

The Magical Land Called “College”

Paper #4 24 November 2010 Tom Jaquish, Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA
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Purpose: A college can take a green, burger-flipping kid and turn him or her into a young professional that companies actually want to hire, pay tens of thousands of dollars, and assign responsibilities in large, important projects. How cool is that? This paper is not meant to be a how-to encyclopedia but an alternate opinion in the form of answers to 10 questions.

1. How do you get into college and then pay for it?

It’s not rocket science, just a lot of legwork. You do a lot of internet searches, visit college web sites, talk to guidance counselors, read pamphlets and maybe books, look at lists of “best” colleges, fill out a lot of applications, and take the required tests. Around the beginning of your junior year in high school is a good time to get started. The best number of colleges to apply to is somewhere between 0 and 400, but most people are in the range of 3 to 8.

You get financial aid from the college itself, from your parents or other relatives, from the government, from your own earnings, from specialty scholarships, or from a college loan program often run by the government. It’s not uncommon for a student to graduate college owing 30 to over 100 thousand dollars, so we could be talking, relatively speaking, of the largest investment you’ll ever make. I recall a day long ago when I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my last dime in the world, and realized that I was \$8000 in debt and had no job. Don’t be shy about applying for scholarships and other forms of aid. Legwork, again.

And pay off that doggone loan as soon as you can after graduation. You’re not free until you do so. I graduated college in 1976 with a loan that was 60% of my first year salary. Due to all the government *help* in the past 35 years, the cost of college has risen faster than the rate of inflation, and you might graduate owing 100 to 200% of your first year salary. I was able to pay my loan off in about 3 years. It might take you 6 to 10 years now. Oh, well. Life is longer now, and you’re not going to retire and abandon your career at age 60, so ten years of scrimping to pay the loan back is still a good investment if you’re serious about the field you choose.

If you get the feeling that all the work to get into college is a filter for those who aren’t so serious about it, you are correct. Your college experience should give you such a distaste for bureaucracy that you never work within one or impose one upon others, but the sad truth is that bureaucracy is a human malaise that will never be stamped out, for reasons of human nature. All you can do is to look to the forthrightness of your own path through life.

2. What is college for, from society’s standpoint?

History and human dynamics tell us that societies must grow or they wither. To feed this growth and to replace retirees, the economy requires a continual fresh supply of doctors and nurses, lawyers, accountants, managers, engineers, scientists, and teachers. Industrial societies have established colleges to sift through each year’s crop of high school seniors to find the ones with the right combination of academic ability and ambition, and then to train them in the professions that are most needed. (That’s why you take algebra and trigonometry in high school) When you get to graduation and some notable person tells you that you are the future, he or she really means it.

This training must be done delicately, or else the creativity of the resulting graduates could be stomped out, and the growth of society curtailed by timid and dogmatic minds. The best curricula have a solid core, with a range of options to customize a course of education for the particular interests of the student.

Never lose sight of the fact that the primary purpose of college is an advanced education. Personal development is secondary. About half of all people who start college do not graduate. Some can’t do the

work. Others get lost in personal development and never quite make it to class and homework. Getting you to college age with your head screwed on straight was the job of your parents. If they've made your life so easy that you have no ambition, or so hard that you feel and act like a hunted animal, then you should do your best to correct that now, whether you are headed for college, the trades, labor, or the armed forces. You are responsible for your own life, and the world already has an ample supply of layabouts and emotional basket cases. Start planning at the beginning of your junior year so you are not still trying to "find" yourself after graduation from high school.

3. How does a college work?

A college is a business that is centered around a creative group of entrepreneurs called "professors." Each full professor heads an enterprise that receives money from research grants and contracts and also from tuition, and employs assistant professors and graduate students to conduct research and to develop and teach classes.

The college exists to employ professors. The student body can be seen as one set of customers, or a flow of resources, or a necessary evil. This is a radical departure from your first 13 years of education, where the students were delightful little bundles of joy that the teachers could hardly wait to serve. You have to grab your education in college; no crinkly-eyed adult is going to deliver it to you on a platter.

4. Does everyone need to go to college?

Gracious, no, especially not to a four year residential college. If your talent lies in your hands, you will not improve it with years of math homework and Humanities term papers. Technicians might go to a trade school, wood craftsmen go to work, pop musicians form a band, classical musicians might go to a performing arts school, and LPNs might go to a community college – there is a path for each different manual skill, and your job is to find the path that best fits you and your ambitions.

So who *does* need to go to a four year college, borrow \$20,000 a year, take classes all day and study all night, and take the risk that there will be no available jobs when he or she finally gets out? Let's answer that question by looking at the three types of college majors:

a) Entrepreneurial majors – Journalism, performing arts, creative writing, film, sports, theater, etc. There are far more graduates of these programs than there are salaried jobs available. In addition, college graduates find themselves competing with well-qualified people who did not go to a four year college. Jobs in these fields go to those who are the most talented and aggressive, not the ones with the best college transcripts.

If you want to be a writer, then you should be writing now, and not waiting for some college program to give you permission. Acting, singing, making films, or playing music in public now. You should also be taking a close look at whether college will add enough to your skills and opportunities to be worth the time and expense.

b) Professional employment majors – Medicine, law, engineering, natural sciences, business, accounting, teaching, social work, etc. This is college at its best. You go 4 years for a Bachelors, more for a Masters, PhD, MD, MBA, JD, and then start work in a profession that will blossom and last the rest of your career. Admissions are competitive and the work is hard, but it could open a world that you didn't even know existed. Science and technology are not magic, just hard work and imagination.

c) Personal enrichment majors – History, political science, art, literature, English, philosophy, sociology, gender and diversity studies, media and communications, liberal arts, etc. There are not a lot of non-teaching jobs in these fields, so how do you get a job with one of these degrees?

Here it gets interesting. Corporations and government bureaucracies need a lot of literate and computer-skilled employees to keep all the gears turning – inventory and documents managed, bills paid, customers invoiced, regulations complied with, and, most important of all, their products have to be *sold*. Modern high schools do not teach sufficient computer skills and, sadly, competent writing. The result is that employers have come to regard a college degree as an entrance requirement for their desk and cubicle jobs. Maybe Dagwood Bumstead has a B.A. in Medieval Literature with a minor in Arthurian Legends and Lyrical Poetry. Maybe Sally Forth made a detailed study of the role of the media in the gender rights and diversity movements, in addition to coursework in scuba diving during two semesters in the Mediterranean. You get the point – personal enrichment majors can be lightweight and fun, but their career prospects are not so great, unless you have a lot of moxie and you can climb the ladder out of the cubicle farm.

Don't get lost in the process. The point of college is not just to rack up a unique set of majors and minors, but to wrap your arms around a field of study and make it yours. What you most seek in college and later in professional life is *understanding* of your field.

The purpose of the Humanities is to encourage you to develop your own philosophy of life by showing you the thinking and actions of those who came before you. You don't *have to* develop your own philosophy -- there are plenty of ready-made ones -- but if you practice one without understanding it, you could find yourself being led. Try to develop one that is based on real people and can pass the giggle test when it's summarized baldly.

5. “But I don't know what I want to do!”

Well, you'd better figure it out. The world is not kind to people who don't know what they want to do. Spend your 11th grade year researching the work that people do in this economy, and see which schools teach the fields you have interest in. Use the internet, and also go to the library and look at a book or two on careers. Get real, think big, proceed with confidence.

In the good old days, the world of white-collar work was distant and mysterious. Nowadays, you can type “What does a _____ do?” into a search engine and get pages of hits that will explain the field from different angles.

6. How do you appraise a college?

Go to the website for the college and read their detailed course descriptions. Then look at their course offerings for the present semester to see which of those courses they are actually teaching. More than anything else, a comparison of the apparent quality and availability of course offerings between colleges will separate the exciting ones from the average ones.

Next in importance is the amount of research in your field that is being conducted at the college. You can find this on the college website and also by searching the internet for references to the college and its professors in your field.

Third in importance is the quality of your fellow students, because the stiffer the competition in your classes, the more you will learn. Smarter and more engaged students also make better team members for project work. Student quality is more difficult to ascertain, but some colleges post ranges of test scores and high school rankings of their incoming freshmen, and guidebook listings like to tell how “selective” the admissions office is for each college.

Last in importance are all the things the guidebooks tell you to do – touring the campus, reading student reviews, looking at all the fluffy propaganda the college puts out. These are fun and alluring, but realize that they are quite subjective, and one yammering tour guide or disgruntled reviewer cannot predict the experience you will have at that college. As a rosy-cheeked bumpkin, you might be taken aback on a one day visit by the street noise and apparent chaos of a campus, but try to concentrate on the interior spaces

where college work is actually done. You'll get used to the outdoor environment after a few weeks living there, and come to like it by the end of the first year.

7. What is life in residential college like?

It's pretty simple on weekdays. You get up at 7, go to the dining hall and get breakfast, then walk to the classroom buildings and spend the day in different classes or studying in the library or working projects in the labs. You go to the dining hall for supper, maybe get in a bit of football or racquet ball or swimming or rock climbing, and then go to your room for an evening of studying, and get to bed by midnight or 2. It's total immersion, baby. Forget all the TV, internet, phone yakking, and texting you might have done in your previous life. You're not a spectator any more.

Many ideas come out of your subconscious. Apparently your brain works on vexing problems below your conscious level and pops up possible solutions into your consciousness. It's important to have regular, unfettered sleep so your subconscious can work, and to have quiet times so you can hear its results. Don't fall prey to the belief that you can study better with distractions.

"Getting behind the power curve" is airplane terminology for getting into a flight regime where drag is increasing at a greater rate than can be overcome with available power, and the aircraft must dive if it needs to increase speed (that would be a problem if you were near the ground). Hit it hard your freshman year so you don't get behind the power curve and have to struggle for the rest of your college career to bring up your average. Starting your sophomore year with a 3.6 average as a base is a lot better than having a 1.6 hanging around your neck.

So, take a large load of difficult courses and work hard on them. Physically, the late teens through early thirties is the prime of your life, and you are capable of feats of energy and stamina that kids and old folks can only dream about. Eat well, keep a positive attitude, and get plenty of exercise.

Find ongoing projects in your field that are bigger than you are and join the team and work on them, rather than picking up old-fashioned extra-curricular activities. If you can't find any good ones on campus, search the internet for all the challenges and competitions that are out there and join one at another institution or start your own team on your own campus. Project work gives you practical experience that complements the theory you are getting in classroom work, and you might hit a gusher that breaks out and becomes The Next Big Thing.

Project work will also reveal any inner talent you have as a leader, and allow you to build your skills in directing others. Modern organizations are continually searching for leaders who can power their future growth. Take charge and take responsibilities. Keep your eyes open for business opportunities and be prepared to run with one if it unfolds.

Stay away from the collectivist professors, especially the Marxists. Most every college humanities department is infested with them. They probably want your body.

And don't run off on some fevered crusade to save the world. If you've chosen a non-trivial field of study, *it* will be the salvation of the world, along with all the other fields that make up the economy and the civilization.

Your freshman year, there will be a group that wants you to play "house" the next year. Don't play house, and don't play "Animal House." There'll be plenty of time later for learning how to wash the dishes and pay the electric bill and get the garbage can out to the curb on the right day, and you'll figure it all out in about five minutes a day when the time comes. Right now it's total immersion, baby. You can go all four years as a dorm rat or join a frat or sorority if they have a good mix of advantages and responsibilities, but don't let them fill your days with games and alcoholic bull sessions and "honeydos."

College is not the same as high school. You are expected to get to know your professors on a personal basis, because they hold a lot more knowledge of your field than you do. Go to their offices regularly to get their perspective on homework problems and “What if?” questions, even if you think you understand it all. Tell them you want to work projects and ask if they’ve got any. It’s the real world – some professors will be clunkers, but others are fascinated with their fields and enjoy teaching and will do what they can to help you along. Also get familiar with your department bulletin board, because it’s a source of opportunities.

Two way conversation with professors and classmates is the whole *point* of going to college; otherwise you could just take courses on video or online.

College is mostly work, but take time on weekends for other things, some traditional and some experimental. Just remember that they are the sauce, not the main course. Figure out some transportation and get out of town once or twice per semester (going someplace other than home).

Project work and meetings take place on the weekends, and you will be surprised at how much time it takes to attend to all the details of a real project. You’ll also get in some overflow studying on the weekends.

Talk to others about ideas. I can’t tell you the meaning of your life and no one else can, either. You have to decide that yourself. If you want to “find” yourself, look in the mirror. You will see the companion that will be with you the rest of your life.

8. What could go wrong?

You get introduced to uncertainty in college, which is a part of the well-lived life. All of the good jobs involve uncertainty. Think of a surgeon cutting into a patient, a scientist embarking on a new project, an engineer starting a design, a lawyer taking on a new case, a pilot pushing the throttles forward at the end of a runway, a teacher walking into the first day of class, a fireman jumping into the truck and firing up the siren, a police officer getting a call over the radio. Before college, your parents shield you from most uncertainty, and it can drop on you pretty hard when they dump you in your dorm room and your mom gets all misty-eyed and slobbers over you.

A civilization can run out of gas when people lose their sense of self-reliance and start demanding certainty of the society and government. Workers put their priority on job security, old people “retire” with the support of tax dollars, and young people expect college education and high-dollar jobs to be provided like manna. In the society at large, certainty kills economic growth and innovation. Certainty is not sustainable.

In college, you will embrace uncertainty by taking a large load of difficult courses and working hard to succeed at them. If you don’t find the limits of your intellect, then you’re not reaching high enough. Take the jump. When you learn to conquer uncertainty, you’ll have a skill that will carry you the rest of your life.

Anyone who’s lived in a freshman dorm has seen a number of ways in which people fail to cope with uncertainty:

- a) Failure to engage – they never quite get it into gear. This is the most common cause of mediocrity. Passive people fall into lethargy when the spotlight is turned away or get sidetracked into pointless recreation.
- b) Lost children – they never get over their abandonment at college by their parents and seek to establish ties of dependency with others, at the cost of distraction.
- c) Lost souls – They fall into addictions that come to dominate their lives.

You have to develop your own sense of self and not get lured into these traps. If it smells bad, it probably is. If “everyone” says yes, and your spidey sense says no, trust your self. If you do stumble and fall, be confident that there is always a path back, and then find it.

There is a trend of kids delaying their entry into adulthood by taking a light load of easy courses and stretching out their college “experience” for as long as they can. Of course, this is a trap. Avoid it.

Life isn't fair. You have to be tough. Not punch-in-the-face tough, but inner tough. Be careful about listening to older people. Some of them came of age after the US had won the second world war and was king of the world economy. Good jobs hung from trees like succulent peaches. They might not have noticed that it's all changed in the last 20 years or so, and the US worker is now in head-to-head competition with workers in 20 other industrialized nations. We're doing pretty well in this competition, but our place in the future will be up to the ingenuity and perspiration of you and your classmates. The best thing the older people can do is to keep from hocking the whole country before you can come online.

9. What is a professional job like?

On your first day, they show you your boss, your desk, and the bathroom. Eventually they give you some small responsibilities to see if you can handle them. Some of them might act like they've got a career plan for you, but in reality it's up to you from that point on. You've got to come up to speed on the practical side of your profession, exercise the patience and perseverance necessary to learn to do state-of-the-art work, and then make your own mark on the world.

Don't be shy about working long, long hours as you gather experience. A healthy person in their mid-twenties can work around the clock, on occasion.

By the way, the job market goes up and down with the business cycles. If you graduate during a dry period, keep scrambling until you've clawed your way into that first job or first product. You don't want to become the 35-year-old underemployed dude living in Mom's basement.

10. Is it all worth it?

Yes.