

Flipping the College Decision-Making Paradigm

by Kevin Fleming

It's quite shocking when you think about it. Ask any adult to describe how they approached three significant life choices—their major, their college, and their career. Ask them to recall, in order, which they chose first, second and third.

They'll probably tell you that the first thing they chose was the college they wanted to attend. Perhaps they picked a parent's alma mater, or one based upon location.

And after choosing a college, most settled on their major, but usually not right away. And that choice is too often driven by current interests or the persuasion from a friend to declare the same major.

Finally, somewhere near or even after graduation, they then picked their career. They embarked onto the job to market expecting to get hired given their education. But in today's economy that is a rude awakening for students and parents alike. Thirty-three percent of college graduates are still underemployed well into their thirties.¹

Most graduating high school students today make these choices in the same order. But when we ask self-aware, mature adults what the selection order should be, they respond without hesitation; choose an initial career first, a college major second, and the college itself third. This order just makes sense. Your career choice dictates what major to pursue, which in turn helps identify the best college or training choice.

Our educational system is very well-intentioned, but incredibly misaligned. The truth is, the pendulum has swung too far toward college preparation and away from career preparation.

We encourage a college-going-culture even as early as elementary school with university pendants decorating 2nd grade classrooms. And an exorbitant amount of time in high school is spent on college application essays and the FAFSA. At some point in recent history we have transitioned from asking the more important question of, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" to now asking "Where are you going to college?"

The problem isn't that we need more students to attend college; the problem is most are not finishing. Enrollments in colleges and universities have reached an all-time high.² But over 45% of students who enter are not completing their degree. Often this is because they are juggling too much, they discover they picked the wrong major or attended the wrong institution, or they don't see the connection between their classes and the job market.³ In fact, for most college drop outs they simply lose interest.⁴

For every young person in America, whatever their background, one of the essential purposes of schooling should be to help them develop the knowledge and skills needed to search for and obtain work that they find satisfying.⁵ But instead, when students finally make it into a college classroom,

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census and American Community Survey, U.S. Department of Labor, O*NET. Calculated by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. 2014. https://www.newyorkfed.org/medialibrary/media/research/current_issues/ci20-1.pdf

² <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/03/why-do-so-many-americans-drop-out-of-college/255226/>

³ http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2014/11/19/u_s_college_dropouts_rates_explained_in_4_charts.html; and Bridgeland J.M., DiIulio J.J., Morison K.B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives on high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises

⁴ Bridgeland J.M., DiIulio J.J., Morison K.B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives on high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises

⁵ Hoffman, Nancy. (Nov 2015). High school in Switzerland blends work with learning. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 97 no. 3 29-33. Phi Delta Kappa International. <http://pdk.sagepub.com/content/97/3/29.full?ijkey=mbwHvmbtrQ7sg&keytype=ref&siteid=spdk>.

most arrive without any career direction or idea of what they want to get out of their collegiate education. They amass an insane amount of student debt taking classes that have little application to their future goals, and far too often with no credential to show for their efforts.

By comparison, the Swiss education model uses a nationwide system that matches high school students with training, jobs, and education which keeps their older teenagers engaged. The Swiss have made learning to work and learning about work central to their education system. Many 16-year-olds in Switzerland already have secured apprenticeships embedded within their schooling. And all this has resulted in a youth unemployment rate below four percent.⁶

In fact, education works differently throughout the rest of the developed world. At the end of the day, about 40 percent of Americans earn a college degree, similar to other countries.⁷ But the difference is how many students make an attempt, but drop out—costing students and taxpayers billions. America today has the lowest college completion rate in the developed world.⁸

But research shows that students who enter college with an informed declared major are far more likely to take the right classes and graduate—by double—than those who wander through the maze of educational choices.⁹

This simple flip of the college decision-making paradigm is the first step in how every student in America should approach their education. Students are more likely to complete their post-secondary education or training if they enter college with three things:

- First: A carefully considered career path
- Second: An informed major or affordable training program that match their career and life goals¹⁰
- And third: a unique Skills-based Education Plan that facilitates successful entry into the job market

That's impossible you say?

It's not—as over 150 high schools across the country are discovering as they help their students **Get Focused** in the 9th grade and then **Stay Focused** in the 10th, 11th and 12th grade. With this focused effort they'll graduate from high school with a 10-year career and life plan that is the blueprint to developing the skills to be employable in a highly competitive global workforce.

For the sake of our students, our families and our country, we can't afford to get it backwards any longer. It is time to “flip the college decision-making paradigm” and help students understand the most direct route to a self-sufficient future.

To learn more about effective student success programs and research,
visit *Get Focused...Stay Focused!*™.
<http://getfocusedstayfocused.org/>

⁶ Hoffman, Nancy. (Nov 2015). High school in Switzerland blends work with learning. The Phi Delta Kappan, vol. 97 no. 3 29-33. Phi Delta Kappa International. <http://pdk.sagepub.com/content/97/3/29.full?ijkey=mbwHvmbtrQ7sg&keytype=ref&siteid=sppdk>.

⁷ Harvard Graduate School of Education, Pathways to Prosperity Report.
http://www.gse.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/documents/Pathways_to_Prosperty_Feb2011-1.pdf

⁸ <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/03/why-do-so-many-americans-drop-out-of-college/255226/>

⁹ CCCC Student Success Task Force:
http://www.californiacommunitycolleges.cccco.edu/portals/0/executive/studentssuccesstaskforce/sstf_final_report_1-17-12_print.pdf

¹⁰ Symonds W.C., Schwartz R., Ferguson R.F.(2011). Pathways to prosperity: Meeting the challenge of preparing young Americans for the 21st century. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Education, Pathways to Prosperity Project