

## **College Graduates Aren't Ready for the Real World**

By MEL LEVINE

We are witnessing a pandemic of what I call "worklife unreadiness," and colleges face a daunting challenge in immunizing students against it.

Swarms of start-up adults, mostly in their 20s, lack the traction needed to engage the work side of their lives. Some can't make up their minds where to go and what to do, while others find themselves stranded along a career trail about which they are grievously naïve and for which they lack broad preparation. Whether they spent their undergraduate or graduate years focused on a discrete pursuit -- say, engineering, law, or medicine -- or whether their college education was unbound from any stated career intentions, many are unprepared to choose an appropriate form of work and manage their first job experience.

In conducting interviews for my new book, *Ready or Not, Here Life Comes*, I heard repeatedly from employers that their current crop of novice employees appear unable to delay gratification and think long term. They have trouble starting at the bottom rung of a career ladder and handling the unexciting detail, the grunt work, and the political setbacks they have to bear. In fact, many contemporary college and graduate students fail to identify at all with the world of adults.

A variety of unforeseen hazards can cause an unsuccessful crossover from higher education to the workplace. Start-up adults may often not even sense that they are failing to show initiative or otherwise please their superiors. Some early-career pitfalls are unique to our times; some derive from the characteristics of individual students themselves; some are side effects of modern parenting; and others result from an educational system that has not kept pace with the era we live in. All have policy implications for higher-education leaders.

The problems start early. While many of today's young adults were growing up, their role models were each other. Kids today don't know or take an interest in grown-ups, apart from their parents, their teachers, and entertainers. That stands in contrast to previous generations, when young people "studied" and valued older people in the community.

Thus, a lot of contemporary college students are insatiable in their quest for social acceptance and close identification with an esteemed gaggle of peers. The commercialization of adolescence has further fueled a desire to be "cool" and accepted and respected within a kid culture. Some young adults become the victims of their own popularity, experiencing surges and spasms of immense yet highly brittle ego inflation. But that bubble is likely to burst in early career life, when their supervisors are not all that impressed by how well they play shortstop, how they express their taste through their earrings, or the direction in which they orient the brim of their baseball caps.

Life in the dormitory or the fraternity or sorority house no doubt perpetuates and even intensifies that pattern of overreliance on peer approval. It may also serve to cultivate an overwhelming preoccupation with body image and sexual and chemical bodily excitation -- at times to the detriment of intellectual development and reality-based reflection on the future. We live in a period of college education in which the body may be the mind's No. 1 rival. While that tension has always existed, our culture stresses more than ever bodily perfection, self-marketing through appearance, and physical fitness over cognitive strength. Unbridled athletic fervor may reinforce such a somatically bent collegiate culture.

Meanwhile, many college students carry with them an extensive history of being overprogrammed by their parents and their middle schools and high schools -- soccer practice Monday through Saturday, bassoon lessons on Tuesday evening, square dancing on Wednesday, kung fu on Saturday afternoon, on and on. That may make it hard for them to work independently, engage in original thought processes, and show initiative.

Other students were the golden girls and boys of their high schools -- popular, attractive, athletic, and sometimes scholarly insofar as they were talented test takers. Yet many never had to engage in active analytic thinking, brainstorming, creative activity, or the defense of their opinions. In quite a few instances, their parents settled all their disputes with teachers, guided (or did) their homework, and filled out their college applications. As a result, such students may have trouble charting and navigating their own course in college and beyond.

Not uncommonly, start-up adults believe that everything they engage in is supposed to generate praise and fun, as opposed perhaps to being interesting or valuable. The quest for effusive verbal feedback has been a prime motivator throughout their lives, as they have sought approval from parents, teachers, and coaches. Unbridled and sometimes unearned praise may, in fact, fuel the pressure for grade inflation in college.

Similarly, students' favorite professors may well be those whose lectures are the funniest. But what if, eight years later, their bosses have no sense of humor, and their work pales in comparison to the visual and motor ecstasy of computer games and the instantaneous satisfaction of their social and sexual conquests? They might then find themselves mentally out of shape, lacking in the capacity for hard cognitive work, and unable to engage successfully in any extended mind toil that they don't feel like doing.

On top of that, some college students are afflicted with significant underlying developmental problems that have never been properly diagnosed and managed. Examples abound, including difficulties in processing language or communicating verbally (both speaking and writing), an inability to focus attention or reason quantitatively, and a serious lack of problem-solving skills. We are currently encountering far more students with learning difficulties, for a multitude of reasons. Many young adults are growing up in a nonverbal culture that makes few, if any, demands on language skills, active information processing, pattern recognition, and original thinking.

The most common learning disorder among undergraduates is incomplete comprehension. Affected students have difficulty understanding concepts, terminology, issues, and procedures. Many of them succeeded admirably in high school through the exclusive use of rote memory and procedural mimicry (known in mathematics as the "extreme algorithmic approach"). So a student may have received an A in trigonometry by knowing how to manipulate cosines and tangents yet without really understanding what they represent. Such underlying deficiencies return to haunt start-up adults striving for success and recognition on the job. A young adult may be selling a product without fully understanding it, or preparing a legal brief without perceiving its ramifications.

Trouble handling the workload is an equally prevalent, and lingering, form of collegiate dysfunction that follows students into their careers. Some college students are abysmally disorganized and have serious trouble managing materials and time, prioritizing, and handling activities with multiple components that must be integrated -- like writing a term paper, applying to graduate schools or prospective employers, and preparing for a final examination. Such difficulties can manifest themselves for the first time at any academic stage in a student's life, including during law, business, or medical school. The students who are burdened with them are vulnerable to dropping out, mental-health problems, and a drastic loss of motivation.

Certainly many students leave college well prepared and well informed for careers, and not every college is affected by such negative cultural forces. But work-life unreadiness is increasingly prevalent and merits the attention of faculty members and administrators. The deterrents that I have mentioned may or may not ignite implosions of grade-point averages, but they can become crippling influences in the work lives of young adults.

Although colleges can't be expected to suture all the gaps in the culture of kids, some changes merit consideration if students are to succeed after graduation. Too many start-up adults harbor serious discrepancies between what they would like to do and what they are truly capable of doing. Often they are interested in pursuits they are not good at or wired for. They opt for the wrong careers because they are unaware of their personal and intellectual strengths and weaknesses, as well as woefully uninformed about the specific job demands of their chosen trades. That combination is a time bomb set to detonate early in a career.

Therefore, colleges should re-examine the adequacy of their career-placement or career-advisory services. Those services should be able to interview students in depth, administer vocational-interest inventories, and make use of sophisticated neuropsychological tests to help floundering students formulate career aims that fit their particular skills and yield personal gratification.

Colleges can also lessen undergraduate naïveté through formal education. Within a core curriculum, perhaps offered by the psychology department, colleges should help students get to know themselves and to think about the relationship between who they are and what they think they might do with their lives. They should provide, and possibly require, courses like "Career Studies," in which undergraduates analyze case studies and biographies to explore the psychological and political nuances of beginning a career.

Students need to anticipate the challenges and agonies of work life at the bottom rungs of a tall and steep ladder. They should be taught generic career-related skills -- like how to collaborate, organize and manage projects, write proposals, and decrypt unwritten and unspoken on-the-job expectations. Colleges should also offer classes that cover topics like entrepreneurialism and leadership. Further, students should also receive formal instruction, including case studies, in the pros and cons of alternative career pathways within their areas of concentration (e.g., medical practice versus health-care administration, or teaching about real estate versus pursuing a money chase in land investment).

To elucidate the specific learning problems of students who are not succeeding, colleges need to offer up-to-date diagnostic services. Those include tests to pinpoint problems with memory, attention, concept formation, and other key brain processes that will cause a career to implode whether or not a student makes it through her undergraduate years.

Faculty members should change not only what they teach but *how* they teach, to help students make a better transition to the adult world. They should receive formal training in the latest research about brain development and the learning processes that occur during late adolescence -- including such key areas as higher-language functioning, frontal-lobe performance (like planning, pacing, and self-monitoring), nonverbal thought processes, memory use, and selective attention.

Professors also should base their pedagogy on some awareness of the mechanisms underlying optimal learning and mastery of their subject matter. Chemistry professors should understand and make use of the cognition of chemistry mastery, while foreign-language instructors and those conducting political-science seminars should be aware of the brain functions they are tapping and strengthening through their coursework. Current students face complex decision-making and problem-solving career challenges, but many have been groomed in high school to rely solely on rote memory -- an entirely useless approach in a meaningful career.

At the same time, professors must have keen insight into the differences in learning among the students who take their courses. They should seek to offer alternative ways in which students can display their knowledge and skills. They might discover, for instance, that their tests should de-emphasize rote recall and the spewing out of knowledge without any interpretation on the part of the student.

In short, faculty members must learn about teaching. It should not be assumed that a learned person understands how people learn.

What's more, colleges should offer opportunities for scholarly research into the cognitive abilities, political strategies, and skills needed for career fulfillment in various fields. The study of success and failure should be thought of as a topic worthy of rigorous investigation at all higher-education institutions.

Finally, every college should also strive to promulgate a campus intellectual life that can hold its own against social, sexual, and athletics virtuosity. Varsity debating teams should

receive vigorous alumni support and status, as should literary magazines, guest lectureships, concerts, and art exhibitions. Undergraduate institutions reveal themselves by what gets tacked up on campus bulletin boards -- which often are notices of keg parties, fraternity and sorority rush events, and intramural schedules. Colleges can work to change that culture.

Our colleges open their doors to kids who have grown up in an era that infiltrates them with unfettered pleasure, heavy layers of overprotection, and heaps of questionably justified positive feedback. As a result, childhood and adolescence may become nearly impossible acts to follow.

Higher education has to avoid hitching itself to that pleasure-packed bandwagon. Otherwise, students will view the academic side of college as not much more than a credentialing process to put up with while they are having a ball for four years. Colleges must never cease to ask themselves, "What roles can and should these young adults play in the world of our times? And what must we do to prepare them?"

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