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A BETTER WAY TO CHOOSE A COLLEGE

Smart colleges give students a healthy dose of the real world.

By Richard M. Freeland

WORCESTER, MASS. - This is a time of year when high school students and their families are thinking hard about college. As seniors, juniors, and parents identify their top choices, discussions typically focus on the college itself. Is the institution small or large? How strong are the academics? What is the social life like? Do I like the campus?

Such considerations are important, but they can obscure the all-important question: Where will these college years lead?

Applicants should think seriously about which college on their list can best prepare them for the real world. They should look for campuses that offer well-structured programs to help them form a direction for their lives and develop the capacity to take steps along that path.

One of the most striking recent phenomena about college graduates in America has been the "boomerang" student: the young person who goes away to college, has a great experience, graduates, then moves back home for a year or two to figure out what to do with his or her life. This pattern has left many graduates – and their families – wondering whether it makes sense to spend four or more years at college, often at great expense, and finish with no clear sense of who they are or what they want to do next.

The trend points to one of the great shortcomings of many of our nation's leading colleges and universities. Structured, mentored opportunities to think about life after graduation are rare. The

formal curriculum focuses almost universally on the academic disciplines of the arts and sciences. Advising on how various majors connect to pathways into the workplace is typically haphazard. Career planning offices are often understaffed and marginal to college life.

It doesn't need to be this way, and in recent years some of the country's top colleges have enriched their academic offerings with opportunities for students to gain real-world experiences.

Stanford University, Tulane, and Notre Dame have developed outstanding programs through which students work in community settings to develop skills in active citizenship. Leading co-op schools such as Northeastern University, Cincinnati, and Georgia Tech place students in multiple full-time work experiences related to their majors during their college careers. Clark University empowers students to "make a difference by linking classroom study with off-campus experience in fields such as "Urban Development and Social Change" and "Innovation and Entrepreneurship."

Programs such as these give undergraduates in the liberal arts the opportunity to step outside an academic framework and see how the subjects they are studying connect to life beyond college. Such programs also allow students to reflect on what their experiences have taught them about themselves and the world.

Those who have participated in such programs typically report that their off-campus activities helped them achieve a clearer sense of who they are, what they value, and where they want to go after graduation. The experience, they say, also adds to their understanding of the subjects they are studying. Employers and graduate programs tend to prefer students with experience in the fields in which they intend to work or to pursue advanced degrees.

Most colleges today advertise some sort of internship program. Only a limited number, however, have created structured, well-supported programs that help students find and prepare for the right placement, link that experience back to classroom work, and provide for reflection in a mentored setting.

It is important for applicants interested in a college's off-campus opportunities to ask how these programs are organized. Programs that are thoughtfully conceived, well-staffed, and embedded in the overall educational experience will contribute the most to their education.

College can be one of life's richest experiences. While considering which college has the most beautiful campus or the highest ranking, however, families and students should remember that college is both an experience in itself and a building block of a total life structure. They should choose a college that takes this latter role seriously.

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