JFK airport and dropped us off. I had just turned 17 and Toby was 16 (she lied about her age so that she could go). We boarded a flight to Israel, via Frankfurt, and landed at Lod Airport (now Ben Gurion International Airport) near Tel Aviv after some 18 hours of travel. No one met us, no one told us where to go or where to stay; there were no prior arrangements. We were not due at the *kibbutz* until the next day. We hailed a cab and asked the cab driver to take us to a hotel or a hostel (we were both fairly fluent in Hebrew). I am not sure where we went, but we were fairly convinced that it was a brothel. We called home, found some street food, and locked ourselves in our room, not sure we would make it to morning. It was loud and people were coming and going all night. People regularly knocked on our door. The next day we woke up and made our way to the bus station, dragging our large suitcases with us to get our tickets to the *kibbutz*. We probably could not have looked more like American tourists if we tried. We spoke the language, but we looked out of place, traveling alone and hauling our big suitcases. Though I used some incorrect words and ended up with the wrong tickets, we finally we got on the correct bus, still laughing at ourselves and feeling nervous. We told the bus driver our destination and asked him to let us know when we should get off the bus. After about 90 minutes, the bus pulled over and the driver told us that we had arrived. I imagined we would be dropped off at a building to check in and meet our hosts, but looking out the window all I saw was open fields. We were “in the middle of nowhere.”

We had no idea where to go. Luckily, a girl about our age

named Hannah also got off the bus and she asked us if she could help. Again, we were so thankful that we could at least speak Hebrew and we told her we were going to *Kibbutz Ma'anit*. She replied that she lived there and showed us the way. As we hauled our luggage across the fields, we had no idea what to expect. We eventually made it to a main building where we checked in and were assigned to a room in a barracks-style building. We shared the room with one other girl. We were issued our work clothes, work assignments, and a meal schedule. All meals were held in the common dining hall. Our adventure was underway.

Because we could speak Hebrew, we were often assigned jobs that required an explanation or minimal training. Not much training or explanation was required to wash dishes, clean the childrens' houses, or wash clothes. Working in the banana and apple fields required some training and so did caring for the chickens and cleaning their coops. As a result, we did almost every job a volunteer could do during our time there.

While we met many people who lived on the *kibbutz*, we also met people from all over the world. In the “backpack-through-Europe” days, navigating to a *kibbutz* in Israel became a popular thing to do, especially if you ran out of money. Though we earned the equivalent of about \$1.00 US per week, we were housed, fed, and clothed. It was a good place to be if you had no place to go and no money. Our *Kibbutz* was also relatively affluent—it had a club house where we could watch television and a swimming pool where we spent a lot of our late afternoons after work. We stopped working early on Friday and had Saturday off so we could take a bus or hitchhike to the beach. Hitchhiking in Israel

was a common method of transportation at the time and was relatively safe if you were not alone.

At the end of four months, we both called home to say we were going to stay in Israel and continue to work on the *kibbutz*. We were happy; we had Israeli boyfriends. These conversations did not go well for either of us; we were instructed by our parents that we must return home for our high school graduation before the third week of June (my father used more flowery language). We left the day before our graduation and arrived back in New York the morning of our high school graduation, feeling quite sad and jet lagged.

Why do I recount the details of this story? The time I spent in Israel impacted my life profoundly. I was 17 years old, meeting new people, speaking a different language, and finding my way socially and geographically. I was independent. I made amazing friends and stayed in touch with them for years. Toby was already a close friend and, since we went to the same college, Temple University, our bond only strengthened. I became more confident and able to stand up for myself (though still not to my father). When the Yom Kippur War broke out on October 6, 1973, I announced to my family that I was dropping out of school and moving to Israel to join the army. Suddenly an advocate for a college education, my father convinced me to finish the semester. After that, he said, I could go. The war ended quickly, and I stayed to finish college. However, his plan for me remained the same—I would go to work for him right after graduation.

College

I started college at Temple University in fall 1972. I was thrilled to finally be taking some anthropology and archaeology classes at the college level. Overall, my college experience was positive; I found it sometimes difficult, but invigorating. Since it had been such a battle to convince my parents, really my father, that I wanted to study archaeology, I could not believe I was enrolled and studying what I wanted to study. I was still living at home during my first year so it was hard to get immersed in college life. On the other hand, Temple University was largely a commuter school and I met other students in the same position. I took the bus or the subway each way; my friend Toby and I would occasionally commute together, just like in high school. We even had a few classes together. Things were going well; I was happy. I knew my father still expected me to take over his business when I graduated, but I had four years to develop my own plan.

In the spring, I enrolled in a Water Safety Instruction class to get re-certified as a lifeguard. This class choice was a turning point in that I met and made some dear friends who I am still in touch with today. A few people in the class were on the swim team and I was able to walk on to the team. I had not swam competitively for years so it was a challenge to get into shape. I also wanted desperately to move out of my house and into the dorms. That, of course, would be another battle.

Swimming was a huge part of my life since I was very young; it still is. I was born with dislocated hips and the doctors said swimming was the best therapy. My mother had never

learned to swim and was terrified of the water so I had to wait until I could take lessons on my own, which was around the age of three. I loved it. It would soon become my escape, a place where I experienced a “runner’s high” except I was swimming. It was and has always been the one place where I can clear my brain. I get focused on counting laps and everything else goes away. On the Temple University swim team, I was far from the best swimmer, but I loved it. I still do.

But my father refused to let me leave. I made every argument I could think of: I wanted to be on the swim team and morning practice was at 6 AM; I wanted to study more and be able to take early morning classes; I wanted to meet more people. Again, his friends intervened and eventually I moved out of my house and into the dorms for my second and third years of college.

I remember moving in at the start of my second year and feeling both joyous and a little tearful, though I am not sure why. I had no doubts about leaving, but there was a small part of me that would miss some of the comforts of home, especially my room which served as my haven in the craziness. I think it took me less than one night to rid myself of any regrets and to enjoy the freedom I now had living on my own. I felt so lucky. I had escaped.

I was not completely free, however. Since I was only a few miles away, I was still on call for family dinners, business dinners, Saturday work at the salon, or attending Philadelphia Eagles football games. I avoided answering the phone and often claimed I was out studying or staying at a friend’s house. If I did answer, and if I was asked (or told) to do something, I usually found a reason to go back right after

those things ended and, at the worst, I left early the next morning.



Figure 2. Conducting archaeological excavations at West Point, NY.

My second and third years of school were even better; I loved being away from home. I felt safer; I was safer. In the summer of 1974, after my second year, I enrolled in an archaeology field school at West Point, New York. I spent the summer doing field work and I loved it despite the hard, manual labor in the heat. It confirmed for me

again that this work was what I wanted to do with my life.

In the summer of 1975, after my third year, a friend and I decided we wanted to find a field school out west. We applied to several programs and Arizona State University (ASU) had the best (and most affordable) one. Attending the ASU field school was another somewhat spur of the moment decision and another one that would change my life. We flew to Arizona and were met at the airport by Professor Ed Dittert, a leading scholar in Southwest archaeology. We drove north in his jeep to Payson, Arizona where we would spend the summer. I was immediately drawn to the desert landscape. We mostly conducted excavation work that summer, but I also spent time in the lab analyzing artifacts, completing archaeological survey work, and writing field reports and a paper.

It was a perfect summer and neither of us wanted to leave so we stayed. I took undergraduate classes at Arizona State

University that would count toward my degree at Temple. I do not remember how I convinced my father; perhaps he thought this was only a temporary whim. I lived in an awful place, but I was happy. I finally learned to ride a bike at 20 years old. I took a part-time job making phone calls to sell carpet cleaning services so I would have some money. I swam (on my own) almost every day, which was still my mental therapy. I took an ecology class and three archaeology classes while I was there and I left, reluctantly, in December. I was set to graduate early now, and I wanted to keep working in archaeology. My father's plan still called for me to work for him. Luckily, my credits did not transfer in time, so I returned to Temple to take more archaeology classes and to swim for one last semester.

Meanwhile, things were tense at home and I was miserable. I stayed away as much as I could, but it was hard. I also knew I had just a few months before my father thought I would start working for him.

In summer 1976, I got a job with a faculty member at Temple as a crew chief on a project in "exotic" Trenton, New Jersey. We were excavating a prehistoric site that would be flooded by modern construction. We all lived in a large house together. In the evenings, we worked cataloging artifacts and preparing for the next day.

Luck was on my side, again. I was offered a job for the summer working on an excavation in downtown Philadelphia. Interstate 95 was being expanded and there were several archaeological sites in the path. Since it was a paid job, my father agreed and I bought myself some more time, though the clock was ticking.

South Carolina

My unplanned gap year in South Carolina turned out to be another lucky choice and a pivotal year in my life in many ways. I did not know it at the time, nor did I plan it, but, in retrospect, I learned so much in that year, both personally and professionally. It is likely why I was successful in graduate school.

In 1976, I was set to start graduate school at Temple University, the same school where I earned my undergraduate degree. My memory is a bit vague on why I was even allowed to attend graduate school at Temple. It is possible I said I would work part-time, it was possible I said it was only a few years, and it was possible I never fully explained it. I had received funding so I was not asking for financial help so that may have played a part as well.

My father had insisted I move back home, but my friend invited me to live in an apartment with her outside of Philadelphia. I thought I could make it work financially and I enthusiastically said “yes.” Telling my father was another thing. At first, he seemed to be okay with the decision. I was 21 so I did not technically have to ask him, but I was still terrified of him. Then, one night shortly after I told him, my mother woke me up around 2:00 AM to tell me I had to go downstairs and talk to him because he was livid. I nervously went downstairs and into the kitchen where my father screamed at me for some amount of time. Thirty minutes? An hour? I was told I was ungrateful, useless, a disappointment. I was asked what was so wrong with our house that I would rather move out, pay rent, and live with a friend. It went on and on until I finally said I would not move

out. I was devastated and terrified that I would never get out of my house. I called my friend the next day to tell her what happened and to tell her that I could not share an apartment with her when I started graduate school. Things were bad again; I needed to find a way out. I was headed for graduate school in a few weeks, and I was being forced to live at home again.



Figure 3. On the way to the Pecos Conference.

Later that summer, three friends and I decided to take a road trip across the country. I had worked doing archaeology all summer, which meant I was able to save some money. The reason for the trip was to attend a conference in Mexico, but it was our excuse for a road trip. That trip changed the course of my life again and put me on

the path to freedom.

The four of us set out in a Volvo station wagon, stopping along the way at various places. As we headed into Arizona, I felt at peace. I had fallen in love with the landscape, the desert, and the archaeology of the American Southwest.

After the conference, we decided to travel the more southern route and stop in Atlanta to see the family of my friend Judy and then head to Columbia, South Carolina to see the professor who had directed our 1975 field school at Arizona State University. We were out of money by then, except for enough for gas, so we took turns sleeping and driving and drove straight through from Canyon de Chelly,

New Mexico (our final stop in the Southwest) to Atlanta, Georgia before driving to Columbia.

While in Columbia, we each discussed our future plans, and I mentioned that I was starting graduate school at Temple University in a few weeks. Our former field director, Glen, replied, “You don’t want to do that.” When I asked why he explained that if I loved the American Southwest, then the program at Temple was not the right fit for me. I should be going to Arizona State University, the University of Arizona, or the University of New Mexico. Glen proposed a solution: “We have a one-year position open for a research assistant and it starts in a week or so. Are you interested?” With little idea of what I was getting into, I immediately said yes. The position was at the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina. He said they needed a female because all their other research assistants were male, and he would make some calls. I was hopeful, but I knew it was not guaranteed. I also knew this could be my way “out” of Philadelphia.

We headed home and I wondered what would happen. I still felt the need to get out and away. I did not think I could survive the demands of my father any longer. He was already telling me I needed to help at one of the salons until graduate classes started. A morning or two later, my mother woke me in the early morning to say that I had a phone call from someone in South Carolina. I tried to clear my voice and sound awake. I was offered the job—did I want it and, if so, could I get to Columbia in a few days? “Yes, and yes,” I replied. It was one the best decisions I have made; luckily, trusting my gut did not let me down.

I moved quickly. I called Temple University and told them

I could not attend graduate school, apologizing profusely. I told my father I had been offered a job in South Carolina and that I wanted to take it. A job was something he understood, and he assumed I would be back home in a year. My mother offered to drive me there and some friends offered to let me stay with them until I found an apartment. I left. I was out. I was (somewhat) free.

Why was this year in South Carolina so critical in my life? It was a tough year for me personally as I was away from my friends, and I did not work with anyone my age or gender. Swimming once again became my therapy. I met another woman, a graduate student, who was swimming on the same schedule so we would meet at lunch or after work to swim. It was not until January of that year that I had any friends close to my age.

The year in South Carolina was critical to my future success in graduate school. I gained extensive field experience, guidance on which programs to apply to, and I read of archaeological theory. It was also a time of transformation for me; I learned to live alone, to manage being in a very different space and place, and I learned to learn. It was a year I could never have planned.

Arizona State University was my top choice for graduate schools. I had been there for a summer and a fall semester, and it was also far away from Philadelphia. When the call came that I was accepted, I said yes immediately. I did not know how I would pay for it, where I would live, or how I would get there, but I knew yes was the right answer.

I delayed telling my parents anything until very late spring. My father knew my job was ending so he assumed I would come home and be done with “whatever the hell it was I was doing”—his words. When I called to say proudly that I had

been accepted to graduate school at Arizona State University, my father told me I could not go. Another gut punch, another battle. But I was slightly stronger now. I somehow managed to reply, “I’m not asking you; I am telling you that I am going.” I was not asking for help or money. I was going to make it work.

Graduate School

I left South Carolina in August 1977, to drive from Columbia to Tempe, Arizona in my 1972 Chevy Vega with a small trailer attached. I started classes in late August still in disbelief that I had made the move; I was in graduate school. My father was never supportive during this time, and he never bothered to try to understand what I was doing. He accused me constantly of acting like I was better than him with my “meaningless fancy college degrees.” I know I never acted that way. If someone were to ask him if he was proud of me, he would likely have said yes but those words were not something he ever randomly shared with me. But it was now 1977 and I was in Tempe, Arizona. A small part of me knew that my escape had begun and I was so happy.

Those years were wonderful and difficult. I was fully immersed in archaeology and I had wonderful friends and colleagues. I had the most amazing advisor, Dr. Sylvia Gaines, who would also become my friend, colleague, mother, and sister all rolled into one. I have modeled my career after her and I always told her how much I valued her.

The Moral of This Story

When I reflect on all of these experiences, I cannot help but think how incredibly lucky I was despite the problems along the way. The chances I took worked out. Each summer, when I spoke to the parents of new students, I told them that I truly cannot imagine my life had I not been able to study archaeology and make it all work. And each time, I get choked up when I say this. Every student entering college should have the opportunity to discover and pursue what they love. If I had been forced into another career, I would have been miserable, and likely failed out of school.

In summer 2021, during COVID, I was a guest lecturer in an online class filled with 60 incoming freshmen. I discussed the value of the liberal arts and the fact that your major is not your career. I provided some examples and gave a three-minute version of my story. After my lecture, I took a few questions and the first student said, “I love French. It is what I have always wanted to study, but my mother keeps telling me that I can’t have a useless major. I need to major in something useful like business.” When I get questions like this, they hit me hard; I feel the pain and angst of the students. I never have to think about my answer. “There is no useless major,” I said, “You should major in what you love and what you want to study. You get one chance to do this—do what you want, study what you love. The job will come regardless of your major.” She smiled. I hope she chose French.

Moving On

With this personal story as background, I move now to the second section of this book; what college is and should be, and why students should be encouraged to try, fail, and succeed. This section also includes a chapter devoted to the value of the liberal arts which seem to need constant defending. My opinions and ideas are based on my personal experiences, some of which are described above. They are also based on the literature, my years in graduate school working as an archaeologist in the field with undergraduates, my years of teaching college students, and my 30+ years as an academic dean (both an Assistant Dean and an Associate Dean) working with students, faculty, staff, and administrators.

Chapter 2. College Then and Now

The college admission system is broken. By “system,” I mean K-12 education and the time one spends applying to college and earning their degree. To understand college today and the current toxic culture around parental involvement in higher education, this chapter provides some background on the history of higher education and addresses the following topics:

- College vs. university
- Origins of the university
- *In loco parentis*
- California: when and where things changed
- The useful degree
- Why attend college?
- Low-income families, students, and college
- Who gets into college and does the school matter
- What is college today?

Much has been written on the history of higher education by experts in the field.¹ This chapter will present a brief background on higher education for those less familiar with its evolution in order to provide some context for the later chapters. In the next chapter, the focus turns to what I perceive to be the disconnect between what college *should be* and what it has *become*. That chapter concludes with what I call “problems to solve” or barriers to success for many

students. The final chapter in this section is a discussion and defense of the liberal arts and sciences. My focus throughout the book is on institutions within the United States.

Why do I believe the system is broken? Modern technology, social media, and the economy have all played a role in changing the landscape of modern-day higher education. The history of *in loco parentis* and its demise also played a role.² Not that I think *in loco parentis* was good nor do I think we should return to it, but someone must watch out for college-aged students who in today's society are no longer viewed as adults. That responsibility went from the students themselves (in the very early years), to the universities, and now, it seems at times, to parents and guardians. At the heart of the issue is whether 18- to 22-year-olds are considered adults by society (not just the legal system).

College vs. University

In my role as a higher education administrator, people often ask me about the difference between a college and a university. I would argue that, for the most part, colleges no longer exist. Traditionally, colleges focused on undergraduate education, while universities were larger research institutions with graduate and professional programs. The word “university” has Latin roots; it comes from the word *universus* which means whole or entire. So, think of a university as a small town or city where people live, study, and work. The President of UVA described the institution this way because, in addition to being a place where people live, study, and work, the university includes

student and faculty housing, dining, live theater, sporting events, a health care system, a police force, a transportation system, and more.

Over time, some colleges expanded and changed their names replacing “college” with “university.” For example:

Table 1. Colleges that expanded and changed their names.

Agricultural and Mechanical College of Kentucky	University of Kentucky	1878
Charlotte College	University of North Carolina at Charlotte	1965
Cumberland College	Cumberland University	2005
Elon College	Elon University	2001
Florida State College for Women	Florida University	1947
Georgetown College	Georgetown University	1814
Kent State College	Kent State University	1935
Longwood College	Longwood University	2004
Marion College	Indiana Wesleyan University	1988
South Carolina College	University of South Carolina	1906
William & Mary (Norfolk)	Old Dominion University	1962

In this book, I use the terms interchangeably.

Origins of the University

According to the *Guinness World Records*, the oldest,

continually operating college is the University of al-Qarawinyin, which was founded in 859 AD in Morocco.⁴ The University of Bologna, Italy, founded in 1088, is the oldest college in Europe⁵, likely followed by Oxford University which may date back as far as 1096.⁶ In the United States, early colleges and universities include:

Table 2. Earliest colleges and universities in the United States.

School ⁷	Year Founded
Harvard University	1636
William & Mary	1693
St. John's College	1696
Yale University	1701
University of Pennsylvania	1740 (chartered 1755)
Moravian College	1742
University of Delaware	1743
Princeton University	1746
Washington and Lee University	1749
Columbia University	1754

Who attended these first colleges and universities? Wealthy white landowners and clergy. Harvard University, for example, is named for the Puritan clergyman John Harvard who determined that there would be a need to train clergy for the new Commonwealth of Massachusetts given the Puritan migration to New England. William & Mary was founded in 1693 by the royal charter of King William III and Queen Mary II of England and has yielded a lengthy list of presidents and leaders:

*“The list of patriots who studied at William & Mary is long and distinguished and includes three American Presidents, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, and John Tyler, sixteen members of the Continental Congress, four signers of the Declaration of Independence, four justices of the Supreme Court of the United States, including John Marshall, and many members of Congress, cabinet members, and diplomats. Additionally, George Washington received his surveyor’s license from William & Mary and after his Presidency served as William & Mary’s Chancellor.”*⁸

Thomas Jefferson, who founded UVA in 1819, expanded educational opportunities for wealthy, white males in the South. While other universities allowed for only one of three areas of study—religion, law, or medicine—Jefferson opened new areas of study at his university including architecture, philosophy, and political science.⁹

From the original goal of training clergy and educating white men in law and medicine, colleges and universities have come a long way. Their fundamental goal has remained education for those able to attend. Through the decades, the liberal arts and sciences expanded (see Chapter 4), and college ultimately became the path to a better career, a higher income, and a better quality of life—at least in theory. Attending college became a way out of poverty for those who could afford to attend without incurring additional debt.

Community colleges date back to the mid-1800s. These schools were originally called junior colleges or two-year colleges, and their roots trace back to the Morrill Act of 1862 (also known as the Land Grant Act).¹⁰ As their numbers increased, these schools opened more doors to higher

education, functioning as both terminal degrees and steppingstones to four-year institutions.

A March 21, 2024 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*¹¹ outlined how some community colleges are now seeking permission to offer baccalaureate degrees, in contrast to the Associates degree typically awarded. Why? The article states it is because, “Employers are in desperate need of skilled labor, and workers need faster, cheaper ways to advance in their careers.”¹² In Idaho, many four-year schools pushed back, saying it would result in duplicative degrees that could “cannibalize limited state resources.”¹³ For me, the most powerful line in this article is:

*“Taken together, the two recent decisions illustrate a blurring of the lines between the two- and four-year sectors that is taking place not just in Idaho, but nationwide, as colleges struggle to overcome enrollment declines and skepticism about the value of a bachelor’s degree.”*¹⁴

In addition, two schools are now pushing a three-year degree. Brigham Young University-Idaho and Ensign College are offering new 90-credit degrees which is 30 credits short of the typical 120 credits required.¹⁵

The University of Virginia tried pushing a three-year degree, though not by decreasing the number of credits required for the degree. The State wanted the university to strongly encourage students coming in with AP or dual enrollment credits to finish in three years. A small note still exists on our school website about this.¹⁶ We also created “3+1” and “4+1” pathways where students may start taking graduate courses in their final year, earning the BA or BS

degree in three years and allowing them to earn their MA or MS in the final year.

I understand the need for these options and certainly understand the financial advantage of finishing college in three years, especially when a student plans to attend graduate or professional school. But the downside is that the “rush to completion” **could** result in the student missing other opportunities like study abroad, a leadership role, independent study work, or writing a thesis. It can also lead to what I call a “check the boxes” mentality where students plow through their course work to finish their degree quickly without really digesting and processing the material and the experience.

The Role of *In Loco Parentis*

In loco parentis in Latin translates to “in the place of a parent.” Up until the 1960s, colleges and universities operated as *in loco parentis*. Legally, this phrase meant that institutions could enforce discipline, regulate speech, and take disciplinary action with little to no regard for student rights.¹⁷

Philip Lee described the early history of this status as follows:

“From the mid-1800s to the 1960s, American colleges assumed this responsibility over their students’ lives that went well beyond academics. During this time, constitutional rights stopped at the college gates—at both private and public institutions. In his inaugural

address as the first President of Johns Hopkins University, Daniel Coit Gilman (1876) stated:

“The College implies, as a general rule, restriction rather than freedom; tutorial rather than professional guidance; residence within appointed bounds; the chapel, the dining hall, and the daily inspection. The college theoretically stands in *loco parentis*; it does not afford a very wide scope; it gives a liberal and substantial foundation on which the university instruction may be wisely built (para. 24).”¹⁸

Lee states that, for the most part, the courts upheld in *loco parentis* in their rulings for cases between students and universities.

Brian Jackson’s 1991 article¹⁹ is of interest here because he describes the origins of the American university system and their early faith-based origins. Jackson²⁰ confirms this by noting, “The earliest American colleges, whether located in Virginia or Massachusetts, sought to ensure that their communities maintained a common religious faith and system of moral values.” Students were required to study both Latin and Greek, and they received a solid foundation in Christian principles.

The 1960s brought relatively rapid cultural changes across the United States and with that the eventual death of *in loco parentis* as it pertained to the university environment. Lee argues that *Dixon v Alabama* was the turning point.²¹ He writes:

“In the seminal case of *Dixon v. Alabama* (1961), Alabama State College summarily expelled a group of African American students for participating in a civil rights demonstration after they were refused service at

a lunch grill located in the basement of the Montgomery County Courthouse. The college expelled the students without any notice, hearing, or opportunity for appeal—in other words, without respect for due process rights. The students challenged their expulsions as in violation of their constitutional rights to due process.”

The Fifth Circuit Court ruled on *Dixon v. Alabama* and argued for some protections for the students including:

“1) The students should be given notice containing a statement of the specific charges and grounds which, if proven, would justify expulsion;

2) The students should be given the names of the witnesses against them and an oral or written report on the facts to which each witness testifies;

3) The students should be given the opportunity to present their own defense against the charges and to produce either oral testimony or written affidavits of witnesses on their behalf; and

4) If the hearing is not before the Board of Education directly, then the results and findings of the hearing should be presented in a report open to the students’ inspection. (*Dixon v. Alabama*, 1961, p. 158–59).”²²

The Civil Rights Movement, protests for free speech, and the anti-war movement, Lee argues, led to a huge spike in student activism cases. By the late 1960s, the idea of *in loco parentis* was essentially defunct.

What came next were conversations around what role a college should play in the management and supervision of young adults.²³ Lee describes what he calls the “University-as-Bystander and Relationship-Based Duty.”²⁴ A 1979 case, *Bradshaw v. Rawlings*, contributed to the end of *in loco*

parentis because the ruling determined that, not only was *in loco parentis* no longer applicable, but colleges were deemed to not always be responsible for what happened to students on or off campus. If the institution was not responsible, who was? Who is responsible today?

One could argue that since most students attending a university are between 18 to 24 years old (or older), they are adults and responsible for themselves. However, I do not believe this plays out in the real world of higher education. Universities bear some responsibility (for example, creating safe environments), but cannot promise that every student will be safe. Who filled the void with the end of *in loco parentis*? Parents and guardians. Perhaps parents became more involved because of modern technology such as cell phones and tracking apps or social media. The increased cost of a degree perhaps made this intervention seem more urgent. What I have seen over the past 30 years is a dramatic increase in calls and emails from parents and guardians each year and, anecdotally, the requests have become more demanding, even absurd. While some are valid – expressing real concern about a student not responding to calls, texts or emails for a reasonable amount of time (more than 20 minutes!) – most are not. They are calls about something the student could and should be handling such as laundry, roommate issues, class enrollment, etc. The outcome? It has become increasingly difficult to focus on education in college as more and more support services are poured into non-academic areas.²⁵

Rita Koganzon's recent article, "The Coddling of the American Undergraduate"²⁶ discusses the current trend of colleges trying to assert almost total control over student's lives and why this is problematic. This control includes

acceptable language, roommate behavior, classroom discussions, etc. I highly recommend her summary of this issue.

The Concept of the “Useless” Degree and When Things Changed

A 2015 article by Dan Berrett in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* notes February 28, 1967, as the day the reason to go to college changed and became more centered on getting a job.²⁷ California had a stellar higher education system, but then governor Ronald Reagan oversaw a state facing economic crises and he perceived higher education as a luxury. Others fought back, but Reagan argued (as stated by Berrett) that, “Learning for learning’s sake might be nice, but the rest of us shouldn’t have to pay for it. A higher education should prepare students for jobs.” Berrett follows by saying, “Once prized as a worthy pursuit for all, liberal education that day in 1967 became pointless, an indulgence, a joke.”²⁸

Words of Wisdom

There is no useless college degree. A college degree provides people with critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Beyond career opportunities, it fosters personal growth,

broadens perspectives, and cultivates the ability to adapt in an ever-changing global landscape.

Fast forward a bit and the idea of the “practical” or “useful” degree takes hold. In my opinion, another wrong turn in the history of higher education. The common thought became, “College is expensive; to make it worthwhile you must have a ‘worthwhile’ major.” In the eyes of my parents, archaeology was certainly not useful for anything. This lack of understanding of what college is, what a major is, and of what a college education means remains today. This is especially true for arts and humanities majors, and several social science majors, as discussed in Chapter 4.

In my position as both Assistant and Associate Dean, I have had hundreds, maybe thousands, of conversations with students over 30+ years who say, “I love x, but my parents will only pay for college if I major in y,” or “I really love z, but I don’t know how I would find a job with that major.” Hearing these statements evokes sadness because (1) any individual aspiring to attend college (or attending college) should be able to study what they love; (2) it shows a lack of understanding of the value of knowledge for knowledge’s sake; and (3) every academic discipline offers great value to the student who will take that knowledge and information out into the workplace and into the world. In addition, college (and every major) teaches you how to continually learn, how to work in teams and individually, how to problem solve and how to be creative. We often cannot solve new problems with old ideas. We, as a society, need

to constantly think, create, and innovate to stay current and to move forward. Again every major teaches you how to do these things.

My discipline (anthropology/archaeology) took a direct hit, one of many over the years, when Rick Scott, Governor of Florida, said in 2011, “If I’m going to take money from a citizen to put into education, then I’m going to take that money to create jobs. ... Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don’t think so.”²⁹ And in 2014, then President Barack Obama had to apologize for his comment about art history majors after saying, “...folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.”³⁰ These naïve statements show complete disregard for the value of knowledge and education and the skill someone brings into the world of work from either of these majors. While a potential employer likely will never ask an applicant “Who painted *Girl with a Pearl Earring*?” or “What is the myth of the mound builders?”, college graduates will use and apply not only the knowledge, but the skills they gained from *studying* these things. Many college majors do go on to work in “skilled manufacturing” jobs and various trades and they will be more educated with a college degree which will help them be successful in those jobs too. These college graduates will work as plumbers, electricians, chefs, construction site managers, hairdressers, business owners, CEOs, etc. They will use their degree in ways they probably cannot articulate.

The disconnect between the following two statements is hard for me to reconcile:

1. If you are going to college, you must major in something worthwhile (per many parents/guardians).

2. Employers do not care about your major; they want college graduates who can function in the workplace (per most employers and college career centers).

Yes, if you want to be a nurse, you need to go to nursing school. If you want to build bridges, you need to study engineering. But you can succeed in many areas of work with any major from a liberal arts program; you can also go to medical school or law school with any major. And, with any major, you **will** be prepared for your first, second, and last career. A liberal arts and sciences degree is not a pre-professional degree.

Search for the question, “Is there such a thing as a useless degree?” and you will find numerous articles that support my belief that the answer is a hard “no.” While many students will tell you years later that they are not using their major because they are not in the career named by their major (e.g., they are not historians, sociologists, biologists, etc.), what they almost never realize is that they are using all the skills they learned from that major such as writing, communication, research, innovation, teamwork, etc. You will also find articles by those who believe there are useless majors, and I would encourage you to ignore those as I do not find them accurate or reliable.

Regarding the second item two paragraphs above, that employers do not really care about your major, Julie Lythcott-Haims talks a bit about what employers want and value in her chapter entitled, “Prepare Them for Hard Work.”³¹ She references Alexa Gulliford who is a managing director at a corporate search firm.³² Gulliford looks for motivated young people who can do “grunt work” and high-level work, and who can think ahead. She quotes Gulliford

as saying, “We teach our kids to wait for cues. To wait for instruction. That’s what keeps them from having the type of mind-set employers want to see.”³³ Nowhere does she say something like, ‘We really want students who majored in x.’”

A 2024 job outlook survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) showed that 78% of employers stated that the top three skills they are looking for in a potential hire are communication, teamwork, and critical thinking.³⁴ All three of these skills can be learned and practiced from every major and program. Both new graduates and employers rank communication as the top skill. Variation exists in the ratings of student proficiency of career readiness competencies as shown in the figure below.³⁵ The survey analysis suggests that,

“Sometimes, the gap is quite large, as in the case of professionalism, where 84.6% of students and just 50% of employers perceive students to be ‘very or extremely’ proficient in this competency. ‘This general disconnect may occur because many students do not understand the connection between the knowledge and experience they gained in college and the competencies. Therefore, students cannot effectively articulate this to employers on their resumes or during interviews,’ VanDerziel [NACE’s president and chief executive officer] says.”³⁶

A more recent article from *Inside Higher Ed* on March 28, 2024, notes the following:

“The most important skill a graduate can hold is adaptability and a willingness to learn (89 percent), according to HR respondents. Other top-rated skills are strong work ethic and reliability (87 percent), communication (81 percent) and teamwork (78 percent).

Human skills, also called soft skills, outranked more technical skills a professional could hold, including project management, multilingual abilities and leadership.”³⁷

Again, communication skills consistently rank high. Employers know they can teach a new employee the hard skills needed for a new job. The soft skills (like interpersonal relationships, willingness to work, respect, etc.) are harder to teach. Employers expect new employees to arrive with them.

The lack of understanding about what a liberal arts major is and can do does not surprise me because I have long felt that, while college and universities do a good job at educating students, they do not adequately help them understand how to translate the knowledge and skills they learned when they leave college, begin interviewing, and enter the workforce. To that end, my school created a program called Catalyst (see Chapter 3) that is designed to help students translate their liberal arts degree into relevance in the workplace. Regardless of a student’s major, they should be able to provide a list of reasons for why they selected that major and what they will bring to the workplace.

Why Attend College?

I am going to backtrack a bit here and address the question, “Why go to college?” Ideally, in my mind, the answer is to become an educated person. Thomas Jefferson is credited with the notion of an “educated citizenry” though this quote cannot be pinned down. He is often cited as saying, “An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a

free people,” but this exact quote is not in any of Jefferson’s writings.³⁸ Researchers at Monticello, Jefferson’s home, acknowledge that the quote reflects Jefferson’s views on education. I agree with the sentiment.

That is the ideal, but it is far from simple and it becomes more and more complex every year. I will discuss some of the reasons for this in the next chapter and I will talk more below about why one should attend college.

A component of this book is to address what I believe the goals of a college education should be for young adults because I think it would help reduce the amount of helicopter and snowplow parenting. To that end, I review a few of the many reasons why college can be an important aspect of a person’s life. This indirectly connects to why a students should “own their education.”

The quote below summarizes well one of the main reasons for attending college:

“One important answer to this question is more opportunity. As opposed to generations of the past, high school graduates today are unable to obtain the number of high-paying jobs that were once available. The U.S. has been transformed from a manufacturing-based economy to an economy based on knowledge, and the importance of a college education today can be compared to that of a high school education forty years ago. It serves as the gateway to better options and more opportunity.”³⁹

Is this still true? According to Paul Tough, maybe not. In his 2019 book, *How College Divides Us*, he describes the results of his research that shows a system still focused on the wealthy while creating divides and roadblocks for those who are not

wealthy.⁴⁰ He argues that while college does open doors and helps those with a degree move up and out of poverty or lower incomes, lower income families are not getting their children to college. Tough addresses other issues such as the difficulty of succeeding in a system you do not understand (see the discussion of the hidden curriculum in Chapter 4), one in which you owe a great deal of money and may often take on more debt, and one in which you never feel as if you belong.

College can still be hard to navigate and much too expensive for too many families. Students graduate with a degree, but some will then spend years (and years) paying off the debt they incurred. The website Student Loan Debt Statistics tracks debt and as of July 15, 2024,

*“... student loan debt in the United States totals **\$1.753 trillion**; 2023 was the first time this number decreased. The debt accumulation rate is slowing, and recent analytics indicate that consumers responsibly manage their student loan debt.”⁴¹*

The site also presents the following statistics:

- The outstanding federal loan balance is over \$1.620 trillion and accounts for 91.2% of all student loan debt.
- 42.8 million borrowers have federal student loan debt.
- The average federal student loan debt balance is \$37,853 while the total average balance (including private loan debt) may be as high as \$40,681.
- Less than 2% of private student loans enter default as of 2021's fourth financial quarter (2021 Q4).
- The average public university student borrows \$33,362 to attain a bachelor's degree.⁴²

It is not clear whether the above statistics include debt for graduate and professional school, but with or without those numbers, these figures are astounding.

On February 21, 2024, President Biden “announced the approval of \$1.2 billion in student debt cancellation for almost 153,000 borrowers currently enrolled in the Saving on a Valuable Education (SAVE) repayment plan.”⁴³ Many people did not support this move, but the cost of attending a college or a university has increased dramatically and federal support has not, so help is essential. A White House Fact sheet illustrates this point:⁴⁴

“Since 1980, the total cost of both four-year public and four-year private college has nearly tripled, even after accounting for inflation. Federal support has not kept up: Pell Grants once covered nearly 80 percent of the cost of a four-year public college degree for students from working families, but now only cover a third. That has left many students from low- and middle-income families with no choice but to borrow if they want to get a degree. According to a Department of Education analysis, the typical undergraduate student with loans now graduates with nearly \$25,000 in debt.”

The data on gender and race/ethnicity is also telling and alarming. The website educationdata.org reports the following information:

Student Loan Debt by Sex or Gender

- 56.5% of student financial aid recipients are female.
- 58% of all student loan debt belongs to women.
- Parents of male students are more likely to take out loans on their behalf.
- 16% of women have undergraduate student loan debt.

- 8% of women have postgraduate student debt.

Student Loan Debt by Race or Ethnicity

- Black college students are the most likely to use federal loans, with 49.4% borrowing, while Asian students are the least likely to receive federal loans at 62%.
- 30% of black college graduates with student loans default in the first 12 years of repayment.
- White students are the most likely to receive private loans, with 7.1% borrowing privately; American Indian and Alaska Native students are least likely to borrow privately at 2.6%.
- Four years after graduation, 48% of Black students owe an average of 12.5% more than they borrowed.
- White and Caucasian borrowers owe 54% of the national student loan debt balance.⁴⁵

A March 4, 2024, article by Emily Peck entitled, “Show this chart [see article] to anyone who tells you college isn’t worth it” is a bit more optimistic and asserts that a college education **is** worth it.⁴⁶ I agree. She asserts that even though trust in higher education is decreasing, “the age gap between recent college and high school grads has been widening for decades, and grew even more last year, per new data from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.”⁴⁷ The chart from the article shows this clearly by illustrating a \$24,000 gap in median annual wage.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, as I say here and as others state as well, trust in and desire for an undergraduate degree are dropping. The above article includes some other interesting data points and

from this article and many others, I would still argue that a college degree is very much worth it.

Low-Income Families and College

Most of the eligible population in the United States is not college educated. Data from the US Census Bureau, showing labor force participation by level of education: no high school; high school or equivalent; some college or associate degree; and Bachelor's degree or higher, confirm this.⁴⁹

Why is this the case? The barriers to college include access, navigability, cost, and family. For the parents of some first-generation college students, the notion of sending their child to college is frightening. They may need their college-age children to take care of younger siblings or aging grandparents, to work in the family business, or to work to support the family. There is also a fear of losing their child emotionally because once they are college-educated: they may never come home, may think they are better than their parents, etc. I believe this attitude was part of my father's anti-college mentality. When he was angry, he would often say things to me like, "You think you're so much better than me because you went to college." But I truly never did. For me, college was not about being better than anyone—it was all about wanting to study something I loved, archaeology.

Hope Chicago

Hope Chicago aims to provide 30,000 scholarships to college and vocational programs over the next decade.⁵⁰ Pete Kadens, who created Hope Chicago, said the following in his 60 Minutes interview:

“I used to think that college and going to college was the great equalizer. In truth, what we’ve come to find out; college is the great stratifier in this country. It furthers the gap between the haves and the have nots.”

As his interviewer Scott Pelley stated, “... the richest country in history has not found a way to educate all its children.” Kadens also commented, “I just think that, fundamentally, there is a misunderstanding in this country that college is accessible to everybody. And the fact is, no, it is not.”⁵¹ Ideally, the United States will, at some point, figure out how to make it affordable for anyone who wants to attend..

What about attending college and earning a degree simply for the love of learning? For the desire to pursue something more in depth? What about the drive to innovate, create, invent, and work with other smart and driven people and a cadre of bright and inspiring faculty? For many low-income and first-generation students, this opportunity is a luxury. How can one justify studying something that is not perceived by those around them to be “useful”? While the above reasons *should be* sufficient enough for attending college, they are often dismissed because, if you are going to go to college, you must earn a “useful” degree. I hope one day the myth of the useful major will end as every major is useful.

Who Gets Into College and Does the School Matter?

Many high school students from high-income families feel pressure to get into a school that has a high-status name, that has caché, and that people will recognize when their parents say, “Oh yes, Sally had to choose between Harvard, Yale, and Princeton and she chose Harvard.” Some students clearly also care as they try to earn bragging rights and gain access to the networks Ivy League schools offer, which can be extensive.

However, **every** school offers networks and opportunities. Much of this next section is based on the work of Frank Bruni, specifically his 2015 book, *Where You Go is Not Who You’ll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania*⁵² and a recent article by Jonathan Wai et al. from *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*.⁵³ While the article by Wai et al. makes some valuable points, and saying one went to Harvard certainly carries weight, it must also be stated that getting into the “best school” is often not an option for many students due to cost, accessibility, grades, high school counseling, etc. It may not be related to intelligence. I worry that an article like the one by Wai et al. will cause some future students to give up and ask themselves if they cannot go to an elite school, should they bother going to college at all. This, I strongly believe, is not true. There is a school for everyone. So while graduates of elite universities certainly have and wield power, a college degree is worth a lot. I will also add that people define success in very different ways.

Wai et al. state that they “found exceptional achievement is surprisingly strongly associated with “elite” education.”⁵⁴

They state that “attending one of just 34 institutions of higher education out of the roughly 4000 in the U.S. appears to be a critical and surprising factor separating extraordinary achievers from others in their fields.”⁵⁵ They discuss the limitations of their study and while I do not disagree with much of what they found and say, I, as stated above, worry about what people might take away from this study.

Another view, expressed by Bruni early in his book, asks whether the school you attend determines who you will be⁵⁶. The clear answer early on is no, partially because “the admissions game is too flawed and too rigged to be given so much credit.”⁵⁷ It is likely unclear to an applicant how many prospective admit seats are truly open. Bruni did an analysis to try to determine what percentage of an applicant class is truly open after legacies, athletes, special admits, friends of the university, faculty children, children of political leaders and/or CEOs, board members, etc. are admitted. He estimates that about 55% of the available spots in an incoming class *could* be spoken for with these populations of students.⁵⁸ He concludes, “... if you’re a parent who’s pushing your kids relentlessly and narrowly toward one of the most prized schools in the country and you think that you’re doing them a favor, you’re not. You’re in all probability setting them up for heartbreak...”⁵⁹

The fact is that much of the admission process is out of the applicant’s control. Bruni also discusses the school that needs a volleyball player, a student from a certain state or country, students who express interest in a certain major, etc. It is a numbers game, a gamble to some extent. He advises, and I agree, that applicants should not become too invested in getting into any one school.

And what happens when every student applying is special,

excellent, and brilliant, with a resumé filled with accomplishments? Schools have a maximum number of students that they can admit. So many of these excellent students will not be admitted. It reminds me of something I shared with parents every summer at orientation. Almost the entire incoming class at UVA comes from the top 10% of their high school, but at the end of the first semester, 50% of the students will be in the bottom 50% of the first-year class. While they may be excellent students with stellar GPAs, half of them will be in the bottom half. That is just the math!

Bruni also looks at former presidents, vice presidents, CEOs, and the 30 under 30 lists. Many graduates went to public universities and many graduates attended schools that are not well known. For the 30 Under 30 lists, Bruni says several went to “state schools like the University of Where-They-Just-So-Happened-To-Live-At-The-Time.”⁶⁰

Additionally, in my experience, prospective students do not always consider the programs offered and general education requirements of the schools to which they apply. Over the years, I have had many conversations with new students about their intended majors, and I am often surprised by how frequently they choose fields that our institution does not offer, such as journalism, fashion design, or nutrition. Others mistakenly assume they can pursue a major housed in a different school within our university, even when access is restricted. Many students are also unaware of their school’s general education requirements. For instance, students in my school, the College of Arts & Sciences, are often surprised to learn that they must complete four semesters (or the equivalent) of a world language.

So, “Does a prestigious college make you successful in life? Or do you do that for yourself?”⁶¹ Bruni asserts, and I agree,

that you can do that for yourself, yet we cannot seem to break free of believing otherwise. Yes, more affluent schools **may** provide some opportunities that other schools cannot, but, in the long run, I do not think that is what makes someone successful in life. Similarly, in my observation, some students with low GPAs have been far more successful in the job search, while those with high GPAs were unable to land good jobs right after college. Why? It is not always about your college GPA.

The college access and admissions “game” is a very complex and ever-changing puzzle. It is also rapidly changing with the introduction of AI. A February, 2025 article from *ECampus News: Innovations in Education and AI* notes the following:

“Integrating AI into higher education can make the whole process more systematic and streamlined. Already, the technology is being tasked with evaluating application materials and screening everything from transcripts and test scores to letters of recommendation and essays. With the number of applicants now on the rise, increasing by 32 percent between 2020 and 2023, automation can shoulder much of the administrative load.

The problem is that the DNA of the data being fed to AI is biased. Data comes from people, and people are inherently biased. Even an unconscious bias can cause AI models to drift, unintentionally introducing prejudices toward certain groups or perpetuating biases and thus leading to greater disparities among gender, race, and ethnicity. So, how can we use AI in college

admissions most effectively to ensure the process is equitable?”⁶²

As AI drives more decisions in higher education, including admissions, a careful examination of the data and programming must be required. In an ideal world (that may not exist) college should become more navigable, accessible, and affordable.

Does College Equal Upward Mobility?

A related question is whether a college degree leads to upward mobility. Is it a way out of or into poverty? My colleague at UVA, Chad Wellmon, discusses this topic in his April 2021 article entitled, “The Crushing Contradictions of the American University” (that title is followed by “Our blind faith in the transformative power of higher ed is slipping. What now?”). One of the opening paragraphs asks the following questions:

“What must one believe in to be willing to borrow tens of thousands of dollars in order to pursue a certification of completion—a B.A.? What would a college have to promise in order to compel someone to do that? What would a bank have to believe to extend this person credit? Or the U.S. government, to guarantee such loans en masse—now roughly \$2 trillion? And what would a society have to believe to sustain the system that keeps it all going?”⁶³

So, what does a college degree offer and what it should offer? At the most basic level, it offers an education. As I always tell parents and students, if students take full

advantage of the many opportunities that a college has to offer (i.e., exploring a wide range of majors, faculty connections, study abroad, getting to know other students well, leadership roles, career centers, etc.), the student should graduate as a different person—older, wiser, more knowledgeable of the world around them, and prepared to enter a global workforce.

Wellmon goes on to say that the belief that colleges and universities could make one's life better and “generate rising incomes and social equality was hard won.”⁶⁴ It is still what we, more or less, believe today as a society, though trust in higher education has dropped. Employers still value a college degree from any school. A degree is better than some college courses, which are in turn better than no college. We still want, I think and hope, an educated public.

In terms of trust in higher education, several recent news stories detail the declining trust that the public has in higher education. A Gallup poll showed that “Americans confidence in higher education has fallen to 36%, sharply lower than in two prior readings in 2015 (57%) and 2018 (48%).”⁶⁵ While Gallup did not investigate the reasons for the declines, the article cites the rising cost of a degree as being a significant factor.⁶⁶ In addition, “previous Gallup polling found that Democrats expressed concern about the costs, while Republicans registered concern about politics in higher education.”⁶⁷

A *Forbes* article by Michael Nietzel added the following information (the four bullets below are all from the same article):

- Political Identification: The largest drop is among Republicans; confidence also declined among

Independents and Democrats.

- Education: Confidence declined among adults without a college degree, but it also dropped “among those with an undergraduate degree (-10 points) and those with a postgraduate degree (-17 points).”
- Gender: Both males and females (the only two groups listed) showed similar declines.
- Age: The biggest decline is with adults 55 and older—a 24% point drop from 2015.⁶⁸

In a *US News & World Report* article, Sarah Wood dug a bit deeper and pointed to political division, cost of attendance, and access issues as being key.⁶⁹ She also addressed ways to try to restore confidence in higher education such as transparency in cost, more grant and work-study programs, and the value of the degree when one enters the workforce. In the final paragraph, she notes:

“People just don’t have the luxury of sitting around and thinking good thoughts. We have to talk about the ways in which that’s not what college does today. We’re actually preparing students with the skills that will help them in a world in which the challenges that we’re facing, from COVID-19 to global warming, require the capacity to apply the liberal (arts) learning that they get in college.”⁷⁰

In the fourth and final example here, Jessica Blake writes about increasing doubts among the public that a college degree is “worth the time and the money.”⁷¹ On the positive side, Blake notes that, while confidence is declining (even in pre-pandemic times), benefits remain and many acknowledge those benefits. For example, among high school students, 81% cite the ability to make more money, 80%

reference job security and 74% reference preparation for life. Among non-college enrolled individuals, 71% cite the ability to make more money, 65% reference job security and 60% reference life preparation.⁷² More data may be found in the article. The solution, Blake asserts, is to change the narrative. Specifically, in the concluding paragraph, she writes:

“Four of the report’s top six suggestions for colleges moving forward involved giving prospective and current students expert advising in academic, financial and postgraduate career success. The other two included eliminating the accrual of student debt for anyone attending community college programs and providing more dual-enrollment opportunities to help students save time and money.”⁷³

A 2018 Gallup report entitled “From College to life: Relevance and the value of higher education” discusses the “consumer” in higher education—the student.⁷⁴ The article states, “...some in the field may be wary of the term “consumer.” I am one of those people.⁷⁵ My issue with this kind of study is it looks to directly link course work and a major to a job. Many of us in higher education know it is not about the facts one learns, but the skills and the ability to learn that are of value from each and every course and major. I encounter many former students who tell me they are doing well, but they say they are not using their major. I argue they are because it was that major, all of their courses, and the completion of the degree that taught them to read, write, think, learn, etc. So, the English major working as a CEO may say “I am not using my major”, but I will always argue that they are. If we do not help students understand this, their dissatisfaction with their degree will likely continue.

Graduation rates are a key factor for rankings and top schools hit the high 80% to low 90% range for their graduation rates, though some regional campuses of major schools are close to being as low as many for-profit schools. The table below shows some of the highest graduation rates:

Table 3. Colleges and universities with the highest graduation rates.⁷⁶

University	Graduation Rate
University of Notre Dame	93%
Babson College	92%
Bowdoin College	91%
Swarthmore College	91%
University of Chicago	91%
Washington and Lee University	91%
Bates College	90%
College of the Holy Cross	90%
Duke University	90%
Georgetown University	90%

It is hard to find a reliable source for colleges with the **worst** graduation rates. A CBS news article lists 13 schools with a graduation of zero.⁷⁷

Employers’ expectations of an applicant’s college degree can become complicated when that degree is from the “for-profit” institution. A degree from one of these institutions often carries less weight and is of less value. Many students attending these schools do not graduate and the graduation rates for non-profit schools are much lower.⁷⁸

Why retention and graduation rates are so low across the

United States is a difficult issue to address. Cost clearly plays a significant role in retention and leads many students to leave before completing the degree. It leads one to wonder why a college education is so expensive in the United States. Where did we go wrong? Several countries offer free or affordable degrees such as Germany, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.⁷⁹ I often wonder whether the United States will ever reach a point of offering free attendance to anyone who wants a degree. And I ask again, then, is a college degree worth it? I think the answer is still yes, but we need to make it easier to get there and stay there to earn a degree.

What is College Today?

A good place to start is with this series of quotations plastered across social media platforms and various websites, mugs, and tote bags. I was in a meeting with colleagues from a range of disciplines several years ago when I first heard someone say, “We need to think of the students as our customers.” My immediate reaction was “No, we absolutely do not.” And I was not alone. The room erupted; people, especially the faculty, were angry. While universities do have service units (e.g., housing, dining, parking, and transportation), student *education* itself is most definitely not a product for purchase. Despite this, I frequently hear from students and/or family members, “I am/we are paying you a lot of money; my child should have an A.”

EDUCATION IS NOT A PRODUCT.
THE STUDENTS ARE NOT CUSTOMERS.
THE PROFESSORS ARE NOT TOOLS.
THE UNIVERSITY IS NOT A FACTORY.

If a university is a business, then it is the business of education. But paying tuition is not the same as buying a new house, car, or appliance. Students get out of college what they put into it. Paying tuition, in-state, out-of-state, or private, does not entitle them to an A grade average. Again, I often hear students and/or their parents say, “You do realize I am paying out-of-state tuition? I/she/he/they should have received an A in this class.” Students do not buy grades in college through tuition, they must **earn** them. That said, while students have responsibilities, they also have privileges such as the right to all the resources their school can afford and the right to good academic advising.

These issues were made even more clear by the onset of COVID-19 and more than three semesters of online-only learning. Some universities cut tuition; mine did not. UVA did cut the activities fee for students who chose to stay home and study remotely. What many people fail to realize is that online education done well may cost more money, not less. The planning, organizing, and technology needed to do it well is expensive. The other problem is that “online” means many things and comes with a dizzying array of possibilities.

For example, I could simply post reading materials on my university's learning management system (LMS), record some or all of my lectures, and tell students to read what I posted and submit their work (essays, quizzes, tests, précis, etc.) by the various deadlines. We came to call this an online asynchronous class. I could turn on Zoom and lecture as I would in class, logging off when I finished; this would be an online *synchronous* class where students would take the mid-term and final in the LMS also. Or I could spend hours (as many of our faculty did and some still do) planning engaging classes with lectures, discussions, PowerPoint presentations, podcasts, guest speakers, and breakout rooms of varying sizes. COVID challenged higher education in ways none of us could have imagined, as it challenged everything everywhere. The impacts are discussed a bit in Chapter 6.

So what is college today? At its very best, it is a place for one to gain an education and, if they are a traditional-aged student (ages 18 to 22), to grow, learn, evolve and develop. For those able to get over the admissions hurdle and enroll and remain in college, I still believe it is one of the most amazing opportunities for everyone and anyone.

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Chapter 3. College: As it Should Be

One of the first steps for all students who are thinking about attending college is to ask themselves **why** they want to go and **what** they hope to learn and experience in their four years. In my first-year (freshman) advising seminar class, I often ask students why they are at the University of Virginia (UVA). There are two key words in that question: why and here. I ask, “Why did you choose to attend college and why UVA?” Some answer with, “I want to go to medical school to be a pediatrician,” or “I want to be a lawyer.” While you cannot pursue these careers without an undergraduate degree, these statements do not actually answer the question. Many legacy students reply, “It’s where my parents went” or “It’s where my grandfather went.” These responses make the undergraduate experience simply a means to an end and place the value on the end. Others respond with, “it’s what you do after high school, right?” or “I didn’t know what else to do.”

Words of Wisdom

DO YOUR RESEARCH!

For students who think they know what they want to study,

be sure the school you plan to attend offers that major and that you can declare it without applying. Or, if there is an application, have a backup plan. If your dream school does not offer what you want to study, you will need to decide whether to find another pursuit or another school. And be sure your school offers a range of majors in different areas because if you change your mind (some data indicate around 70% to 80% will) you want to be sure there will be other good options for you.

Sometimes it is clear the student has not selected the right school for their interest, often due to a lack of guidance. Every year I see at least a handful of students who are intent on majoring in something the University of Virginia does not offer or majoring in something the College of Arts & Sciences does not offer. For example, journalism, graphic design, or fashion design. I worked with a student in my school (the College of Arts & Sciences) who insisted she was going to major in nursing. I had to tell her she could not do that in the College of Arts & Sciences. “But it’s why I came here,” she said. She could not seem to understand that she could not do it; she thought I was saying she was not smart enough to do it. I repeated over and over “I am not saying that you cannot or will not be a nurse. I am saying you must be enrolled in the School of Nursing to do that. We do not have a nursing major for you to declare.”

According to an article from *Edsights*, of those students who attend college, more than 75% do so for one of the following reasons:

- Get a better job
- Learn more about topics of interest
- Receive relevant training
- Earn more money¹

I would also add to this list self-improvement, moving out of poverty, learning something new, and becoming an educated person. In U.S. society college has become a box to check so you can start your career or go on to professional school (see Chapter 2). For some, college is a four-year ordeal that you “have to and get through.” Before college, many students earn dual enrollment credits² in high school and complete a four-year degree in two years or three years. Some states incentivize this by heavily promoting dual enrollment credit at the high school level.

Social norms generally dictate that college students should achieve high grades, build connections, join and lead clubs, study abroad, and pursue other key experiences. The underlying expectation is to check all the right boxes to secure the ideal six-figure job. Students are encouraged to gain admission to the best possible college, major in something “useful” rather than “useless,” and graduate as quickly as possible to save money.

However, for others, college remains a path to gaining knowledge and education, a means to escape poverty, and an opportunity to secure a better job and improve their quality of life. But is this always the case? It is important to emphasize that trade and vocational schools are equally valuable options. Many of these institutions also offer courses in writing, history, math/statistics, humanities, and social sciences, providing students with a well-rounded education.

Students typically earn only one undergraduate degree in their lifetime so they have one chance to be an undergraduate student (students who double major almost always earn just one degree). This means a student should be able to study what they love and take full advantage of as many resources as possible. Because I almost did not get the chance to study what I loved, this point is important to me and something I tell students and their families regularly. I cannot imagine the regret I would have today if I was not able to study and major in archaeology. Also, I have seen the sadness, despair, and frustration on the faces of those students who are forced or required to study something they do not like or enjoy.

How do we get to a place where college is a place to focus on learning, exploring, and innovating? How do we make this ideal possible for all students? And what do we do about meddling parents and guardians? What should college be?

Fundamentally, college should be a place where a student can discover and experience the joy of learning. Unfortunately, there are several factors that make this journey difficult starting with the desire for the best school, the drive for high grades, the mental health issues that emerge in young adults between the ages of 17 to 22, and the relative lack of support for first-generation, low-income, and under-represented students of color and more. College can be harder to navigate for first generation and low-income students and, as more and more students within these categories are admitted, much more support is needed. Admission is just the first step. Getting this group of students, and all students, through to graduation is the hard part. What changes need to be made to reach this goal?

A good starting point is that all schools need to teach

what is called the “hidden curriculum.” They need to load up on “just in time” resources for students in the first year of college and then gradually back off so that, by their fourth and final year, students are mostly independent, know that it is okay to ask for help, and know who and where to find that help. College must become more navigable for students who lack “social capital” (more below) and for those who feel they do not or will not belong. This change needs to be accomplished very early on, starting with the orientation programs that a school offers.

What is “just in time” advising?

This is a phrase my colleague first used years ago and I have used it ever since. What I have not figured out, however, is what that time is! We in higher education want students to know things early on in their college careers, but they cannot process and remember the information until they need it. For example, UVA students do not have to declare a major until the end of their second year, in early May. When they hear this requirement, they think they have until that month to make the decision. However, by spring of their first year, students must have sufficiently narrowed their choices so they can take the required prerequisite class or classes. A student cannot declare an anthropology major in May of their second year if they have not taken the required classes to do so.

Increases in anxiety, depression, and other mental health

issues seen in students before and during college also must be addressed. Universities must define what they mean by a “sense of belonging,” the latest trend in making students feel welcomed, and then determine how best to increase this sense. Students need financial security, not only for tuition and fees, but also for food and housing. Much has been written on these topics recently and, in the sections below, I will briefly discuss each of them.

The Hidden Curriculum

Every college publishes general education requirements, major requirements, and graduation requirements—the standard curriculum. Most student information systems have tools that students can use to track their progress in all these areas. In addition to meeting with an advisor, who also relies on these tools, students can view what classes and how many credits they need to take to graduate. What, then, is the **hidden** curriculum of college?

The hidden curriculum has several definitions according to different higher education settings including the classroom, clubs, one-on-one meetings with people in power, etc. Fulya Kentli’s 2009 article comparing hidden curriculum theories provides ten different definitions.³ Here, I focus on academic settings. Rachel Gable, in her 2021 book, *The Hidden Curriculum: First Generation Students at Legacy Universities*, writes:

“The title of this book—The Hidden Curriculum—is borrowed from a commonly used phrase among education scholars that describes the tacit rules of

educational practice. If you learn those rules well and follow them closely, you will not only succeed in the particular educational context in which you find yourself but you will likely also come to believe in the naturalness, universality, and inevitability of the norms and values these tacit rules uphold.”⁴

The associated footnote states:

*“Defined by Philip Jackson in his 1968 *Life in Classrooms*, the hidden curriculum comprises what Michael Apple in his summation of Jackson calls, ‘the norms and values that are implicitly, but effectively, taught in schools and that are not usually talked about in teachers’ statements of end or goals.’”*

The hidden curriculum includes topics that college-educated people and people who work in higher education often take for granted. It is assumed that students will know things like: what a syllabus is and how to read and use it; what college subject codes and course numbers refer to; what majors and minors are; who to ask for help and how to follow through with that request; how to contact faculty via email or phone; and what office hours entail. Many students do not have this *a priori* knowledge. For example, Anthony Jack⁵ discusses his encounters with students who thought that when faculty talked about office hours, it was the time **not** to go to their office because they were in their office working. Why would someone unfamiliar with college think otherwise?

In September 2023, I had the chance to meet with Louis Newman to talk about his recent book, *Thinking Critically in College: The Essential Handbook for Student Success*.⁶ This book is a wonderful resource for any high school student

thinking about attending college, or for students already in college trying to find their way. Critical thinking is essential for high school, college, and for life in professional school, graduate school, and/or the work force. This knowledge is something I feel fortunate to have been exposed to in high school as we were posing research questions, forming hypotheses, and writing research papers on a range of topics in almost every class. Very early on in his book, Newman reflects on a conversation with a student in which he told her to ask herself the following question upon receiving a syllabus:

“What are the questions this course is designed to address, and why has the professor chosen to organize the material in this particular way to explore them?”⁷

This question was eye opening for the student who wondered why she had never heard of this idea before. Newman goes on to say, “Learning is all about focusing on the questions, especially the unstated questions, which underlie whatever someone is telling us.”⁸ This note is excellent advice for anyone, and I highly recommend this book to every high school student.

Every college also has their own language that students need to learn. At my university, we never say “campus,” we say Grounds. We never talk about freshmen, sophomores, juniors, or seniors. At UVA, you are a first-year, second-year, third-year, or fourth-year student. Like every other school, there are dozens of acronyms for offices that we assume students will somehow know. Here are just a few that are used daily at UVA:

ISO: International Studies Office
OAAA: Office of African American Affairs
ODOS: Office of the Dean of Students

SFS: Student Financial Services

SDAC: Student Disability Access Center

TA: Teaching Assistant

UCC: University Career Center

UREG: Office of the University Registrar

The offices are just a few of the many key areas that students may need to navigate. Even the College of Arts & Sciences is called “the College.” So if a new student is asked “Are you in the College?”, they often answer yes, even if they are in the School of Nursing or the School of Engineering, because they are in college; they have not yet learned the UVA vernacular.

There is also a dizzying array of acronyms for classes and majors: bio, stats, anthro, psyc, cog sci, comp lit, etc. Many UVA majors with long names use only the acronym such as PST (Political & Social Thought), ETP (Environmental Thought & Practice) or WGS (Women, Gender, & Sexuality). Complicating this shorthand are the many disciplines that students can choose to study, but do not yet know exist. If they heard about them, they may not truly understand what those disciplines are since they did not encounter them in high school (e.g., archaeology, philosophy, cognitive science, linguistics, etc.). History and English in high school are radically different from History and English in college. Imagine how hard this must be for transfer students who may have finally learned the language and hidden curriculum of their first school only to have to start again at their second school.

We assume students know what majors and minors are, how to “declare” them, and how to navigate the requirements. Incoming students often do not know what it means to declare a major; and if they do, they may not know

how to do it. Many high school students do not know what this step entails, including those who are not first-generation college students. When and how this is explained to new students matters and could impact their ability to graduate on time or at all.

Once enrolled in a course, in addition to knowing what a syllabus is, the hidden curriculum also includes knowing **how** to read a syllabus and track assignments in an organizer (paper or electronic). Time management is an essential skill to being successful in college. As noted above, think of Louis Newman's conversation with the student and her "light bulb" moment.

The hidden curriculum may also be about all the opportunities a college offers, but that some students never learn about such as career help, study abroad opportunities, internships, work study jobs, research opportunities, etc. It includes knowing how and who to ask for help.

We need to provide easily accessible and visible support for students during their first year, gradually reducing this assistance over time to help them become independent, high-functioning adults by graduation. Many universities address this through "College 101" courses, which are often mandatory for all new students. However, delivering these courses effectively can be challenging, particularly for large incoming classes, due to a shortage of available faculty to teach in a meaningful and pedagogically sound manner. New students often receive an overwhelming amount of information. As a result, students may struggle to recall what they learned early on when they need it later in their academic journey regardless of how it is delivered. Colleges need an array of strategies to help students access the information they need.

When UVA went fully remote because of COVID in March 2020, the notion of the 8-5 workday disappeared. This likely also happened at other schools. The boundaries around workday hours and evenings and the weekend vanished. We were all scrambling to figure things out and everything was new. There was no one to call to ask for advice; for example, “let’s check with the University of X because we know they had to manage this before.” We were all building the plane as we were flying it. Booked until 6? Can we meet at 6:15? Booked from 8-8? Can we meet at 7 AM? I have rarely worked a 40-hour work week; it was always more like 50 to 80 hours a week using the weekends to catch up, but there were some boundaries. No one, except an occasional student, asked to meet with me on a Sunday afternoon. During COVID, those of us on the leadership team were meeting every Sunday afternoon because it was the only time everyone was free. This is not a complaint, but it is what I think helped set the stage for students to expect help later in the evening and on weekends. Many of us were on call for everyone almost 24/7.

On some level, students are right to expect this degree of access. A recent article from *Inside Higher Ed* by Ashley Mowreader discusses the need to support students outside of the “9 to 5” workday.⁹ During the height of the pandemic, we learned we can work remotely, even if we did not like it. Why not offer help until 9 PM with some limited weekend hours? Why not hire staff who want to work from 12:00-9:00 PM or from 1:00-10:00PM? Mowreader mentions that this generation of students are used to on-demand services.¹⁰ This degree of access need not be our goal but when a student faces a problem on a Friday night at 9:00 PM, is it right that they must wait until 8:00 AM on Monday (or later) for an answer? Of course, we all have to wait sometimes as

not all offices are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, but I think we can do a bit better providing assistance for students beyond the typical 9-to-5 workday.

Social and Cultural Capital

Definitions abound for these terms. On the site Everylearner Everywhere¹¹, Gabe Fink writes that cultural capital is “a form of social currency made up of the values, experiences, knowledge, and behaviors that assist a person in navigating culture. The concept is a way of characterizing non-economic or non-tangible resources that individuals draw on.”¹² A 2022 article from *Inside Higher Ed* notes that, “A friend refers to [social capital] as the ‘dark matter of opportunity’ because you see its effects, but it can be really hard to spot and measure.”¹³ It goes on to say that “social capital can be a significant factor in college and postcollege success.”¹⁴ MaryBeth Walpole¹⁵, citing James S. Coleman, differentiates between social capital and cultural capital as follows:

Coleman (1988) also uses the term “social capital” but with a very different meaning (Horvat, 2001). To Coleman, social capital is a set of networks that connect families, neighborhoods, schools and communities. Social capital in a Bourdieuan framework is an individual possession that can be converted to social or economic profits depending on the person’s habitus, or strategies for utilizing his or her capital..”¹⁶

R. D. Stanton-Salazar¹⁷ defines social capital as “the value of a relationship that provides support and assistance in a

given situation,” as cited in Rozanne Moschetti and Cynthia Hudley.¹⁸ Nan Lin¹⁹ refers to it as “investment and use of embedded resources in social relations for expected returns.”

These definitions have overlapping but subtle differences. For my purposes here, I prefer a combination of these two: *a relationship that provides support and assistance in a given situation* **and** *the investment and use of embedded resources in social relations for expected returns*. Therefore, when I use the term social capital, it is with this definition in mind.

In Susan D’Agostino’s *Inside Higher Ed* article,²⁰ we find an example of three students all of whom want to work on Wall Street when they finish college. The first student is from rural Nebraska and has never visited or met with anyone from New York City. The second student is from New York City, but knows little of life in the financial district. The third student grew up “on the city’s Upper East Side with parents, grandparents and friends’ parents who worked on Wall Street.”²¹ Who do you think will have the upper edge? It should be clear that it is the last student. The problem we all face in higher education is what to do about this discrepancy. How do we level the playing field around social capital when we have no metrics by which to measure it? Perhaps that is the place to start.

Rozanne Moschetti and Cynthia Hudley²² state that much of the research on social capital has been aimed at understanding how it correlates, or does not, with socioeconomic status. What I see is that continuing generation and/or affluent students typically have a lot of social capital and lower income students, first generation students, and under-represented minority students often have less. This difference is also connected to the hidden curriculum. Students with social capital know how to appeal,

advocate, argue, and contact faculty. They go to career centers and look for internships. When they fail, they ask their parents to intervene on their behalf. Those students who lack social capital do not even know that appealing is an option. If they do know, they may not know how to submit an appeal for something or they may feel they should not do so for fear of making someone angry.

Ways to remediate this issue include better student support, better communication, and first-generation student centers with relevant programs and readily available help and support. Processes should be accessible, clear, and easy. Susan D'Agostino's article referenced above points to a powerful article called "The Missing Metrics" that outlines some of the ways to measure and perhaps help solve the problem.

A Sense of Belonging, Imposter Syndrome, and Loneliness

Many universities focus on fostering a sense of belonging among students, while others address the challenges associated with what is commonly referred to as imposter syndrome. Some institutions are working to tackle both issues simultaneously, recognizing their impact on student well-being and success. Additionally, loneliness is another significant factor affecting students, often intersecting with these challenges. While there is some overlap between the concepts of belonging and imposter syndrome, it is important to note that they are distinct issues, each requiring

unique approaches. In this section, I will explore both belonging and imposter syndrome, along with the issue of loneliness, as recent research and a Gallup survey have highlighted connections between feelings of loneliness and a lack of belonging in student populations.

Belonging

The concept of belonging is well defined by Strayhorn²³ who provides the following definition:

“In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers.”

Students sometimes report that they do not feel they belong at their home institution. Interestingly, some will report they are happy and connected and that they feel respected, but they do not feel that they belong. According to DeLeon Gray at North Carolina State University, “a sense of belonging at school means feeling a sense of acceptance, respect, inclusion and support in a learning environment.”²⁴ The question I often ask is who bears the responsibility to help students feel like they belong—other students, the faculty and/or the staff? The answer, I believe, is all the above.

It is somewhat of a “no-brainer” to say that students who feel like they belong at their college or university are more likely to do better, stay in school, and graduate. This idea is

something most of us can agree on even if it did not impact our own college experience. Think for a moment about a time when you felt like you did **not** belong, when you felt untethered, on the outside looking in. Maybe it was temporary—the first few days of a new job, the first week being the “new kid” in school, the formal cocktail party where you felt completely out of place. Maybe it lasted a few days or weeks or months. Take that feeling and overlay it with four years of college, or even one. How can a student be successful when they constantly feel like they do not fit in, no matter what the reason?

Data from across the country support this conclusion. The Education Advisory Board (EAB) has an infographic that shows the five components that contribute to a sense of belonging.²⁵ These components are (1) [a] seamless student experience, (2) mental health and wellbeing, (3) active and engaged learning, (4) cocurricular and social engagement, and (5) faculty mentoring and support.²⁶

It is up to all of us with careers in higher education to guarantee that students feel like they belong and are supported. Everyone at a university must play a role in this process. For example, if the faculty help students feel like they belong, a gap will exist if most of the student body is taking off for elaborate vacations during spring break leaving other students behind (Anthony Jack describes this well in *The Privileged Poor*).²⁷ On the other hand, if the student body is welcoming, diverse, and supportive, it will not be enough if the faculty are not. Belonging must come from everyone.

Jack’s 2019 book illustrates Strayhorn’s definition quite well. One of the ways Jack identifies students is by the categories of Upper Income (UI), the Privileged Poor (PP), and the Doubly Disadvantaged (DD).²⁸ He then adds their

ethnicity of White, Black, Latinx, or Asian so students in his book are identified as DDW or PPB.²⁹ UI students come from privileged backgrounds and wealth with all the advantages one needs to succeed (though I would add this does not always guarantee success for other reasons). PP students are low-income students who, through a range of ways, managed to attend elite high schools or elite boarding schools. When this group arrives at college, they are still low-income, but they “know the ropes.” While they may feel left out of some activities, they are not as shocked by the wealth that surrounds them. They also feel more comfortable reaching out to faculty, staff, and administrators for assistance because they had to do those things at their high schools. The Doubly Disadvantaged (DD) students do not have that advantage and they are in a whole new world that is difficult to navigate. They might feel they are imposing on faculty and not go to office hours unless they absolutely must. Making friends is difficult. As mentioned above, Jack describes one student who intentionally avoided office hours thinking they were the time faculty spent in their offices and therefore did not want to be bothered (see the “Hidden Curriculum” section above). Doubly Disadvantaged students do not yet know who to ask for help and they are worried that asking for help is a sign of weakness. Even when some students are told who to talk to and where to go, they do not follow this advice.

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome, or the imposter phenomenon, is slightly different. First defined in a 1978 study by Pauline Clance and

Suzanne Imes, the term is “used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phonies.”³⁰ Their study indicated that this feeling impacts women more than men. It is the feeling of being a fraud. While a person may be capable and competent, they are convinced that someone made a mistake in the admissions process, or they were selected accidentally as a leader. Students tend to manifest this feeling when they feel like they should not be where they are. It may be that they feel that they belong at their home school, but not in their major or not in the leadership position they earned. Imposter syndrome leaves one filled with self-doubt and it can be stifling.

Loneliness

In a November 2023 article, Johanna Alonso discusses loneliness—what she calls “the new plague on campus.”³¹ She describes a program that Surgeon General Vivek Murphy launched to combat loneliness among college students. On a tour of colleges beginning at Duke University, Murphy talked about his “5-for-5 Connection Challenge”³² in which he asks students to “pick 5 actions and 5 days in a row to connect with people in your life.”³³ He believes this activity to be as important as exercise or diet.

COVID caused us all to lose our social connections and, while I have seen slight improvements among college-aged students since we returned to in-person classes, I still see students struggling with how to act now that we are in this new normal of mostly in-person life again. Alonso cites studies that show that “loneliness is more prevalent among

young people”; a Gallup poll³⁴ of college students showed that “39% said they had experienced loneliness the previous day.”³⁵

Finally, Alonso differentiates between isolation and loneliness and makes a connection to belonging in the final sentence that states, “By reducing the stigma and ‘making sure students on the campus know belonging is a goal for the university,’ she said, colleges may be able to play a more significant role in ending the loneliness epidemic.”³⁶

What can colleges and universities do to help this feeling of loneliness? UVA launched a new, one-credit class called Hoos Connected³⁷ a few years ago which has grown in popularity. As described on the website,³⁸ the program aims to do the following:

“Hoos Connected at UVA brings together groups of students to get to know one another while discussing the key components of making meaningful connections.

Led by two trained upper-class student facilitators, groups of 6-10 students engage in activities and dialogue about what brings us together, what can keep us apart, and how these things manifest at UVA.”³⁹

This program is one example of a student-driven model to discuss and help eliminate loneliness on campus.

Academic Advising and Support

Successful academic advising is the nut no one can crack, or at least something no university does very well according to its students and faculty. Harry Lewis, in his book *Excellence*

Without a Soul, devotes a chapter to advising entitled “The Eternal Enigma: Advising.”⁴⁰ While retention and graduation rates may be one measure of successful advising, students often say that advisors are aloof and unhelpful, that “there is no one available to ask or talk to,” or they simply do not know the name of their advisor (even though the information is usually available in multiple places). Similar complaints also come from faculty when students are unwilling to engage in conversations.

Lewis provides an illustrative example of the issues that often arise when a student comes in for “academic advising.” He details a conversation with a student whose performance in coursework was declining. While talking with him and trying to help, the student “blurted out that his girlfriend was pregnant and neither of them had told anyone.” This type of situation is not uncommon and most faculty are not trained to deal with these kinds of personal situations. Most faculty and many parents have no idea what college-aged students are facing on a daily basis. Students must contend with the struggles of everyday life while also trying to succeed in a very competitive environment.

One unanswered question is, “Who makes the best advisor for a student?” A faculty member or a “professional advisor”? Given the mental health crisis today, should the advisor also have a counseling degree? What should the load be for an advisor? Ten advisees? Twenty? Two hundred? How are advisors trained and evaluated? Again, this is one of the unsolved problems of higher education.

How can schools improve their advising systems? Ideas abound in the literature including concepts like proactive advising, formerly known as intrusive advising and appreciative advising.⁴¹ These concepts focus on the best

ways to engage students, which I believe should begin as soon as they accept their admission offer.

The concept of intrusive advising, now called proactive advising, came from the work of Robert Glennen and Faye Vowell. Jennifer Varney built on their work and defined proactive advising as “intentional institutional contact with students such that personnel and students develop a caring relationship that leads to increased academic motivation and persistence.”⁴² While this approach sounds as if it should or could be easy, it is hard to create meaningful social relationships between students and faculty. Some work perfectly, some work well, and others flop. Perhaps there needs to be a “match.com” for students and their advisors.

In 2021, UVA’s College of Arts & Sciences administration launched what I called the First Year Initiative which was an effort to better communicate with our new first-year students (freshmen). Our plan was to share, early on, key information and resources. This program began with introductory emails from academic deans in which we shared links to key workshops taught by our College Life Skills Coach, provided resources around mid-terms, and finally, assistance at the end of the term. Interspersed were shorter messages around key deadlines, such as the class drop and add deadlines and the class withdrawal deadline.

In one email message we sent in the fall semester, we asked the students if they would like their academic dean to reach out to them for any reason. All this required of the student was a simple click to say yes. It was a high-risk question since the College of A&S at UVA has around 3,000 new first-year students and some 500 new transfer students. What if they all said yes? What if half said yes? Thirty-two students (yes, 32) responded yes to this offer to meet one-on-one

with their academic dean to discuss anything they want. My guess is of those 32, several never responded when their dean reached out. So how do we reach the unreachable?

In recent years, software has been developed and marketed that enables advisors and administrators to “ping” or “nudge” students. These messages can be sent either to all students or to specific groups of students who may need additional support. In my opinion, some software is quite intrusive, allowing administrators to know when a student swiped into the gym, the library, or their dorm room. It also allows administrators to see when students accessed course management sites. Opinions on this approach range from those who think that it is too much interference, to the right amount, to even more is needed. While we need to provide plenty of help in the first year, I do not think intruding on adults in this way is necessarily the right approach to solve retention problems.

Recently, Chant’a Holmes conducted research at Virginia Tech to determine the best way to deliver notifications, aka nudges, to students.⁴³ These nudges might include financial aid or academic deadline reminders. They might ask students how they are doing with links and phone numbers for help. Her question was whether these nudges help students or make them feel more stressed out. Holmes’ second study included 1,500 students across four classes. Students “received either no academic notifications, text messages that they could not respond to, or text messages that they could respond to, sent by one of 35 volunteer peer coaches who had already taken the course.”⁴⁴ Some students responded that the messages were motivating and others felt they were repetitive, impersonal and/or stress inducing.⁴⁵ Holmes concluded that “these frustrations may have led

students to stop reading or caring about the texts, which could have influenced the drop in grades mid-semester.”⁴⁶ These strategies will no doubt continue as they tend to be low cost, but we should be sure we are not doing more harm than good.

Mental Health and College Life

I referenced earlier the increase in stress, anxiety, and depression among college students. Two charts from a *Psychology Today* article illustrate the number of students struggling and the increase in the number of mental health issues, both mild and serious, as well as temporary to long-term, over the last few years. For example, “40% of students fail to seek help,” “80% feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities as a student,” and “50% of students rated their mental health below average or poor” (see the article for additional statistics).⁴⁷

This trend is always the topic of conversation at conferences I have attended on higher education. How, why, and when did this happen? How did it become so serious? Is there really an increase in the number of mental health issues, or is there more awareness and better diagnoses now? Are we now diagnosing less serious issues as more serious cases? Is it all the above and more?

In his book *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt writes that the increase in mental health problems among young people, particularly in the U.S., started in around 2012.⁴⁸ He believes this trend is closely linked to the widespread adoption of social media platforms, especially on

smartphones. Haidt argues that social media use has contributed to higher levels of anxiety, depression, and feelings of inadequacy among adolescents, particularly teenage girls. He also points to other contributing factors such as overprotective parenting, which he calls “safetyism,” and a cultural shift that emphasizes avoiding discomfort or challenging experiences. These combined influences, Haidt suggests, have led to a decline in resilience and an increase in mental health issues.⁴⁹

Other answers are not hard to come by, but they are varied. Many administrators point to snowplow parenting and excessive monitoring of students, the pressure put on students by their parents or guardians who set standards and aspirations that most of us would not be able to meet. That is, some parents expect all As, participation and leadership roles in the best clubs and sports teams, and perfect test scores. In short, they expect perfection—something none of us, including them, could ever achieve. Is this you? If so, I know this is hard to hear and I do not want to say it is easy, but you can change!

In addition, when parents or guardians consistently intervene to solve problems, they will, overall, do more harm than good. While their intentions are good (we all want to help our children whenever we can and it is painful to watch them struggle), the message they send when they do this regularly is “you are not capable of solving your own problems so I will/must do this for you.” This intervention does not let the student develop their problem-solving skills or resilience.

These are complex issues and they cannot be solved by universities alone. Diagnosing and improving mental health needs to be an all-out community effort.

Time Off from College

Some students need time off and I am always surprised at the reluctance of some parents/guardians to allow a student to withdraw from or take a leave of absence from school. I often try to find a kind and empathetic way to ask some version of this question: “Do you think your child will be successful, do their best, and enjoy their experience when they are coping with anxiety, depression, recovery, treatment, etc.?” I have watched students withdraw knowing it was best for them, all while their parents argued, “They just need some structure to their days” or “They will be so much better off if they can just stay here.” I often respond with, “But the student is clearly struggling/unhappy/failing.” Often I must resort to a line borrowed from a colleague many years ago: “School is not therapy.” I tell the parents or guardians that their child needs to focus on their health, physical and/or mental, and then return to school. We will still be there, I remind them. Students can only do their best when they are 100% focused on school and they cannot do that when others issue have not been addressed.

College should be a positive and life-changing experience for all, not something a student has to struggle through while coping with crippling anxiety, depression, or a physical injury or illness. This statement also applies to students who are not motivated because they are taking courses in a subject they do not like because someone is making them do so. Students will hit bumps along the way no matter what, so being healthy is critical. For students who manage to persevere through college despite taking time off, I often question the personal cost. I wonder how they will look back

on their college years—an experience that I see as incredibly valuable and unique, something you can truly only experience once in a lifetime.

Financial Security: Money, Food, and Shelter (and Tuition)

Too many students in the United States cannot afford college and of those who manage to attend, too many face financial insecurity while in school. This insecurity includes concerns about covering tuition, daily expenses while in college, an inability to participate in extra-curricular activities or study abroad. It also includes food and housing insecurities.

Many recent articles have addressed housing and food insecurities among college students (see especially Broton and Goldrick-Rab;⁵⁰ Chen⁵¹; and Butler and Torres⁵²). In 2017, Katharine Broton and Sara Goldrick-Rab present recent research and summarize the issues well; I highly recommend it. Despite a rising distrust of higher education (discussed in the previous chapter), it is still thought to be one of the only routes to upward mobility.⁵³ According to Broton and Goldrick-Rab, 1.3 million students are homeless, an increase from three years ago.⁵⁴ The problem is worse at two-year community colleges where “the most recent estimates indicate that one in two community college students has experiences housing insecurity challenges in the past year.” They also report that, “Among 4-year college students, at least 1 in 10 and up to 1 in 5 indicated they were housing insecure.”⁵⁵ In addition, more than half of the 2- and 4-year

college students they surveyed reported some kind of issue with food access.⁵⁶ After reading this article, I asked UVA's Student Financial Services Office how many of our students they thought had housing insecurities and their response was "more than we know about." It is a difficult thing for a student to admit and explain, especially at a school where there are many students who are quite well off. I have little doubt that the actual numbers are higher than the surveyed results.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (called the FAFSA) has a question on homelessness, but the data are only from students who complete the form. This form is notoriously difficult to complete and my colleagues in the Financial Aid office tell me it could get worse in 2025. In a 2017 *Education Northwest* article, Michelle Hodara⁵⁷ nicely summarizes the barriers to completing the FAFSA along with strategies to help prospective students complete the process. She states that "about a third of students who did not file a FAFSA would have been eligible for a Federal Pell Grant..." Completion rates vary by state; overall, the numbers have declined in all but a few states. Hodara says the barriers include the following: Students and families...

- think they do not have financial need;
- lack awareness and information about financial aid;
- are deterred by the cost of college and the thought of taking on debt;
- are put off by the complexity of the FAFSA form and process;
- face similar barriers to FAFSA renewal.

Her strategies for helping future students complete the FAFSA include:

- Offering personal assistance

Providing early, accurate, comprehensive, and clear information

Correcting misperceptions

Using student-level data to guide FAFSA outreach.⁵⁸

Several states are trying a statewide FAFSA policy to make completion of the form a requirement for high school graduation to increase completion rates. Texas and Illinois were two early adopters and they have seen an increase in completion rate.⁵⁹

Broton and Goldrick-Rab⁶⁰ also make the very important and obvious point that a person cannot be successful when they are hungry and homeless. This fact is true whether they face these insecurities occasionally or daily. There is no free lunch program at most colleges and even good aid packages may not cover everything that is needed. My years of talking with students have made it clear to me that many students on aid send the money back home to their families who are struggling to keep a home, to keep the lights on, to feed younger children, to care for aging parents, etc. Students on aid who are struggling with food and housing also work part-time or full-time, while juggling the demands of being a full-time student.

So, imagine yourself as a 20-something year old college student who is trying to earn a degree, who worries daily (or weekly) about food and shelter, who is trying to juggle four to five classes, and who is also working 20+ hours per week. Imagine how difficult and overwhelming that life would be. And for those who manage to do it, the cost in terms of mental and/or physical well-being is likely enormous.

A 2020 survey of 195,000 US college students who were enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic found that 14% had experienced homelessness within the past year, though only

3% identified that way.⁶¹ Some students said their car was their home, so they did not always think of themselves as homeless. Others talked about staying with friends, family, or “couch surfing.”⁶² I do not have an easy solution, but I firmly believe we must do better and that this must be made a priority for **society**. Lois Beckett’s 2022 article, “My Car is my Home: The California Students with Nowhere to Live,”⁶³ brought the issue to the public’s attention again. Beckett states the following:

“At Long Beach City College, a nearly 100-year-old community college south of Los Angeles, at least eight students have been given permission to sleep in their cars in a campus parking facility, as part of an official campus program to help college students who cannot afford a place to live.

The college parking garage, which has a security guard, wifi, and bathrooms nearby, is seen as a safer alternative to students sleeping in their cars on the street, where fears of being robbed or written up by the police make it even more difficult for them to succeed at school. At least 98 students enrolled at the school are known to be experiencing homelessness this semester, according to the college’s basic needs program manager, with at least 25 of them living in their cars.”⁶⁴

It is appalling that this is a solution. Yet, lacking solutions of my own, I have no right to criticize the school, but I can ask how have we as a society allowed this to happen? It is not just a problem for college students; most people recognize that. I also think most people assume that if you are in school, whether the school is a 4-year residential college or a 2-year

community college, you are somewhat financially secure. As Sara Goldrick-Rab writes in her opinion piece entitled “It’s Hard to Study if You’re Hungry”,

*“As a researcher who studies how college students live, I hear frequently from people who say that struggling a bit to get through college is fine—in fact, it’s better than fine because it teaches you to work hard for what you want. After all, they had side jobs in college; they ate Ramen noodles. That’s just how it goes.”*⁶⁵

Broton and Goldrick-Rab⁶⁶ argue that the stereotypes of undergraduates (and I will add graduate students) living on ramen noodles and “couch surfing” have not helped. I think they have almost romanticized what is a serious, life threatening (in some cases) issue. If you went to graduate school, you were likely at some time, “a poor graduate student.” You ate ramen or bologna on Wonder bread, you shared an apartment with others, found the best “all you can eat buffets” and smuggled food out. You saved your cans and bottles and recycled them for cash. And so on. I did all those things as a graduate student. But I was lucky, as I never truly worried about going for a day or more without any food, or about being homeless. And there is a significant difference.

Ashley Mowreader’s *Inside Higher Ed* article⁶⁷ offers reasons for student food insecurity and some solutions. Briefly, she states that the reasons students experience food insecurity at higher rates are (1) lack of resources, (2) social stigma, (3) busy schedules, (4) transportation, and/or cooking skills.⁶⁸ Solutions might include (1) food pantries, (2) meal swipe donation/transfer programs, (3) food recovery programs, (4) community and shared gardens, (5) cooking

and meal preparation demonstrations, (6) financial literacy programming, (7) connecting students to resources and benefits, and/or (8) financial assistance. I am pleased my school currently provides several of these programs, but we all need to do more. The final line in Goldrick-Rab's article says it all: "After all, it's impossible to learn when you're starving."⁶⁹ We know this is true in K-12 grades and it does not change when you get older. Why would anyone think otherwise?

Many of us were struggling college students or graduate students. We scraped by with the resources we had. No doubt food insecurity and homelessness are not recent problems, but they were not discussed in my early years as a faculty member and administrator in higher education. We now see schools, cities, and states struggling to find free or affordable housing so students can have a chance of completing a degree. Goldrick-Rab argues,

*"But what is happening today is very different. For decades, many students survived on little to afford college. But over time, the situation worsened to the point where now, hunger and homelessness routinely undermine students' very ability to learn. Even though a far greater percentage of college students qualify for financial aid than in the past, colleges and states have fewer dollars per student to allocate to them."*⁷⁰

I want to add that I have wondered when and how food and housing insecurity became a problem for colleges to solve. I am NOT saying it should not be, but imagine a world where society solved these problems so the focus of college could be education, where college and/or technical school was affordable for all who wanted to go. A world where schools

did not have continuously increase staff for financial aid, mental health, college adjustment programs, etc. I am likely delusional in this realm, but I can dream, right?

Support for First Generation and Low-Income Students

Last, but of no less importance, every student needs some help adjusting to college. It does not matter who they are or where they are going, there is no doubt that starting college is a big change. For some, however, we know the adjustment is more difficult. When one or both parents or guardians have attended college, there is someone to ask about the experience, even if their experience was a few decades ago. When no one in your immediate family has been to college, it is harder to know who to go to for advice and help. Some families are completely against their child attending college, fearing they will be alienated from their child. Some families are supportive but cannot offer any practical help. I remember a first-generation student telling me that her mother was completely supportive and her biggest fan, but she rarely wanted to call her when she was stressed or anxious about anything academic-related because it took too long to explain the issue which resulted in her being more stressed out. For example, she could not call to say she was nervous about finals when her mother did not really comprehend what was involved in the final exam period.

I once had the privilege of helping our Financial Aid Office call newly admitted students to tell them about their aid

package. We completed a short training and were told to “expect anything.” This warning meant you could be hung up on, cursed at, or met with tears of gratitude. While most students were happy to get the call, I was told by one parent to “fuck off and never call this number again.” Upon calling back to try again, the same basic words were screamed at me. I still wonder what happened to that prospective student who may never have known we called to offer financial aid. But for the calls that were met with pure joy, the positive moments far outweighed the negativity and made enduring the unpleasantness tolerable.

Many colleges like UVA are actively working to recruit and admit more low-income students and more first-generation college students. This goal can be hard to reach. Also, while these two categories often overlap, they do not always overlap, and the needs are different. Some first-generation students are not low-income, and some low-income students are not first-generation. I, for example, was a first-generation college student but I was not a low-income student. And while some of the programming can be the same and would benefit any new college student, other needs are unique.

And getting students into college is only the first step. Supporting them through four years **and** helping them have a positive experience, ensuring they graduate on time, and helping them transition out into the workplace or to a professional school are all equally important. The infrastructure must be in place first and I do not think that is always the case. I see more schools providing funding to their low income/first-generation students, but I worry about whether there is sufficient help in place for them once they arrive. Who will guide them through their time in college,

help them find majors, help them take full advantage of everything that college offers, and then help them find jobs and move on? This second phase is essential; to bring students in without help and support is irresponsible. We need to do better.

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70 Goldrick-Rab, “It’s Hard to Study if You’re Hungry.”

Chapter 4. The Importance of the Liberal Arts and Sciences

This chapter offers a brief background and some thoughts on why the liberal arts and sciences, often abbreviated to the liberal arts, are so heavily criticized and denigrated. I also discuss why I believe a liberal arts and sciences major, especially those in the arts or humanities, will never result in a “useless” degree (see also Chapter 2). It is not that I think a liberal arts degree is better or best (well, maybe a little). It is that this type of degree needs defending. As I assert throughout the book, students should always have the opportunity to study what they love at a university, either a two-year or a four-year school, or a trade school. Why do I include this discussion here? Because I have seen a great deal of parental interference in students’ major selections in my school and it makes for unhappy, and sometimes unsuccessful, students.

I have never heard someone say, “Why would you major in business? What are you going to do with that?” Or, “What? Electrical engineering? That’s absurd!” Or, “Nursing? Really? I don’t even know what that is. How will you ever get a job?” What you hear far more frequently is “An art major? That is a waste of time and money.” Or “A German major? How will you ever get a job?”

In this vein, I remember visiting the house one of my relatives in New York when I was a teenager. They were

showing us around and there was a nice piece of art on the wall. My father loved to collect art and pointed it out saying that he really liked it. He asked where it was from.

They replied, “Oh that piece? It’s by a local artist. It cost us \$120,000.”

My father said “Wow, really?”

Their reply? “Our daughter did it; she was an art major and that’s how much her college education cost us.” Never mind that she was a happy and employed college graduate.

Negative responses, like those above, are always saved for majors like art, English, religious studies, archaeology, etc. and that is simply wrong. Why? Identifying some majors as “useless” minimizes the value of a college education, the discipline, and the acquisition of knowledge and critical thinking. Scholars have written extensively on this topic. Fareed Zakariah’s book *In Defense of a Liberal Education*¹ offers a great message. So does Michael Roth’s *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*² and George Anders’ *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a “Useless” Liberal Arts Education*.³

Many families, including those with parents who are college educated and those not college-educated, do not fully understand how a college education and/or a liberal arts degree can help someone. Occasionally, people think it is a political statement—getting a “liberal arts” degree means you are a liberal or will become one. I often explain to parents at my summer orientation talk that there are no “conservative arts.” What, then, is the origin of the term “liberal arts”?

The History of the Liberal Arts

Much has been written on this topic, so I provide just a brief overview here. Again, note that here I use “the liberal arts” as shorthand for “the liberal arts and sciences.” Some colleges and universities split the arts and sciences into different schools. My university does not. Therefore, when I mention the liberal arts, I mean the sciences too.

The *Trivium* and the *Quadrivium*

Originally, the liberal arts were those areas that the ancient Greeks thought were most essential for success in life. The original seven liberal arts were taught in two groups called the *trivium* (translated as the place where three roads meet or the three ways) and the *quadrivium* (meaning the four ways). The *trivium* included grammar, logic, and rhetoric and the *quadrivium* included arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. The *trivium* was studied first.

Early on, many colleges required knowledge of Latin and/or Greek for admission. While some schools maintain a foreign or world language requirement, many do not. I know of no school that **requires** fluency in Greek and Latin, though some majors do. And when universities and colleges first opened, study was mostly limited to theology, medicine, or law. This is no longer the case. So what are the liberal arts today?

Definitions

In modern higher education, there is a lack of agreement on a definition of “the liberal arts.” The liberal arts were originally constructed as different from the servile arts—those areas that were more skill-based. Catharine Hill and Elizabeth Pisacreta⁴ point to Daniel Kleinman’s 2016 definition which states that a liberal arts education is “a broad integrated education that includes course work in the humanities, social sciences and sciences.” They also state it is not only about *what* is taught, but *how* it is taught.

Think of the many small liberal arts colleges that draw students every year. This category includes schools like Bowdoin College, Swarthmore College, Williams College, Wesleyan University, or Middlebury College. These institutions are different from large public institutions like Ohio State University, Penn State University, or Arizona State University, which also offer solid liberal arts programs.

According to the American Association of Colleges and Universities website,⁵ a liberal education is defined as follows:

“Liberal education is an approach to undergraduate education that promotes integration of learning across the curriculum and cocurriculum, and between academic and experiential learning, in order to develop specific learning outcomes that are essential for work, citizenship, and life.”⁶

This same website states that the key components of this degree are:

- “Essential Learning Outcomes: a framework that

defines the knowledge and skills required for success in work, citizenship, and life and that can be used to guide students' cumulative progress through college.

- High-Impact Practices: specific teaching and learning practices that have been widely tested and shown to be beneficial for all students, including and especially those from demographic groups historically underserved by higher education.
- Signature Work: an inquiry-based exploration of a significant problem that the individual student identifies and defines, that is conducted over the course of at least one semester, and that involves substantial writing and reflection.
- Authentic Assessment: an approach to learning outcomes assessment that uses rubrics to evaluate the work students produce across their diverse learning pathways and whose results inform efforts to promote student success.”⁷

I also tell families and students at my school that we have come a long way from only seven areas (the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*) to the over 70 majors, including concentrations, that we offer to students in the College of Arts & Sciences. To date, the College of Arts & Sciences at UVA has not gone down the professional path of offering majors like diet and nutrition, journalism, fashion design, hotel management, etc.⁸ We do, of course, have students who successfully pursue all these careers (and many more) after completing their more traditional liberal arts degree.

“On the contrary, studies show that people who have chased power and achievement in their professional lives tend to be unhappier after retirement than people who did not.”

-Arthur C. Brooks⁹

What About the Humanities?

In the past eight to 10 years, numerous articles have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and other publications, that debate and discuss the “fall” or the demise of the liberal arts and especially of the humanities. I find this trend disturbing because of the high value of the liberal arts and the humanities for the sake of the knowledge itself, life skills, and because of the misunderstanding that a humanities major will never lead to a job, which the data do not support. I cannot stress enough in this book that **your major is not your career**. Adding to this stress is the pressure placed on students to have a “useful major.” Glassman’s *New York Times* opinion piece notes the following:

“It’s called pre-professional pressure: a prevailing culture that convinces many of us that only careers in

fields such as computer programming, finance and consulting, preferably at blue-chip firms like Goldman Sachs, McKinsey or big tech companies, can secure us worthwhile futures. It is an inescapable part of the current college experience, like tailgating or surviving on stale dining hall food. It not only steers our life choices; it also permeates daily life and negatively affects our mental health.”¹⁰

Much of this pressure comes from the desire on the part of the students and adults to make money, a lot of money. After graduation, many students are faced with crippling student loans that will take them decades to pay off. They want houses, families, and quality of life. But this comes at a price as Glassman also notes:

“But what is missing in this race to perceived economic safety is the emotional toll. The number of young adults ages 18 to 25 who have had at least one depressive episode has doubled from 2010 to 2020. Almost two-thirds of college students have reported feeling “overwhelming anxiety” within a given year, and experts have pointed to the cocktail of coursework, pressure to participate in extracurricular activities and concerns over choosing a career as causes.”¹¹

And the advice offered that I fully agree with?

“Take a deep breath. A kid’s first word doesn’t need to be “revenue” or his first language Java. It’s hard to not want the best for your children—and not to define it as them starting the next Amazon. But stop and think about what actually makes them happy and keeps them sane, not what you think will keep them safe.”¹²

When I see parents or guardians forcing a student into a

program they do not like and do not particularly excel in, it makes me frustrated, sad, and angry—not only because of my personal experience, but because I care about students, and it pains me to see them unhappy and struggling.

What is the proof that a degree in humanities prepares students for the workforce? See, for example, an October 2023 article from *US News & World Report* entitled “Why Majoring in the Humanities Can Be a Great Career Move.”¹³

The article states:

*“It turns out that your parents were wrong. English majors—and others in humanities fields often seen as even less “marketable,” like philosophy and film studies—can get great jobs right out of college.”*¹⁴

Yet, as colleges and universities face budget issues, humanities departments are the first to be cut. This move is likely because the number of these kinds of majors is in decline at many schools and because these are the disciplines that are most often criticized for “leading nowhere”—certainly not to jobs. David Curry’s 2024 article, *The Gutting of the Liberal Arts*, notes,

*“The American public has become convinced that the only justifiable purpose for higher education is to get people jobs (though it isn’t), and they are convinced that one can’t get a good-paying job with a degree in philosophy, art history, French, sculpture, or dance (though one can).”*⁵

Curry goes on to discuss how the humanities are being “hollowed out.”¹⁶ He notes that SUNY Potsdam recently fired seven tenured faculty and discontinued 18 programs. More departments are so small that they no longer have any full-time faculty.¹⁷ For example, in September 2024, Stanford

called together 23 members of the creative writing program to inform them that their current positions were terminated and they would receive only short-term contracts.¹⁸ The fate of the program is unclear.

I understand the concern that parents have when they pay for two or four years of a college education and their child is unemployed at graduation. However, they tend to blame the program or the major first when there may be other key factors at work. These obstacles include, for example, the job market, the salary the prospective employee wants, where the person is willing to live (or not live), as well as how a person interviews. The data show it is **not** the major. The article just mentioned above notes the following statistic.

*One indicator, Payscale's College Salary Report, ranks philosophy the 272nd highest-paying major out of 800 degrees listed; Business administration ranks 360th.*¹⁹

Despite much evidence to the contrary,²⁰ the myth of the useless major continues with parents prohibiting their children from declaring the major they love.

One of my favorite articles is a May 2015 article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled, "If students are smart, they'll major in what they love."²¹ The article's author Cecilia Gaposchkin states, and I agree (as I said above), that many people equate the declaration of a major with a person's life career choice and what they want to be.²² A major in English means... what? That you are an English teacher, professor, writer? No! It means, as it means for every major, that you can do whatever you want when you graduate.

Examples abound of successful people who are in careers that do not directly link to their major. I often played a game with students where they had to guess the major of some

high achieving and famous people. Some know and guess correctly, some are way off, and others finally see that they should pick the most unrelated major. Gaposchkin gives some examples in her article and notes:

To assume a necessary link between particular courses of study and students' career prospects is to limit their options, and in many cases, their capacity for discovery and intellectual growth. Dartmouth College, for example, has educated two U.S. treasury secretaries, yet neither of them majored in economics or government: Henry Paulson was an English major, and Timothy Geithner majored in Asian and Middle Eastern studies. Plenty of other Dartmouth alumni explode the perceived link between major and careers: Jake Tapper, CNN's chief Washington correspondent, majored in history; Phil Lord and Chris Miller, who wrote and directed The Lego Movie and directed 21 Jump Street, majored in government and art history, respectively.²³

The UVA alumni website shares success stories of those who majored in the liberal arts²⁴; other schools have comparable sites. Review the Notable Alumni section²⁵ and you will see, for example, that UVA alumni have done quite well without a journalism major (e.g., Jamelle Bouie, Margaret Brennan, Katie Couric, John Dickerson, Brit Hume, Jenna Wortham). Why? Because, again, your major is **not** your career. A quick search of “famous people with a liberal arts degree” yields many more names such as these examples:

Stacey Abrams, Politician and Organizer:
Interdisciplinary Studies
Connie Britton, Actor: Asian Studies
Kenneth Chenault, Former CEO of American Express:

History

Ben Elbermann, Pinterest: Political Science

Andy Jassy, Amazon: Government

Jack Ma, Cofounder & CEO, Alibaba: English

Alexis Ohanian, Reddit: History

Jen Psaki, Former Press Secretary: English and Sociology

Elizabeth Warren, Senator from Massachusetts: Speech Pathology

Susan Wojcicki, CEO, YouTube: History and Economics

Whitney Wolfe, Founder & CEO, Bumble: International Studies

Some of the people listed above went on to get MBA degrees, which likely contributed to their success. And while there are others who never finished college and are successful (e.g., Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Richard Branson, Mitchell Broderick, James Cameron, Larry Ellison, Mark Zuckerberg), I assert these people were lucky and that a college degree is something everyone should have access to.

One of my favorite parts from the Gaposchkin article reads as follows:

The irony, he [a political scientist at Dartmouth] added, “is that the seemingly practical majors aren’t practical. The government department doesn’t teach you how to get and keep power. The econ department doesn’t teach you how to make and maintain wealth. The computer-science department doesn’t teach you how to code the way Google needs its engineers to code. Each of these are taught as a liberal art.”²⁶

I do not know why this powerful myth continues. So, I will beg you here, for a multitude of reasons, let your child go and

let them pick the major they love, or at least like! Break the pattern and dispel the myth!

While some data support the fact that the number of humanities majors is on the decline, an explanation is hard to come by. Some scholars argue that the decline aligns with the 2008 financial crisis.²⁷ A pair of articles in *The Atlantic* provide two points of view in the articles “The humanities are in crisis”²⁸ and “Actually, the humanities aren’t in crisis.”²⁹ What should one believe? As always, it all depends on what data you look at and how you analyze those data. Though these articles are both a bit dated, I find them to still be relevant.

The “in crisis” article by Benjamin Schmidt asserts that students are turning away from the humanities to majors they think will get them a job, or a better job. At my school, that includes new majors in business and data science, and a minor in real estate, that pull several hundred students away from the College of Arts & Sciences every year. At UVA, English and history are still among the top 10 largest majors, but their numbers have decreased from previous years. It is worth noting that this decline also impacts the social sciences. The “aren’t in crisis” article by Jordan Weissmann asserts that this debate is not new, and the humanities were in more peril in 1985.³⁰ The typical student has changed and the number of new programs, especially interdisciplinary programs, at many schools has grown (for example, area studies and global studies) so students have more options now than they did 10 or 20 years ago. And most recently, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* announced a virtual event for October 2, 2024 entitled *Where the Humanities are Thriving*. In the advertisement for the event, it stated:

“Yet, across the country, there are colleges where these

departments are experiencing enrollment growth. Statistics around unemployment also show that the dire narrative around employment for these majors is just that, a narrative, as the unemployment rate for humanities majors is similar to other college graduates (around 3 percent). In other words, the humanities may simply have a marketing problem.”³¹

The humanities and social sciences provide essential knowledge and life skills and perhaps there is less of decline than previously thought. More importantly, if one wants to study English, philosophy, or archaeology, those options must remain available for the sake of knowledge. The skills acquired from every major, not the specific major, will improve a person’s success in the job search.

Regret

A recent statistic from *Inside Higher Ed* citing Dreambound³² stated that 44% (over 4 in 10) of US adults surveyed regret their major.³³ The survey highlights that the most common reason U.S. adults regret their choice of major is a stronger interest in another subject, with 56% of respondents citing this as their primary reason. This number saddens me but does not surprise me given the number of students I see who tell me they love one area of study but are majoring in another.

What did surprise me was the number of respondents who said they wished they studied computer science or business since the article also says that education and business majors were “most likely to regret their college major.”³⁴ Perhaps

those who majored in business wish they did not and those who did not wish they did? The largest major at UVA is currently computer science, but I predict this will change as AI takes over and as the market is flooded with too many computer science majors. Businesses say they want “thinkers,” not just coders, so I think this trend will change in the next three to seven years. More importantly, my consistent message is “major in what you love (or at least like).” It does not have to be your career, in most cases it will not be, but you will do better in college, enjoy college more, and hopefully have fewer regrets later in life if you find a major you enjoy!

“Skills” From A Liberal Arts Major

Students can develop a wide range of valuable skills through any liberal arts or sciences major. Our role is to help them articulate these skills effectively during job interviews. For example, many employers state that any liberal arts major should offer the following “skills” to students:

- Critical thinking
- Research
- Writing
- Rhetoric
- Quantitative literacy
- Teamwork and Individual Work

While some majors may emphasize certain skills more than others, I believe every major in a liberal arts and sciences

college offers opportunities to develop all these skills through a combination of general education requirements, electives, and courses within the major (and minor). A liberal arts degree gives students the ability to learn how to learn, which they need for a host of jobs that they might pursue in life. This degree also provides the potential to pivot to new careers if the opportunity arises. The odds are high that a student will not be in their first job out of college when they are 30, 40, or 60.

Students and their families often make the mistake of focusing on a major that is popular now or that they think will lead to a career in a field that is on the rise currently. However, what will happen 10, 20, or 30 years from graduation? What new skills will job seekers need to have to learn? Think of the jobs from the past that no longer exist such as:

- Ice Cutter
- Scribe
- Milkman
- Elevator operator
- Switchboard operator
- Film projectionist
- Word processor/typist
- Keypunch operator
- Video store clerk

While some of these jobs may not have required a college degree to do them, the key point is that the world is constantly changing and the liberal arts major can pivot as the economy and workplace changes.

It is predicted that by 2030 the jobs of travel agents, retail

providers, real estate agents, and many administrative legal jobs will no longer exist. Some predictions state that many doctors will be replaced by AI and improved technology. Some argue that the importance of programmers will dwindle significantly as AI programs take over and learn to program faster and better than any human.³⁵ As stated above, the computer science major at UVA is currently the largest major with students often saying it is what they must major in if they want a job. However, UVA recently launched a new school—the School of Data Science—with both undergraduate majors and minors. It will be interesting to see if a shift occurs from majoring in computer science in the College of Arts & Sciences to a degree in Data Science from this new school. I believe it will happen rather quickly.

The fact is that jobs will exist in the not so distant future that do not exist now—jobs that we cannot yet imagine. An article on the website CareerAddict³⁶ lists 15 in-demand jobs that did not exist 15 years ago. The list includes:

- Driverless car engineer
- Social media influencer
- Blockchain analyst
- Podcast producer
- Telemedicine physician
- Cloud architect
- Uber / Lyft driver
- Drone operator
- Chief listening officer
- Budtender
- Big data scientist
- Contact tracer
- E-sports game coach

- Online dating profile writer
- TikTok marketer³⁷

Similarly, the website The World Economic Forum³⁸ lists the top 10 jobs of the future for 2030 and beyond.³⁹ It includes jobs like “Work from Home Facilitator”; “Algorithm Bias Auditor”; and “Cyber Calamity Forecaster.” Again, I believe it is the liberal arts major who is best positioned to pivot to new jobs that do not yet exist.

A recent research piece from Brookings titled “Don’t knock the economic value of majoring in the liberal arts” makes two key points:

- “According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Humanities Project, the share of humanities degrees out of all bachelor’s degrees peaked in 1967 at 17.2% and by 2018 had fallen to 4.4%.
- Earnings for all college graduates rise rapidly after graduation and continue to rise for decades. In contrast, the age-earnings profile of high school graduates is relatively flat.”⁴⁰

This first point illustrates the decline in humanities majors. The second confirms what most data tell us—that those with a college degree will earn more over their lifetimes than those who do not have one.

The parents of students who want to pursue a liberal arts degree, and especially a major in the humanities, need to let students go forward and forge their own path. Students and their adults need to understand the value of knowledge and the value of studying what one loves and enjoys. And I will

again add that it needs to be easier and more affordable to get to college, to stay in college, and to complete a degree.

Below, are some key skills that one learns from every liberal arts degree. These things are learned elsewhere as well but, again, it is the liberal arts that need additional defending.

Innovation

Some people assume that all research and innovation rests in STEM fields. I am pro-STEM; I worked and taught (and still do) in a discipline (archaeology) that thinks of itself as a science. However, innovation can come from everywhere and anywhere, college education or not. You do not have to major in a traditional STEM field to be an innovator. MaryAnne Gobble, in her article “Innovation Needs the Liberal Arts,”⁴¹ summarizes the assumptions behind STEM funding:

“The end point of this line of thinking, which peaks around innovation indexes and national elections, is a relentless focus on producing more STEM graduates and a devaluation of liberal arts and social sciences. What use, to society or to the individual, is a degree in anthropology, or philosophy, or art history, politicians will ask as they channel ever more funding to STEM programs and slash funding for art and music in primary schools.”⁴²

Decreasing liberal arts funding is a huge problem. We most certainly have work to do in building STEM fields, especially around diversity and inclusion. However, in addition to forcing students into areas they do not enjoy and may not excel in, we diminish potential innovation that comes from

other fields. Think of art, dance, drama, music, creative writing, poetry, and all the research done in other fields like anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and history. All of these fields contribute to innovative thinking in social and economic settings.

Creativity

It goes without saying that there is creativity within the liberal arts and sciences. One of Kurt Vonnegut's oft-cited quotes reads:

*"The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something."*⁴³

Creativity can be found everywhere—in every discipline. Our world and our societies need creativity to thrive, to survive, and to flourish. The liberal arts are a great source of creative and innovative ideas.

Of course STEM fields, like engineering, applied sciences, or architecture, lead to innovation and creativity too. The difference is that few people ever question whether majors in these fields possess these qualities. It is the humanities and social sciences that are more consistently criticized for being "useless" majors without much research into the long-term careers of people with these degrees.

Critical Thinking

The Foundation for Critical Thinking, which offers professional development, conferences, and research opportunities, suggests that critical thinking must include qualities like clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, and fairness.⁴⁴ Critical thinking is a skill that students sometimes lack, having mostly learned to take standardized tests in their high school years. However, critical thinking is essential to college, communication, and success in the workplace. Many students just want to “know what’s on the test” or ask, “What’s the right answer?” Faculty know that often there is no one “right” answer.

For several years, I regularly co-taught an advising seminar class with a colleague from biomedical engineering. This class focused on major technological innovations in prehistory and history. We talked about the first stone tools, the beginnings of agriculture, the origins of writing, the printing press, and his personal favorite—sanitary water systems. We agreed on much and disagreed on much as well. Sometimes we would debate and, although there were no tests in the course, at one point a student raised his hand and said, “Can you just tell us what the right answer is?” We laughed. We were both right. It was not a multiple-choice test with one right answer. This exchange illustrates perfectly to me the importance of learning how to pose research questions and of critical thinking to support your statements and responses.

It also shows the necessity to be familiar with scientific inquiry and the process by which hypotheses are formed and

tested. More people need to understand how science works and how it evolves with new evidence.

Research

If you are a college student, the odds are high you will need to write a research paper of significant length at some point. While this task should happen in high school, in many cases it does not. I have had more than a few students tell me that the longest research paper they wrote in high school was two pages. When asked to write a five-page paper for the first time, many students are overwhelmed and do not even know where to start. In one of my senior seminar classes where students were required to write a research paper of at least 15 pages, we built in all the necessary steps with assignments such as the submission of a title and abstract, a draft outline, a draft of first part of paper, etc. One student wrote a fairly solid paper, but cited only one article. When we asked her about her other references, as we required more than one, her response was “the paper was already too long.” We had to explain that citing references appropriately did not make the paper longer and that it was required. We all wondered how she got through four years of college without knowing this.

Equally important is learning how to develop a research topic and pose a research question. In the same advising seminar class I mentioned above, we required a short paper to begin to expose students to the process. We told them we would critique their papers as if they were a senior thesis, but grade them like a first-year paper in a one-credit class. The

first step was for students to submit their research proposal on a technological innovation.

Very few students came close to a viable topic on the first try. One student, for example, said her paper would be on the Nile River.

“What’s the research question?” I asked.

Her response? “The Nile.”

“That’s not a question, it’s a place. And it’s not a technological innovation,” I replied.

She did not understand what we wanted. We met with her to explain the process of framing a research question. Another student proposed “the impact of television on culture.” Closer, but my response was, what kind of television, what culture, where and when?

“Oh,” he said; “I guess that is pretty broad.”

Research skills, from framing a question, conducting the research, and drawing conclusions to whatever the final product is (even if it is not in the form of a paper), are essential for any job. Learning how to ask a question, pose a question, propose hypotheses, and test them, etc. are key skills for life. It is unfortunate that some students finish college without those skills in hand.

Writing

Writing is something everyone will need to do well no matter what job they accept. Whatever career one has over their lifetime, they will need to write emails, summarize documents, draft proposals, etc. In some jobs, obviously, there is much more writing than in others. It is a skill that the

majority of employers rank highest and they expect potential employees to have this skill. A 2020 survey conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) showed that “90% of employers viewed the ability to communicate through writing as either a ‘somewhat important’ or ‘very important’ skill.”⁴⁵ Most high schools have classes where students have to write papers, but that paper may be short, which makes the research papers assigned in college a shock. I consider a 5–10-page paper to be relatively short; some students view it as a dissertation. Some do not understand the process, the parts of a paper, and/or how to do the research. And while most colleges have writing classes (required or optional), those papers sometimes do not prepare students for the 20-page research paper they will need to do in their major. Most schools have help—either online advice for how to get started or writing centers where students can go for one-on-one help. See, for example, the following schools which are a somewhat random selection of large and small schools, public and private schools, and two-year and four-year schools.

Arizona State University
Brown University
Dartmouth College
Mesa Community College
MIT
Ohio State University
Piedmont Virginia Community College
University of Virginia

While writing help abounds at colleges, students must learn to access these writing centers and not the night before their 10-page paper is due. Students also need to realize that writing is not something that one ever stops learning; it

requires a lifetime of always trying to improve (as wanted and as needed). College provides a wonderful start.

Summary

Several years ago, I received an email from a woman in her fifties who had graduated from UVA. She had, under pressure from her parents, gone on to medical school and incurred hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt. More importantly, she described how unhappy she was with her life. She said she wanted to pursue her passion, which was philosophy, and asked if she could return to get a degree.

Like many schools, UVA does not permit a student to earn two undergraduate degrees. After struggling to find the right words to express my empathy for her situation, I responded that it was not possible for her to do this at UVA, but it would perhaps be possible elsewhere. I offered some suggestions such as perhaps starting with a free online course or an evening class at a local college and then thinking about earning enough credits in philosophy as a part-time student to be able to apply to a graduate program. It was disheartening to read her email, and I could not help but imagine myself in her shoes, running my father's beauty salon business and regretting that I never studied archaeology. It is hard to know how that would have played out, but I do know I would not have been a good fit since it was something in which I had no interest. I also know that if that is how I spent the last few decades, I would have been miserable.

The faculty at most colleges and universities would cringe at the thought of reducing what they teach to a set of skills,

myself included. We teach disciplinary content, and we are passionate about what we teach. We have devoted our lives to it. However, a student entering the work force from any major will bring creative thought, different ways of working and solving problems, and innovation to any job they take. We need diverse thinkers on every team: technical people, detail-oriented people, big idea/blue sky people, financial planners, “box checkers,” and so on. There are various tools that assess our strengths like Clifton Strengths Assessment, Emotional Intelligence Assessments, VIA Character Strengths Survey, and Working Genius. These evaluations allow employers to build varied teams. Some employers now administer these assessments to job candidates to help with their hiring decisions.

As you move on to Part II of this book and the next sections of examples, lessons learned, and advice, I urge you to consider what was said here. In sum: (1) there is no useless major; (2) your major is often not your career; and (3) critical thinking, writing, and research, in qualitative and quantitative realms, are essential skills which can be learned from any major. If you are a student, please major in what you love; if you are a parent, please let your child study what they love.

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Chapter 5. The Art of Knowing Your Role as a Parent: Examples from the Trenches

During the early days of the pandemic in March 2020, I started walking almost every day since I could not go to my gym. By late April, it was warmer and summer was coming—my favorite season. I listened to music on my walks and then started to listen to podcasts and books, something I had not done very often. I became temporarily addicted to Brené Brown podcasts. She had two podcasts on the book *Little Fires Everywhere*, written by Celeste Ng. The first was with the author and the second was with Reese Witherspoon and Kerry Washington who starred in the Hulu adaptation of the book. The podcasts drove me to read the book and watch the television series. The podcasts and the television series referenced and even highlighted the following excerpt from the book:

“Parents, she thought, learn to survive touching their children less and less.”¹

“It was the way of things, Mia thought to herself, but how hard it was. The occasional embrace, a head leaned for just a moment on your shoulder when what you really wanted more than anything was to press them to you and hold them so tight you fuse together and could never be taken apart. It was like training

yourself to live on the smell of an apple alone when what you really wanted was to devour it, to sink your teeth into it, and consume it seeds, core and all.”²

This sentiment hit home for me. I feel this way about my children, but I also know I must, absolutely must, let go. And I did, for the most part; I am not perfect. As parents, we must let our children find their own way and even fail, while they are young, still at home, and under the age of 18. If they grow up in a fully protected environment, they will not learn what to do when they encounter adversity, barriers, and/or obstacles.

The following exchange from *Little Fires Everywhere*³ is also relevant here:

“Lexie: Oh, I think I figured out what I’m going to do for my Yale essay. It has to be about some kind of hardship I’ve overcome. So, I’ve decided that I’m going to write about South Pacific.

Izzy (sister): The Musical? What about it?

Lexie: How I killed myself for that audition and didn’t get Nelly. But I still gave it my all in the stupid chorus.

Elena (mother): I remember that honey. It was very political. You know, I for one have a real issue with this Yale essay topic. You know, your father and I worked very hard your entire life to prevent you from having any hardship and now you have to just go and try and drum one up.

Bill (father): I expect Yale to come up with a better question. Right? I mean it is Yale after all.”

What struck me about this exchange was Elena’s statement about how hard she worked to prevent her child from “having

any hardship.” On the one hand, that seems ideal. Who wants their child to struggle and/or fail? But on the other hand, what happens when the child is protected from **everything**? That protection can only last so long, and adversity takes on new meanings when young adults have never “failed.” Young people need the ability to navigate and learn from simple mistakes, then move forward, so they are better equipped to handle the larger challenges life will no doubt bring. A friend once shared the German expression “*Kleine kinder kleine sorgen, grosse kinder grosse sorgen*,” translated as “small children, small problems; big children, big problems.” If a child does not learn to manage the smaller problems in life (even when they seem large to them), they will not have the skills they need to manage more serious problems later in life.

I could go on at length about the various situations I encountered over the years that showed me again and again that a student’s college education and experiences were being driven by their parents or guardians. I faced this (see Chapter 1), and it is not the way to do college. I was lucky; some students are not. This chapter presents the trends and patterns I have seen over the years and then provides some examples.

A recent article from *Parents* magazine shares comments from children raised by helicopter parents or from the spouses of someone raised by helicopter parents.⁴ The article was the result of a question asked in Reddit that resulted in over 2,000 comments. Comments included statements about how people who are now adults feel today. They included statements such as, “Honestly, just an anxious mess”; “Anxious, suffocated”; “I had zero life skills”; and “I held a lot of resentment towards my mom for years for not teaching

me things, and for ‘saving’ me all the time.”⁵ Similarly, a 2022 study published in the *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* shared this key point and conclusion:

“Overparenting even though done with good intentions but it has bad outcome. Parents should have constant watch on their children but over policing or constant guidance for every small thing make child less confident and generate anxiety in child. Parents are advised to read some good books or magazine on parenting. Remember parenting is a very delicate and discipline way of management of your children.

Children are lovable for every parent, but over parenting is harmful, though it starts unintentionally but become a habit, and if not checked, it will harm the child. Overcare will reduce self-esteem, self-confidence, and hamper the child in learning how to cope or prepare for a fight from adverse situations.”⁶

If a child is shielded from nearly all challenges and difficulties, they are unlikely to develop the essential life skills needed to manage problems and cope with disappointments. Facing challenges helps children build resilience, problem-solving abilities, and emotional regulation, all of which are critical for navigating life’s complexities. Without these experiences, they may struggle to adapt or recover when faced with inevitable setbacks in adulthood. One parent called me to tell me that they was not a helicopter parent, but they could not log into their child’s account to add their classes for them as their child was having trouble finding the classes they wanted. In these situations, I find myself struggling not to say what is really on my mind.

One of my first encounters with students’ inability to cope

with disappointment or failure was about 25 years ago during our summer orientation program. A student collapsed on the floor in tears because they were so anxious about not getting every one of their first choices for courses. No one could calm down the student and we eventually had to find their father who took them home. They left Orientation and called in a few days later so we could enroll them in some classes via phone. Unfortunately, this incident is no longer a unique situation. Over the years I have seen many students “fall apart” at the simpler things such as not being able to enroll in a class,⁷ not getting into their first choice of a major, not being elected president of a club, not getting a role in a play, not being asked to pledge a sorority or fraternity, etc. These situations are disappointments, but they should not, I think, result in the severe anxiety, stress, and despair that I (and others) see in our students. Even if one of these disappointments resonates more strongly in a student, they need to have the skills to know how to manage their emotions and move on. Some students seem unable to “pick themselves up.” They enter a downward spiral that is difficult to end. How will they cope with the more serious problems and scenarios life brings us such as divorce, a failed promotion, loss of a job, or death of a loved one when they lack essential life skills and coping mechanisms?

Trigger Warnings

The increased emotional distress among college students also impacts the faculty, especially how we teach, what we say, and how we grade. We worry about the possible

scenarios in which something we say might be triggering to students. For example, Jessica Schrader notes,

*“...students’ emotional fragility has become a serious problem when it comes to grading. Some said they had grown afraid to give low grades for poor performance, because of the subsequent emotional crises they would have to deal with in their offices. Many students, they said, now view a C, or sometimes even a B, as failure, and they interpret such ‘failure’ as the end of the world.”*⁸

Trigger warnings were originally limited in scope to topics such as sexual violence, violence, war, and sometimes around topics such as slavery or racism. As trigger warnings made their way to college campuses, faculty were asked to flag content, film, lectures, and/or assignments to avoid triggering students. Examples can be found in the National Coalition Against Censorship’s 2015 report⁹ and in the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) 2014 statement On Trigger Warnings.¹⁰

The AAUP statement notes the following:

“Oberlin College’s original policy (since tabled to allow for further debate in the face of faculty opposition) is an example of the range of possible trigger topics: ‘racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism, and other issues of privilege and oppression.’ It went on to say that a novel like Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart might ‘trigger readers who have experienced racism, colonialism, religious persecution, violence, suicide and more.’ It further cautioned faculty to ‘remove triggering material when

it does not contribute directly to the course learning goals.’¹¹

Anecdotally, it sometimes now seems like students are triggered by statements they simply disagree with. Complaints come to my school about a range of topics presented in lectures which go against someone’s belief. Filipovic’s article sums this up in her statement on trigger warnings saying, “Often, they seemed more about emphasizing the upsetting nature of certain topics than about accommodating people who had experienced traumatic events.”¹² Perhaps more importantly, Khazan’s article cites a 2019 study on trigger warnings that came to the following conclusion:

“To better estimate trigger warnings’ effects, we conducted mini meta-analyses on our data, revealing trigger warnings had trivial effects—people reported similar levels of negative affect, intrusions, and avoidance regardless of whether they had received a trigger warning. Moreover, these patterns were similar among people with a history of trauma. These results suggest a trigger warning is neither meaningfully helpful nor harmful.”¹³

Finally, Filipovic goes on to ask, “Have we inadvertently raised a generation that has fewer tools to manage hardship?”¹⁴ This topic is also discussed by Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Anxious Generation*.¹⁵ The question is whether we now have a generation of students raised by snowplow parents whose coping mechanism is avoidance. If so, what will happen when those protecting them are gone or when they cannot avoid something that is truly horrific?

Grit and Resilience

Among the many lessons I learned through my work, the most important was to allow each of my two children to be their own person, discover their own path, stumble along the way, and learn how to get back on their feet. I am fortunate that I (mostly) learned this before my children left for college. I am grateful that I learned early on to let my children “fail” when they were still at home, when they were in middle school or high school, when the risks were lower. I also know this is easy to say and so much harder to do and I certainly did not do it perfectly. It stung to watch them hurt; it still does. Yet, this is how we all learn.

As I side note, I will share it gets no easier with grandchildren. I was recently visiting my daughter when I heard a crash upstairs and then sobs from my grandson. The next thing I knew his dad brought him to me saying “tell grandma what happened.” He could not speak between his sobs. He had dropped a lighthouse that was a gift and something he loved; he did not know it was fragile. After he calmed down and started playing with another toy, his dad asked my daughter and me, “Did you already buy a replacement on Amazon for him?” She said, “I really want to, but I also want him to know that when things break or get lost, they cannot always be immediately replaced—some items are not be replaceable.” I could tell this was as hard for her as it was for me (I confessed to already searching for one too which I would not have bought without their permission). Later, my grandson was able to talk about it and said things like “The lighthouse broke because it fell. I’m really sad, but it will be okay.” I still want to buy him a new one and in fact

at one of my more recent visits, he saw it (it sits broken on a top shelf since it was just the base that broke and it was sharp) and he asked me when I thought it might be fixed. I told him I was not sure, and he was okay with that answer. I think situations such as this one are a great start for young children to begin to learn coping skills.

According to many recent studies, today's students lack resilience, grit, and/or coping mechanisms (see, for example, articles by Cummins,¹⁶ Dwivedi,¹⁷ and Schrader¹⁸). This deficiency is something I also see in many, though not all, of the students with whom I interact. Dwivedi states, "In a 2019 study of college students, 75% of current college students said that they need help for emotional or mental health problems."¹⁹ 75%! A great number of the college-age students with whom I work have not learned how to recover from failure or to deal with disappointments. Small disappointments become big failures and "disasters." Why? There are a few generations of young people who have been told they are good at everything and reinforcing that is that there is often a trophy or a certificate for everyone. Society went from no rewards to rewards for everyone so that no one would feel left out. Ask yourself this question: what adult do you know today who is good at **everything**? I think the answer is easy: no one.

Some data suggest that the "trophy for all" culture has negative consequences. In a 2016 *Washington Post* article, Erica Reischer states, "Telling kids that they can do anything—whether fueled by imagination or hard work—obscures the critical role of chance in success. Not every child who wants to be a surgeon or sports star can become one, even if they work hard at it."²⁰ She goes on to ask a key question: "Let's ask ourselves why we mourn the

idea that our children's futures are not limitless. Why do so many of us dislike the idea of having average children?"²¹ Why indeed? Why do our children have to be stars at everything? Why not excel in or enjoy one thing? More importantly, what pressure are we putting on our children when we tell them they are amazing at everything only to have them find out later in life that they really are not? Add to this the complication that they likely never had the chance to determine what they **are** good at doing and what they enjoy.

Books like *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*²² and *Resilience: Hard-Won Wisdom for Living a Better Life*²³ talk at length about the value of such assets. In the inside jacket cover, Eric Greitens writes:

*"You cannot 'bounce back' from hardship. You can only move through it. There is a path through pain to wisdom, through suffering to strength, and through fear to courage—if we have the virtue of resilience."*²⁴

I have given similar advice to people when they encounter serious hardships or major losses. People typically say, "You will get over it," but someone once said to me, "You will get/move through it." I think the latter is far better advice and it is what I try to say to students. There are things, good and bad, in our lives that we will never forget and that we will perhaps never really get over, but we will, with help, support, and love, get *through* them. Ultimately, humans are incredibly resilient. What happens, though, if you are never given a chance to learn from the less significant setbacks because someone paves a smooth path for you with not even a small bump? What happens when you are 25, 35, or 40 and you never developed any coping mechanisms? Most of us can guess the answer.

Interestingly, I think it is sometimes the more privileged students who lack grit. Over the years, I worked with many first generation and/or low-income students. In many cases, these students have already overcome a range of adversities to get to college so when they begin college, they have a toolkit of coping mechanisms. Some have no family and/or no support; others have support, but no funds. Some have a little of both, but getting to college was still a marathon run for them—slow and steady, and often confusing and tedious. I also hear this experience from colleagues at conferences. University administrators and advisors say it is the students who have struggled the most *before* college who often have the grit they need to succeed in college. These students have resilience, they know things can be hard and unfair, and their grit is an asset. They often know how to ask for help. This ability does not mean the road is easy for them or that they do not struggle. They have faced hard times before and thus some know they will make it through again. This said, they still need help and support, and usually more than schools can offer.

Words of Wisdom

“You can’t wait until life isn’t hard anymore before you decide to be happy.”

– Jane Marczewski/Nightbirde²⁵

I also acknowledge that many students struggle, and the

parents/guardians do not become involved, but those numbers are far less than they were when I started my job in 1994. At that time, it was rare to hear from parents via phone or in person, and email was in its infancy. Now it is commonplace; not only do parents call my office, but when they do not like our response, they immediately call the University President. Their level of anger is often inappropriate as they yell at staff, faculty and/or administrators. And during the height of COVID and online classes, parents sat in on classes, meetings, and calls, sometimes hidden and sometimes not. Chapter 6 talks more about heightened parental vigilance during the pandemic.

Trends

There are patterns of behavior that I have seen repeated by different parents and guardians over the years. These behaviors have become more intense and frequent. This is what I find so alarming.

When my children were younger and problems came up, I usually first assumed that they did something wrong (sorry, kids)—not that *they* were wronged. A colleague in my office used to frequently say to students “Help me understand how you got yourself in this situation.” The trend I see today is for parents to assume that their children are 100% without blame, and that they were wronged. It is as if the world, in this case a university, is out to trip them up, set them up for failure, or catch them at something. A few examples may help clarify. Again, the details have been slightly modified to guarantee anonymity, but the spirit of each story is the same.

A few years ago, a letter was posted by a parent to a social media page stating that their child had lost all their classes for the upcoming term. The responses from others were immediate with comments like the following:

This is awful; the student system sucks, and they should take it down.

The student system is so broken, and it needs to be replaced.

Call the Dean, the Provost and the President!

As I read these comments, I knew that “the student (computer) system” did not do this; it does not automatically remove a student from their classes. I posted a note asking the parent to contact me directly via email with more information so I could try to determine what happened. It took me less than 30 seconds to figure out that their child had withdrawn from the prior term and had not applied to return. This scenario happens more often than most people would guess. No classes were lost because the student never enrolled in any classes, nor had they told their parents about the semester withdrawal. Because of FERPA,²⁶ I had to find the right way to share this information with the parent without revealing any details. I suggested the parent speak with their child to get the full story. A few days later I received an email thanking me and saying they had a productive talk with their child, and that the student would be returning in the following semester.

Another trend has to do with students not getting into the classes they want. As noted above, these courses are often not the ones students **need** for basic requirements or a major, but rather courses that they think they must have for a range of other reasons (e.g., a popular professor, a convenient time, an “easier” class, etc.). At UVA, for example, students often

desire specific time slots for sections that are required for writing and world language classes. Parents complain that the university has a required class and that their children are unable to enroll. While sometimes this is true, the more likely situation is that there are no *open* spaces that the student **wants**. For example, there may be spaces available in the 8:00 AM and 9:00 AM sections, but not in mid-afternoon or later options. Once I provide this information, I almost never get a response back or I get a brief “thank you.”

Studies in Overparenting: Learning from Examples

The purpose of the examples below is not to diminish a student’s experience or their questions. I truly believe every student should be able to ask advisors, or anyone at a university, **everything and anything** even if they think the question is silly or if they think we will think it is silly. I always tell students it is better to ask the question than to not know something.

Before I share the more detailed examples, I want to share some of the “emergency” calls that come in to either academic offices or the Office of Student Affairs and some versions of the comments posted on various websites. The questions are valid, but they should be asked by the student. None are *verbatim* but they meet the spirit of what I see. Also, most are not emergencies.

My kid got a speeding ticket driving back to school.

Should I pay it so they don't end up with points and a court date?

What kind of shoes will your kids wear on graduation day?

What should we do if a faculty member moved an exam and it no longer works for us?

My son received an 89.1 on a test and got an B+. Should we call and ask for an A-?

What size are the windows in the dorms and do I need to bring curtains?

My child thinks their professor is being unfair—what should we do?

I just spent several hours going through the course catalog to figure everything out for my kid. I made a spreadsheet with notes. If you want it, let me know.

You get the idea; also note the use of “we.” If parents are paying the tuition bill, and most are, then questions about financial aid, payments, due dates, etc. are certainly reasonable and they should contact the University. But questions like the ones just above are all things that an 18- to 22-year-old should be managing on their own.

The phone calls that come in, often as urgent or as an emergency to my office and to the Dean on Call number in Student Affairs (their emergency hotline) are usually neither. None of the items in the list below qualify as urgent. Some are placed by parents and some by the student.

The following question came into an academic department at a school where one of my daughter's friends teaches: “Where will my son be able to fill up his water bottle?”

From students to the Dean on Call **emergency** number at UVA:

How do I sign up for my meal plan?

I have a hold on my record, and I don't know what to do.

I can't get into a class that I really want.

From parents to Student Affairs:

My son has a really hard time waking up; can someone please call him every morning?

Is there a laundry service that will pick and do my child's laundry?

Is there someone who can clean my daughter's room every day?

Can someone be sure my daughter eats three healthy meals per day?

My child keeps getting undercooked food served to them in the dining hall. How are you going to fix this?

I am very worried about my child. I'll tell you what happened, but you must promise never to tell them I called you.

In addition to social media posts and calls, there are also emails from parents. These take the form of questions like these:

I am reaching out for help with parent portal access to our child's account. How do I view all their classes and grades?

I think my child has a cold; how can I send him food?

The bathrooms always run out of toilet paper—who can I call to report this?

The room map we were sent doesn't match the actual room and now the furniture doesn't fit. What have you all done about this?

There is mold in my son's dorm room; where do I file a complaint?

We need to file a grade appeal, and we don't know how to start. Please send detailed directions.

And from an email sent to the school by a parent:

“My son’s class was taught by someone not listed who did not explain anything. I want to know why this happened, why there were no TAs in the class, and what you will do to immediately fix this.”

These types of calls tend to come in from more privileged families, though not always. Some calls, understandably, are from first-generation families who do not know what to expect. And they are worried about what it means for their child to be in this whole new, very independent, environment. We have tried to provide support and information for everyone, and especially for parents of first-generation college students. Again, the issues and questions above are not silly or invalid. My point is that the **student** should be doing the work to solve the problem or get an answer.

In the next section I provide more detailed examples of parental interference. In these examples the students also all had valid questions, problems, and/or personal issues. The point is that either the parent’s behavior was inappropriate and/or that the student should have dealt with the issue. Examples include situations in which a parent or guardian was too involved or did too much talking, managing, or negotiating. Or, in some cases, they reflect situations where the student never made contact; the parent/guardian was the only person involved. I also fully recognize that some students face serious adversity and trauma while in college and the second set of examples below addresses those kinds of situations (which happen far more regularly than most people, even faculty, would think). Interestingly, I find it to

be more often true than not that the more serious the issue, the more resilient the student might be, and the more that student wants to negotiate the situation on their own.

A few points about the examples below...

I use “parent” to represent any adult responsible for a student which includes, but is not limited to, legal guardian, grandparent, aunt, uncle, sibling, etc.

In all cases, gender neutral names and pronouns are used (e.g., them, they, their).

The stories are slightly altered to protect the identities of the students and their families, but the spirit of each story is accurate and has not been exaggerated.

Each scenario is a composite so if you see yourself here, know that none of these scenarios reflect any specific individual.

Overblown Concerns or Involvement by Parents

The examples below are grouped roughly by theme and address the various kinds of interference that many of us in higher education deal face daily. The questions are valid; the point, again, is that the student should be asking the questions.

Class Selection

Avery

One of the more recent incidents took place at our first return to in-person orientation in July 2022. My university had in-person summer orientation since the late 1990s, but COVID required that we shift to a virtual program. We were happy, though a bit nervous to return to in-person sessions (COVID was still surging) and to again see the excitement and energy of the new students.

In the middle of a session unrelated to academics a parent stood up and began shouting that their child could not enroll in a chemistry class. While the parents were attending various talks, the students were with advisors and academics deans in the library enrolling in their classes. We knew the student had been on the phone with them for the entire two-hour enrollment block. Some students made quick calls (even this is not necessary) but this student never got off the phone with their parent.

One of the orientation staff members had to go into the audience and escort the parent out. The parent demanded to talk to someone, so they were escorted to my office (which was mostly empty since we were all with students). There, they proceeded to yell at two staff members who told them the same thing (summer is the start of enrollment; nothing is final; in August students can add their name to wait lists, etc.). After 45 minutes of this, the parent left and both a dean and program director called them to try to calm them down. The time and energy this adult took and the disruption

they caused were astronomically out of proportion with the problem—not getting into a chemistry class.

Why was this parent so upset? Was it something else in their life? Do they micro-manage everything in their child's life? What will happen if and when something serious transpires?

Kai

Kai sat in my office with me trying to build their third semester classes. This is the point in time where students should be working on the completion of their general education requirements and taking classes that will help them declare a major. This includes both completing prerequisite classes as well as a bit of exploring—both are critical.

Kai still needed one more class in math or science to complete that general education requirement. “I’m not really a math/science kind of person,” the student said. In response, I suggested some of our introductory science classes on “cool” topics, classes that did not include a lab. Kai perked up at an astronomy class—*Unsolved Mysteries in the Universe*. “That sounds interesting,” they said; “I’ll ask my parents about it tonight.”

I couldn’t help myself and responded with “Oh, is one of them an astronomer?” “No,” Kai laughed. “Then why do you need to ask them? What will they know that you and I don’t know?” Kai responded with “It’s not that; I just always run my classes by them first.”

This is problematic on many levels. I continually hear parents scoff at:

Classes with what we like to call “cool” titles (e.g., Unsolved Mysteries of the Universe; Witchcraft; Sex and Gender);

Classes that seem too politically or socially charged (e.g., Darwinian Medicine; Queer American History; How Others See Us);

Classes that seem too “dated” (Exploring the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1700; Roman Civilization; Greek Mythology); or,

Classes that are perceived as a “waste of time” (Drawing I; Introduction to Acting; Introduction to Poetry; Introduction to Archaeology).

These responses reflect a lack of understanding about knowledge and what is considered “valuable” knowledge. More importantly, it prevents a student from taking a class that may spark an interest or lead to other interests. It is a lose-lose situation for the student.

Selecting or Changing a Major

Jordan

Jordan desperately wanted to major in drama. This student loved the theater and earned good grades in all of their drama classes. By the time I met Jordan, they had already been in several plays—this was at the start of their third year. I asked Jordan when they planned to meet with the drama

department to formally declare a major and the response was “my parents want me to major in economics.” I asked what they planned to do. The response? “I am going to declare a major in economics.” Jordan went on to say that their parents told them they would not pay for an education if the student majored in something as “worthless as drama.”

I hear this repeatedly and it shows a fundamental misunderstanding about what a major means and what a liberal arts degree is. A liberal arts school is not a pre-professional school. A major is or should be what a student loves to study, what they enjoy, and what they are good at doing. Though it may become their career, in the majority of cases it does not. That is, most anthropology majors do not become anthropologists. A drama major can go onto to almost any career; it can take you anywhere. Think of the skills learned: public speaking, working as part of a team, analyzing complex materials, being on time, etc.

By the end of Jordan’s third year, I saw a very unhappy student, with low grades. Jordan said they were switching to drama and would figure everything else out later. In the end, I believe it all worked out but not without unnecessary angst and stress for the student. Had the parents said, “we support you in whatever you want to do,” the student would likely have been happier much earlier and had a better GPA at graduation.

The quote below comes from Glennon Doyle’s book *Untamed*²⁷ and I think it is very relevant.

“Erica and I went to college together. She was a born artist but she studied business because her mother was a corporate executive and wanted Erica to become one too. Erica resented every minute she spent in those business classes. It’s

nearly impossible to blaze one's own path while following in someone else's footsteps. Erica returned to our dorm each day and recovered from her business boredom by painting. She graduated with a business degree and then fell in love with a fantastic guy and worked in a corporate office to put him through medical school. Next the babies came and she quit her job to stay home and care for them. All the while she heard a voice nagging her to start painting again. One day she told me she planned to honor that longing, to honor herself, by enrolling in art school. I heard fizz and fire in her voice for the first time in a decade.

So I answered the phone in celebration of Erica's commitment and I said "Hey, how is school going?"

She was quiet for a moment and then said "Oh that. That was silly. Brett is so busy and the kids need me. Art school just seemed so selfish after a while."

Why do women find it honorable to dismiss ourselves? Why do we decide that denying our longing is the responsible thing to do? Why do we believe what will thrill and fulfill us will hurt our people? Why do we mistrust ourselves so completely?"

Greer

When I met with Greer during our pre-enrollment period, they seemed quite stressed.

“You look stressed,” I said, “What’s going on?”

“I just can’t do the business major,” Greer said. “I am good at it and the classes are fine, but this is not what I want to study.”

“Okay,” I replied, “no problem. What do you think you want to study?”

“I love history,” Greer replied. “I called my parents last night to tell them and they said it was fine so that’s what I want to do.”

“Great,” I said, “Go for it.”

Greer seemed shocked. “What? Really? I can just change my mind and study history?”

This student was in their second year, so they had not yet declared a major. At this point, the change was a simple switch in interests that would not delay graduation or cause the student to fall behind. Greer seemed to think that this would not be permitted; I do not know why but I am glad they thought to ask.

This type of situation is common although sometimes the ending is not a happy one. Sometimes the students want to do one thing—take a certain class or declare a certain major—and the parent says no. This was my situation up until the last minute. I was glad that in this case the parents were supportive. I remain shocked, though I am not sure why, that (1) so many students run their academic decisions by their parents before making them, (2) and so many think of a change in interest as failure. Most parents/guardians are

not faculty, advisors, or counselors. As with the example just before, what do the parents know that trained professionals do not? And again, I was also surprised that Greer thought I, or our policies, would not allow this. We guide and advise; we do not decide what a student should or should not do. I am glad this situation had a happy ending.

Overinvolvement in Student's Academic Life

Taylor

My university has an undergraduate business school and major to which students apply in the fall of their second year (the application cycle recently changed to the spring semester of a student's first year). There are several prerequisite classes students must take and complete before entering the business school (economics, statistics, calculus, world language, writing, humanities classes, an introductory business class and one year of accounting). Many more students apply than are accepted because the business school is relatively small. Most cannot articulate why they want to transfer to this school other than to say, "I want a good job," "I want a high paying job," "My parents told me to," or "I want to make a lot of money." An occasional student talks about their love of numbers and their desire to be an accountant.

In fall 2021 the parent of a student wrote to the College of Arts & Sciences three times asking for detailed explanations of the classes their child needed to take. Each time the

response was simple and along the lines of, “If after reviewing the pre-requisites on the school’s web site, your child still has questions about the business school, they should contact that school directly.” The parent responded the first time saying that the student did contact them but still had questions. The response again was, “If your student has additional questions, **they** should meet with a pre-business school advisor from the business school.” The third time the parent wrote, “Would someone just please answer these questions.”

In addition to the College of Arts & Sciences being the wrong contact for questions about another school, this student never wrote to ask any questions. I need not go on at length to ask how likely it is that this 20-year-old will function well in the world if they cannot ask some simple advising questions and take the initiative to help themselves by meeting one-on-one with a qualified advisor.

Desi

Desi’s parents (yes, both) sent an email like the one below a few days before classes were to begin.

Good afternoon,

Our child is in the College of Arts & Sciences. We have a couple of questions regarding classes for the major and what is required this semester.

Desi is currently a biology major but is planning to get a BS specialization in Biochemistry. Can you tell me which classes Desi needs for this track? Desi is also

a pre-health student and I see some math classes listed but we don't know which one they should take.

Also, I see for the first year Desi needs chemistry. Does Desi have to take it then? I ask because our child is having a hard time getting into a calculus class. We are on the waitlist for four different times, with four different numbers. What are our chances of getting into one of these classes, and what options do we have besides waiting it out?

We've been told to email the professor or show up to the class when the semester starts and ask for permission. Are either of these options acceptable?

We await your responses.

Where do I begin when there is so much wrong with this message? Why are the parents writing? Why is the student unable to take the initiative to ask these questions themselves? The repeated use of “we” throughout the message is concerning. Saying “we are on the waitlist” is nonsensical—only the student, the one who will actually be attending college, is on the waitlist.

Also, much of this information is on various web sites and Desi needs to learn to look first and then ask questions if things are unclear. And the parents want to write to the professor? That would likely go unanswered, or the parents could receive a response that does more harm than good to the student!²⁸

Desi would have best been served by seeking out an advisor, introducing themselves, and asking these questions. The parents were not helpful, and they deprived Desi of the chance to make connections and start to find their own way. They did more harm than good and, sadly, they had no idea.

Harper

Harper was a student with whom I had met a few times for advising. When we met in their third semester, they confirmed that they were still interested in applying to our undergraduate business school. Again, this has been a school to which students apply at the start of their fourth semester; they then complete their last two years in that school. It is a very competitive application process.

There are numerous prerequisite classes, listed in the above example, most of which Harper was missing as their fourth semester was about to begin. I listed them out for the student; there were at least four required classes missing along with the world language requirement (which the student would also need if they remained in the College of Arts & Sciences). The language requirement is one my school typically likes students to complete before the start of the third year and one in which this student still needed two more classes. The business school also requires these classes. Harper's GPA was also well below that of students typically admitted but I did not mention this as there can always be exceptions.

I asked that Harper meet with an advisor in the business school to find out whether they would be eligible to apply and that they then come back to see me. We set up a time for the same week—an appointment that the student missed. That evening, I received an email from one of Harper's parents which copied the student too. The parent said they had several academic concerns, all of which Harper could easily have brought to me.

The parent told me that Harper did not want to take all

the prerequisite classes together (nor should they; nor did I advise them to do so). The parent laid out a different plan, one which would not work for the student, and then asked a few very detailed questions about requirements—also all questions Harper should and could ask me. I responded to the student and copied the parent. I provided a detailed summary of our meeting and of what the student would need to do to be able to apply to the business school. I received no response.

This was a simple matter. No one was at risk, no one was sick. The student knew me and knew how to contact me and yet never did. If a 20-year-old adult college student cannot address these concerns, how will they function after college? Had the parent always done everything else for this student? In defense of some of our students, I know that some are mortified when they find out that a parent or guardian has called me. They are embarrassed and sometimes angry. I understand. I had the opposite problem, but I would certainly have been horrified if my parents ever called a professor, advisor, or academic dean.

Angel

Here, almost verbatim, is an email from a parent. A few details were changed to preserve anonymity.

Dear School Official,

I am inquiring about major/minors appropriate for my child who intends to apply to UVA for the upcoming fall semester. We plan to do a visit in person (from

Ohio) in July and we need some guidance for which major/tour would be best for Angel to get a full picture.

Angel is interested in medical fields, veterinary science, and forensics, mainly.

Thank you for your help.

-The Parent

Again, where to start? We get many, many emails like this one on a regular basis. The questions may be different, but the tone is the same and it is the parent writing. This message is a good example of what is problematic. Some parts of this message are okay—a family planning a trip and a parent trying to line up tours. But the use of “we” is what always troubles me. For example, “We need some guidance...” And the interests of the student are already laid out and defined. The student may not change their mind. Like me, this student might be part of the approximately 20% of students who do not decide to change majors, but they are in the minority (more on this in the next chapter). Most importantly, why was Angel unable to write the letter—even with some coaching from their parent? “You do it,” the parent could have said. “I’ll help you to be sure you have a professional tone. Then you will know what to do next time.”

Intervening (and Not Intervening) in Probations and/or Suspensions

Alex (and their parent)

Alex started college as a new student out of high school (not a transfer student) in fall 2022. Like all our students, Alex selected their own classes and, like all our students, they were informed of the relevant deadlines around schedule changes (when and how to drop, add, swap, and withdraw from classes). Alex was also told to carry a full load of classes (15 to 16 credits) in the first semester in case they needed to withdraw from a class later in the term. Nearing the end of the semester, Alex was failing two classes. I do not know whether Alex did not know they were failing, or they knew and decided not to withdraw because they would then only carry 14 credits. Alex was also a student athlete and therefore could not fall below 12 credits as this would have resulted in a loss of athletic eligibility.²⁹ At the end of the semester, Alex was placed on academic probation.

While I am sure Alex was disappointed, the student dutifully met with their academic dean at the start of the next term and was ready to move on. The parent was not. The parent emailed the Dean of Students to ask what could be done to remove Alex's academic probation and the failing grades and that message was forwarded to me. The parent's email said something along the lines of:

“Who can I speak to next about this? Why is there is such a hard stand to say there is nothing that can be done. There is always something that can be done and

this needs to be fixed. Surely you have a way for parents to address these types of issues and a grievance process associated with it.”

I found it curious that this parent believed they should have a platform for a grade appeal, but it did not surprise me. My response was short and simple—I have learned less is more and my response was something like this:

“UVA does not alter transcripts to remove grades or for any other reason. I know this is disappointing to hear but this decision is final. I understand Alex met with their academic dean and I would urge you to encourage them to continue to do so. Alex’s dean can help with course selection, major advice, and refer them out to other resources as needed. Thank you.”

Was this the end? No. It resulted in an email from the parent to the Provost and the President, with three different responses explaining that we do not remove, replace, or change grades after they have posted. The parent replied with comments such as,

“I demand immediately an understanding of your appeal process. Stop saying it’s final when I know it’s not. I am not sure what has been done in the past, but the stress this first semester has caused has been challenging and was completely avoidable. I want Alex’s failing grades removed immediately or you need to let my child take summer classes to replace the grades that are Fs.³⁰ Alex doesn’t even need these classes for anything and they were too advanced for a new student!”

Yes, the parent received the same response as before because there is no appeal process from a parent (or in this

case from a student) who is simply unhappy with a final grade. The classes that Alex failed were **not** too advanced; they included an introductory math and science class—both made up largely of new, first-year, first-semester students.

The parent continued to email the university asking for the policy (which was sent) with their final message saying just this:

“Since you are unable to resolve this for me, send me the contact information for the University’s legal team.”

This response stopped all communications since once someone says they plan to take legal action against the university we refer them to the University’s legal counsel. This case was unlikely to go anywhere, and we did not hear from the parent again.

Chris and Their Parents

Chris was placed on academic probation at the end of their third semester. Chris was vague in our meeting about what happened, saying it was mostly a lack of motivation as they had little interest in their classes. I asked the student to perhaps consider taking a semester off to get some focus, but they said no, the next term would be better. Chris thought they would like their classes better and that all would be fine. As with all students, I told Chris to check in with me every three to four weeks and sooner if they needed me for anything. Chris came in once, just a few weeks later, and said that everything was fine. I told them I was not convinced, but they assured me everything was okay.

At the end of the semester, Chris earned a second academic probation and was therefore subject to suspension. Like many students, this second probation seemed to have cured all the problems the student was having, and Chris told me multiple times that everything would be fine if they could just return to school. The parents agreed, arguing that the structure of school would help. My counterpoint that it had not done so for the past two terms went unheard. Chris needed time away and the request to return was not approved. Chris would have to sit out the year.

Absent any mitigating circumstances, and especially those that have not been resolved, the faculty at the university where I work tend to uphold academic suspensions. Students can appeal, but if they cannot clearly show us in writing and in a meeting, as best as they are able, that they are ready to tackle full-time study, we err on the side of caution, and the student sits out for a full academic year. During that time away, they hopefully tackle the problem or problems that led to the suspension.

I have never thought an academic suspension to be punitive. Based on the criteria at my school, academic suspension is a clear signal that something is not working for the student. Most of our students are suspended because of back-to-back academic probations. The first probation is the sign something is not working; we meet with the student and try to map out a recovery plan. The second probation means that the plan did not work, and time away is needed.

Our admissions office does a good job of admitting qualified students. With that assumption in place, all admitted students can be successful. But we know they are not. Sometimes it is because “life happens,” sometimes it is because they spend their time partying, and sometimes it

is because they need some time away to sort out whatever led to the suspension in the first place. I feel strongly that allowing a student who is not ready to return to come back early is unethical. A student returning early may be at risk of failing again, and that cost is high—emotionally and financially. School is not therapy. I have often heard parents say, “Just let them come back, the structure will be good.” But the structure of taking 15 credits at a top, competitive college (or at any school) is not a recovery plan. One can find structure in many places such as a job or by volunteering. Time off is what is needed.

Darcy and Their Parents

I met Darcy during my first few years in the job of an Assistant Dean. I met with Darcy frequently and it was always hard for me to read how they were doing. They never seemed happy and struggled academically. By the time I met them, they had completely switched programs/schools within my university three times, which is not easy to do, and had also changed their major multiple times. This left the student somewhat behind, but Darcy also had not found anything that truly sparked their interest. Darcy described life as being on a trampoline bouncing around from program to program and from one idea to the next. Art, pre-law, pre-health, sociology, etc.—Darcy was all over the place. Eventually the student was academically suspended.

When students are suspended, I tell them to take the time they need to figure out what was not working and to know that we will still be here when they return to complete their

degree. Anecdotally, I think that the majority return and they are successful when they do. This student was different. The family insisted that we allow Darcy to return, but they had no academic plan, no direction, and they were clearly not motivated to be in school. The suspension was not overturned, and Darcy left the university.

Unlike most of our students, this student never contacted me about returning. I felt bad when Darcy left, but I also knew they needed time away. Again, suspensions are not punitive; when a student is not ready to return, I feel strongly that it would be unethical to let them come back and fail again. But I did think about this student often and I wondered what happened to them.

Sometime before COVID hit, perhaps around 2018 or 2019, I returned to my office from a meeting, looked down the hall, and saw someone who looked vaguely familiar. It was about ten to fifteen years later, and it was Darcy.

The student walked toward me and said, “Do you remember me?”

“Yes,” I replied, “definitely. How are you?”

Darcy replied that all was good and said that they recalled that I had been tough on them, but in retrospect it was, they said, what was needed. Darcy had transferred to another school, completed an undergraduate degree, and gone on to professional school. Darcy was married with children and was a working professional; this former student was doing incredibly well.

In the end, though Darcy did not complete a degree at my school, the student did complete a degree and went on to earn a professional degree. This outcome is all that matters. And, in the end, Darcy also realized that they needed that time away and it helped. I cannot say what would have

happened had the family been successful in lobbying for an immediate return to school, but my guess is Darcy would have failed again and perhaps never finished because the student would have been demoralized. Darcy took the time needed, found a new way, and was (and is) thriving.

Sky and a Parent

The parent of a student called the Dean's office upset and angry that their child just found out they were short on credits from within our school to graduate. A technical point about our degree is that students need 120 credits to graduate. Of those 120 credits, 18 credits *may* come from another school at the university (e.g., nursing, architecture, etc.) and 102 *must* come from the College of Arts & Sciences. The parent said that their child had only just discovered that they had 25 credits from other schools, seven more than could count toward the degree, meaning graduating on time was at risk. It was clear, this parent said, that the university, the college, and the student's advisor had failed. And why, the parent asked, would the student system not send out alerts when this happened?

We tell our students from their first day at summer orientation that **they** are responsible for tracking their academic progress toward their degree. They have a tool with which they can do this that works well. There are numerous people they can go to when they have questions or concerns. In addition, our school registrar sends personal emails to students at various points late in their seventh semester and early in their eighth and final semester telling

them they may not graduate unless they clear up whatever problem is pending. None of us knew if Sky ever looked at this online tool or asked an advisor for assistance. In looking through the notes on this student, it was clear that there was another time that they did not follow policies and guidelines and had to forfeit credit earned.

The parent's intervention was not helping Sky who needed to sit down with an academic dean to map out a plan for graduation (which would be difficult but doable). The parent was not helping their child learn how to navigate the mistakes they made, learn from them, and move forward. The parent continued to write to the dean; the student never contacted us.

Micah

Micah was moving through their semesters in college, but not excelling. When I met with Micah, the student seemed unmotivated and disinterested. Micah was majoring in chemistry because they thought it was a “good major” that would result in a “good job.” I tried to dig deeper but Micah was unable to answer my questions. At the end of the spring term, Micah was placed on academic probation. Micah returned in the fall, not wanting to take time off and was again placed on probation which led to suspension (like the student described above).

Micah came to meet with me after the deadline to appeal a suspension had passed, so I braced for an uncomfortable and difficult meeting. But when we met, Micah acknowledged that they needed time away to refocus and figure out what

they were doing. They did not want to appeal because they now saw time away was what was needed.

Micah left for the year and stayed in touch. The student worked and volunteered and returned a year later. Micah switched to an English major, something they enjoyed and had been good at in high school. When April rolled around, Micah emailed me to say they were not doing well and had been struggling for a long time with anxiety and depression. They wanted to withdraw from the semester.

Withdrawing from a semester is always a hard decision. To the student, it usually feels like they are admitting defeat. There is also the tuition loss and parents must explain to friends and family why their child is back home as well as why they “dropped out of school”—language we never use. This feeling should not drive the decision, but sometimes it does. Parents also think school is structure, but as I said before, school is not the place to be when dealing with physical or mental health issues.

Micah did withdraw from the semester. In retrospect, the student may have returned from the academic suspension too quickly. While students and their families often feel like a year is too long, the collective wisdom from my office has been that it is the minimum amount of time needed for a student to refocus and regroup. Some students need more time, and I wish they would take it. I often find myself telling students “Take the time you need; we will still be here.”

The More Serious Problems

There are also students in college with what I can only call

“more serious” problems that are usually related to mental or physical health or to a traumatic event. This fact should not minimize the situations described above. The problems just described are all real—the issue is they are being handled by a third party and not the student.

Some students spend the entirety of their academic life in counseling, and some seek counseling along the way. Some make it by taking time off, some leave and do not return, and some succeed. At what cost I cannot say because college is hard enough for a healthy individual. When you factor in some of the problems I have seen students try to work through, I often do not know how they do it.

Mel

I met Mel in my first year as an academic dean and when they were in their second year of college. An incredibly bright and outgoing student, Mel had faced discrimination along the way which took its toll. Something happened in Mel’s third year of college, an event I will not describe to protect the student’s identity, that impacted them and their friends greatly. Mel was impacted the most by what happened, and the student began failing their classes. In the fall of their third year, they were placed on probation and, in the following spring, it became clear they were again not doing well.

Mel asked to meet with me, I knew this student quite well by this time, and they came in with coffee and a pastry for me.

“I am going to be suspended,” Mel said. “I’m failing all but one of my classes.”

I tried to talk Mel into withdrawing from the semester to protect their GPA and avoid suspension, but Mel wanted no part of that.

The student said they loved the one class they were doing well in and wanted to “stick it out” to prove to themselves that they could do it.

“I know I’ll be suspended then, and I know I need time away, but I need to finish this class,” Mel told me. Mel finished the term passing that one class and, as predicted, failing or earning low grades in the others. They were suspended, left school for home and a job.

We stayed in touch via email, and I was happy to hear Mel was doing well; I thought so highly of this student, and I had come to care about them a lot. After about five years, Mel said they wanted to return to complete their degree. Mel needed to earn some additional credits, which they did while working, and eventually came back for what was their last year. Mel was a different person—confident, strong, and self-assured. Mel had harmed their GPA by failing most of their classes in the term before they left so they were determined to return strong and finish in a year. Mel did just that and they did it while taking 19 credits each semester and earning just under a 4.00. I was astounded at what a different person this student was academically—they had been the ideal candidate for taking some time off.

Mel wanted to go to graduate school and asked me for letters of recommendation which I was thrilled to write. I took a great deal of time to explain that the student’s transcript told the story of two students—the one before suspension and the one after. The graduate program would be admitting the latter and they would be crazy not to take this student (I used slightly different wording in the formal

letter). Mel was accepted to several programs and went off to graduate school which they completed. Mel has had several successful jobs since then and we are still in touch after just over 30 years. This is the joy of my job.

Cameron

Cameron was a recruited athlete when they entered college. They had a difficult first year which would only get worse. This student too would eventually be suspended and would end up taking time off. It would take Cameron about 9 years to finish a degree, including time away and several part-time semesters.

Cameron had numerous issues they had to face in their life as well as what I called “fear of success” syndrome. Cameron always started strong, but at around the mid-point of the semester, just when it looked like they would be okay, they would stop going to class and stop turning in work. They would have to withdraw from some classes and would fail others. I constantly placed a hold on this student’s enrollment which forced them to meet with me.

Cameron once said “Why do I always have a hold? My friends don’t seem to.”

I replied, “Would you come meet with me if you didn’t?”

“No,” they said, “to be honest, probably not.”

“Thus, the hold,” I said. And we both smiled.

Cameron was also someone I met in my first few years in the job of academic dean and someone I am still in touch with today. Cameron was, and is, an amazing individual; interesting, funny, and smart. School was not always “their

thing.” This student had more job offers when they graduated than almost anyone I knew at the time and a relatively low GPA. The GPA just did not matter to employers, and I am sure Cameron “wowed” those who interviewed them. Cameron has had many successful jobs since college and has been active in their community as well. I am so happy and proud to know this student and to still be in touch.

Leslie

I met Leslie in their third year of college. A graduate student who knew the student well walked them over to my office and said, “This student needs help and I hope you can find them some.” Leslie told me that they were a victim of sexual abuse and had tried counseling, but was either dismissed and told “just be strong, you can do this” or “this situation is too complex for me to help you.” I must admit that I froze for a bit, unsure of what to do. I then picked up the phone and called a colleague in the counseling center. I explained the situation and begged her to see this student. At first, she said she could not take on anyone else because she already had a full case load, but I pleaded.

“Please just see this student once,” I said. “We need to help them; they have been passed around and passed off too many times.”

The counselor agreed and I made an appointment for Leslie for later that day.

The counselor called me back to say the student had faced some of the worst abuse she had heard and that she would make time to work with them. She did so for the rest of

Leslie's academic career. Leslie came to see me often and, as you would imagine, had highs and lows. Even the highs were somewhat low as this student was confronting so much pain in their life. At times Leslie was more high functioning than others, but they always managed to do well academically with extra time for assignments and incompletes. I always went to bat for Leslie.

One semester they came in and said, "I'm not doing well right now. I need to pick my spring classes, and I just can't do it. I can't make any decisions about anything right now and I can't face the technology."

I said, "Okay, we will do it together."

And we did. Leslie was grateful and when they graduated, on time, they wrote me a beautiful note. Leslie was so appreciative that someone finally cared.

Casey

I met Casey shortly after Tuesday, September 11, 2001, a day no one will forget. We all remember where we were when we heard the news that planes had crashed into the World Trade Center. I had just dropped my son off at his high school after a dentist appointment. That was at about 8:45 AM and by the time I pulled into my parking space at work, I heard the news. A plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. Like many people, I think, I assumed it must have been a small plane that went off course. I listened for a moment and then turned off the car and walked the short distance to my office. I entered the building and people were already talking about it, though none of us knew yet what had really happened. By the time

I gathered my papers, checked my mailbox, walked upstairs to my office, and turned on my computer, there was more information available.

Someone came by and said, “Log into CNN; it’s bad.”

I tried but could not get the page to load right away and when it finally did the horror of the north tower spewing smoke took up the screen. A few people, including a close colleague two doors down, came in to watch with me. When the second plane struck the south tower he said, “I have to leave; my daughter lives New York City.” I cannot imagine the terror he must have felt until he was able to connect with her.

The next day, Casey appeared in my office. Their parent was in the Pentagon when the plane hit, and they were killed. Casey came in to tell me they had to go home and was not sure if they could come back. I struggled to keep myself together, but their pain was so evident it was close to impossible.

“I am so very sorry,” I said, “What can I do?”

Casey said they did not know, they could not really speak.

So I said, “Go home. Do you need help making arrangements? Do you have a safe way to get to home?”

“Yes,” they replied, “a friend was going to drive them home.”

I contacted Casey’s instructors and told them to stay in touch and let me know what I could do. A week or so later Casey emailed saying that they really wanted to come back to school. Their family wanted them to finish their degree and they both agreed it was what the other parent would have wanted.

We stayed in touch off and on throughout that year. With help, support, counseling, and Casey’s strong will and determination, they made it through the semester and the

year and earned their degree. Casey also went on to graduate school.

Parker

Parker was a student athlete I had worked with for several years. A smart and dedicated student, they started struggling in their final year. It became clear to me that Parker was going to fail all their classes, and I was having a difficult time getting them to withdraw from the term. At the last minute, the student responded and withdrew.

Parker took some time off, returned and repeated the pattern, but this time, despite having what I felt was a good relationship with the student, they did not respond. Parker was suspended when they failed all their classes and “disappeared” for almost five years. I continued to try to reach them as they were very close to graduating.

I received no response until several years later when they contacted me to see if they could return.

“Yes,” I said, “you can. But you have used up all your full-time semesters [we limit our students to eight full time semesters], so you will need to finish by taking summer classes and as a part-time student with no more than six credits per term.”

They said that was fine, likely even best, and that they were ready.

When spring 2023 rolled around, Parker need three more classes and I helped them request one more full-time semester. The request was granted and they enrolled in their final three classes. Upon returning, they had done well

earning all As in the classes they took. But spring brought some health issues and Parker was struggling.

Parker reached out to the counselor they had worked with who contacted me and we developed a plan to help them finish. This was a student in distress who needed additional help. Though they were worried about passing two of their classes, they finished those three classes with an almost 4.00 grade point average! Parker graduated. Their counselor and I were so thrilled for them and so happy to see them at graduation.

Sometimes students need significantly more help, and we will always do what we can. But they must ask us—how else would we know?—and they must be willing to accept the help and follow our guidance.

Summary

Words of Wisdom

“Kids are resilient. It’s the parents who are fragile.”

–“Hardboiled,” NCIS Season 22, Episode 7.³¹

Having been at this job for just over 30 years I (unfortunately) have many more of these stories, but they are hard for me to tell and deeply personal for the students. You now also have

some insight into the kinds of issues the student should deal with and the more serious issues students confront while in college. Some come to college with these problems and some encounter tragedies along the way. This is not to say that the students in the first batch of examples do not have real and/or serious problems; they often do. The issue is the student is not trying to address the problem. What is also unique about these last few cases is that, in each one, the student managed the situation. There was no involvement from the parents. Each student worked hard, asked with help, dealt with trauma, and developed coping mechanisms to move forward.

Every situation is different. But I could not tell just the stories of parental interference where the student could have negotiated the issue and not acknowledge that sometimes really bad things can happen to other students. Those of us in higher education help students face these horrible things: rape, the death of family and friends, car accidents, murders, suicides, the consequences of natural disasters and wars, and serious illnesses.

The one rule I made for myself, which I have come close to breaking several times, is that I will not cry with or in front of a student, unless it is out of joy. I do not think my crying helps them and in fact it might do more harm than good. When students are struggling, they need someone to be there for them and be strong for them and not fall apart with them. That does not mean I do not emote compassion and empathy (or even get teary eyed); I just try so, so hard not to cry with them. I cry later. Sometimes I go home and just scream or go to the gym and do lots of sand ball slams or box. But I leverage all my willpower to stay strong for them as I hold their hand or hug them or just sit and listen.

Parents, my advice to you is simple: unless you think your child is in danger, “back off.” Luckily, life-threatening situations are rare. I wish I could say that at my parent talks, but I do not think it would translate well or correctly. Let your now 18- or 19-year-old drive their own life. Give them love, support, care, and advice **if** they ask for it, but it is time to sit back and watch. Be the cheerleader, not the coach.

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26 FERPA is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act; see <https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/ferpa> .

27 Glennon Doyle, *Untamed* (New York: Random House, Dial Press, 2020), 114.

28 In her book *How to Raise an Adult*, Julie Lythcott-Haims recalls the story of a Wall Street banker whose mother called his boss to say her son was being asked to work too much. She found the number online. Unknown is whether the son knew or not. The result was that when the son went in to work on Monday, he was greeted by security with a box of his belongings and a note that read “Ask your mother.”

29 NCAA rules state that a student must be full-time to compete in their sport (except for a very few exceptions). This rule typically requires carrying 12 credits each term (see <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2015/2/13/transfer-terms.aspx#:~:text=Full%20time%3A%20Typically%2C%20you%20are,credit%20hours%20in%20a%20term.>) Full-time at UVA is also defined as carrying 12 academic credits.

30 Some colleges have this policy, which is often called grade replacement or “repeat to forgive.” There is usually a cap on how many times a student can do this (e.g., for two or three classes). UVA does not have this policy. The transcript is an accurate reflection of the classes a student took and the grades they earned. UVA does not erase or replace grades.

31 NCIS, season 22, episode 7, “Hardboiled,” directed by José Clemente Hernandez, written by Donald P. Bellisario, Don McGill, and Andrew Bartels, featuring Sean Murray, Wilmer Valderrama, and Katrina Law, aired December 2, 2024, in broadcast syndication, CBS Studios. Cited quotation occurs at 39:04.

Chapter 6. Pandemic Ponderings & Reflections

Beginning in the middle of February 2020, many of us from various leadership teams across UVA attended countless meetings on what COVID would bring our way. How bad was it? How bad could it get? What did we need to do? A brief few weeks later, it became clear to me that we would do what other colleges and universities were starting to—we would send our students home for what was initially four weeks, then six weeks, then until the end of the term, then the end of summer, and eventually until the end of the summer 2021 term. We were in a global pandemic and we lacked leadership at the national level. While initially we all were sure we would be back by April 15, or May 1, 2020, at the latest, the return to in-person work (at least for a few days each week) did not occur until August 2021. I, like many others, was unsure what the “new normal” would be. And none of us can really know what the long-term impacts of social isolation and online learning will be.

Much of this chapter was written at the height of the pandemic and then revised. I therefore made the decision to switch to the past tense for most of this chapter as it was awkward to flip back and forth between past and present tense. Despite the use of the past tense, most of the first part of this chapter was written at the height of the pandemic.

The Beginning of the Pandemic

In my administrative office of approximately 28 assistant deans, lecturers, and staff, people began asking me:

We are not really closing down, right?

How will we do our jobs?

Will we keep our jobs? Take a pay cut?

What does this mean for us?

Our technical support person sent me an urgent message, saying, “It would be a good idea to ensure everybody’s laptop is VPN (Virtual Private Network) ready, and I need to get everyone set up on Teams and Zoom.” Teams and Zoom were not complete mysteries to me; I had attended several Zoom meetings recently for non-COVID related reasons, but I was not a regular user. I was familiar with Teams, but again, not a frequent user. Soon, our work lives (and most of our personal lives) would exist entirely via Teams, Zoom, FaceTime, email, phone, and text. On March 9, 2020, everyone in my office packed up their most-needed books and papers, as well as their plants and other personal items, and headed home. We assumed we would return to our offices in four to six weeks.

Like many people, I thought it would be nice to work from home for a few weeks. I thought I could sneak in a few house-related tasks and chores early in the morning or between meetings. No one knew yet how bad things would become. I was among those fortunate enough to head home to a nice, safe living space with reliable internet. I recognize how lucky I was (and am). Though I am an extrovert and love being with family and friends more than anything, I have never feared being alone. I can **always** find things to do. In addition, I was so busy for those three semesters, that I never felt

lonely. I never thought that I would work from home for three semesters and then be in only a few days a week for the next two terms.

My foolish idea of getting anything done, including grabbing a cup of coffee or food from my kitchen on some days, never happened. Life became a series of endless days of back-to-back meetings on Zoom and Teams as emails poured in, Teams dinged with chats, and texts came in continuously. However, I did remind myself daily (especially as things got harder) that I was healthy and would hope to stay that way, that my children were healthy, that I had a nice home, food, and a job. I could even see my children a bit as they were both within driving distance. I would eventually develop a routine of getting groceries, filling my car with gas, and completely quarantining for 14 days (except for walks with a friend, outside and masked) so I could visit my children for one day. I would drive straight to their home, visit, and drive straight back. Again, I knew I was very lucky. I also met friends outside, six feet apart, through much of the pandemic.

As a College Academic Dean and Professor who works daily with college-age students, I could not help but think back to my college years and wonder how different my college experience would have been if I had been forced out of my dorm room and back into my parents' house. I would have been scared, miserable, and horribly stressed. I would have felt completely isolated except for a landline phone. At that time, there was no internet, no smart phones, no Zoom, limited TV channels, no recording technology—just one land line phone to connect me to my friends. I would not have been able to swim, which has always kept me sane and balanced. I assume the semester would have been canceled

as there would have been no technology to allow for distance learning or online classes. I would likely have had to work for my father when his business reopened, and I do not know if I would ever have been able to escape that life and get back to college. Even worse, his salons would have closed for some period of time, which would have increased his level of anxiety, anger, and his fits of rage. Home would have been difficult for me as I know it was for others, especially so many women and children trapped in abusive situations. My life would have been so different. So, I reminded myself daily that, while Zoom fatigue was real, meeting with my office on Teams was not the same as in person, and “Zoom wine” was not the same as an in-person happy hour, I was incredibly grateful because I was able to work, and to work safely, from my home.

Our lives were (and will continue to be) permanently changed because of the COVID pandemic, but we will not know how for years. Will young children be able to catch up in school? Will their socialization skills lag or will they be okay? Will middle-school aged children be okay? While students in high school and college are better suited to do many things online, what about hands-on classes like science labs, music, dance, theater, and art? And what about their social connections? I have friends whose children were thriving because they are introverted and loved learning at home away from daily social pressures and bullying. I also have friends whose children were slowly “drowning,” so to speak, because of the social isolation.

Some people gained more quality family time; for others the abuse at home escalated. My own children, recently married, spent quality time with their newborn sons, while they jokingly worried that their children might only “bark” or

“meow” or that they would talk to people the way they talk to Alexa, shouting commands like “Alexa, shut the door!” or “Alexa, play music!” My friends whose parents were in the last years or even decade of their lives worried that their parents would not be able to enjoy their lives as before. They also wondered if and when they would see them again.

I also wondered what changes would remain. How would the workplace change? Education? Medicine? Travel? Would anything go back to the way it was before? Would people who lost their jobs get them back? It was just several months into the pandemic when some businesses went fully remote, the owners giving up their leases as they realized their employees could work remotely without paying rent for a physical space. There were so many questions with no answers.

And then there was the political chaos, the racial tensions, the social justice movements, the shootings of so many Black men and women, mass shootings, the 2020 election, the January 6 insurrection, and the loss of so many loved ones. On top of the pandemic, it was hard not to feel that we were (and I think still are) terribly broken as a country and that our democracy was (and is) at stake.

This chapter is about what I witnessed over the 20+ months of the pandemic. My observations fall into three main categories with several observations in each. The first set of observations centers on what many schools saw as a dramatic increase in cheating.¹ The second has to do with increases in parental intervention (while hard to believe it could increase, it did). As stated earlier, we are well past “Blackhawk parenting” and into the “snowplow” stage, and on our way to a stage not yet defined. A friend recently told me her colleague calls these parents “curling parents.”

Like snowplow parents, they are out in front rapidly and frantically clearing and modifying the path ahead. The third set of observations highlights the significant rise in people treating a college degree as a commodity. Finally, COVID had, and continues to have, a significant impact on student mental health which is discussed briefly in the summary and elsewhere in the book.

The Increase in Academic Cheating

As the pandemic extended on (and on) and students were learning remotely, certain departments at my university (primarily STEM programs) reported increases in cheating. This increase also happened at other schools.² As the number of sites offering “help” grew, so did the number of sites that provide online proctoring software. I will not “name names” here, especially since there are lawsuits pending against those who claim these sites do more harm than good. If you do a quick search, you will find the types of sites I am referring to.

Several departments at my college knew students were cheating, but we were at an impasse since no one could identify the individuals. Some website services were emailing out URLs and emails (which led nowhere since the email addresses were anonymous aliases). How the students were cheating was also hard to determine though faculty imagined it included working with others, looking up answers, using various sites to compute the answers, etc. The faculty were torn between wanting to stop cheating by insisting every student keep their camera on and knowing that many

students did not want to turn on their cameras since they did not want others to see themselves or their surroundings.

Students were pushing back against online proctoring software saying it was intrusive, embarrassing, and/or humiliating and that it violated their right to privacy. Some students filed lawsuits. In January 2021, for example, a student filed a lawsuit against Northwestern University “for violating an Illinois law on biometric information privacy.”³ The suit argued that Northwestern collects and then owns the biometric data collected by the online proctoring software used and does not give the student a choice on if it can be collected and how it can be used. Another lawsuit was filed against DePaul University in March 2021.⁴ This lawsuit states that a 2008 Illinois privacy law was designed to “protect against invasion of privacy, identity theft and other economic injuries...”⁵ The suit claimed that, like Northwestern, DePaul violated the state’s Biometric Information Privacy Act because it did not ask for consent before collecting and storing student data.

Was there really an increase in cheating, or did we just not know how frequently it was happening before? If cheating did increase, why? Was it stress? Was it easier to cheat in an online class?

The reasons for cheating are many and somewhat obvious, at least to those of us in education. They include, but are not limited to:

- Pressure to earn excellent grades
- Fear of parental retribution for poor grades
- Misbelief that all As gets you a better job
- Lack of time management skills
- Lack of organization to study
- Poor study habits

Fear of failure

Poor planning

Boredom

Opportunity

Cheating irks the faculty who are trying to teach and who want the focus to be on learning and not test scores. Yet, we seem unable to move away from testing and grades.⁶ At UVA, we have had conversations about what eliminating grades in the first year would look like and about “grade forgiveness” policies. While traditional grading persists at most colleges, some are trying alternatives such as “ungrading.”⁷

Parental Overstep: The Next Level

My experiences, and those of my colleagues, was that parental interference reached a whole new level beyond “snowplow parenting” during the pandemic. Parents sat in the background of classes, listened in on phone meetings, and they sat in on Zoom calls. What comes after helicopter parent, Blackhawk parent, and snowplow parent? What are their children called?

According to Julie Lythcott-Haims,⁸ millennials in the workplace have a few names and these names work for college as well. There are “orchids” (because they can’t survive outside a greenhouse) or “teacups” (because they chip easily and are therefore ruined). Lythcott-Haims says that educator Joe Maruszczak calls them “veal” because they are raised in a controlled environment and led to metaphorical slaughter;⁹ they cannot cope on their own without parental involvement.

Below are a few examples of the kinds of “issues” that were brought to me and to my office during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are many more I could tell; I selected those examples that best represent the kinds of situations that cropped up, that illustrate how much worse behavior became during COVID, and that are different from the examples in Chapter 5. Though in the same genre as the examples presented in Chapter 5, these situations are somewhat different because they occurred under the stress of the global pandemic. Again, I cannot say for certain that COVID was the cause of these somewhat extreme cases of interference; it is possible that COVID only brought to light what was already happening.

You’re Wrong About Everything

At around 8:30 one evening as I was trying desperately to walk away from my computer, I received a new email message. In the world of overbearing parents, this message may have won a prize for the longest and most dramatic email. The email was an incredibly long rant filled with details criticizing an instructor, their method of teaching, their content, their exam (with detailed responses to several of the questions from the exam), their textbook, and the entire academic department. I cut and pasted it into a Word document—it was five pages long, single spaced. I read it twice. With a level of detail about their child’s class, the syllabus, and an exam that no parent needs, this parent picked apart everything while completely missing the concept of academic and intellectual freedom. They

presented questions from a recent test along with their own reasons and rationale for why these questions were phrased incorrectly and neglected key concepts from the course. They also included statements on why their child's answers to these questions were correct (though the instructor said they were not). Because of the level of detail in the email, I cannot share the best examples from the letter and still maintain anonymity. Here is one of the more generic comments that was included, referring to a question on the exam:

“This is a good question in terms of it referring to a particular ‘principle’ or theory so that the student knows the perspective of the intended response, but why is the order important? In any case, my [child] claims to have stated them in the proper order, and the TA¹⁰ did not explain any error, neither did [the professor] upon appeal.”

Imagine five pages of comments like this but with much more specific detail.

In my almost 30 years of working in the Dean's office, I had never seen a letter like this. All I could think, as I usually do, was that this could not be healthy for the child. How will this roughly 20-year-old person ever navigate their life? At the same time, I also wondered if the student even knew the parent had written the email.

In the end, nothing changed. The student had already appealed their grade to the instructor and their incorrect answers were explained to them. Parents cannot submit appeals of any kind for their child. The department chair wrote a response attempting to explain academic freedom

and the student's right to appeal. At some point, we all had to stop responding and the grade stood as posted.

My Mistake is Your Fault

For almost two months, the university addressed a complaint by a parent whose child missed a key deadline. This deadline was well advertised, the school sent reminders about it through email and texts, and almost 500 other students accomplished the task. However, this student never contacted an advisor or dean, and their parent went to an external web source (i.e., not a University-sponsored website) for information. In addition, the error was a bit costly financially.

When I heard the family's name, it was familiar to me. This same parent-child duo complained to the Dean's office four years earlier over another issue and a smaller amount of money. It reminded me that I had spent almost 30 minutes on the phone with the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences on Mother's Day four years earlier, while I was with my children and their significant others on a trip to Philadelphia, trying to sort out what this parent wanted.

The first time, the university ended up accommodating this parent and returning a small amount of money to them, money to which they were not entitled. They were not successful the second time around nor should they have been; **they** made the mistake. I can also add that this was not a family who was financially stressed.

“We” Can’t Figure This Out

Anecdotally, the number of emails using “we” certainly increased during COVID. In early June 2021, an email came in from the parent of a new transfer student—a student who had some college background regardless of whether they lived at home, in a dorm, or in an apartment.

Paraphrasing for anonymity, the start of the email went as follows:

We created a checklist based on the links you sent us (inserted below just as an FYI, no need to read). My child is working through them while awaiting the email about enrollment. We were hoping to watch these two webinars, but the links are invalid.

Below this was a lengthy list of the to-do items we sent to students, all color coded with various statuses and no doubt completed by the parent.

How will this young person succeed when they arrive on campus? Will their parent be keeping an assignment to-do list? Will they call multiple times a day to check in on their child? There is no scenario in which I see this as helpful and again, the message it sends to the student is, “I am doing this for you because you are not capable.”

How do I respond to these messages? I have learned that the response needs at least two things: (1) a sincere and empathetic acknowledgement of the problem and the stress it may be causing; and (2) a short answer that is direct and to the point. Here, again, I discovered that “less is always more.” I typically write directly to the student, copy the parent (or parents or guardians) who wrote, and offer our assistance to the student. FERPA prevents us from sharing information

with a parent or guardian without the child confirming it is okay, but, more importantly, the student needs to take responsibility for their education. We rarely get responses back from anyone, parent or child. We did not get a response back in this case either.

Call the President!

It never ceases to amaze me how many times a parent asks a question, receives an answer they do not like, and then immediately sends an email complaining to the President of the University. Most of the time, the complaint is over something very trivial. Here is one example.

In 2021, my school, the College of Arts & Sciences, was in the process of implementing its first general education reform in just over 40 years. We had a three-year plan to scale up such that, after that time, all new students would enroll in a series of amazing classes we call “The Engagements.” As we scaled up the curriculum, we created two “pathways”—some students enrolled in the four 2-credit classes, and some took other classes. A parent wanted his child “out of these useless 2-credit classes.” The request was made to us, but it came in too late (we had a short window in which **students** were able request a change), so it was denied. The parent went right to the President. I am grateful that in my time as Associate Dean, the President’s office always backed us up. None of our decisions are ever made lightly; they are always made with much thought and after many conversations. We always strive to be fair to all students.

The same was true in this case; we again responded to the student that it was too late to change pathways.

“I’m a Lawyer”

This is my absolute favorite line from a parent or guardian and the number of calls we received from parents who said they are lawyers increased during the pandemic. The call typically starts with something like, “I’m Mrs. Smith, Donna’s mother, and I am a lawyer. I’m calling about [fill in the blank]. This is a problem and I want it fixed.”

Three things always enter my mind. First, I wish I had a law degree so I could say “Really? So am I! Where did you go to law school?” I often think about finding a law school that would award me an honorary degree just so I can say this (not really, but you get the idea). Second, since I do not have an honorary degree, I wish I could respond, “Interesting, I’m Rachel, I’m an archaeologist.” And my third thought is that I have **never** started a conversation with “Hello, I’m Rachel and I’m an archaeologist with a Ph.D. in anthropology,” so you can guess why someone is saying they are a lawyer from the start.

My response, however, is typically something like “Thank you for calling, but if you are calling me as a lawyer, I need to end this conversation and direct you to the University’s Legal Counsel.”

The response is always, “Oh no, I’m just calling as Donna’s mother.”

The call that came in during July 2021 was from a parent, who started by saying they were a lawyer, and who claimed that between them, their spouse, their siblings, and their

several children, they had over 130 years of higher education experience and thus knew a lot more than we did. They went on to complain about something quite simple and something the student should and could have been handling. Since we had the parent's name, we looked them up to find they **hadbeen** a lawyer, but had been disbarred. We asked that the student call us with their questions; they never did.

“We” Want to Enroll in a Class

The following message was sent to the College of Arts & Science's email address in June 2021; the class and names have been changed to protect the identity of the sender.

Hi,

We are interested in enrolling a first-year student into ANTH 1010. The web site says to add this class for enrollment, but we get an error message.

Please advise.

Thank you,

Sam Doe

I wanted to respond saying how wonderful it was that the parent and child were both enrolling in the same class and could take some classes together. But, I also wanted to keep my job. So, my response to the parent was that their **child** needed to manage this, and that they could enroll in the class when it was their time to do so and if there was space. I must again ask how these young people are ever going to learn how to navigate the world with this level of interference during college.

What Class Should We Take?

I have no doubt that COVID increased the degree and intensity of parental intervention. Similar to the message above, this email also came in during the summer of 2021; the name and class have been changed to protect the identity of the sender. The conversation with the student's parent went back and forth several times; the student never responded.

Parental Message

First Message from Parent: "Good afternoon, My child is a rising first year, and we are confused about math requirements in the College. They think they scored a 4 or 5 on their AP Calculus AB exam. Do they need to take any additional math courses in the college?—Parent"

First Response from School: "Please tell your child to review the modules and materials emailed to them and to check the website on academic requirements. If they still have questions, they can email us or log into one of the advising workshops. They should also register for one of our webinars which start on Monday."

Second Message from Parent: "I already reviewed the modules and all of the materials emailed to my child with them, and we still have questions which is why I sent the email. I would appreciate an answer. Thank you, Parent"

Following this initial exchange, the parent wrote five more

times demanding answers and eventually responded in all capital letters with something like: “JUST ANSWER MY QUESTIONS!”

Why was this student unable to write an email to ask their own questions? How did we get to this place and why does it make **me** so frustrated? My frustration is more concern for these young people than anything else. I do not see how this helps the student and I do not know where it will lead. And I will again stress that when a parent does everything for their child, it sends the same message to them repeatedly—I am doing this for you because you are not capable of taking care of it yourself. Though we all wish it simply meant, “I just want to help you,” that is not the message the child receives.

The Commodification of Education (Take II)

This is a complex topic and, as I said earlier, one I cannot fully or sufficiently address in this book. I introduced the topic in Chapter 4, but I bring it up again here because the pandemic seemed, to me, to increase the idea of purchasing your education, degree, and diploma—of getting “your money’s worth.”

As colleges and universities across the country began to move all their classes online in March 2020, parents and students began demanding tuition refunds, accommodations, different grading options, late schedule changes, late grade changes, the deletion of failing grades, etc. On March 6, 2020, *The New York Times* published the

article, “First U.S. Colleges Close Classrooms as Virus Spreads. More Could Follow.”¹¹ The article describes how the University of Washington moved its 50,000 students to online classes. Study abroad programs shut down and sent students home. Other programs were cancelled immediately because of their late start dates and some moved online. For many students, there would be no returning to college campuses after spring break.¹² The hope was that the situation would improve by the summer, but the online spring term rolled into online summer, fall 2020, and spring 2021.

“Online classes” and “online teaching” can mean many different things. There is certainly a huge difference between a very engaging seminar taught by a stellar faculty member and an asynchronous class in which the students watch recorded lectures, read posted materials, and submit assignments online. That said, even the latter can be done well and be an engaging class.

In spring 2020, the term was already well underway so, when we switched to remote learning, our students knew each other and they knew their instructors. There was a level of trust and engagement already established. In summer and fall 2020, and spring and summer 2021, that trust had to be created from scratch and built online. Some classes, like science labs, sculpture, dance, drawing, etc. were difficult or impossible to offer in an online format. Some were cancelled and some received permission to meet in person (with a smaller class size and social distancing). Some classes became better, some stayed the same, and some likely became worse. My own class, which I team taught with a wonderful colleague, moved seamlessly to Zoom. We were in the phase of the class where students were presenting

their research projects so they could do that on Zoom, and we used the chat for the class to enter comments. We also used the “raise hand” function to keep track of who wanted to speak in class. While it was not the same, and we missed seeing them in person, it worked well.

Our most creative faculty made full use of Teams and Zoom with breakout rooms, whiteboard work, polling tools, etc. Inviting guest speakers became easier and, in many cases, free. Suddenly language classes could use Zoom to invite native speakers to talk with the class. Advanced seminars could bring in a range of people who were at the top of their fields to talk for 30, 60, or 90 minutes. The students became more comfortable in breakout room conversations. One of our anthropology faculty, Ira Bashkow, converted his lectures to podcasts and the students loved it.¹³ People got creative and good things resulted. However, there were still many families demanding tuition refunds, tuition reductions, and so on.

What is frustrating for many of us in higher education is that we know an online class that is developed and taught well will likely cost much more than delivering that same class in person. No one wanted to hear this response. Converting a class to an online format in one week was incredibly difficult, and there were some classes that no doubt delivered a lesser experience. And again, some labs, and drama, art, and music classes were cancelled because they could not be taught online.

In the end, while UVA did not refund or decrease tuition, they did something else. We offer a winter session, which we call January Term. It is a term in which students can take one three-credit class. Before COVID, several of these classes were study abroad classes leaving just after Christmas

and returning a few days before the spring semester. That allowed for an abroad experience just over three weeks (not the same as a semester or a year, but still valuable). We also offered many classes on campus designed for this intensive format where classes met for four to five hours each day for eight to ten days. The university announced in fall 2020 that students who paid full time tuition that fall could take a winter session class in 2021 at no cost; those who paid full-time tuition in spring were eligible for a free class in our first summer session. All classes would be online and there would be no study abroad classes. Because we expected high enrollments, the university sent out a call for Faculty to create what they called Signature Classes. These classes would enroll 400 to 800 students with graduate students leading discussion sections of 30 students each. My colleague and I submitted a proposal which was accepted.

From the day we found out it was accepted in October 2020, we began preparing the class. We consulted with our Center for Teaching Excellence and the Learning Design & Technology groups for advice. We learned about specifications grading¹⁴ and decided to implement it. In the end, our class enrolled 440 undergraduate students, and we were assigned 17 graduate student teaching assistants and a head teaching assistant.

It was a wonderful and unusual experience. We wanted the class to be engaging, but we also needed to deliver content. We designed a structured format for each class, delivered over 10 days in two-hour sessions each day. Each session began with a 30- to 40-minute lecture for the entire class, followed by 50 minutes in breakout rooms with 18 students per group, each led by a teaching assistant (TA). The final 30 minutes were dedicated to completing a live, synchronous

online assignment. We met with the TAs before and after each class to answer questions and make adjustments as needed. We dealt with the January 6 attack on the capital, staying on Zoom long after the class ended with our graduate students to help them (and ourselves) try to process what was happening and granted all our students extra time to complete their work. Coincidentally, it was the day I was lecturing about the collapse of prehistoric civilizations.

My colleague and I loved the experience, but were terrified to see our course evaluations. Did the students feel like they had engaged with us at all? Some came to our virtual office hours, but we did not get to meet the majority of students. We both had far less student contact than any prior class we taught. I did get to know a few students well, but not as many as I would have normally. Fortunately, the comments were positive. For example:

“This was one of the most interesting and engaging courses I have taken and if this course is available for future J-terms and taught by the same professors, I would highly recommend anyone to take it.”

The point is that online classes can be material thrown online quickly or they can be wonderful and engaging—the latter takes a lot of time, hard work, and money. Convincing parents of this difference was close to impossible.

I also must acknowledge that much of the college learning and social experience takes place outside of the classroom and that part of the experience did not exist during the pandemic. Though some clubs met online to stay in touch, these meetings could not replicate the in-person experience. Many students went part-time, and many took a leave of absence. I understood the reasons for those decisions. For those who stayed, many experienced some wonderful

(though different) online, synchronous classroom experiences.

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and worsened problems already present in higher education. From accessibility and cost, to reliable internet, safe spaces to work, student privacy, housing and food insecurity, everything became more difficult for students, staff, and faculty.

Neuwirth et al. discuss the future of higher education in their 2020 article, “Reimagining higher education during and post-COVID-19: Challenges and opportunities.”¹⁵ They describe the many changes underway, issues around diversity, resource inequalities, and the issues concerning online education. For example, while many colleges poured resources into helping their faculty transition to online courses, often little help and guidance was directed to helping students figure out how to **learn** in the new virtual environment. Some classes were not all that different—one could argue a large lecture is a large lecture no matter whether it is online or in person. However, it is much harder to sleep in a large lecture hall than online. I know that during our winter session class we had students log into our class, mute their audio and video, and likely go back to sleep. When we moved students to discussion sections, there were always two to four students who were logged in, but not responsive to our verbal request to move. We would place these students in the waiting room, which meant they had to re-join the meeting and almost all would say, “So sorry, my internet

froze.” While for a few students this may have been the truth, for the students who were not doing well, we knew that was likely not the case.

At my university, I saw the ongoing consequences of the policy changes we made to ease the burden on students—no probations, no suspensions, a lack of enforcement of “academic holds” that typically required a meeting with a dean to talk about an academic plan, and three semesters of the credit/no credit option for all classes, including requirements. For example, there was a student whom I will call Dylan who completed the fall 2019 term on academic probation. For the next three terms, Dylan took almost all their classes as credit/no credit¹⁶ and passed six credits in three terms, instead of what would normally have been 45 credits pre-COVID. In the fall of 2021, when we returned to normal policies, Dylan earned two Ds and three Fs and was academically suspended. By then, the student had used seven of their allotted eight full time semesters; while they should have earned around 105 credits, Dylan had just 63 credits. The student lost their financial aid and had little to no chance of ever earning a UVA degree. The hole that the student dug was so deep, I saw no way for them to climb out. While Dylan’s was an extreme case, there were other students in similar situations—so low on hours that they could not earn a degree and/or loss of financial aid.

While I said multiple times to several people that we will pay the price for all these leniencies, I do not know what else we could have done. Some students were able to sit out their one-year suspension and come back. Others had to take what credit they earned and try to complete a degree elsewhere. While some higher education professionals argued that we needed to continue to let things slide, I agree

with the following words by Johnathan Malesic in his *The New York Times* opinion piece, “My College Students are Not OK.”¹⁷

*“Higher education is now at a turning point. The accommodations for the pandemic can either end or be made permanent. The task won’t be easy, but universities need to help students rebuild their ability to learn. And to do that, everyone involved—students, faculties, administrators and the public at large—must insist on in-person classes and high expectations for fall 2022 and beyond.”*¹⁸

If we are ever going to get back to something close to pre-COVID standards, we must start somewhere and there is likely no time like the present. Malesic also talks about the experiences of several faculty members, specifically what it is like to teach to little circles with initials. He mentions a Spanish instructor who “began calling her students her ‘divine little silent circles’... because she would typically see only their initials in a circle on her computer screen, none of them speaking.”¹⁹ This behavior may be okay in a large lecture; in my large online signature class, I could not see more than a few students at a time anyway. However, in a smaller class of, say, less than 30 students, I encouraged and pleaded with students to keep their video on when they could. I wanted to see them, I wanted them to see me and each other, and I wanted to know if they were engaged. Most of the administration agreed that we could not require students to keep their video on. Some students were in housing conditions they did not want anyone else to see. Some were in cars, libraries, bathrooms or any quiet place where they could find internet access. Though we were able

to purchase “hot spots” for many students and faculty, those devices are not perfect and anyone without reliable internet struggled.

It goes without saying that the years since March 2020 have been difficult and challenging (and that is an understatement). It is my strong hope that higher education will recover and be stronger and better than it was before. There is a great deal of work to do to get there. In the next chapter, I provide some advice for how I think students can best succeed in college.

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Chapter 7. Essential Strategies for Success in College

Introduction

Some children grow up experiencing little to no failure and without realizing that not everyone is a winner. They therefore have little to no sense that you can (and should) learn from your mistakes because they have not experienced many. In these cases, everything has been done for them to ensure they always succeed and never fail at anything. They are known as “snowplow children” or members of the “trophy generation.” According to Wikipedia,¹ one of the first references to the participation trophy was on February 8, 1922, in *The Evening Independent*, an Ohio newspaper. The article mentions that trophies went to many participants, not only to the winners.

Many debate the pros and cons of the practice of giving every player a trophy at the end of the season. A pro is that no child feels left out; a con is that the trophy could be meaningless since every child received one. More importantly, when a child always wins, they do not get the chance to figure out what they are truly good at doing.²

It is hard to know where the line is for these situations. It is hard, even painful, to watch three out of 12 five-year-old

children get a prize while the others get nothing, especially when your child is in that population of nine. Does a reward help very young children, say under seven or eight, become motivated? If so, then where is the line between more harm than good? Most importantly, at least for this context, how does it play out into adulthood, when young adults begin to fail at small and large things? This concern is especially dismaying when young adults have no idea at all what they are good at doing because they have been told they are good at everything. An A- is a “disaster,” not getting into a club “ruins their life,” and/or not becoming president of a club translates to, “I will never amount to anything or get a job.”

Children are smart enough to know who is good, better, and best—just ask them. They are smart enough to know that yes, while they were on the team that won, they mostly warmed the bench. As Gwenna Laithland wrote in 2019:³

“Would you like to know the secret my trophy generation has kept quiet all these years?

We knew.

We all knew. The ruse of awards for merely showing up was pretty transparent. Participation trophies weren’t some grand, global hoax that we all fell for. You can stop twisting your mustaches now.”

Laithland goes on to say that some children likely celebrated and felt part of something, maybe part of something for the first time, but most could tell the difference between winning and losing even at a young age. I think there is a fine line here between children feeling included and valued and handing out awards to everyone.

We learn from our failures and losses. Despite the pain at the moment, we learn when we struggle and then we work

to move forward. We can determine where our strengths and weaknesses are and how to improve on those weaknesses, if we choose to do so. We learn to fight back when someone tells us we are not good at something; we know that we can be better, and we want to persist and improve. Or, we learn to walk away having learned from the experience. While grit is essential, at some point, we may need to realize that something we are trying repeatedly is not in our skill set. Failure hurts and stings for the child experiencing it and for the parent watching. However, it creates resilience and strength in a young person; it helps us learn what we are good at and what we enjoy when we are young.

I have a still clear memory of being somewhere between five and seven years old when my parents arranged for me to take piano lessons. I have no idea why. Neither of my parents played an instrument and I do not recall asking for the lessons. If I had, I doubt they would have complied. They bought a piano and sent me off to a friend of a friend's house a few blocks away. I did not like the lessons or practicing, and I was not very good (I am pretty sure I am as close to tone deaf as one can be; though I can hear the difference in notes, I can't replicate them). Nevertheless, I practiced as best as I could and I dutifully went to my lessons. I had my first recital and I was terrified because I knew I was not very good. I clearly remember my mother picking me up one day and the teacher saying something like, "I think you're wasting your money; she doesn't have a good ear and she's not very good at playing." Clearly, as I still remember it decades later, it stung, but it also confirmed what I knew, and it gave me an out. No one gave me a trophy, no one ever said, "you're so good at piano." It did, I think, teach me to focus on something

else I loved and was pretty good at doing (swimming), and I think those two things often go together.

Search the internet for inspirational quotes on life's challenges and struggles and you will find an endless supply of them.⁴ It seems, however, that this advice often goes unfollowed. What follows below is some of my best advice based on my years of working in higher education, my personal experiences, and information and advice learned from colleagues and at conferences. While much of this book has been geared toward parents or guardians, this chapter is aimed at students. So, if you are about to head off to college, I hope some (or all) of this advice will work for you. And if you are a parent or guardian, please read, share, discuss, and then... back off.

Embracing Independence

It is time. It is time to grow up a bit and be your own person. You need to own your college experience. You need to make new friends (and keep the old), discover new ideas and passions, and find what you want to study academically. If you are being pushed to go to medical school or law school, for example, and you do not want to follow that path, you need to find your voice and speak up. If you do not know how, you may want to consult with a counselor on how to begin the discussion.

Finding and following your own path does not mean that you do not love and respect your family. Taking control of your college experience means taking the classes that **you** want to take and declaring the major that **you** want to study.

It also means finding “**your** people” in the new college environment. Those new friends may come from an orientation session, an introductory class, a club, or from a major requirement course. New students (whether entering from high school or as transfer students) may have to work a little harder, but I believe forging new connections can happen for everyone who tries.

For some students, they may find that their “dream school” is not the fit they thought it would be. Some students start off close to home and realize they want to be further away; some students go far away and realize they want to be closer to home. Some think they want to study a certain topic and then get to their new school to realize it is not offered, or not offered in the way they want. I have met many students who want to study something at my school, which is not offered. Do your research for the schools that you apply to!⁵

Follow Your Instincts (If They Are Good)

Trusting my instincts has generally worked well for me, but I hesitate to recommend it as universal advice, particularly for anyone under 25, as their brain is still developing. I believe that gaining life experience—through wins and losses, successes and disappointments—is essential for learning to trust your instincts and make confident decisions as you navigate life. When instincts are well-developed, they should (in most cases) provide reliable guidance. But how does someone develop strong instincts if most of their decisions have been made for them? How does one reach that point?

And what exactly are instincts? Are they innate to humans, or are they entirely shaped by experience and learning?

If you search for a definition, you will get entries like “a natural or inherent aptitude, impulse, or capacity.”⁶ While I believe we may have some instincts, like a baby’s instinct to grip things, I am talking here about instincts in social situations. Humans are an advanced species and, as an anthropologist, I believe that our knowledge is *learned*, not *inherited*. If that is the case, do we and can we have instincts about how to make decisions? Read up on the topic and you will find a range of information, much of which I do not agree with.

Because I was trained as an anthropologist, I know and value the power of culture. We are the products of the environment we grow up in; we are not hard coded for much. I know biologists, psychobiologists, and others disagree, but my discipline has shown me multiple times how we reflect the culture in which we were raised. What we know and how we act is **learned**. Take a child at the moment of birth born in Philadelphia and immediately transport her to Shanghai. This child will grow up speaking fluent Chinese and have a very different set of values, cultural norms, and beliefs than she would have had she remained in Philadelphia. The same is true if you reverse that scenario. This situation is essentially the nature vs. nurture debate and there are strong opinions on both sides.

I believe our instincts are based on situations we experience and learn from over the course of our lives. The older you are, the more experiences you have and thus, *perhaps*, the better your instincts. Sometimes they are that first feeling you have about something and sometimes they come after thinking and talking and thinking again. Either

way, those decisions are based on your accumulated, not biologically inherited, knowledge. If you have acquired knowledge from positive examples in your family or community, and learned from your own mistakes, then you are likely safe trusting your gut to make the right decision. And if not, you will learn from those subsequent mistakes.

If you have never had to make decisions or judge situations because it was always done for you, you will not have the instincts you want and need in life. It is not too late to start making your own decisions.

Have a Plan, but Be Willing to Ditch It

Going through college with no plan is not advisable, but going through college (and life) with blinders on that limit you to a single plan can be even more problematic. I often call this approach, “you can’t see the trees for the forest.” Many students enter UVA as “pre-something.” They are pre-law, pre-med, pre-business, or some combination of all of these. In other words, they are so focused on what is down the road after college, on the plan they made when they were 8, 10, or 15 years old, or on the plan that was defined for them, that they cannot see what is right in front of them. The forest is this future dream that they cannot articulate; and those trees are everything right in front of them—the wonderful classes, the faculty, the opportunities, etc. and they miss them.

A colleague told me she often plays the “why game” with her students when they seem to be set on a path that no longer interests them. If you have raised or been around a toddler, you know they ask an endless array of questions and

many of them start with “Why... ?” She uses this approach with her students. For example:

Student: I want to go to medical school.

Instructor: Why?

Student: I want to help people.

Instructor: Why?

Student: It’s a good thing to do and I want to help people.

Instructor: Why do you want to help people by being a doctor?

Student: [no answer]

While some students can answer questions like these, some cannot. They have not thought through the road they are on, perhaps because it is not their road. In this specific example, many students who self-identify as “pre-med” have not thought about the many ways they can help people through other professions or even why they want to help people. Students with a set plan believe that leaving the path they chose at a young age as a failure, rather than a success, when they find something else.

College should be about learning and exploration and, if you are fortunate enough to “see the trees”—to discover art, music, philosophy, or archaeology—then you are incredibly lucky and you are more likely to be successful. At the very least, you will enjoy your academic work.

Don’t Try to “Find Your Passion”

Finding your passion used to be the advice given by many advisors. While some of us may be lucky enough to do this,

for many of us it is hard to know what that might be, let alone what it means—especially if you are 18 to 22 years old. In a 2018 article for *Forbes* magazine entitled “‘Following Your Passion’ Is Dead – Here’s What To Replace It With”⁷, Michael Bohanes wrote:

“Finding your passion’ presupposes that interests and passions are fixed, rather than fluid and evolving as we age and gain wisdom and experience. Those who follow the fixed mindset are much more likely to give up when obstacles arise.”

Your passion might change over time, you may find a new passion, or you may have more than one. Ask yourself a series of questions, such as those below:

What areas do I excel in?

What do I like doing?

Do I want to spend my days with people or alone? Do I want a balance?

Do I like to write? Analyze data? Draw?

Do I want to supervise people?

Do I want a job I can leave at 5:00 PM or one that follows me home and takes up my time on nights and weekends?

Am I willing to travel and how often?

Do I want a job where I can move up easily or at all?

If Your Family Does Not Support You, Build a Second Family

I have met with students whose parents cut off funding or

support because they were not following the path the parents laid out for them. For example, they are not following their parents' wishes to attend medical school or law school, or they are not majoring in economics or computer science. Even more harshly, parents have cut them off because the student does not have a perfect 4.00 GPA. The student is on their own.

This was my experience; while I was fortunate that my parents did pay my tuition for my undergraduate education, I had little to no emotional support. I was someone who needed to build a second, more supportive family. I have been beyond fortunate over my lifetime to have wonderful friends and mentors who have always supported me through the many ups and downs I have faced. When I hit tough times, they were the people who were there for me. Different people at different times—some for decades.

I had a wonderful undergraduate instructor who I relied on for academic advice while I was in college. And as a graduate student, one faculty member more than anyone else, Dr. Sylvia Gaines, played a key role in my life and did so until she passed away in September 2020. She was my MA and Ph.D. advisor, and she also served the role of faculty instructor, mentor, colleague, dear friend, and mom. She was all those things to me (and to other students) and more.

If you are someone whose family is not supporting you, build a new family. It does not mean you disown your biological family or that you cannot still love them, if you choose to do so. If your old or current friends are not supportive, find friends who will support you. This choice also does not mean you have to ignore your older friends. It simply means they may not be your support network for college issues. This is okay.

Keep Your Mentors in Your Life

One of the common complaints of first-generation students is that their parents or guardians, though supportive, cannot help them with certain things because they do not understand the ins and outs of college life. A student once told me that his father was supportive of him attending college, but calling him to vent was not helpful. Having never attended college, his father could not understand the pressure of writing a 15-page final paper because he was never in this situation. He father could not understand what it was like to also have several final exams at the same time because he also never took final exams. The student said it was more exhausting to have to explain all this to his father than to just plow through without the assistance of someone to listen.

It is essential to find good mentors. That person might be one of your faculty members, a dean, or an advisor; there are always people who can help you. Every college offers help, some more than others. If there is no formal program, do the work yourself. Make it a point to connect with one faculty member every semester. At the end of two years, you should know four faculty members well—faculty who you can go to for advice and information. My office tells students to collect advisors; the more the better. Collect their advice and then figure out what works best for you. Only you will know what is best.

Build a Diverse Support Network

This step is essential and an extension of the advice just above. Even the smallest college is a big place compared to most high schools. Smaller colleges may have one person that can help but, in many cases, the support systems will be large and decentralized. Students will need to see different people for different things: financial help, study abroad guidance, writing help, selecting a major, etc. So as you collect advisors and build your “go-to” network, be sure you have different people to help with different things.

I attended a workshop a few years ago and the leader talked about “building a presidential cabinet.”⁸ She developed a worksheet and asked her students to list the name of someone they went to for various kinds of advice: academic, personal, financial, love, emotional support, exercise, etc. She added, “If you listed your mother or your best friend (and if they are the same person) under every item, you have a problem.” Yes, while we moms are wonderful at doling out advice, students in college should have a list of people (personal and professional) that they can ask for advice. Then they, again **they**, get to choose what works best for them. And, of course, it is not going to be perfect. This is how we learn, advance, and do better next time.

Maintain Your (Good) Relationships with Family and Friends

Friendships should sustain us, support us, and hold us up. I

would not be where I am or who I am without the amazing friends I have had, and still have, in my life. I still remember the life-altering comment my counselor said to me once as I was trying to work through my family issues. After numerous sessions of hearing my story (and convincing me not to underestimate the abuse I had endured), she said, “Why are you working so hard to get these dysfunctional people back into your life?”

I immediately replied, “Because they’re my family.”

Her response? “Sometimes you need to make a new family.”

It took me a long time to realize how right she was. I did not disown my biological family, but I finally realized they would never value or support what I did or who I was. I found people who did.

There is a difference, I think, between a fight you have with a relative you have always been close to, be it your mother, father, sibling, or guardian, and pursuing relationships that are abusive, dysfunctional, or simply never worked well. People with healthy families would sometimes tell me, “You really should make up with your [insert mother, father, sister].” But I knew, as do others in my situation, that that was impossible. It was never about forgiveness over one thing they did; it was about the absence of any healthy relationship to repair. It was about the abuse I endured, which meant that I had to distance myself from them to survive and thrive.⁹ I never cut them off completely and I was with them both at the end of their respective lives.

I would also hear “You’re going to feel really awful when your [again, insert mother, father, sister] dies.” I never thought I would, and I did not. I was sad when my father died, I cried. I felt sad for him because I knew how much he wanted to keep on living. But I had the same regrets I had my

entire life; I wished it could have been different. I did, finally, come to terms (at least almost) with my childhood. And that is mainly because I worked incredibly hard, especially after a divorce, to be happy. I worked through what happened. I learned to enjoy life and to be grateful. My children and my friends made this possible.

Not all friendships are healthy and stable ones. Do not be afraid to distance yourself from people who do not support you or value you. Find the people who will always have your back.

Always Ask for Help and Use It

Asking for help is one of the things that I see students struggle with frequently. When they are reluctant to ask for assistance, I tell them that asking for help is a sign of strength and not a sign of weakness. How do you learn if you don't ask? How do you innovate, build relationships, advance if you don't ask about what you don't know? Perhaps this reluctance ties back to students being told they were great at everything. If one is great at everything, one should never need help, right? But no one is good at everything, and we all have questions and need help at points along the way.

College is a major transition for all students; it is a big leap from high school, even for those who went to the best high schools, come from supportive homes, and have parents or guardians who attended college. In most high schools, there is guidance for getting to college, but once there, students may still find themselves on their own to navigate the system. If their parents have always done everything for them, then

their days are filled with multiple calls home to ask how to do things ranging from laundry to picking classes and a major.

This need for help from home comes with mixed emotions for parents. We all want to feel needed so when our child calls home and asks for help, it is a wonderful feeling. However, if they call home multiple times a day to report in or to ask questions that they should be able to find the answers to on their campus, then the situation switches to one of enabling. Chapter 5 presented some of the experiences I witnessed where the parent was doing all the work for their child during college. Sometimes the child is not aware of their parent's actions and sometimes the child requests parental involvement because they do not know what to do. I do not think any of us want to raise children who cannot function in the world when they are in their late 20s or beyond. We want to know they will thrive and have a happy and secure life long after we are gone. That likely will not happen if the parent continues to do everything after their child leaves home.

College is Hard

Words of Wisdom

“You are stronger than you believe. You have greater powers than you know.”

-Antiope (*Wonder Woman* film)¹⁰

In his opening address to parents and students, the President of UVA, James E. Ryan, discusses college being a big transition for every new student and that it can be hard. His analogy, which I think is perfect, is to an individual or a couple who are expecting their first child. (This advice is for parents and guardians!) All expectant parents hear about how wonderful parenting is, how glorious it will be, how it will change their life for the better. Yet anyone who has either given birth to or parented a newborn knows that, while there is incredible joy and wonder in those early years, there is also exhaustion and frustration. It is hard. The endless crying, feedings, dirty diapers, throwing up, sleepless nights, sickness, worry, etc. These difficulties are rarely talked about until well after the child is born. This tendency is likely for good reason because the alternative would be, “Congratulations! Expect to be exhausted, stressed, and frustrated for the next several years or even for the rest of your life because you will never, ever stop worrying about your children!”

College is the same, he says. “Best four years of your life,” you will hear people say. “You’ll have a blast; it’s so much fun!” While these statements are often true, college is hard work and a big adjustment for most people. The classes are challenging, the newly found independence is hard for many young adults to manage. The first year is the toughest, but no college welcome talk addresses this fact. In higher education, we rarely talk about how difficult the adjustment period can and will be, academically, socially, and culturally until much later. And we should... and earlier. We offer help, support,

and classes on how to navigate the campus and study, but we do not normalize the fact that almost everyone will need these tools. As we see more first-generation college students enter universities, this support becomes even more critical. We need to tell students that it is okay to struggle with the adjustment because there is help of all kinds for them including academic advice, financial help, social adjustment help, mental health, etc.

You will Stumble, Fall and/or Fail—Learn, and Get Back Up

College, and life, will not always go according to plan. You will succeed, you will falter, and you will fail. But you need to be able find the strength to get back up, learn, correct, and move forward—with help as needed. That help can come from family, friends, faculty, and/or professional counselors. Talk to people and write in a journal; these are great ways to process and to think about what went wrong and what it means. But do not dwell. This last step has been something that has not come easily to me. It takes work. It is hard not to have regrets about something, but it is important to analyze, learn, and move on.

After my father died, there was a huge event to honor him in New York. It opened with a guest speaker and a fashion show (if you read Chapter 1 you may remember he was a hairdresser and business owner). The guest speaker was a motivational speaker and, while I do not remember his name, I remember much of what he said. The room was filled with

hairdressers and the speaker talked about the importance of connections. As an example, he mentioned the few professions where you can legally and ethically touch someone else in the workplace: doctor, dentist, physical therapist, massage therapist and... hairdresser. While I found that an odd, though correct, analogy, he went on to talk about how much people trust their hairdressers and I know that to be true. We share personal information with them, we bring our children to them, and if our children happen to stay in the same town, they bring their children to the same person. They establish strong bonds and loyalty. That all made sense.

Then he switched gears a bit and began talking about regrets; he said he found it troubling that so many people said, “I have no regrets about anything.” He said something like, “So you did everything right throughout your whole life? You wouldn’t change anything? You have no regrets?” I immediately disagreed with his point of view for several reasons. While I think most of us have some (or many) regrets about something we said or did or a decision we made, I do not have a problem with someone saying they have no regrets. If they are at a point in time where they are happy and they have had a good life so far, whether they are 25, 40, 60 or 80, then all their decisions, good and bad, helped to get them to that point and they do not need to have any regrets because they likely learned along the way. So, even if you have made mistakes, **if** you have been lucky enough to learn from them and did what was best at the time, then maybe you are lucky enough to say, “I have no regrets.” It does not mean your life was perfect or that you made no mistakes; it means you are content in the moment.

Faculty Expectations

One of the many adjustments students make when they transition from high school to college is dealing with college professors and instructors. Faculty and teaching assistants are different than high school teachers. Understanding and getting to know your professors can help a student be successful in college.

A student's relationship with professors should be one of give and take. There are things that students want from them (like knowledge, a professional contact, perhaps a letter of recommendation), but there are also things faculty want from students. If you know the general rules, you are more likely to get what you want from the relationship. These relationships often last for years, even lifetimes, and can be of great value throughout one's life, long after one graduates.

Here are a few facts I gathered over the years from my own experiences and those others that I frequently share with students at orientation.

Faculty Want to Impart Their Wisdom to You

In most cases, faculty chose the field in which they are teaching to be their life's work. Often, they chose the field before they chose to be an educator. They do research and they write articles and books on the topic. In short, almost all faculty are very embedded in their areas of expertise. Respect that; be alert in class, ask questions, and do the work.

Faculty Love Their Own Subject Area and They Want You to Love it Too

Faculty lecture on the topics that they are most passionate about and that they believe are most important to teach. You may or may not share that passion, but you should respect it. Showing up for class shows them that you care. Staying awake and asking an occasional question doesn't hurt, either. Going to see them during their office hours might seal the deal.

Go to Class—All of Them

Reading as a substitute for showing up to class is a losing proposition. In fact, lecture content and textbook readings may have very little in common. Learning that the book does not cover the same material as discussed in class can be a painful lesson if you choose sleep over attending class. Go to every class, sit up front, ask questions (if permitted) and stay awake.

On Faculty Testing

College faculty test your knowledge about the things that they believe are most important. In some cases, the test may come more from the lecture than from the assigned reading. They will look for understanding rather than rote

memorization and they might ask test questions to determine if you grasp the material beyond the surface facts.

College faculty rarely grade on your effort, they grade on whether or not you know the material. In high school, a student can sometimes get away with a plea of “But I worked so hard on this assignment” or “But I studied for days.” In college, this rarely matters. If a test is multiple choice or true/false, as many are in large college classes, then your grade is your grade and there is little to no room for negotiation. If the assignment was a paper in which you earned a B-, an argument of “But I worked so hard on this paper and I should have an A” will carry little to no weight. The response will likely be “While you may have worked hard on this paper, it’s still a B- paper.”

Faculty Chose to Teach at The College Level to Educate Adults

College faculty have no desire to be disciplinarians, nor will they waste valuable class time with non-academic issues. If you sleep through an exam or show up on the wrong day, they may or may not allow you to make up the work.

Faculty Do Not Always Take Attendance

In large classes, the faculty may not chase after you to get your homework or ask why you were not in class. They

assume that you are an adult and that you will do what you need to do. You need to take responsibility for your college education. Nobody else will. You need to police yourself to make sure you are doing what is necessary to achieve the results you want. If you have a problem or a question, it is your responsibility to meet with the instructor and not expect that they will seek you out. Some faculty will take attendance and others will not. In large classes, it is easy to feel as if no one will notice whether you are present or not, but it matters for you! Many faculty will take attendance with iClickers¹¹ or give a pop quiz which you cannot make up for if you are not in class. The main point is that if you do not attend classes, you will miss a great deal of key knowledge and information.

Stay Calm

Stay calm, even if you find a particular professor especially intimidating and the class average on the first exam is 53%. Some college professors want you to “stretch” and get your attention with hard work early on in the semester. At the end of the semester, however, you may see a curve on their tests; not everyone will fail. So stay calm and keep at it. Ask for help, attend office hours. You will probably end up with a better grade than you thought (if you beat the curve on the tests). If you are really having problems, it may help to discuss withdrawing from the class with your advisor.

What Irritates Faculty?

Students not attending class, talking in class, and/
or sleeping in class

Students doing other work, watching movies, and/
or shopping online during class

Lack of interest, motivation, and/or responsibility

Not reading the syllabus or e-mail

Excuses (own your mistakes!)

Missing deadlines

Begging for better grades because you “need” them

Avoid the above behaviors!

Take the Jobs That Come Your Way/Do the Jobs No One Wants (Even in College)

There are two related parts to this piece of advice. Students sometimes think that when they graduate from college, their dream job will be waiting for them with a six-digit salary. For some new graduates it might be, for most it is not. I worked many jobs along the way to my current job that provided me with a range of experiences that I could leverage. Some students look for that dream internship that lands them the perfect job when they graduate. Again, this outcome may happen for some students, but not for all. Some students will never be able to afford an unpaid internship because they must work over the summer and winter breaks. They almost always underestimate the value of this work, whatever it is.

As an undergraduate student at Temple University, I

earned money by lifeguarding and teaching swimming lessons. These are not uncommon jobs for a teenager or college student, but students often do not place value on jobs like these when they could and should. The same is true of other kinds of work.

How do you leverage the skills earned from lifeguarding or teaching swim lessons? Most universities have a career center that can help students translate work into a solid list of skills on a resume. As an example, if you work at a restaurant, ask what else you can do. Can you help with marketing and advertising? Can you shadow the person who does payroll? Help interview future employees?

The second part of this piece of advice is to be willing to do the work no one else wants to do. But do not just do it, do it and improve it. Improve the work, the product, and the process—whatever it is. Change it from something no one wants to do to something everyone wants to do. When I was in the first year of my job as an Assistant Dean, the office produced a paper student handbook that was compiled for all new students. When the person who had produced it left, someone else was asked and said no as the work was too menial. I had done a fair amount of editing as a graduate student, and even on an *ad hoc* basis when my children were little, so I volunteered. They slightly increased my salary for taking it on since I was only part-time at the time. I enjoyed this kind of work as I found it calming. I liked the collecting of information, the proofreading, and the organization. I improved the look of the handbook and changed the way it was organized. I believe it is one of the things that helped me secure a full-time position in the office. The other person was not renewed.

Don't Look Back

Tim Elmore, the founder and CEO of Growing Leaders,¹² wrote a series of books called *Habitudes*. I attended one of his workshops several years ago and used a few of his books in my advising seminar class for new students and a class I co-taught to help graduating students prepare for life out of college. One of the exercises in the book *Habitudes for the Journey: The Art of Navigating Transitions*¹³ that struck a chord with me (and with many of the students) was called “Windshields and Rearview Mirrors.”¹⁴ In this exercise, Elmore talks about his fascination with the rearview mirror when he was learning to drive. He writes, “How cool was it to see what was right behind me (especially if it was a police car) without having to turn around.”¹⁵ But, he quickly learned you cannot drive that way, and his dad had to tell him to “Stop looking at all the cars behind you and focus on the road ahead of you.”¹⁶

I find this a great analogy. We all must glance back from time to time and remember the lessons we have learned from past mistakes and successes. But if we dwell on either too long, we cannot move forward. If we had a miserable past year we have to move on and if we had the best year of our life to date, we also have to move on knowing the next one might not live up to our expectations. So do not live in the past (or at least try very hard not to); learn from your successes and your failures and move forward. The future is ahead of you!

“Call Your Mom”

Yes, after all this advice about letting go, you should “call your mom” (or dad, guardian, aunt, uncle, grandparent, etc.). But do not call to *ask* what to do; call to *tell* them what you are doing, what you are thinking, and what you are learning. Call them to tell them about the amazing book you just read in your literature class; to tell them about the lab you completed in organic chemistry; the play you saw with your drama class. Share this with them; your excitement will be contagious. Don’t forget to ask about their life too.

Summary

I hope you found this advice useful and that it will help you to be more successful. I can also boil it down to three simple things to do:

1. Go to all your classes, sit up front, and be involved.
2. Ask for help when you need it.
3. Learn to manage your time and work hard at getting things done early.

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5 To be honest, this continues to amaze me. Every few years I meet a student in the College of Arts & Sciences who, when asked what they think they might want to study responds with graphic design, fashion design, or I am going to major in journalism or nutrition. My school offers none of these options and I am baffled that they did not do this research first! It does not mean they cannot have this career, but they cannot have this major.

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7 Michael Bohanes, “‘Following Your Passion’ is Dead—Here’s What to Replace it With,” *Forbes*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michalbohanes/2018/07/05/following-your-passion-is-dead-heres-what-to-replace-it-with/?sh=1525bf17f832>.

8 Jennifer L. Bloom, Bryant L. Hutson, and Ye He, *The Appreciative Advising Revolution* (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing, 2008).

9 I was always grateful that my children knew and loved my parents. They were, for the most part, very different people with them than they were with me. But my father could always snap. I saw that even with my children and for that reason, I never left them alone with him. My in-laws were wonderful, and I trusted them completely with my children.

10 *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins (2017; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2017), DVD.

11 An iClicker is an electronic device that may be required for use in a class so instructors can take attendance, track engagement and understanding of content, and/or develop polls or quizzes.

12 See <https://growingleaders.com/dr-tim-elmore-millennial-expert-founder-of-growing-leaders/>.

13 Tim Elmore, *Habitudes for the Journey: The Art of Navigating Transitions* (Atlanta: Poet Gardner Publishing, 2013).

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Epilogue

At the start of this book, I explained what ultimately drove me to the computer to sit down and start writing. The idea for this book had been swirling around in my head for a while and over the years, as I continued in my roles as both an Assistant and an Associate Dean, I saw three things come together—my personal story of getting to college, the problems I see with college today, and the problem of invasive/overparenting that I believe increases yearly.

I hope you found useful information here whether you are a parent or a student. I hope that reading this book will inspire students to navigate college differently and help their parents or guardians let them follow the path they choose. Students, please “lean in” to the learning and the experiences of college, both inside and outside of the classroom. Make braver and bolder academic choices and pursue the major you love, not the one you think will get you a better job. Landing in the major you think will get you a better job that you neither like nor are good at will not bring joy to your college experience. Parents, allow your children to pursue what they love and find challenging.

The Future of Higher Education

Having now described the history of higher education, the enduring value of the liberal arts, and the destructive rise of snowplow/bulldozer parenting, it is important that I

synthesize the key themes that have emerged. Throughout the history of higher education, universities and colleges have evolved in response to societal changes, economic demands, and shifting cultural values. From the classical education of the ancient world to the emergence of modern research universities, higher education has played a central role in shaping both individual lives and the broader trajectory of human progress. Yet, the current challenges facing higher education—particularly the devaluation of the liberal arts, an increasing consumerist culture, the increasing forced connection between college and career, and the increasing dominance of parental overreach—signal a pivotal moment that calls for deep reflection on what education means (and should mean) in today’s world.

Though much has been written on where higher education is headed over the next few years and decades, many of the books and articles were published before COVID-19 struck the U.S. (and the world) in March 2020. The pandemic had, and continues to have, a profound impact on all aspects of higher education. A colleague sent me a May 3, 2021, article entitled “Disruption and the Future of Higher Education and Advancement.”¹ The article summarized the results of a panel that was held to discuss the future of higher education, especially considering the global pandemic and the lack of leadership (and I will add sanity) at the national level. A few statements or issues from the article resonated with me and I want to share them here.

The first point is:

“... from the chaos, higher education and the advancement organizations that support it will emerge stronger. Higher education learned it can change, and that nimble institutions are more resilient.”²

I think this will prove to be true. All colleges struggled, and not just financially. There was no roadmap for a global pandemic; there was no other college or university to call to ask, “What did you do when a global pandemic hit your school?” We are not fully past the consequences of COVID-19 yet and likely will not be for a while. Several colleges closed their doors for good. Mills College in Oakland, California, Concordia College and Iona College in New York, Urbana University in Ohio and MacMurray College in Illinois all closed.³ Iowa Wesleyan University, Cardinal Stritch University, and Cabrini University, among others, also closed.⁴

The second point from Baldwin’s article that resonated with me is:

“Chaos in the upper levels of government led to an eroding level of trust in institutions in general. Higher education was not immune.”⁵

What role should and does a college degree play in our society? What is its value? Can it be a safe space, and an educational space, to talk about race, equity, gender, political issues, socioeconomic status, and/or poverty? Higher education is not perfect, but I still believe in the power of education and all that comes from it. We should all fight to keep higher education strong and to make it affordable for anyone who wants to attend.

Finally, Baldwin’s concluding statement is an optimistic one:

“...higher education will not only survive the three-ring circus of disruption—COVID-19, a volatile reawakening of the discussion around equality and civil

rights, and a severely divisive political atmosphere—it will thrive.”⁶

I believe this to be true based on my experience during and after the pandemic.

On the other side, an opinion piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* made the following assertion: “The increasing need for upskilling and reskilling caused by automation, the knowledge explosion, and the pandemic will tilt the balance toward more educational programs that are closely aligned with the labor market and provide certificates, micro-credentials, and badges—not degrees.”⁷ I hope this is not true. Clearly, we need programs aligned with the labor market and tradespeople to serve those roles. However, we also need to value learning and education and all that happens during that process regardless of what one does for a job and career over their lifetime.

The Role of AI in Higher Education: Today and the Future

A relatively new issue facing higher education (and all levels and forms of education) is artificial intelligence (AI). It is transforming education in profound ways, from personalized learning experiences to automated administrative processes. As AI continues to evolve, its influence on teaching methodologies, student engagement, and institutional operations is becoming increasingly apparent. Its relationship to cheating is also an area with which many faculty are struggling. Here, I briefly explore the current

impact of AI in *higher* education and speculate on what the future might hold.

A 2024 Educause study aptly describes the appropriate and inappropriate uses of AI.⁸ On a positive note, some of the significant contributions of AI in higher education today include personalized learning. AI-powered platforms, such as adaptive learning systems, can analyze students' performance in real-time and adjust content delivery accordingly. This approach ensures that learners receive instruction tailored to their individual needs, which in turn enhances comprehension and retention.⁹ AI-driven chatbots and virtual assistants, such as IBM's Watson Tutor or ChatGPT-based systems, provide immediate support to students, answering questions and offering guidance outside of traditional classroom hours. AI can also streamline administrative tasks, allowing institutions to function more efficiently. Universities can use AI to automate admissions processes, predict student retention risks, develop communications, and optimize course scheduling. On the other hand, inappropriate uses include lack of human oversight and plagiarism.¹⁰ AI-driven plagiarism detection tools, such as Turnitin, can help maintain academic integrity by analyzing submissions against vast databases of scholarly work, but these tools are not perfect. In addition, ideally our goal as faculty is to teach, not catch students cheating.

The faculty members I have spoken with are grappling with how to effectively assess students in the age of AI. Some rely on carefully proctored, in-class, multiple-choice and true/false exams, where AI-assisted cheating is difficult. However, for those of us who have traditionally assigned essays and written papers, preventing students from using AI-generated content is a significant challenge. While AI-generated writing

can sometimes be detected, it is not always obvious. Recognizing AI-generated text differs from identifying traditional plagiarism, where students copy directly from online sources like Wikipedia.

Years ago, while reading a poorly written student paper, one well-crafted sentence stood out. A quick Google search immediately led me to the uncited source, making it clear the student had copied most of the text. In contrast, determining whether a student used AI to generate a five-page paper which they then edit is more difficult. As a result, unless faculty shift to in-class, oral exams, many are struggling to find reliable ways to measure student learning outcomes.

Looking ahead, AI is expected to play an even more integral role in shaping higher education. One foreseeable change is the expansion of AI-driven virtual classrooms. With the advancement of augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), AI can facilitate immersive learning experiences that replicate real-world scenarios. For instance, medical students could use AI-powered simulations to practice surgeries in a risk-free environment, and engineering students could engage in AI-driven design projects. AI may play more of a role in college admissions which could be either good or bad depending on how it is programmed and used.

AI is already making a significant impact on higher education. Determining how best to move forward and harness the advantages is something that education will need to figure out.¹¹

The Role of the Liberal Arts in Education

At the heart of the liberal arts lies a commitment to the broad-based education that fosters intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and the ability to synthesize complex ideas. The liberal arts encourage a more holistic approach to learning. This tradition of education emphasizes the importance of questioning assumptions, engaging with diverse perspectives, and developing skills that transcend a single discipline.

Despite its clear benefits, the liberal arts face ongoing threats. The corporatization of higher education, with its emphasis on metrics and marketable skills, has led many institutions to cut funding for the humanities and social sciences. This trend undermines the very essence of higher education, reducing it to a transactional process that views students as consumers and degrees as commodities. To preserve the value of a liberal arts education, universities must resist these pressures and reassert their commitment to developing well-rounded, thoughtful individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society. I truly believe it is a liberal arts degree that will allow students to pivot to new challenges and careers as they move through the world of work.

Parenting Down the Road

Here is what no one tells you when you have small children: it does **not** get easier as your children get older, it gets harder

(and harder). Just as our children become fascinating adults that you would love to be friends with and spend all your time with, they leave—and they should! In an ideal world, they build their own new lives, sometimes very far away.

And when things do not go well, the problems are also bigger. I mentioned this German expression earlier: “*Kleine kinder, kleine Sorgen*,” which translates to “the bigger the children, the bigger the worries.” I am not referring to a failed test, low grades, or the social and academic stresses of college. I am talking about broken relationships, lost jobs, failed auditions, failed interviews, divorces, miscarriages, deaths, etc. Our children may call us to talk about these things and here is the heartbreaking news: we cannot fix these problems. Or they may just call to say they need support and add they do not want to talk about their problems. If we live nearby, we may be fortunate enough to go visit, if asked, for a few days and hug them. However, many times we are busy with our lives, travelling, working, too far away, or the trip would cost too much. If they have not learned any coping mechanisms along the way, if they lack the grit and strength they need, then these more difficult things will be much, much harder. And if they outlive us, as they should, what will happen when we are gone if we are still solving their problems for them when they are in their 30s, 40s, and 50s?

I believe the smaller tough times help us learn how to cope. If we never face them, the big losses become bigger. This means we must stop fixing everything for our children. We have to stop intervening and let them learn from mistakes when they are young adults.

A blog post by author Heather Plett from October 23, 2023,¹² touched on all these points. Her post covers these

topics and the issue of parenting adult children from afar. The section I love is close to the conclusions:

“Our children don’t need enmeshed or codependent parents. They don’t need fixers who will disempower them when they swoop in with solutions. They don’t need us to become overly attached to their identity, their emotional experience, or the outcome of their decisions.

They need a safe place where they can fall apart occasionally. They need to know that they won’t be abandoned (or fixed) when they fail. They need to be allowed to have big emotions without having those emotions shamed, ridiculed, fixed, or projected back at them. They need to be allowed the autonomy to discover their own resilience and their own tools for navigating hard places. They need us to hold space for them—with a love that’s not enmeshed.”¹³

This is true now and likely always will be. We learn from our mistakes and our failures as much as we learn from our successes. Life is hard and unfair. At the same time, humans have amazing resilience and we survive unimaginable things in our lives. Some of us are luckier than others. Our children must learn from life too.

The history of higher education, the value of the liberal arts, and the dangers of snowplow parenting all converge around a common theme: the importance of fostering independence, critical thinking, and personal growth. Higher education, at its best, is not simply about acquiring a degree or preparing for a career. It is about shaping individuals who can think deeply, act ethically, and contribute meaningfully to society. In the College of Arts & Sciences at UVA, when

we rewrote our general education curriculum in 2017, we talked at length about preparing “citizens of the world.” We imagined individuals who could adapt to the several roles life will offer them: parent, child, aunt, uncle, guardian, grandparent, employee, employer, citizen, partner, spouse, and so on.

As we move forward, both educators and parents must work to ensure that the next generation of students has the freedom and support to fully engage with the transformative potential of higher education. And we must make it affordable for everyone who wants to attend. Thus, in closing I wish you resilience, strength, peace, and the power to let your children go and grow.

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