



ADAPTATION





V A L U E

## PROPOSITION

With more people going to college, how do we  
calculate the worth of our degrees?

WORDS BY LAUREN LOFTUS

PHOTOS BY LAUREN LOFTUS & LESLIE GRIFFY

“YOU WILL LEARN about life when you play The Game of Life” goes the original 1960 television jingle advertising what’s become one of the most popular board games of all time. Sure, if we all agree that life, like the game, begins with the choice of whether or not to go to college, and not during the years that come before.

Positioned as the first big decision a person must make as an independent adult—start working and make money right away versus taking out a loan to earn a college degree and, hopefully, access higher-paying careers later—the game’s starting line insinuates that the choices are equal, and both are gambles. Choose one path, lose out on something significant on the other, it implies. And while that may have been true in 1960s America (and certainly in 1860 when board game pioneer Milton Bradley first dreamed up The Checkered Game of Life in which the goal wasn’t to make the most money but simply to make good and honorable choices), the stakes seem much more skewed today.

Ask any college graduate or incoming student over the past few decades and they’ll say there was never really a choice at all: It’s college or bust, baby.

Whether it’s parents, classmates, career guidance counselors, myths about ascending in socioeconomic status, their subconscious, or a childhood game, the modern college-eligible person is surrounded by forces telling them the best, most fulfilling, and therefore most valuable life begins with a bachelor’s degree. It follows, then, that never before has there been more pressure to get one.

Almost 90% of all high school graduates now spend some time in higher education, whether at a traditional four-year university, community college, or in online programs, per a 2016 report from the Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education. And according to the most recent U.S. Census numbers, 36% of people age 25 and older had at least a bachelor’s degree in 2020—a 6-point increase over the previous decade. Similar gains were measured across all racial groups.

## It seems Sisyphean to attempt to calculate the value of a degree against the backdrop of an unknowable future.

With a growing number of people attending college, it can be argued that the value of an undergraduate degree—no longer a rarity—is changing. So, as humans are wont to do, we adapt and shift focus to assign value in other ways. Those same students will tell you that while college is a given, not just any bachelor’s degree will do. It should be from a good school. Your chosen major should set you up for success after college by offering coveted internships and generating networking opportunities. It should be practical but also fulfill a lifelong passion. And help others. And make you a lot of money. And. And. And.

That’s a lot of pressure to put on young people (most undergrads are under 24 years old). Make one big decision—a life-altering decision—only to be confronted with yet more choices, we tell them. What happens if they choose wrong?

Take **Malarie Howard ’14**, a communication major who

studied filmmaking and writing at Santa Clara despite her parents’ desire that she study engineering or business, which they felt would lay a more straightforward path to steady employment after school. Howard found a compromise between their desires and hers in a copywriting gig at a tech startup in San Francisco after graduating. By all measures, a “good job.”

“I was so miserable. I was not living my truth,” she says of the year she spent working there, pushing herself past her limits to work more and more hours. The stress of it culminated in a stint in the hospital to deal with anxiety and mental health issues. “But it was the best thing that could’ve happened to me. It woke me up.”

Now Howard is living in Los Angeles, working as a writer on the CW crime drama *In the Dark*. She’s excited about recently selling a script, a dark comedy based on her tumultuous experience right after college. She says she’s much more stable, ironically, in Hollywood, where work is never guaranteed. Her contentment, she says, can be attributed to no longer ignoring her gut feelings—about jobs, about working with good people, about not doing something just because it is what’s expected of her. An invaluable lesson she says she learned in, you guessed it, college.

“I guess it’s a theme that carries on from touring the campus at Santa Clara for the first time when I was in high school: Go with your gut,” she says. “I had no reason to go there, other than it just felt like I should. It felt like the right place to be.” It’s where she learned how to write compelling characters—in classes for her history minor, in particular, she learned to consider how context affects a person. “Now I write characters by considering what’s going on in the world around them: How did they grow up? What’s the political climate like? How do they fit in socially?” Outside the classroom, it’s where she learned about herself.

Cheesy, Howard admits, but true. “At that age, you’re trying to figure out who you are,” she says. “So you’re trying on these different hats and seeing what clicks for you.” She learned to bet on herself, and that’s a game-winning strategy.

### FACTORING FOR THE FUTURE

There’s no mathematical equation to calculate the worth of a college degree. Still, it’s something that’s debated among higher-education researchers, professors, students, and politicians. (Many of whom, it should be noted, have advanced degrees.) A 2019 *Forbes* article asks the very question and concludes that, yes, according to the Federal Reserve, college remains a sound investment. A degree leads to higher earnings—the average graduate earns about \$33,000 more than those with only a high school diploma.

Meanwhile, the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University assesses the return on investment (ROI) on a specifically liberal arts education: Its ranking of 4,500 institutions found that bachelor’s degrees from private colleges have a higher return than those awarded by public colleges 40 years after enrollment. Furthermore, the median return on a liberal arts education is \$200,000 higher than the median for all colleges.

Good news for Santa Clara University, which continues to post record application numbers. SCU received more than 8,600 applications for the incoming Class of 2025, a 5% increase over the past year. That’s despite a nationwide trend of dwindling applications, due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Daniel Press**, the new dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, SCU’s largest school, credits a spirit of flexibility and readiness to pivot. “There’s this core willingness to



not just endure but to flourish in this time. Whether explicitly or implicitly, much of the Santa Clara community understands that this is one of those historical moments that require a real stepping up,” he says, pointing to the hours upon hours faculty and staff spent improving their tech skills to continue connecting with students during remote instruction.

Even pre-COVID-19, Press, who came to SCU in 2020 after 28 years at UC Santa Cruz, says Santa Clara stood apart for its student-first focus, at least on the part of faculty. “They’re thrilled by their students. They’re impressed by their students. They believe in their students ... and having that predisposition, that bond, it was strengthened, not weakened during COVID,” he says.

Kumbaya as that may be, it doesn’t fully explain the value-add of attending college, let alone a small, liberal arts school like Santa Clara. After all, an estimated 65% of Generation Z (those born between 1995 and 2015) could end up in jobs that don’t even exist yet due to exponentially evolving technology, according to the MacArthur Foundation’s Digital Media and Learning initiative. It seems Sisyphean to attempt to calculate the value of a degree against the backdrop of an unknowable future.

“What does it mean to prepare students today for tomorrow? It means adaptation, resilience. It means suppleness and civility,” Press says.

We could be cowed by the idea we’re preparing for battle against an unknown enemy, but why does there have to be an enemy at all? It’s hard to see the forest for the trees, but this is the way it’s always been—society changes and evolves, humans adapt and continue pushing the needle.

“When I started off teaching environmental studies in the early ’90s, parents would say, ‘What’s that? What is my kid going to be able to do?’” Press gives as an example. “And I would tell them, look, there’s no shortage of work to do on the environment. It’s only going to become more

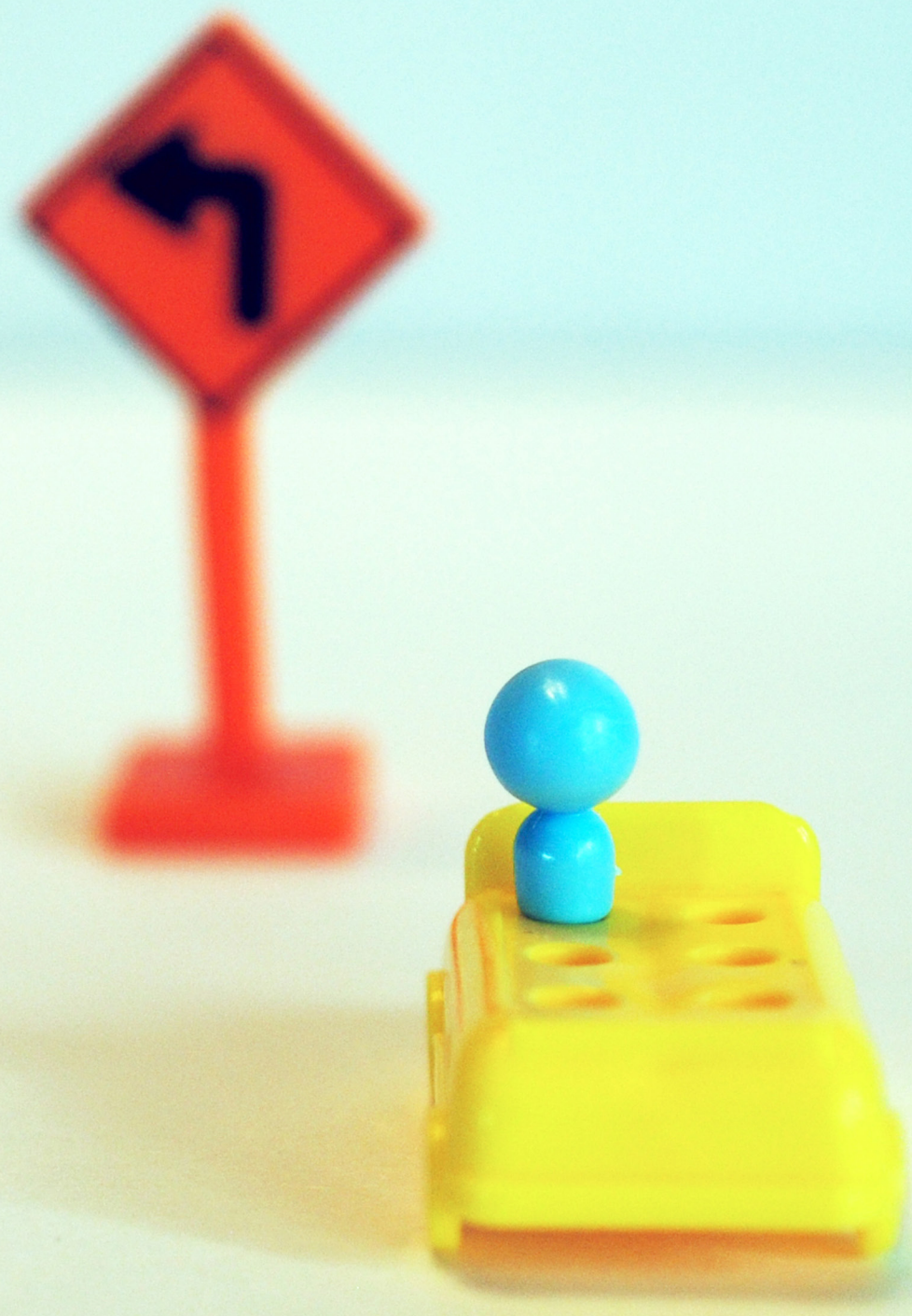
important.” As with any job in the history of humankind, sustainability and environmentalist jobs didn’t exist until people curious about oceans and solar energy and concerned about their carbon footprints created them. “There’s a certain kind of hustle that we are trying to prepare students for. Be the agent yourself, it’s not all going to be given to you,” Press says. “Be the person who identifies the need for improvement, change, innovation, revelation.”

Most incoming students are at least somewhat aware of the need to ensure the highest possible return on their college investment dollars (either via their families or loans)—by getting good internships and, later, lining up good entry-level jobs. As part of orientation a few years ago, **Rose Nakamoto**, director of Santa Clara’s Career Center, says the vast majority of first-year students said they think about their future every single day. That’s consistent with the nationwide trend of people going to college not to expand their worldviews or become inquisitive scholars—at least, those aren’t the primary reasons—Nakamoto says, citing UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute findings that 83.5% of college freshmen said the No. 1 reason was really “getting a better job.”

That short-term goal-setting is a point of tension for liberal arts institutions “where we focus on the long-term gains and the long-term value of a holistic education,” says Nakamoto, “of becoming a citizen of the world.” Most people aren’t that forward-thinking. With Gen Z in particular, many “grew up during a time of economic uncertainty [post-9/11, during the Great Recession, etc.] and so there’s a greater concentration, a focus, on practicality,” she says.

Throw in the highly pressurized, competitive environments of hyper-college-focused K-12 schools and college prep programs and the cost of higher education, and its unsurprising consumers—*err* students—“have greater expectations for the ROI ... and better professional outcomes,” Nakamoto says. Of course, they’re anxious to





deliver by picking practicality or stability over passion.

"I don't think it has to be an either-or proposition, but that's the picture that often gets painted," she says. Santa Clara, a Jesuit institution founded on the ethos of social justice and ethics, can also be (and is) a genuinely innovative, future-focused center of STEM learning, positioned as we are in the heart of Silicon Valley. "I hear time and time again an employer say, 'Stanford students are brilliant, but they want to come in and tell me how to run my business,'" Nakamoto says. "Santa Clara students are open to learning and they're hungry and they're engaged and they work hard." While getting a job may be the goal of all that learning in college, it's the ability to learn itself that proves incredibly valuable to future employers.

#### EVALUATING MAJORS

Professor of English **Michelle Burnham**, who co-directs SCU's Center for the Arts and Humanities, says she's dismayed by this trend of choosing practicality over preference. "I think students' relationship to their major has changed quite a bit, and that change really happens before they even get to college ... it's unfortunately based on a lot of misinformation," she says.

As a result of labor economists predicting the demand for specific technical skills in a future job market, the arts and humanities have suffered certain losses. Of the more than 1.9 million bachelor's degrees awarded in the 2015-16 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics found that most were conferred in the fields of business and health sciences. Meanwhile, education studies suffered the most dramatic loss—19% fewer than in 2005-06—while English, philosophy, and religious studies also posted significant decreases over the decade.

"That becomes doubly unfortunate because the job students think they are preparing themselves for, by majoring in what appears to them to be a practical or immediately applicable field, they could have gotten that same job with a humanities degree," Burnham says. Students are "practicing a kind of risk aversion in their major selection," which she understands stems from familial or personal anxiety over an uncertain job market. "But in those instances where I see students making their way through four years of college studying something they don't love, that feels painful to me."

To help circumnavigate some student anxiety, Burnham has become more proactive in incorporating career-readiness tactics into her classes. For example, the English Department has ramped up its internship program and brought in consultants to help students "identify and give names to the skills they had gained as English majors and learn to articulate them and translate them into language that would be of value in the job marketplace," she says. They might not realize there could be a place for them right down the road at the massive tech campuses that employ people with many different skill sets, "not just engineers."

Though, that's not to say that if engineering or accounting or business or whatever "practical" major *de jour* is your passion, you shouldn't pursue it. It's just, "if there are no humanities minds and sensibilities intersecting with an engineering or a business mindset, we're in trouble," Burnham says. If business, technology, medicine, education, all the fields that form functioning societies are "approached with too little of the human dimension and too much of the profit margin dimension, we're not making the world better."

As the Bay Area's tech industry skyrocketed and cost

of living and rents followed suit, exploding in the post-Great Recession recovery, the already high pressure on local college grads to land solid, well-paid jobs reached boiling. "If you're a student in this environment where everything's expensive and competition for top jobs is tight, there's a lot of pressure to start working immediately," says **Ramsey Allington '01**, who majored in liberal studies, which included social sciences, natural sciences, and the humanities; traditionally, liberal studies majors went on to become K-12 teachers. (Though liberal studies is no longer a major at Santa Clara, the College of Arts and Sciences offers both a Child Studies Program and an Individual Studies Program, which allows majors to design their own catalogue of classes with a multidisciplinary perspective.)

After graduation, Allington started working at Google, where he's now chief of staff in the phones and wearables division. He credits his "broad-based education" for his long, rewarding career at one of the biggest tech companies in the world. "The range of classes, professors, classmates, and collaborative classroom environment gave me a Swiss Army knife of skills to be in many situations, pulling from critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, how to be intentional and empathetic," he says.

Something Allington thinks more colleges could do to better set up their students for success is to start discussing with them what comes next sooner, and help students see the ways their academic interests apply in various careers. There's no real preparation for life post-graduation. "It's that transition they [both students and schools] haven't nailed yet."

## Society changes and evolves, humans adapt and continue pushing the needle.

As such, Allington tells the current SCU students he mentors as a member of the College of Arts and Sciences Leadership Board to get as much "real world" experience as possible prior to graduation. These are students like **Melody Yang '20**, a business major from Taiwan who wasn't sure about switching her major to engineering or computer science and prolonging her graduation date (potentially problematic for an international student dependent on visas) or sticking with Management Information Systems and figuring out how to gussy it up on her resume. "We identified ways, such as the Maker Lab [in the School of Engineering], where she could develop her technical skills without extending her time in school," Allington says.

Ultimately offered a job as a software engineer at Apple after graduation, Yang says she hustled to take advantage of every career prep opportunity she could find at Santa Clara—from networking groups and mentorship circles to career fairs and student clubs. She also took some outside coding classes.

"I don't remember a day I didn't stress about having an internship," she says. "You have to learn skills that are attractive to recruiters. Taking classes wasn't enough, they're looking for leadership, technical skills ... you have to package it nicely, so an employer finds you valuable."





#### ADDING SUPPORT

Choosing “unpractical” majors—or, as we’ve learned, majors with less obvious applications in a tech-focused job marketplace—may feel like a kind of risk for those students whose families can easily cover the cost of tuition or who otherwise do not need to worry about financial stability. There’s societal and class pressure to perform as well as or better than one’s parents in one’s personal game of life. If your mother is a successful lawyer, for example, it follows that you’d feel compelled to strive for a similar level of success (and salary). But what about those students who are the first in their families to go to college? In addition to feeling pressure to perform, they also have to navigate an unknown landscape alone, often without financial support from their families.

In light of these mounting hurdles, it’s no wonder that first-generation students are less likely to graduate on time (48% compared to 66% of non-first-gen students, according to the National Center on Education Statistics) or graduate at all (33% drop out of their undergraduate program within three years). They also earn less on average than their peers. Starting salaries are 12% less on average for first-gen graduates, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

Nevertheless, despite incredible odds, first-generation college students are a fast-growing population at nearly all institutions of higher education. According to the national Center for First-Generation Student Success, 56% of undergraduate students in the U.S. were first-generation in 2015–16, meaning their parents did not have a bachelor’s degree though they may have attended some college. Universities must then offer vigorous packages of support to this growing population to deliver on their promises to shape students who will go on to build a more just, equitable world.

At Santa Clara, the LEAD Scholars Program was

established in 2003 to build a more inclusive community and enhance support for underrepresented student groups, especially first-generation students. **Zakiya Cooper ’23**—whose parents pushed hard for her to apply to college, enrolling her in a magnet high school with a strong college focus in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, but could not offer any financial support—relied heavily on LEAD to help her adapt to college life.

“Santa Clara had a foundation for first-gen students, and the financial aid department was so supportive. They had a very good system of communication compared to other schools I was looking at,” says Cooper, who’s majoring in political science and Spanish with a minor in ethnic studies. Knowing that she would be surrounded by other first-gen students enticed Cooper to enroll at SCU. Plus LEAD offered specialized programming that prepared her socially for life on campus and helped with job placements if she needed help covering living expenses.

Still, even with all the extra support, Cooper knows she faces an uphill battle in reaching her aspirations of law school and, eventually, the U.S. presidency. Just like all her classmates, she stresses about doing well in class, making the right connections, and getting the right internships and fellowships. But unlike many of them, today she needs a job that pays, even if it offers no networking opportunities or prestige, because she’s financially independent and has bills to pay. “It’s really difficult sometimes because you have to think about how you’re going to balance your expenses and how you’re going to balance your school and these positions that are unpaid that aren’t going to help you take care of yourself,” she says.

There’s a big fear, Cooper says, particularly among her fellow first-gen students, in feeling like they might have “wasted all of the hard work and all of the effort and all of the money and all of the things our parents have done to support us if we can’t get a good job after we graduate.”

Director of special projects in the College of Arts and Sciences **Katy Korsmeyer** knows firsthand how important it is to get real-world experience to access the best jobs after graduation and get paid for it. As a first-generation college student who went on to earn a Ph.D. in biochemistry, Korsmeyer understands a lack of connections or “help or support or encouragement or motivation from sources other than themselves” can hinder someone’s access to a wide range of career opportunities. Tasked by the Dean’s Office to increase internship participation, she wanted to make sure every student could explore their options to figure out what they really liked doing, without having to worry about their finances.

Ideally, Korsmeyer thought, every Bronco enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences, no matter how well-connected, whether they’re studying anthropology or dance, should get a paid experience in a career field they’re interested in—a big ask for a college with 27 different disciplines. Thus began the REAL Program (Real Experience. Applied Learning), which has placed more than 300 students and distributed \$1.7 million since 2018.

Stipends of up to \$5,000 are awarded to students for internships (both internal and external), research, projects, and creative works conducted with a faculty member for up to 10 weeks. That’s in addition to whatever income is provided by the employer, allowing participants to pay for living expenses, such as housing and groceries, perhaps not fully covered by internship wages. Students can browse positions on the REAL webpage or find their own opportunity and apply for funding. It’s the funding that matters, Korsmeyer says. “There’s data that shows the undergraduate in a paid internship versus the person who’s not being paid, the person who started out getting paid will earn more over their career lifetime.”

A recent study by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that while unpaid internships might allow students to familiarize themselves with certain fields, they only turn into full-time post-grad job offers 39% of the time. That’s compared with 65% for those with paid internships. If a student can demonstrate that they were paid for a deliverable product—whether they’re a Classics major paid to transcribe religious artifacts from Latin to English or a neuroscience major who interned with the Federal Trade Commission, investigating unfair business practices—the worth of their work is literally quantifiable to future employers.

So, it’s an investment in students, Korsmeyer says, and a boost in the long run to the University’s reputation of delivering on its promise to maximize a student’s return on their investment by helping graduates of all majors land good jobs. In the shorter term, she says, “If we just open the door for them now, I know they will help other Broncos get in the future. We are building that pipeline.”

#### LONG DIVISION

The strength of that alumni-student networking pipeline is one of the most valuable benefits a college can offer applicants. A LinkedIn survey found 85% of all jobs are filled via networking (rather than blind resume submissions), while about 80% of open positions aren’t posted on job boards in the first place—meaning they’re filled by recruiters or by networking. While not necessarily fair or just, especially for those without family or friends in their chosen field, the reality that it’s all about “who you know” must be contended with.

Seeing a need for more personalized networking connections while job searching her senior year,

**Mariah Manzano ’20** co-founded Opal, an app that customizes matches between college students and mentors. Majoring in engineering and tech entrepreneurship, Manzano had access to career-development opportunities through the School of Engineering, which offers a mentoring program and faculty well-connected to the tech industry by virtue of Santa Clara’s Silicon Valley location. Still, she felt something was missing—namely, a safe space for students to get real about how tough the job search can be and how lonely the transition from college to career can feel.

Sifting through job posts on LinkedIn, Manzano says the vibe was, “Oh, I’m happy to announce I accepted an offer with so-and-so,” while no one ever talks about the 200 rejections it took to get there.” She started Opal—named for the gem that shines in darkness—to be able to openly talk about what that pressure “does to your state of mind,” and the anxiety and imposter syndrome that can occur from comparing yourself to other, seemingly more successful, classmates. Having open, honest conversations with people you connect with on a personal level, who come from a similar background or look like you or faced similar struggles can make a world of difference in a student’s post-graduation job search, as well as their time in school.

Manzano, who now works at Cisco as a software engineer, wished, for example, that someone had told her the world wouldn’t end if she didn’t land the perfect job or that she was learning far more than software development in college. “The skills I got from college, the ones that paid off way more than any coding language,” she says, were things like “leadership and communication skills, learning to work with others, how to make friends.”

## Sometimes you’ll choose well, sometimes you’ll be wrong. It’s the choosing that’s worthwhile.

For it might have once seemed to a go-getter like Manzano, if we return now to the board game with its little plastic cars filled with little peg people, that life is a one-way street. A series of events, one after the other after the other, propelling players toward the finish line. And the player who wins is the one who makes the most money—they cash in their stocks and bonds and retire in luxury to Millionaire Estates, rather than Countryside Acres (once cringingly called “The Poor Farm”)—which is much easier to do if they decided way back at the start to go to college and therefore unlock access to higher-paying jobs.

But real life is not a one-way street. People get turned around, or stuck in traffic, or zigzag off the path that was once so clear. Perhaps old Milton Bradley had it right after all: Life is not a succession of actions but a random checkerboard of choices. Sometimes you’ll choose well, sometimes you’ll be wrong. It’s the choosing that’s worthwhile. And choosing the college route is undoubtedly a good choice—it’ll help mold you into a more adaptable, more fully realized person. Traits that will prove invaluable in those times when you get lost along the way.