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Elite Colleges Don't Buy Happiness for Graduates

Poll of 30,000 Grads Finds Strongest Correlation Between Inspiring Professors and Future Well-Being

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A word to high-school seniors rejected by their first choice: A degree from that shiny, elite college on the hill may not matter nearly as much as you think.

A new Gallup survey of 30,000 college graduates of all ages in all 50 states has found that highly selective schools don't produce better workers or happier people, but inspiring professors—no matter where they teach—just might.

The poll, undertaken this spring, is part of a growing effort to measure how well colleges do their jobs. This survey adds an interesting twist, because it looked not only at graduates after college; it tried to determine what happens during college that leads to well-being and workplace engagement later in life.

The poll didn't measure graduates' earnings. Rather, it was rooted in 30 years of Gallup research that shows that people who feel happy and engaged in their jobs are the most productive. That relatively small group at the top didn't disproportionately attend the prestigious schools that Americans have long believed provided a golden ticket to success. Instead, they forged meaningful connections with professors or mentors, and made significant investments in long-term academic projects and extracurricular activities.

"It matters very little where you go; it's how you do it" that counts, said Brandon Busteed, executive director of Gallup Education. "Having a teacher who believes in a student makes a lifetime of difference."

The poll is the brainchild of former Indiana Republican Gov. Mitch Daniels, who became president of Purdue University in January 2013. As he prepared for the job, Mr. Daniels said he kept bumping into the same problem: a lack of benchmarked data to measure the value of a college degree. Last spring, during a trip to Gallup's D.C. offices, he seized on the idea of applying their engagement and well-being questions, which had been used in other contexts, to college graduates. The index will soon be broken down to the level of individual schools "for those that have the will, and frankly, the nerve," Mr. Daniels said.

"There is a lot we don't know about higher education, and there is a sense it's skating on its reputation," Mr. Daniels said. "We needed to know with more rigor how well the experience is serving people."

The poll found that just 39% of college graduates feel engaged at work—meaning, for instance, that they enjoyed what they did on a daily basis and are emotionally and intellectually connected to their jobs. And only 11% reported they were "thriving" in five different aspects of their lives, among which are financial stability, a strong social network and a sense of purpose.

That relatively small handful of graduates—who tend to be more productive—went to a variety of colleges, though they were slightly more likely to go to larger schools and less likely to have attended for-profits.



The strongest correlation for well-being emerged from a series of questions delving into whether graduates felt “emotionally supported” at school by a professor or mentor. Those who did were three times as likely to report they thrived as adults. Graduates who reported having “experiential and deep learning” were twice as likely to be engaged at work as those who didn’t.

University of Pennsylvania Professor Martin Seligman, who has studied the psychology of happiness, said it was impossible to know whether the college experiences Gallup asked about were the cause of later success or simply coincidental to it.

“One hopeful possibility is that if college were changed to produce more emotional support, this would result in much more engagement later in life,” he wrote in an email. “Another, less interesting possibility” is that people engaged at work who said they were emotionally supported in college are simply upbeat to begin with, and that rosy outlook colors their memories.

Other, less fuzzy correlations were between debt and entrepreneurship. About 26% of graduates with no undergraduate debt started their own business, compared with just 20% of those carrying debt from \$20,000 to \$40,000. Nearly three-quarters of U.S. college graduates leave school with debt; among those who do, the average is nearly \$30,000. Graduates with that amount of debt were one-third as likely to report they were “thriving” as graduates without debt reported.

The survey’s most dramatic takeaway—that graduation from an elite college provides no discernible advantage over Podunk U—echoes a refrain that began getting traction about a decade ago. Stacy Dale, an economist at Mathematica, a New Jersey research firm, co-wrote a paper in 2004 that found that students who were accepted to elite schools, but attended less selective schools, went on to earn just as much money as their elite counterparts.

“Individual traits matter more than where you went,” Ms. Dale said. “It’s a lot more important what you learn later in life than where you got your undergraduate degree.”

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