

Advice on how — and whether — to go to college

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In a new book on college, author Jeffrey Selingo warns that earning a bachelor's degree no longer guarantees a good job offer, and gives practical advice for enlarging the experience.

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Journalist Jeffrey Selingo spent two decades writing about higher education as a reporter and editor for The Chronicle of Higher Education, a prestigious daily newspaper that covers the nation's colleges and universities. But when he shifted focus from writing about administrators and faculty, and started covering college from the perspective of students trying to get into the schools of their choice — and parents trying to pay for it — he began to view college in a different light.

Now, he's one of higher education's biggest critics.

He thinks it's wrong to tell every high-school graduate that they need to go to college, believes colleges are doing a poor job of preparing students for the workforce and wants to see the bachelor's degree completely redesigned.

“We've closed off more options for students by pushing college for all,” said Selingo, who is out with a new book, “There Is Life After College.”

That's not to say young people should stop their educations after high school, Selingo said in a phone interview last week. He's a proponent of encouraging students to look at all the options, including work experience, apprenticeships, technical degrees and taking a gap year after high school.

About 70 percent of high-school graduates go to college, Selingo said, but only 50 percent of those students graduate in four years. Many are left with student debt but no degree, which saddles them with loan payments but doesn't help them find a job. No employer ever advertises for a job that requires an incomplete college education, he noted.

In Washington state, about half of all high-school graduates go to a community or technical college, and Selingo advises those students to be intentional about what they're doing: They should aim to complete a technical degree — many workforce training degrees result in jobs that pay a solid middle-class wage — or they should transfer to a four-year college. “The associate degree should not be a terminal degree — sometimes it doesn't pay any more than a student with a high-school diploma,” he said.

And a student who gets a technical degree should be sure that the program connects to the workforce. Selingo praised Walla Walla Community College because of the way its [degree programs are matched up with jobs that pay well](#).

He thinks the nation's colleges and universities should do a better job of linking work and academic skills, and says the higher education system needs to come up with more options and pathways.

“U.S. colleges and universities have a strong bias against combining education with relevant work experience,” he writes in the book. “For American education to remain relevant to students, it must abandon the antiquated idea that schools and colleges broadly educate people for life while employers train them for jobs.”

In the book, Selingo praises a Seattle startup called Koru, which runs a kind of finishing school for recent college grads that [trains them to be ready for the workforce](#).

“Koru mostly focuses on that soft-skill development, and instills more confidence in students,” he said. “I think that’s the part that colleges can more easily replicate — and they don’t.”

Selingo is enthusiastic about the experiences that can be had in a gap year, a year off between finishing high school and starting college. [President Obama’s daughter Malia recently announced](#) that’s what she will do next year. “Be sure to find an experience that is totally unfamiliar and will force you to navigate through uncertain situations and perhaps even fail from time to time,” he writes.

Selingo’s book contains practical advice about picking the right college, choosing courses that will mean something to employers, and finding ways to gain career-building work experience. He describes six specific skills that employers believe are a better marker of success than an impressive transcript: Curiosity, creativity, grit, digital awareness, contextual thinking and humility.

Too many students have a passive relationship with college, Selingo said: “They wait for college to happen to them.” He calls for students to take control of their educations and seek out opportunities like internships to augment time spent in class.

A four-year degree, even from a college or university with a stellar reputation, he says, is no longer the automatic ticket to a good job.

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