

Book Notes

THE CAREER ARTS: MAKING THE MOST OF COLLEGE, CREDENTIALS,
AND CONNECTIONS

by Ben Wildavsky

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In light of increased economic instability, the opportunity cost associated with college attendance, and a rapidly approaching college-age demographic cliff, higher education leaders, educators, and policy makers must collaborate to ensure both student and institutional success. In the current economic climate, a greater proportion of high school graduates are foregoing college. Among the students that do enroll, a greater proportion are expected to abandon their programs due to financial strain or other competing responsibilities (Krupnick, 2022). Individuals who do not procure the “currency of educational credentials,” in the form of a college degree, are likely to suffer under the US’s “contest mobility” system (Collins, 1979, 121), regardless of increased public discussion around the value of alternative credentials.

As the price of college continues to rise, students and their families have increasingly “substituted a utilitarian question—Why do I need to know this?—for an earlier faith in the power of intellectual breadth” (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004, 16). This question continues to spark debate over who should determine a college’s curriculum and, more broadly, the purpose of a college education. Without a clear response from the higher education sector, larger numbers of prospective students are likely to cast aside college enrollment in favor of post-secondary opportunities that are more directly employment oriented.

Because college attendance represents a large investment of resources, there is greater interest in ensuring a return on investment in the form of post-graduate job opportunities and income. However, decision-makers at many institutions trivialize this perspective. They operate under an assumption that students progress through college with a limited view of the broader landscape and a “prevocational” mind-set that is focused on their individual goals, while faculty have a longer-term vision of effective teaching and what training will best prepare their students for postgraduate life (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004, 137). By eschewing these concerns and arguing that the Academy knows best

about what students should learn and that career readiness should not be an explicit priority, some officials in higher education are perpetuating a “trite appeal to the tradition of the leisured gentleman whose status is linked to not having to use his education to earn a living” (Roth, 2015, 160).

In *The Career Arts: Making the Most of College, Credentials, and Connections*, Ben Wildavsky challenges this dichotomy, arguing that a traditional college education and career preparation need not be an either-or dilemma for students. Based on research, interviews, and case studies, this volume offers a concise overview of the value of college degrees and nondegree pathways and the role of social capital in achieving postgraduate financial stability and success. It provides a range of evidence supporting the continued value of college degrees over an individual’s lifetime to refute the common argument that the return on investment may not be worthwhile for many students.

Having demonstrated in chapter 1 that traditional two- and four-year college programs are still the strongest path to economic mobility, in chapter 2 Wildavsky argues that institutions need to pay greater attention to career readiness and advising students on how to make decisions that will set them up for greater financial stability. In chapter 3, which explores the current landscape of alternative credentials and their future possibilities, he draws attention to sectoral training programs that provide job training in industries with strong labor demands, to intermediary organizations that create partnerships between colleges and employers, to practical skills-based microcredentials that students can accrue alongside their majors, and to stackable credentials that ultimately lead to degrees.

Chapter 4 shifts to discuss the “often underemphasized and misunderstood” skill of networking and social capital. Wildavsky quotes Julia Freeland Fisher of the Clayton Christensen Group saying, “We’ve designed [the education and workforce system] around the premise of learning, but the premise of connections has been outright ignored or downplayed because in polite company you don’t talk about how who you know is part of how you get jobs” (86). In doing so, Wildavsky argues, higher education has continued to replicate the disadvantages students who do not enter college with family networks face. Simply granting access through admission to students from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds and greater numbers of first-generation students is not enough. Rather, schools must be proactive in designing career counseling and mentoring programs tailored to these students and maximizing their opportunities for network growth. In addition to explicitly stating this often-implicit but unstated dynamic that “education and skills are necessary but often not sufficient” (105), Wildavsky highlights several nonprofits and companies—such as Beyond12, Braven, COOP Careers, and Climb Hire—whose missions aim to close these resource and information gaps via near-peer coaching, career counseling from volunteer professionals, training in job search skills, networking opportunities, and targeted technical training.

In the final chapter, Wildavsky articulates eight principles derived from the book's earlier discussions, which he terms "the Career Arts." He argues that these pieces of advice, which prioritize a mix of broad education, targeted skills, and social capital, should drive students' action as they determine their postsecondary plans and navigate the next steps in their education:

1. Go to college
2. Find the best *kind* of college and program
3. Complete college
4. If pursuing nondegree options, purposefully build education, skills, and networks
5. Seek a both/and combination of broad and targeted skills
6. Take advantage of employer-funded education benefits
7. Find effective ways to build social capital
8. Prepare for the world as it is, not as you wish it were. (106–107)¹

These action items may be fairly self-evident to those working in the higher education sector, but having them distilled into a single list with accompanying evidence may be useful to readers looking for answers about how to advise students on how to more effectively approach their postsecondary experience.

That said, while framed as a guide for students, parents, counselors, and educators, this book offers much advice that is dependent on the cooperation of higher education institutions and other actors in the space. For example, Wildavsky notes that "quality control and clear information and guidance is vital to help learners navigate the more than one million credentials, plus other training pathways, now available" (61), but he does not offer suggestions for how to better provide this information to prospective students. This is crucial for the second Career Arts principle and plays a role in completion (the third) as well. The resources that are currently available to students and families for determining the "best *kind* of college and program" and postgraduate outcomes are difficult to navigate and parse. Coupled with the dismal student-to-counselor ratio in the United States (Meyer & Bell, 2023), this principle is dismissive of the reality many students face when sorting through their options. The fourth, fifth, and sixth Career Arts principles require that institutions provide opportunities for students to build these skill sets simultaneously. For example, Wildavsky heralds the possibilities presented by stackable credentials but notes that "this credential scenario is not yet widespread," citing data that only 2–4 percent of workers have followed this pathway (80). The other models suggested and nonprofits cited can only serve a limited number of students without scaling. Thus, in order for students—even those with the most agency and resources—to follow this advice, sincere investment must be made on the part of institutions.

There is no question that higher education institutions and leaders must grapple with the issue of public perception regarding the value of college. They must prioritize strategic initiatives that convince hesitant students to

enroll and provide the necessary supports to ensure that these students are able to persist and graduate. *The Career Arts* offers readers—whether working in the higher education sector already, advising prospective students, or students making decisions for themselves—several arguments based on economic data to combat misperceptions about a college degree’s waning relevance in the labor market. It also provides an overview of promising directions that could help drive positive student postsecondary outcomes and examples of programmatic initiatives that could inspire action by campus leaders to change the status quo and better meet student needs.

CAROLINE TUCKER

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Note

1. See <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691239798/the-career-arts>.

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