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Following the Rules of the College and Career Game Can Help Students Reach Economic Independence, But Not All Students Benefit Equally, Georgetown University Report Says

Systemic change is needed to narrow equity gaps and prepare students for long-term career success

(Washington, DC, November 4, 2021) Over the past half century, postsecondary education has taken on an increasingly important role in career preparation in the United States, with profound effects on the life experiences of young adults. But while college tends to be a good investment, it involves significant risk based on program of study, level of educational attainment, and occupation after completion, says the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW). Its new research paper published in partnership with the Postsecondary Value Commission, *Navigating the College-to-Career Pathway: The 10 Rules of Moving from Youth Dependency to Adult Economic Independence*, underscores key considerations for students as they prepare to make one of the biggest financial decisions of their lives.

The growing strength of the relationship between postsecondary education and the workforce requires a deeper focus on career outcomes in the United States. The journey from college to gainful employment is not a smooth ride. Rising student debt loads, a fragmented approach to youth policy, and COVID-19's disruption of college enrollment plans have widened equity gaps and compounded the challenges students face on the pathway through higher education to economic independence.

“One major missing link on connecting postsecondary programs and careers is holistic and culturally competent counseling,” said Anthony P. Carnevale, lead author and CEW director. “All students would benefit from access to new and existing information about their postsecondary options.”

To differentiate among the myriad options on the postsecondary pathway, students and their families should follow these 10 rules of the college and career game.

Rule 1: Know before you go. Understanding the potential return on investment (ROI) before choosing a college and a program of study is complicated, but it is also crucial. In the short term, community colleges and certificate programs tend to have higher ROI, while in the long term, colleges that award bachelor's degrees are often the better investment.

Rule 2: When faced with poor job prospects due to recession, go to school. It's much better to enter the labor market during an economic recovery because a first job influences the earning and learning trajectory of a career. In contrast, entering the labor market during a recession can hinder advancement along an optimal career trajectory.

Rule 3: Get more postsecondary education if you can, because more education typically pays better and yields better employee benefits than less education. With each level of educational attainment, workers have higher median earnings. But race, ethnicity, and gender still matter: women earn less than men, and workers from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups earn less than White workers at the same levels of education.

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Rule 4: Choose carefully when selecting a major and program of study, since these factors may matter more than your education level. Earnings vary significantly by field of study. On average, more than 35% of full-time, full-year workers ages 25 to 64 with only a bachelor’s degree make more than the median earnings for workers with a master’s degree, while 27% of workers with an associate’s degree make more than the median for those with a bachelor’s degree.

Rule 5: Do not worry too much about where you go to school: institutional brand adds value, but not nearly as much as most people believe. College selectivity matters primarily because money matters: students are often better off investing their time and money at institutions with high per-student spending. But an employee’s industry, employer, and sector are all crucial factors in determining the college payoff. When it comes to labor-market returns, occupation and program of study generally matter most.

Rule 6: Realize that field of study alone does not determine workforce outcomes. Earnings within majors range widely. For example, the top 25% of bachelor’s degree holders with majors in the humanities and liberal arts earn more than the bottom 25% of architecture and engineering majors.

Rule 7: Know the costs and benefits of your choice of major: at the median, majors like humanities, education, and psychology rarely catch up with the highest-earning majors. Long-term earnings trajectories vary considerably by major, much as they vary by education level. While graduate education boosts earnings, it also tends to widen the disparities between STEM majors and humanities majors.

Rule 8: Seek out a curriculum that provides broad learning across disciplines as well as deep learning in a subject area. Both general liberal arts education and specific career education have value, and they can act as complements and substitutes for one another. The bachelor’s degree conveys an optimal balance of learning tailored to a field as well as learning about a wide range of subjects.

Rule 9: Focus on competencies required in individual occupations and common occupational clusters. Educational programming should be designed to yield the general competencies that are valued across the workplace—specifically, communication, teamwork, sales and customer service, leadership, and problem solving and complex thinking.

Rule 10: If you are a woman or a member of an underrepresented racial or ethnic group, the deck is stacked against you—so you will need to take additional measures to optimize your outcomes as long as our education and labor market systems remain unjust. Even if you follow every rule outlined above, systemic bias means that you will likely need to navigate around additional barriers on the pathway to a good job.

“Racial segregation and resource disparities among institutions are systemic problems that cannot be fixed through individual choices,” said Nicole Smith, CEW’s chief economist and a co-author of the research paper. “The same goes for differences in access, completion, and earnings among equally qualified White, Black, and Latinx groups—we can’t move the needle there without systemic change.”

While the 10 rules provide students with a clearer roadmap along the pathway to economic independence, administrators and policymakers can help smooth the pathway by following the paper’s key recommendations:

1. Mandate transparency and economic accountability for all postsecondary programs and institutions.
2. Enhance counseling and other student services.
3. Provide high-quality experiences that align education and work.

4. Come to terms with the underrecognized value of the intellectual and caring professions.
5. Conduct research on the economic and noneconomic value of different mixes of general and specific education.

To view the publication, visit cew.georgetown.edu/10rules.

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The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) is an independent, nonprofit research and policy institute that studies the links among individual goals, education and training curricula, and career pathways. CEW is affiliated with the Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy. For more information, visit cew.georgetown.edu. Follow CEW on Twitter [@GeorgetownCEW](https://twitter.com/GeorgetownCEW), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Medium](#).

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