

WITH THE IVY?

# The six college experiences that determine whether you thrive as an adult

By [Jenny Anderson](#) • October 2, 2018

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University of Anywhere.

Many of us think the college or university we attend matters a lot. If we go to Harvard, or Oxford, we will be happier, smarter, richer and land a killer job. A new report from Challenge Success, a nonprofit that is part of Stanford's Graduate School of Education, suggests this thinking is almost entirely wrong.

The [white paper](#), "A 'Fit' Over Rankings: Why College Engagement Matters More Than Selectivity" finds that college selectivity—Stanford's acceptance rate was 4.5% last year—does not determine how much a student learns, how happy they become or how satisfied they are with their jobs. "It appears that what students do in college is far more important than the type of institution they attend," the report says, quoting M.J. Mayhew, one author of *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence that Higher Education Works*. Time studying results in better student learning. Effort put into coursework results in better subject-matter understanding and general knowledge. Engagement with coursework increases curiosity, creativity and initiative, and not surprisingly, the more and the more effectively students study, the better they do in their courses. Better learning, it seems, is associated with better studying, not



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What about happiness and general life satisfaction? Since 2014, Gallup-Purdue has conducted a survey of job satisfaction and general well-being among college graduates, asking about workplace engagement and well-being as measured by purpose, social, financial, community and physical health. The [2014 results](#) include 1,557 associate-degree and 29,560 bachelor's-degree holders. The 2014 survey found no relationship between college selectivity and either broad measure of life satisfaction, arguing that what seems to matter is “what students are doing in college and how they are experiencing it.” The report compiles six college experiences that have an impact on how fulfilled employees feel later:

- Taking a course with a professor who makes learning exciting
- Working with professors who care about students professionally
- Finding a mentor who encourages students to follow personal goals
- Working on a project across several semesters
- Participating in an internship that applies classroom learning
- Being active in extracurricular activities

Gallup's survey cannot account for the fact that people are not randomly assigned to colleges. Background and parental income play a significant role, as do schools and access to information about the process.

But sending kids to Yale is no guarantee of the thing most of us claim to care about: being happy.

## Show me the money

OK, maybe selective colleges don't make you happier. Do they make you richer?

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Challenge Success' paper shows a complicated relationship between attending top-tier institutions and later earnings. [Some research](#) shows graduates of “high quality” institutions earn 6% to 8% more out of college than graduates of “low-quality” institutions (those which accept everyone). That percentage rises to 16% to 19% a decade after college.

The authors argue that it is hard to disentangle how much of this comes from the student and how much comes from the institution: Are the kids who get into the Ivies or OxBridge (Oxford and Cambridge) driving those higher salaries, or did those institutions make them more valuable for the job market?

S.B. Dale and A.B. Krueger explore this [in a novel study](#) in which they examine students who were accepted to similar and often the same selective institutions (the latest study included 14,238 students). Some went to the selective school, and some, though they were accepted, did not (this could be for financial reasons, geographical reasons, sports, etc.). The researchers then tracked both sets of students. If the institution had a significant effect, those who attended top-tier schools would outperform the ones who opted for “lesser” ones. They did not.

There was a caveat: the study did register a benefit for first-generation college students as well as underserved students. Yet for the majority, there was no effect.

Denise Pope, founder of Challenge Success and a senior lecturer at Stanford's Graduate School of Education, says that people are not so receptive to the idea that brand name in colleges do not matter. Many argue there is a “network” effect—that the people you meet in top-tier institutions shape your outcomes. She says there is no conclusive evidence proving this. “You would be surprised how many people push back on this,” she said. “They absolutely believe going to more a selective school makes a difference, because they feel it's helped them.”

Their sample group, she notes, can be quite small (starting at one).

## So what's a tiger parent to do?

The pressure to get into a “good” college has never been higher and the consequences of that pressure never clearer—[unhappy kids](#). Pope says Challenge Success undertook the paper because survey data from more than 100,000 students revealed the two most stressful parts of being a teenager are 1) overload—too much work and extracurriculars and 2) college admissions. Challenge Success works with schools to tackle the first, showing evidence that too much homework is counterproductive and that reworking



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schedules can ease the pressure. But the second one seemed to be out of everyone’s control. “They think the stakes are so high,” she said.

Aside from exploring the connection between selectivity and student outcomes, the report also debunks college rankings, showing the how subjective and flawed individual components that make up the rankings (for example, two of the most heavily weighted metrics are “peer reputation” and guidance counselor reputation, based on surveys that administrators take about other institutions, for a total of 22.5% of a school’s score). “It’s safe to say that most college administrators and high-school counselors don’t know the inner workings of even a few —much less all—colleges well enough to accurately evaluate their quality on a year-to-year basis,” the reports says. The other biggest components— graduation and expected graduation rates—do not account for family background, which heavily influences the likelihood of a student graduating in six years. “It was surprising to see just how problematic the rankings are,” Pope said.

Pope says she hopes the white paper paper will show parents the stakes do not have to be as high as they think. There are 4,5000 colleges in the US and plenty could be a good fit—if we could all get over our fixation with getting into the brand names.

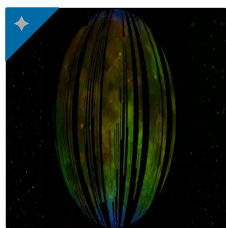
“The parenting instinct is you want what’s best for your kid,” she says. “If someone tells you ‘these are the best’, you’re going to do stuff to make that happen.”

Her report shows that the best for one might not be the best for all. Whether parents and students chose to heed this advice is another story.



edited by john mancini, harvard, stanford, ivy league, gallup

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