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COLLEGE
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How College Has Evolved in 2019, and Why Students Should Trust the Process

By: Dillon Hulse

Getting an education in the United States has been a rote process for a long time now: Start the ball rolling in elementary school, develop good habits in middle school, do well in high school, get accepted into college, get a degree, and finally get a job and start earning a living. Variations appear here and there, of course; but, for many, this mandate is as natural as the Earth's orbit around the sun.

Except, a chink has begun to form in the armor of this absolution in recent years. Students are beginning to lose faith in this time-honored path, and the data seems to back it up. According to the 2017 College Student Survey, a collaborative effort between the Strada Education Network and Gallup, "Only a third of students believe they will graduate with the skills and knowledge to be successful in the job market (34 percent) and in the workplace (36 percent)."

"Heck yeah! I am very nervous, because I've been in school for so long," said Kameron Vincent, a senior English education major at Cal State Long Beach. "Then it's like, this is down to the wire, now, and I'm gonna be released into the real world, and that's really scary."

When asked about this trend, other students around the CSULB campus acknowledged apprehension for their prospects after graduation, as well. A common thread that arose in conversations with students were the nerves surrounding graduation as a huge transition in their

lives. For many young people, mechanically attending classes and completing assignments constitutes the chief priority through their early 20s.

“I guess a little bit nervous, because it is unknown; like, I’ve been a student since I was five, so I guess that’s the biggest reason why I am kind of nervous,” said Shanna Hie, who is currently pursuing her master’s in nutrition.

Unemployment rates for graduates have also increased over the years. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for people with a bachelor’s degree or higher has risen from 1.7 percent in April 1998 to 2.1 percent in April 2018.

So, what’s changed in the past 20 years? Wayne Tokunaga, a career counselor at the CSULB Career Development Center, or CDC, points to an evolving job market and a need for students to adapt their educational goals.

“10, 20, 30 years ago, experience wasn’t as coveted by employers; the degree was what generated interest in a potential employee and qualified their capacity for a job,” said Tokunaga.

“So, the difference is now employers pay particular attention to experiences.”

Despite these grim statistics, college can still be just as beneficial as it used to be. Students just need to step back and look at the big picture instead of simply homing in on a degree and jumping ship. To use an old adage, they need to stop and smell the roses along the way and try to soak up the process without being blinded by the goal.

“You’re learning certain skillsets that all employers want you to have, which a lot of students don’t realize,” said Tokunaga.

He’s referring to soft skills, things like time management, meeting deadlines, adaptability and teamwork. In contrast to “hard” skills, those directly focused on by a class or major like math or art, soft skills are acquired more organically through classwork, working with others and the overall exercise of attending college.

“Every single major has to develop all these skillsets in order to make it to graduation,” said Tokunaga. “As long as you realize this is what the employer is looking for, and you prepare how to explain these skills to the employer, then that’s how you’re going to get the job.”

Vice President of Student Affairs Mary Ann Takemoto also spoke about the value of these skills in an email response.

“Our world is changing so rapidly. Think about technology and increasing globalization. College teaches skills to learn flexibility and be open to new ideas,” said Takemoto.

Students approached were also able to identify benefits of the college experience which transcend the degree and hard skills gained.

“I think, part of it, in our society, is it’s kind of a coming of age experience, leaving home; I think that’s valuable, learning how to do things on your own,” said Antonio Castillo, a history major who graduated from University of California, Davis. “College is just the avenue that a lot of people choose, and that’s what I chose.”

Hie achieved her bachelor’s at Baylor University and appreciated how the Christian environment encouraged instruction and conversation on values and how to improve as a person, topics that she felt can slip through the cracks at more secular universities.

“I feel like Baylor kind of shepherded that and taught me that through the professors and also the students around me who had that culture,” said Hie. “That fed into ‘Oh, this is what’s expected of a person, and this is what a decent person does.’”

Additional data from the College Student Survey sheds light on why some students may feel underprepared after graduation. The survey’s results show that “nearly four in 10 students have never used their school’s career services resources. Overall, 39 percent of students have never visited their school’s career services office or used its online resources, including more than one-third of seniors.”

“Don’t hesitate to use the services of the Career Development Center,” said Takemoto. “They have a lot of great workshops and services to help prepare you for life after college.”

“Personally, at my university, there were a lot of resources and I just didn’t take advantage of a lot of them; so, if I don’t feel prepared, I don’t know if that’s entirely the university’s fault, cuz there are a lot of resources,” said Castillo.

Karvin Prado is an undergraduate peer advisor in the CDC at CSULB. He implores students to take the wheel and be responsible for their own success by forming relationships with professors and visiting their career centers.

“As a student, they should be able to take advantage of office hours. I feel that’s a great opportunity to communicate with the professors,” said Prado.

Traditionally, the CDC focuses on two goals: Helping students decide what they want to major in and, career-wise, what they want to do when they graduate. But, most importantly, career centers fill in the missing middle piece by instilling confidence in young people to apply what they’ve learned in order to get the job that they want.

“I think that’s the part that people don’t realize is gonna be part of the college experience,” said Tokunaga. “They think it’s only gonna be about acquiring the knowledge, but it’s this other stuff that’s gonna give you the confidence and make you more attractive to employers.”

The students interviewed for this article are optimistic about the future, despite the statistics shown in the College Student Survey.

“I feel pretty confident that I’m gonna be able to get a job right out of graduating, [but] there’s always that little voice in the back of my head, though, that’s like, ‘Oh my god, am I gonna be wasting my time and all of my money here, and I’m not gonna be able to get a job?’” said Vincent. “I feel pretty confident, though, that’s why I’m still here and pushing through it.”

“I feel mostly confident just because, I think, jobs for nutrition are pretty wide-spread; they’re usually hired in hospitals and food service organizations and food corporations,” said Hie. “So, I think for my major, I don’t feel too worried; I think I will be able to get a job.”

“For the students graduating, I would say, ‘Don’t be nervous, be open-minded,’” said Prado. “We should feel like, after graduating, we should be an asset to the team; we’re young, we’re hungry, we should be that determined.”

For any CSULB students that need help charting a path to the future – or just need a boost in confidence to cement the direction they’re headed – visit the Career Development Center on campus. It’s located at Brotman Hall in Room 250. Instead of just getting an education or getting a degree on the way to uncertainty, they can help students beat the statistics and achieve them.