WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Three Crucial Conversations for Coaching Teens to College and Career Success

Stephen M. Smith | Shaun Fanning

WILEY

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Three Crucial Conversations for Coaching Teens to College and Career Success

Stephen M. Smith | Shaun Fanning

WILEY

Cover design: Paulina Maldonado

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey
Published simultaneously in Canada

ISBN 9781119384700 (cloth)
ISBN 9781119384717 (ePub)
ISBN 9781119384748 (ePDF)

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

About the Authors

Shaun Fanning is chief product officer at Intellispark and a cofounder of Naviance. He previously served as vice president of research and development at Hobsons, where he led new product initiatives focused on improving student success through technology in K–12 and higher education. He joined Hobsons in 2007 through its acquisition of Naviance, where he served as head of product strategy and technology. Prior to cofounding Naviance, he held a variety of roles in business analysis, finance, technology, marketing, and product management at AT&T and The Thomson Corporation (now Thomson Reuters). He earned a BA degree in economics from Cornell University.

Stephen M. Smith is CEO of Intellispark, an education technology startup. He is vice chair of the board of College Possible, a member of the board of the National College Access Network, and a cofounder of Naviance. He previously served as president and chief product officer at Hobsons, where he led global product strategy, corporate development, student data privacy, and R&D. He joined Hobsons in 2007 through its acquisition of Naviance, where he served as chief executive officer. Prior to Naviance, he was vice president of digital product development at Peterson's, then a division of The Thomson Corporation (now Thomson Reuters). Prior to joining Peterson's, he was a founding member of the Internet consulting practice at Thomson Technology Services Group. He has also served as a practitioner faculty member at Johns Hopkins University and at Montgomery College. He earned a BA degree in history and an MBA, both from Cornell University.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the thousands of school counselors, teachers, administrators, and community mentors who trusted us, through Naviance, to join them in their journey to help transform the world through education. You inspired us, challenged us, and showed us every day how much of a difference a caring adult can make in the educational and personal trajectory of a child. We hope that through this book we can share many of the lessons we have learned from you and do our part to make the world a better place. We are lucky to have worked with you.

We are extremely grateful to Kim Oppelt for rounding out the book with her experience and knowledge in college admissions and financial aid—while remarkably also completing her doctoral dissertation and keeping up with the demands of a full-time job.

We appreciate the encouragement, insight, and feedback we received from Brandon Busteed, Laurie Cordova, Mary Docken, Patty Mason, and Nick Rabinovitch.

Thank you to Tom Zoldos, Paulina Maldonado, Lucian Slatineanu, and members of the Hobsons marketing team for your design, branding, and marketing support.

Thank you to Amy, Ruby, and Shepherd Fanning for giving up time with your dad and providing love and enthusiasm.

Last but not least, neither of us would be who we are today or have useful insights to share without our mothers, who believed without question in our wildest dreams, and our fathers, who taught us how to fight for those dreams.

Washington, DC
August 2017

PART I

Who Are You?

1 How Do You Get Started?

We are doing this all wrong. College gets more expensive and more competitive every year. Kids lose sleep over where they're applying and whether they'll be admitted. Parents are anxious and increasingly wonder whether college is a worthwhile investment. Those same parents ask a lot of important questions. *Will my child will get into a "good" college? How long will it take her to earn a degree? Can we afford tuition—not to mention room, board, and other expenses? Will she get a decent job after graduation? Will she be happy?* The problem, in most families anyway, is that we take the questions in the wrong order.

Brandon Busteed, the executive director of education and workforce development at Gallup, describes this process well. We start searching for colleges by thinking about attributes like size, selectivity, and location. We look into what majors are offered at the institution, and we may even consider sports programs or campus life. We probably look at the list price for tuition, room, board, and expenses, but because our system of education finance is so complex, those figures often bear little resemblance to what it will cost to attend. We build a list of colleges that meet our criteria. We visit some of those institutions to get a sense of how they "feel." We narrow the

list and begin the arduous task of preparing and submitting college applications. By having focused our attention on list prices instead of the actual cost of attendance, we may have already ruled out some attractive options for financial reasons, even if those institutions may have turned out to be affordable. It's not until acceptances start coming in from colleges we chose to apply to that we get a better sense of the actual cost of attendance. For the vast majority of us, the cost of attending even an institution with a modest list price is higher than we can afford based solely on what we have saved or earn, so we explore loan options. After that, we decide where to enroll.

As many as half of all traditional-age first-year students enter college without declaring a major, and according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at the U.S. Department of Education, almost 80 percent change their major at least once after they enroll. So it's not until well after starting college and often taking on debt that families begin to understand how much the student will be likely to earn after graduation and what he can realistically afford to repay. Because such a high percentage of students change majors while in college, many are taking a long time to get to the finish line. In fact, NCES data show that only 44.2 percent of first-time bachelor's degree recipients earn a four-year degree in four years or less.

If you were designing this process from scratch, you might approach it from exactly the opposite direction. Start with the end in mind. Pick a career based on what you like to do. Research the labor market and find out how much you'll be likely be able to earn. Then look at the type of education required to get that job. Weigh the ability to pay for that education given your career prospects and reconsider if necessary. Once you're sure the cost of your education is manageable given your chosen career, enroll in the institution of your choice and complete your degree.

Many adult students (defined by the Department of Education as those age twenty-five and older) approach college in just this way. These students often enter college with specific career objectives. And although they're sometimes referred to as nontraditional or posttraditional students, this demographic now makes up the majority of college students in the United States. Can an approach that works for twenty-five-year-olds also help teenagers to make better college and career choices?

It's incredibly challenging for an adult to pick a major or a career, and developmental differences and comparatively limited life experiences make

this decision even more overwhelming for teenagers. In that context, it's not surprising that so many college students change their minds after picking a major. Nonetheless, with poor retention and graduation rates at many colleges, few would argue that what we're doing now is working well. Something needs to change. By rethinking the path from middle and high school to college and career, we can reduce the stress and anxiety families feel and put more kids on track for a healthy and successful adult life.

This book got its start nearly seventeen years ago when we launched a program called Naviance and began working with high schools to improve how their students choose among colleges and universities. Since that time, more than 22 million kids around the world have researched college and career opportunities; selected middle and high school course work; gained important knowledge about what it means to go to college; and completed personality, strengths, and career interest assessments and other self-awareness activities in Naviance. These activities have helped those kids build a foundation for a thoughtful progression from school to college to work.

The goal of this book is to help more kids think about school and college with an objective in mind: recognizing that learning is intrinsically valuable and continues for life but that purposeful learning can be even more transformative. The question "Who do *you* think you are?" gets at the essence of what families need to explore to help their children make good college and career choices. The other questions posed throughout this book are meant to prompt crucial conversations that can help you and your teen, ideally with the support of your teen's school counselor, better inform the college and career search process.

Let's look at how the process typically works today. In U.S. elementary schools, there are few choices to make. Most kids in elementary school have a single teacher for all core academic subjects, even if there are separate faculty members for specialized courses in areas such as music, art, or physical education. While some subgroups of kids with particular needs, aptitudes, or interests might be selected to receive additional support, most follow a fairly consistent program and spend the majority of each day in the same room with the same teacher and the same classmates.

The environment is much different in secondary schools. By grade 6 or 7, schools frequently offer separate classes within core academic subjects for students who are performing at, above, or below grade level. Many schools have optional courses, known as electives, in subjects such as foreign

language, instrumental music, and technology. Kids may still receive additional support if they need it, but they are also able to make many more choices to personalize their school experience. Many schools offer clubs and after-school sports. In grades 6 and 7, but especially by grade 8, the courses kids take have a direct impact on the courses they can take in high school, and as a result, their choices affect the majors they can select and even the colleges they may be able to attend.

Some of those connections are straightforward. For example, students who don't take algebra by the end of eighth grade typically can't complete the required course work to take calculus by twelfth grade, and those who don't take calculus before graduating from high school are at a significant disadvantage when applying to engineering and other quantitative programs in college. Other choices are a bit more complex since requirements for admission vary significantly from one college or university to another. Those requirements can even vary among schools and departments within the same college or university. The shared experiences in elementary school give way to a much more individualized program of studies and other activities in middle and high school, which can put kids on very different paths to life after earning a high school diploma.

How do you make sense of these choices? Is it even possible to ask a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old to think ahead ten years or more to consider how making a choice between taking algebra in eighth grade and choosing a slightly less demanding math class is likely to affect college or career options later in life? Is it possible to ask that same young person to weigh the benefits of taking another elective, and making time for the required homework, versus joining an additional after-school club? Choices like this one are being made by and for kids millions of times each year in U.S. schools, often with limited insight into the consequences. For some, it may even feel as though their plans are on autopilot. Those who have done well academically are often pushed to take every one of the most rigorous courses (regardless of their interest level in the subject) and to add even more to their plate through extracurricular activities based on their prior academic successes.

There's a false dichotomy playing out in many American schools. Kids with high grades get pushed to take more and harder courses, while those with lower grades are directed toward career-oriented programs. This approach sets up a tension between college and career. As one counselor in a highly regarded American high school told us, "At this school, college is

the career." She conveyed that statement with no sense of irony or anxiety. For their four years in high school, every academic and extracurricular decision these students made at that school was intended to put them on a path to college. The purpose for which the high school was designed was to get its graduates admitted to a highly selective college or university with very little thought to what they might do once they earn a college degree.

This tension between college and career isn't unique to middle and high schools. On college campuses, too, it plays out on a regular basis. Some faculty, especially in the arts and humanities, bristle when earning a bachelor's degree is seen simply as a ticket to getting a job without an appropriate level of consideration for the intrinsic value of learning. One professor at an elite U.S. university explained, "My job is to teach English, not to get my students a job." Technically this professor is correct. His job is to teach English, and we share his love for the humanities. But nearly every one of his students will need to get a job after graduation—most of those outside academe—and there's nothing inconsistent or shameful about admitting that a degree in English is an outstanding qualification for many careers.

Because of this tension between college and career in schools and on college campuses, it can be difficult to have a constructive conversation about the role of academic preparation in developing the workforce. We don't mean to suggest that the subject doesn't come up. It does, both at cocktail parties and in policy circles. But too often college and career are presented as being at odds with one another. Kids in middle and high school are steered either to college *or* to the workforce. Courses in school or college are seen as either intellectual *or* vocational. College majors are presented as idealistic *or* practical. The truth is quite the opposite. Higher education is an important step on the path toward a better quality of life and a fulfilling career. And while some degrees are unquestionably more directly aligned with specific careers than others, the act of earning a four-year college degree is generally more important in enabling a stable, successful future than what or where kids study.

Nearly every career requires some form of preparation after high school: on-the-job training, a certificate, an associate degree, a bachelor's degree, or beyond. Research by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (GUCEW) predicts that by 2020, 65 percent of all jobs will require some education or training beyond high school. A bachelor's degree, in particular, is a gateway to financial stability. A graduate from a four-year

college or university will earn, on average, $1 million more than someone who finished high school but did not earn a four-year degree. We recognize that a four-year degree on its own is not a guarantee of future earnings and acknowledge that it's possible to find fulfillment in a career and financial success, if that's what you're after, without a college degree. But throughout this book, we assume that you and your teen are interested in both. The odds of finding a fulfilling career and making financial ends meet are far greater in the United States for those with a college education than for those without. In 2016, GUCEW found that 11.5 million of the 11.6 million jobs created after the Great Recession were filled by people with at least some college-level education.

This book seeks to put aside the unnecessary tension between college and career. With it, we aim to help families, counselors, and kids take a pragmatic approach to making choices about what to study and what to do. Our approach is grounded in several key beliefs:

- Everyone deserves to be able to go to college.
- Everyone deserves to have a fulfilling career.
- Everyone is entitled to have an honest and open conversation with a caring adult about which options are really on the table and which aren't.
- Every academic program is a form of career preparation.
- Learning is valuable both intrinsically and extrinsically.
- Idealism is admirable, but realism is critical.

We call this approach *connecting learning to life*. By helping kids to see how their goals in life relate to their time in school, we hope they will come to see school as personally beneficial. Instructors who work with adult learners are trained to show their students what's in it for them. They recognize that when people can apply what they're doing to something that matters to them, they'll pay attention. Primary and secondary schools don't usually work this way. Instead, we send our children to school and expect them to pay attention in class. The motivation for doing well in school is some combination of earning good grades and avoiding parental frustration. Unfortunately this just doesn't work very well for many students.

Each year, the Gallup Student Poll measures how kids feel about school. In recent years, the poll has surveyed about 900,000 public school students annually in grades 5 through 12. The results have been startling, and although the poll is based on responses from those who opt in rather than a scientific