

1

Introduction: How to Succeed in College and Beyond: The Art of Learning

Purpose: Preparing Students for College

The purpose of this book is to help prepare students, parents, and high school advisors for the college experience and beyond. My goal is to help students balance the joy of learning with the practicality of finding a career path. This book is for all those contemplating a college education and for their families, as well as for those already admitted to college.

Important questions are being asked today about American higher education. Not only are the value of a college education and the economics of colleges and universities under scrutiny, but so too is the concept of the American dream whereby people use their ability and education to fulfill their potentials and move up the socio-economic ladder. On the one hand, colleges and universities do have more diverse student bodies than in the past. But on the other, evidence of severe economic inequality and social injustice dominates the news. Inequality and injustice are causes and effects of a crisis in America that extends to the role of higher education. I address those issues in the context of offering ideas for applying to and succeeding in college, including how to apply for financial aid and how to limit burdensome loans that hamper the future.

I suggest initiatives that might help middle- and working-class parents and their children who cannot afford to send their children to expensive private schools or to live in affluent communities with elite public schools. In these affluent communities, preparation for college dominates virtually every educational policy decision made by school administrators and Boards of Education. In such school districts, parents are in the foreground encouraging

Introduction

their children, playing roles in shaping school policy, and contributing to foundations that supplement the tax base for the purposes of supporting extra-curricular activities, including athletics. These parents also pay for their children's private tutors and sports coaches. By contrast, in many rural and urban schools, graduation rates are low, school budgets are pinched, teachers are overworked and deal with serious discipline issues on a daily basis, guidance counselors are asked to serve far too many students, and parents struggling to make a living do not have time or funds to be advocates for their children.

In early fall 2014, in an op-ed piece for the *US News* as he began his ninth and last year as the President of Cornell, David Skorton asked vital questions:

For the first time in my 36 years in academia, the value of America's colleges and universities is being questioned – and seriously. Is what we offer worth the money and time invested? Will a college degree really translate into a better job down the road or improve our quality of life? Couldn't we rely more on technology and less on highly paid faculty members and expensive campuses and student amenities to deliver our "product" at lower cost?

In part, this book is a response to issues raised by these questions.

While my primary focus is on the US system of higher education, my suggestions are transferable to the educational systems of other countries. Young adults seeking higher education everywhere face similar challenges and pressures, although the US is unique in the financial issues students face. While career opportunities vary from country to country, balancing the joy of learning with the necessity and reality of career preparation is a pervasive issue.

I draw upon my 47 years as a Professor of English, but also the experience of colleagues and students at other universities in the US and other countries. My appointment has been at Cornell, but I have held visiting professorships at the main campus of the University of Hawaii, the University of Alabama at Huntsville (which is one of the Alabama state system's four research universities along with Tuscaloosa, Auburn, and Birmingham), and at the University of Arkansas (Little Rock). As Director of five NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) Summer Seminars for College Teachers, I have also worked with faculty from a wide variety of colleges. I have also directed four NEH Summer Programs for school teachers in which virtually all my participants were secondary school English teachers working with Advanced Placement classes and were knowledgeable about college preparation.

I have consulted hundreds of students and scores of colleagues for input on this book. This book is about the college experience and how to make the most of it, including not only the available resources for financial aid, but also ways for students to prepare for their economic futures.

Introduction

Much has been written of late about the shortcomings of American colleges and universities, with a focus on the relatively little time students spend on their academic study, the excessive partying that turns campuses into permissive social circuses and sites of sexual abuse, and the burgeoning costs accompanied by excessive student loans. I will take up these legitimate concerns in the pages that follow. Although prior research about the economics of the university is not my primary focus, I will on occasion address how and why research universities balance their priorities in light of limited resources. While both acknowledging the shortcomings of American colleges and universities and praising their strengths, I will propose ways for students to get the most out of their higher education.

This finding fault with American higher education includes not only William Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* and the CNN documentary *Ivory Tower* but also Kevin Carey's *The End of College: Creating the Future of Learning and the University of Everywhere*, and, to a lesser extent, Frank Bruni's *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania*.

Yes, I do believe that the most highly endowed universities and colleges could do better at controlling their rising tuition by drawing more on their endowments – that is, by increasing the payout rate of their endowments. Colleges and universities could also ask their most generous donors to contribute more to their year-to-year expenses rather than to endowments. In the case of the wealthiest schools like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford, their endowments are so large that a case could be made for their not charging tuition to any students.

Owing to the rising prices of stocks and bonds, and taking into consideration major fluctuations in those assets, the ratio of payouts to total endowments has shrunk in the past two decades (see Ehrenberg, *Tuition Rising*, 35–49). At Cornell, a mere half percent increase in the payout would result in approximately \$31 million, based on a \$6.2 billion endowment. Indeed, to meet the competitive need to raise financial aid to at least approach its much wealthier peers, the payout was raised from 2010–11 to 2014–15, but there is no way that Cornell can keep up with the much larger endowments of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford.

A significant issue is how to open the doors of higher education, including those of the most prestigious schools, to those in the lower economic and social strata. In a report by Barry Bergman for the *Berkeley News*, Goldie Blumenstyk, author of *American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know*, asserts:

[Y]ou'll still find lower-income students and minority students far more concentrated in community colleges and for-profit colleges, and upper-income students and white students more concentrated at four-year private colleges and publics. . . .

Introduction

[A]n adult from a wealthy family is nine times as likely to earn a bachelor's degree by the age of 24 as one from a poor family – with all the implications for social and financial success that entails.

A narrative of higher education in America should highlight the role of public education, including that of the great state universities like California and Michigan and the role that CUNY (City University of New York) played and still plays for first-generation Americans. When admission was exceedingly competitive, CCNY (City College of New York) produced a significant number of Nobel Prize winners, and one could argue that the University of California at Berkeley has been the pre-eminent university of the country if not the world. Unfortunately, the days of free and almost free tuition have passed. Nonetheless, the public universities still offer a lower-cost alternative to elite schools, particularly for residents of the state or city in which they are located.

The Economic Value of Higher Education

While I will be realistic about problems, I will be telling another, more optimistic story than many critics of American Higher Education. As Barry Glassner and Morton Schapiro wrote in the October 6, 2014 *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

The vast majority of students graduate with relatively modest loans – under \$30,000, on average – and almost one-third leave college with no debt at all. Meanwhile the college premium – the ratio of earnings by college graduates to those by high-school graduates – is at or near a record level.

MIT economist David Autor writes: “The economic payoff to college education rose steadily throughout the 1980s and 1990s and was barely affected by the Great Recession starting in 2007.” According to Autor, that is true for a great many “developed countries.” In the US, Autor finds that between 1965 and 2008 the value in lifetime earning of a university education, compared to those with a high school diploma, has “roughly tripled.”

We are often told that college isn't for everyone, but it is surprising how many people can benefit from graduating from a four-year college. According to David Leonardt in an April 24, 2015 *New York Times* article entitled “College for the Masses”:

The unemployment rate among college graduates ages 25 to 34 is just 2 percent, even with the many stories you hear about out-of-work college graduates. They're not generally working in menial jobs, either. The pay gap between college graduates and everyone else is near a record high.

Introduction

What needs to be stressed is that even students with less than sterling credentials benefit greatly from college, although among this group there is, as Leonardt further notes, a high drop-out rate:

Less selective colleges often set [low] benchmarks: Students who score 840 on the SAT, for example, or maintain a C+ average in high school are admitted. Those who don't clear the bar are generally rejected, and many don't attend any four-year college. ... Perhaps most important, the data show that the students just above the admissions cutoff earned substantially more by their late 20s than students just below it – 22 percent more on average.

From the practical standpoint, we know the economic value of a college degree. In a 2014 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article entitled “Is a Degree Still Worth It? Yes, Researchers Say, and the Payoff Is Getting Better,” Lance Lambert reports on a study by two researchers with the Federal Reserve of New York:

Jaison R. Abel and Richard Deitz, found that ... a bachelor's degree for a 2013 graduate was worth \$272,693, on average, and when adjusted for inflation, the value of a degree has hovered around \$300,000 for more than a decade. ... Even though the wages for college graduates are not increasing, the gap between their pay and earnings of those with only a high-school diploma has increased, keeping the value of a college degree from falling.

Citing the same study in a *Wall Street Journal* piece entitled “A College Degree Pays Off Far Faster Than It Used To,” Josh Mitchell writes:

College graduates may be taking on historically high debt burdens to finance their educations. But it will take them far less time to get a return on that “investment” than it took their parents' generation. That's the conclusion of new research from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Researchers there estimate someone earning a bachelor's degree in 2013 will need 10 years to recoup the entire cost of that degree. Those who earned a bachelor's in 1983 needed 23 years to do so.

Thus we have incontrovertible evidence for the economic value of a four-year college degree.

College Education and Quality of Life

What about the value of a college education in non-economic and at times intangible terms? In a *New York Times* column entitled “Demanding More from College,” Frank Bruni rightly complains “about the narrowness of the discussion

Introduction

[about the value of a college education], which so heavily emphasizes how a career is successfully forged and how financial security is quickly achieved.”

In the pages that follow, I want to stress what education can add to students’ quality of life in terms of self-awareness, understanding of the past and present contexts that define our individual experiences, and appreciation of the arts as a doorway to a fuller life. To those lifetime gifts, I need to add that education teaches us to solve problems, to read insightfully, to write lucidly and logically, to speak articulately, to think rigorously, and to be creative.

College can also make us more tolerant citizens by teaching us to be receptive to diverse ideas. In the same piece, Bruni observes:

[T]here’s another dimension to college, and it’s one in which students aren’t being served, or serving themselves, especially well. I’m referring to the potential – and need – for college to confront and change political and social aspects of American life that are as troubling as the economy. ... [W]e should talk as much about the way college can establish patterns of reading, thinking and interacting that buck the current tendency among Americans to tuck themselves into enclaves of confederates with the same politics, the same cultural tastes, the same incomes. That tendency fuels the little and big misunderstandings that are driving us apart. It’s at the very root of our sclerotic, dysfunctional political process.

Openness to rethinking past assumptions is a goal that fulfills both the joy and practicality of learning, for if students learn to communicate ideas in nuanced discourse, logically and lucidly presented in such a way that there is space for substantive discussion, we will have the pleasure of living in a less polarized and more civil society where democracy functions and diverse perspectives are respected. At best, college teaches democracy by teaching students not only to work cooperatively in classes and extra-curricular activities, but also to speak their minds, often with the hope of changing the minds of others.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings of US universities, they offer hope and possibility. While some of our American students may take this for granted, most of my students are aware that they are in a crucible of opportunity. Foreign students who come here understand that the United States and its better colleges offer them something special. In the words of Emma Ianni, Cornell ’17, an undergraduate from Italy,

I came here to find something that cannot be found [at home]: a bright future. My generation was born in a time that many define as the worst period for the job market since the Great Depression. Crisis, fear, and disillusionment are pandemic, but here at Cornell I did find something I could have never found in Italy, my home country: here in the United States I found that determined hope that everyone needs nowadays. I say “determined” because I don’t mean hope in a sort of fatalistic way; it’s not about lightheartedly waiting for things to work out;

Introduction

it is rather about making things work out. ... But here, people from very early on learn that if they do extra-curriculars, if they fully commit to what they do, if they work hard enough, if they practice every day and don't give up when it gets hard, if they accept challenges and run for leadership positions in their clubs, then they will make it. And this is powerful.

Writing during the fall 2014 political crisis in Hong Kong, Gabriella Lee, Cornell '16, explains why Hong Kong students like herself appreciate the security of Cornell:

With so much instability at home, it's easy to see why so many Hong Kong families find they need the security they feel an Ivy League education guarantees. ... I worry if I'll even be able to go home or if I will want to go home to a place that may eventually lack press freedom and government accountability, or a place where the police are ordered to openly tear gas peaceful protestors, or a place where local heritage and culture are wiped out in favor of big business interests.

Sally Ruge Gao, Cornell '15, who was an undergraduate from China, observes:

I personally came to Cornell because I knew it offered me choice in learning whatever I wanted to learn, be it liberal arts or applied economics. ... An excellent education – in my opinion – teaches you to think critically and to have a good set of rational judgment abilities. ... Cornell and the Ivies give you choice in what you want to be educated in. ... The universities precisely teach you to not be a sheep, if you know how to listen. There will always be people who pawn Ivy degrees for high starting salaries.

Responding to Naysayers: College as Hope and Opportunity

In his *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, William Deresiewicz has complained about the shortcomings of education at what he calls elite schools – a list of which he never provides and a category he does not define precisely – and about how these schools encourage careerism and stifle creativity and boldness: “We want kids with resilience, self-reliance, independence of spirit, genuine curiosity and creativity; and a willingness to take risks and make mistakes” (236). In contrast, he praises some non-elite liberal arts colleges as places where teaching, rather than research, is valued and where the humanities are emphasized.

I am sure that this emphasis on teaching takes place at the world's prestigious public and private universities too, as well as throughout the American higher education system. Every day I see those qualities that Deresiewicz regrets missing. My Cornell classes and those of many of my colleagues are devoted to

building those qualities even while we teach subjects. Moreover, I am speaking in this book not only about the elite schools, but also about the full range of American colleges.

Deresiewicz does have some interesting things to say about the ideals of a liberal education. I do agree with his objections to giving preference to legacies – the children of former graduates – in the admission process. Perhaps there are a small fraction of students who are busy building a CV as opposed to enjoying and immersing themselves in their studies. However, Deresiewicz's macro-cosmic generalizations lack evidence, and his indictment of the "meritocracy" is reductive.

Certainly, in some urban and suburban places there is an anxiety epidemic on the part of parents worried that their children will not excel. I have heard parents in NYC worrying about getting their children into the best private nursery schools and even hiring people to prepare their three-year-old children for interviews. I have had students who had so much parental help and expensive private tutoring that, despite having terrific grades in private day schools and competitive public schools, they had trouble as first-term freshmen doing their own work.

But we need to understand that this anxiety epidemic is only one strand of the story of students making their way through the American educational system. I also see middle- and lower-income children – often first-generation college students – from less competitive public schools excelling at Cornell. Within a term they usually catch up with students from Horace Mann, Dalton, and Exeter as well as from elite public schools such as Stuyvesant, the Bronx High School of Science, and Boston Latin. Certainly upward mobility is alive and well, although, to be sure, were admission based purely on merit, the Ivies would take fewer legacies and potential varsity athletes. The latter, especially in so-called major sports like football, basketball, and hockey (as well as, at Cornell, wrestling), are heavily recruited by the coaches even though the Ivies don't give athletic scholarships.

Perhaps we professors and administrators need to do a better job responding to naysayers such as Deresiewicz. As Nicholas B. Dirks, Chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley, asserted in the July 22, 2014 *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "For too long we have neglected the need to aggressively defend, explain, and promote the value of the education our institutions provide, not just for individuals but for society as a whole." One goal of my book is to do just that while not overlooking areas that need improvement.

One of Deresiewicz's basic premises is that students have changed for the worse. He asserts that students were once more creative, imaginative, and interested in learning for its sake than they are now. My experience contradicts this claim.

We are also told that previous generations of students were happier, more confident, and had more developed "souls," a term Deresiewicz uses in a secular

sense. Put another way, they were less anxious, stressed, and depressed, and more reflective about who they were. Of course, those who make these assertions do not provide substantive evidence or consider that prior generations were less likely to admit to depression and anxiety, because in the past admitting stress and depression or seeking help was culturally less acceptable.

Judged by the attention he received, Deresiewicz briefly touched a popular chord and became a rallying point for naysayers. Anxious parents whose children were not, or might not be, admitted to elite colleges could feel that little had been lost. While a great many of Deresiewicz's examples refer to Yale and Harvard and very few to Cornell, I believe much of what he says either is hyperbolic or lacks factual underpinnings: "Everybody [at elite colleges] thinks that they're the only one who's suffering, so nobody says anything, so everybody suffers. Everyone feels like a fraud, everyone thinks that everyone else is smarter than they are" (Deresiewicz, 16). Suffering is living under the fear of having one's home bombed, or being displaced from an area where one has lived for generations, or having a dread disease, or losing a beloved friend or family member. Suffering is not, in most cases, being concerned about your future when you are 19 years old and are attending an elite university in the United States. What Deresiewicz is describing is the discomfort that we all experience as young adults and, indeed, periodically thereafter.

Students from our current diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds may have more anxiety than those admitted to elite schools two generations ago, but they succeed. Moreover, today colleges and universities admit students with emotional and physical challenges who might not have been able to function at college a few decades ago. We have far more support for deaf, blind, and other physically challenged students as well as those diagnosed with bi-polar disorders, depression, and dyslexia.

Did universities, especially elite ones, have higher standards in the past? If we use grades as our criterion, there is some reason to answer "Yes." Without doubt we have grade inflation, and one could argue that giving an A- for what 30 years ago was a B or B- is a lowering of standards. On the whole, however, I do not see a decline in the quality of academic work. I would argue that the quality of my students in terms of their preparation and performance is better than it once was. Moreover, while some students (being human) may occasionally take advantage of a professor's good will and trust, at Cornell I don't see much evidence of Deresiewicz's particular complaints: "[T]here are due dates and attendance requirements at elite colleges, but no one takes them seriously. Extensions are available for the asking; threats to deduct credit for missed classes are rarely, if ever, carried out. Kids at prestigious schools receive an endless string of second chances" (218). Is there anything wrong with a day or two extension for a student who is ill or temporarily overwhelmed?

Another area where standards may have suffered nationally is the amount of time students spend on their academic work, and I will discuss that issue in the pages that follow. Some of the time once spent on academic study has been replaced by the surge in the time spent on extra-curricular activities and employment. At non-elite schools, students often have jobs to pay for college and family needs, and these jobs may require that they work many hours a week and perhaps full-time. Furthermore, statistics show that a good deal of students' time is spent on social media. It is possible that more time than in the past is spent on what is now called "partying." Of course, how students use their time varies from student to student.

When I hear of my students' impressive range of extra-curricular activities, I realize how much more time I had in college for reading and thinking. Whatever strengths I have today as a teacher-scholar would be less developed had I not given priority to my studies as an undergraduate; those years built a base for my future work. I write now not to turn back the clock for today's students or to scold them for trying to do too much, but to share my own joy in learning.

The Joy and Practicality of Learning: Succeeding in College and Beyond

I begin with a chapter on how to prepare for college while in secondary school and even before that. I devote the next chapter to the complex process of choosing a college as well as the college application process and suggestions for getting financial aid. I then address in separate chapters each year of the four-year experience; in those chapters, I discuss such specific issues as time management, how to find mentors, whether to go abroad or take a term in Washington, DC, and planning for the future after graduation.

I include chapters on how to select classes as well as what parents need to know about the college experience. I discuss the pros and cons of the Greek system, that is, sororities and fraternities, and why I think, despite their importance to some students, that the Greek system may have outlived its usefulness.

Believing everyone should take some courses in the arts and the humanities (as well as gain a grounding in basic science and computer skills), I then turn to issues that pertain to the study of the arts and the humanities. What follows are chapters devoted to why we should study the arts, what we learn from them, and what kinds of employment and career possibilities are available to those with a BA in English and, by implication, in other fields in the arts and the humanities. I am responding to the widespread view that the study of the humanities is a passport to unemployment, if not to poverty. I also discuss the possibilities and advisability of getting a doctorate in the humanities.

Introduction

I conclude with a section on my perspective as a professor. Because I think students and parents will benefit from knowing what a professor is thinking about when he or she organizes his/her courses, I discuss my goals and my philosophy as a teacher. I discuss the balance between teaching and research and why, despite some claims to the contrary, these two activities usually supplement one another. Finally, I discuss the values of the current generation of students and the current emphasis on community involvement. In doing so, I respond to the charge that contemporary students are self-immersed and less interested in the world than their predecessors.

