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Book Review: Choosing College

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Book Review:

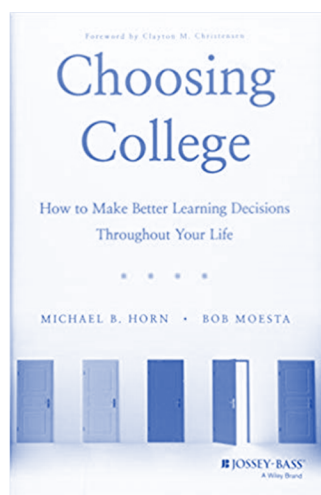
Choosing College: How to Make Better Learning Decisions Throughout Your Life



Reviewed by
Alice Anne Bailey (Southern Regional Education Board)

While we have witnessed a significant increase over the past fifteen years in the number of students who enroll in education after high school, credential completion has remained stubbornly stable over the same time period. The statistics are sobering. Only 30 percent of students complete a bachelor's degree in four years, and only 60 percent of students complete a four-year degree in six years.

The book *Choosing College* tries to answer the all-too-familiar question of why so many students who enroll in education after high school fail to complete a credential. Horn and Moesta's main premise is that many students go to college without a clear understanding of *why* they want to go and exactly *what* they want to get out of the experience, which can create a mis-match between their education goals and the institution they attend, leading to dissatisfaction and ultimately, dropout. "In the United States, we have a college-choosing problem," the authors write (p. 13).



As we see in our work as college access professionals, this match and fit problem impacts low-income and first-generation students to a greater degree than students who have parents with postsecondary credentials. While most students apply to seven to ten colleges, thereby increasing their chances of match and fit as well as institution-specific scholarships and better financial aid packages, the students we serve typically apply to only one, with little thought about whether it is the right institution to help them meet their goals.

For example, in my own research interviewing very low-income high school students across the country, most students reported Googling one institution they had heard of for some reason, then going to that institution's website and following the steps to apply. Very few had taken time to first explore whether that institution offered a major they were interested in, whether their academic qualifications were a "match," or whether they would be happy with the school size, culture, extracurriculars, geographic location, etc. Students explained that their own experience with education was attending the school they were zoned for, then following



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the requirements to complete a diploma. They had little understanding of the diversity of postsecondary choices.

Therefore, *Choosing College*, which is clear, straightforward, and easy-to-read, is a good resource for school counselors and college access professionals to use in their work with students and families. The authors recommend that a student's search process follow three basic steps: 1) Know thyself – Think about what you want out of a college experience; 2) Identify matches – Explore schools to identify which ones meet your needs, then make a list of possibilities; and finally, 3) Check and choose – Review each school on the list to determine which one meets most of your needs. The premise is simple, yet not often followed by students and parents.

Advice for Students

Horn and Moesta frame the task of selecting a college as “hiring” an institution for a “job to be done” – similar to the analogy as purchasing and using the right tool to help you accomplish a specific task. Just as you need the right tool for the right job, so too you need to clearly define and understand your personal end goal and have a clear understanding of what success looks like before you start reviewing and selecting schools. The first question school counselors and college advisors should ask students, before embarking on the search or application process, is, “What do you want a postsecondary degree or credential to do for you?”

The term “job,” which sounded odd to me at first, is actually a fitting analogy because it acknowledges the amount of work that students will have to do to achieve their end goal – college is a “job to be done,” not an ethereal aspiration. And the frame of “hiring” a college is important because students are indeed consumers who are paying for a product, and, like all consumers, they expect the product to work well for them. For that amount of money, students should receive significant value and satisfaction from their purchase.

In their research, Horn and Moesta conducted in-depth interviews of 200 current post-secondary students. Qualitative analysis of responses found that students' reasons for attending college, their “jobs to be done,” fell into one of five types:

Get Into the Most Competitive School Possible.

Students with this “job” seek the classic brick and mortar college experience as well as the prestige of belonging to a school with a good reputation; they want to meet new people and reinvent themselves in some way.

Do What's Expected. These students are going to college to satisfy others because it's what everyone in their lives has told them they should do to have a better future.

Get Away. These students are not sure what they want to do after high school but are looking to escape from a dead-end job, a bad home life, a dysfunctional

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relationship, a town with limited job opportunities, etc. They seek change in their lives and are not concerned with the prestigiousness of a school or how relevant a school's programs are to their interests.

Step it Up. These students want to do better in a career. They have a clear focus on what they need to do next and have a specific time frame in mind – for example, working adults who seek a career change.

Extend Yourself. These students are interested in learning for learning's sake and have the time, money, and freedom to do so. They report an intrinsic motivation to learn as much as they can about a specific topic.

The authors then make practical recommendations for students who find themselves in each situation, or “job” type. (I focus here on recommendations for the audience we in the school counseling and college access community most often serve.):

1. For those whose “job” is to get into the *most competitive school possible*, students should find the campus that will provide the experiences they are looking for in order to be happy and fulfilled.

2. If students who are going just to *do what's expected*, however, they should consider taking a meaningful gap year to help find themselves and determine their goals. Or they should select a low-risk/low-stakes school

and attend for only a short time while working to transfer where they'll be happier. Or, they should find something else that makes them happy, such as a job.

3. Students who want to *get away* should first be honest with themselves about why they are leaving, then take time to learn their strengths and passions as well as what they do and don't like. Instead heading straight into a four-year college, the authors recommend that these students explore low-cost/low-risk options such as community or technical college, trade school, or apprenticeships.

Horn and Moesta caution students that “taking on lots of debt for something about which you lack passion is unwise.” (p. 223). This is good advice. *Choosing College* recognizes the valuable role that associate degrees and technical diplomas play in preparing workers for careers. As the authors note, some professions that require a technical diploma, a two-year degree, or low-cost IT certifications can have higher starting salaries than those that require a four-year degree. The book also recognizes the reality that students face in terms of weighing costs of attendance, loans, and expected salary upon graduation. As the authors caution, “not all investments are good investments” (p. 118) because college does not pay off for many people, even if they complete a degree.

But reading the book through an equity lens, I wondered. What if four-year college investments are good for students from high-income households, but not for students from

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low-income ones? What if circumstances beyond a student's control force them into the *Get Away* job type, but they would be in the *Best School Possible* job type if they had the financial means to do so? Some students have a desired "job to be done" but cannot afford to buy the right tool for that job. They may feel dissatisfied with their college experience and unable to pursue the career they are passionate about.

Horn and Moesta report demographics for the overall population interviewed, which does mirror the currently enrolled student population. But further research needs to be done to determine the demographic makeup of which students fall into which of the five job types. I would guess that the *Best School Possible* job is comprised mostly of students from high income families with at least one parent who attended college, but greater numbers of low-income and first-gen students fall into the *Get Away* and *Do What's Expected* jobs. This is concerning, because as the authors note, students who are most at-risk of not knowing what they want out of a college experience, thus, those most likely to mismatch and dropout, are those with *Do What's Expected* and *Get Away* jobs. One recommendation for students in these two jobs is take time to find themselves first, then pursue higher education at a later date when they have a more informed plan. Another is to re-think the value of college as the solution. I have a problem with that.

We know that when students meet with school counselors to discuss postsecondary

plans, they are more likely to complete the FAFSA and apply to education after high school. In fact, when they are able to meet with a school counselor, African American and first-gen students are more likely than White or non-first-gen students to name that counselor as most helpful and having the greatest influence on their postsecondary decisions. Yet, African American and low-income students are less likely to have access to a school counselor, and students in large, high-poverty schools are less likely to seek out school counselors for postsecondary planning. Without access to a qualified adviser, these students are less likely to have the information they need about their postsecondary options, more likely to have *Do What's Expected* and *Get Away* jobs, and more likely to apply to institutions that are not the right fit.

Horn and Moesta encourage these students with *Get Away* and *Do What's Expected* jobs to consider short-term postsecondary options. Yet not all certificate programs, technical diplomas, etc. truly pay off. As Itzkowitz (2019) notes: 82 percent of certificate-granting institutions (and 72 percent of associate degree programs) have a majority of graduates who earn less than the average salary of a high school diploma holder.

Students need knowledgeable advisers to help them explore the graduation rates and average salaries of alumni from different institutions in order to make informed decisions. In order for this to happen, students need greater access to, and more

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time with, school counselors and college access advisers. In addition, counselors and access advisers need more (and more frequent) training in college and career counseling so they are up-to-date on the most recent data.

It is critical in our jobs as counselors and advisors that we help our students pursue the *Best School Possible* job. To do that, we must help students to “know themselves” – their likes, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses. We need to help them better develop an understanding of what careers are really like, what they want to get out of their education after high school, and what postsecondary option will leave them most fulfilled. We must also continue to work with policy-makers to break down the financial barriers that prevent students from pursuing the college experience they most desire.

Likewise, we need to do a better job with exposing students more fully to different types postsecondary choices so they can determine fit. In the corporate world, HR professionals often provide “realistic job previews” of available positions, covering both the “good” and the “bad” so that employees can make informed decisions in accepting an offer. Realistic job previews have been shown to significantly reduce turnover rates among employees. How can we provide similar realistic previews of postsecondary institutions for students? The preferable but expensive option is in-depth campus visits, which again favor the wealthy over students from low-income households. We need to

explore emerging technology options, such as virtual reality programs that allow students to experience what a campus is like from a distance.

Advice for Postsecondary Institutions

As Horn and Moesta note, education is a two-sided process, similar to finding the right spouse: Just as students must know what they want to get out of their college experience, so too schools must understand what students are really trying to accomplish:

“Understanding the Jobs for which students hire an institution...gives institutions the ability to zero in on what matters to their key constituents.” (p. 205). The authors offer several laudable recommendations for how institutions can better serve low-income students, such as finding ways to unbundle the elements of a prestigious college experience (study abroad, gap year, etc.) and offer each individually in a more cost-effective and affordable manner. When serving students who have *Get Away* jobs, the authors provide good advice on how colleges can create meaningful programs to help students discover a sense of purpose and what they want out of a postsecondary experience.

Horn and Moesta also address a critical issue facing many colleges today: more institutions, particularly small liberal arts colleges, are closing their doors each year. The authors propose that in order to survive, institutions should specialize by providing services to meet only one or possibly two of the goal


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types. Schools should consider creating a niche, then re-organizing and marketing themselves specifically to a job type—for example, as a transfer college for students who did not get in their first- or second-choice school(s). The authors recommend that colleges change the admission process and the orientation of how they serve students:

“Focus on serving students in a particular job – and then [serve] only students in that job. If [students] are in a different job from the one your program serves, then direct them elsewhere” (p.216).

While this makes sound business sense, particularly for at-risk schools, again I thought, “What if high income students fall into *Best School Possible* jobs, but low income and first-gen students fall into *Get Away* jobs?” What does admitting and serving only a single job type do to the homogeneity of the student population and the future of higher education? Does this limit the full college experience? To spur students’ social, emotional, and academic growth, we want them to be exposed to as many different types of people from as many different backgrounds and perspectives as possible.

Even though I have equity concerns with a few of the suggestions in the book, overall, *Choosing College* is a helpful read for students, families, school counselors, and college access professionals. As early in the postsecondary planning process as possible, students need to answer questions such as, “Why do I want to go to college?” “What do I ultimately want to get out of the experience?” and “What end

goal am I trying to accomplish?” By helping students first know themselves and what they want their education to do for them, we can then help students think through what will be the best and most cost-effective tool for the job. Your “job” to be done is to check out this book. 

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