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ADVICE

College as ‘Practice for Life’

A lot of the learning that takes place for undergraduates — perhaps most of it — happens outside the classroom

By James M. Lang | AUGUST 15, 2016

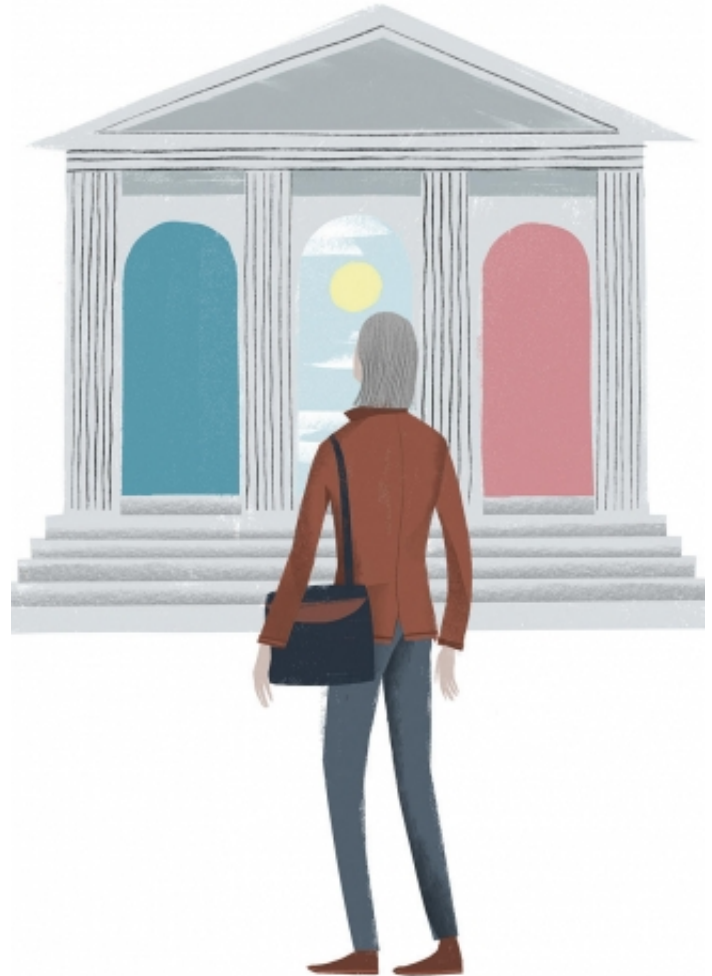
When my oldest daughter arrived on her college campus for the first time three years ago, she bonded immediately with a group of women in her dorm. Her first text reports from the campus, after my wife and I had made the long drive home, came replete with enthusiasm and exclamation points for the fun she was having with her new friends.

But this turned out to be a honeymoon, and it didn't last. Over the course of the next few days she realized that her new friends wore fancy clothes, came from money, and heartily enjoyed those facts about themselves. The daughter of two teachers, a graduate of an urban public high school, and an aspiring social worker, my daughter found herself an increasingly uneasy fit with this group.

The text message I received from her late one night, a week after classes started, still breaks my heart to remember. She reported that she was lonely and had no friends; everyone else seemed to know each other already; she didn't know what to do. I lay in bed that entire night, miserable and wide awake, fighting every urge in my body to jump in the car and drive 14 hours to bring her home. I proffered Dad advice as best I could via texts and emails into the wee hours of the morning.

I woke the next day still anxious and unsure of what to do. But that afternoon something astonishing happened. My daughter, like her father, is an introvert; she does not socialize easily with strangers. Somehow, though, she found the courage to walk down the hallway, stop at a dorm room, stand in the open doorway, and introduce herself to some girls who were sitting and talking. She met a friend that day who was feeling lonely as well. That friend led her to other friends, and now — of course — she enters her senior year with a tightly knit group of wonderful friends who have made her college experience a very happy one.

According to the authors of a new book about the value of a residential, liberal-arts college experience, what happened to my daughter that day when she walked down the hallway and made a new friend was a restart — a moment in which she was at a crossroads and had the opportunity to restart her college experience and reinvent herself in the process. She took full advantage of that restart, and I have observed over the past three years how it has paved the way for other restarts, all of which have helped her mature and develop life skills that this father has been delighted to observe.



Sam Kalda for The Chronicle

In *Practice for Life: Making Decisions in College*, out this month from Harvard University Press, the authors Lee Cuba, Nancy Jennings, Suzanne Lovett, and Joseph Swingle argue that the value of a residential, liberal-arts college lies in the continuous slate of opportunities that students receive to start and restart their lives over the course of their college years.

"Becoming liberally educated," they write, "is a complex and messy process involving making decisions and learning from them." The most valuable learning in college may arise from the continued practice students receive in confronting difficult situations, making choices, restarting their college experience, and growing from that process.

Those conclusions come from analyses of extensive interviews the authors conducted with more than 200 students from seven New England colleges — all of them residential, liberal-arts institutions. Students were interviewed three times during their first year, twice a year after that, and a final time a year after graduation. The interviews yielded more than 40,000 pages of transcripts.

From those interviews, the authors found five major areas in which students have an opportunity for a restart during their college years: time, connection, home, advice, and engagement.

When it comes to home, for example, students have to make frequent decisions about their living arrangements on or near the campus. "For most students," the authors write, "going to a residential college will be the first opportunity to realize that home has the potential to be an achieved status, something they create and will have to recreate in their future." Students confront the challenge of creating their new homes each year with decisions about housing, roommates, location (including study abroad), and timing (when to return to the campus after a summer break or a semester overseas).

"A residential college," the authors conclude, "is excellent practice for reflecting on what home means and finding one as an emerging adult."

A similar conclusion emerges from the chapter on time, in which they report that "students experience college as a serial decision-making process punctuated by deadlines." Their perceptions of time evolve — both on a daily basis and over the course of four (or more) years. As they approach graduation, students must learn to make increasingly difficult decisions about time.

How quickly they learn to manage those decisions plays an essential role in the quality of their college experience: "We found that the earlier students learned to manage time and achieve a workable balance among academic and social experiences, the greater their academic engagement and social integration."

For readers familiar with the National Survey of Student Engagement and similar studies, the book's chapter on engagement offers an especially interesting critique of how academe has measured student engagement. "The limitations of ... [such] large-scale surveys," the authors explain, "stem from asking students to describe their academic experience in broad general terms devoid of context and curriculum."

For example, engagement surveys might ask students how often they contribute to class discussions. But how accurate is that information, really? A student might report on the survey that she speaks "frequently" in the classroom — by which she means that she contributes often to class discussion in two small seminars but never says a word in three of her large lecture courses.

The authors' reliance on in-depth interviews (instead of a survey) allowed them to avoid broad conclusions that labeled certain types of students — or a certain percentage of students — as "engaged" while others were not. Instead, they found that student participation was much more episodic. The book offers numerous examples of students who said they were deeply involved in one or two courses but not in others — say, involved in their major courses but not in electives (or vice versa).

The implications are clear enough: We should perhaps pay less attention to global strategies recommended by national surveys to engage *all* students and instead focus on helping students see each course, each semester, and each year as a unique opportunity for new or renewed academic engagement.

Unfortunately, *Practice for Life* mostly leaves the reader to draw out the practical implications of the book's findings. Still, I found the book's research and analysis very convincing. Residential colleges, as the book argues, are indeed "places densely populated with

decisions about who one is becoming and who one aspires to become."

But the question I kept asking myself as I read — from my perspective as a faculty member, as a part-time administrator, and as a father — was how we could help ensure that colleges make these practice grounds as conducive as possible to students learning from their decisions.

In the final chapter, the authors do explore two areas in which higher education could take a fresh look at some of the challenges raised by their analysis. They encourage us to reconsider the major as the primary source of deep intellectual engagement in college, and they suggest that colleges could do a more effective job of helping students understand diversity and different perspectives after the first year. But even there the authors write in a manner more invitational than advisory, raising questions instead of offering prescriptions.

Anyone who works in higher education, however, should find this book a compelling read that offers a fresh perspective on what lies at the heart of a liberal-arts education, especially on residential campuses. So much of our rhetoric about the value of higher education focuses on learning, and we tend to associate learning with classes. This book, along with other excellent studies like *How College Works*, reminds us that a substantial amount of the learning that takes place — perhaps the majority of it — occurs outside of the college classroom.

The arguments in this book will remain with me in the coming years in my role as a faculty adviser, or when I am meeting with students in my office hours, or even when I am considering how to invite students to connect more deeply with my courses.

But I confess: Mostly I read the book with greatest interest as a parent. The way in which the authors describe the college experience resonated deeply with what I have observed in my daughter over the past three years, as she has transformed from a smart, reserved person into a much more engaged, active shaper of her own future. As I write, she is traveling home from her summer internship, where she spent 10 weeks living on her own and working for a nonprofit in Texas, half a country away from her family home. I could never have envisioned such a future for her three years ago. I have little doubt that repeated exposure to small decisions about her future helped her find her way to that dramatically new place.

At the moment my second daughter is preparing to leave home for her first year of college. The conversations I have with her over the next four years will be enriched by my reading of *Practice for Life*, as I realize now that challenges or difficult situations like the ones my eldest faced in her first week at college should be considered opportunities instead of obstacles. Should such challenges arise for my second daughter, they may still break my paternal heart, but I will have a richer vocabulary both for understanding them and for helping her to recognize how to confront such challenges, make smart decisions, and restart her college experience anew.

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Vitae

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By Gwendolyn Dungy

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