



THE GREAT CAREER & EDUCATION MISMATCH: WHY COLLEGE PLANNING IS SO IMPORTANT IN TODAY'S WORKFORCE

KEY INSIGHT

64% of professionals don't work in a job function related to their undergraduate degrees

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For many American job seekers, undergraduate education is the first set of building blocks in a lifetime of career success. The college to career transition promises additional benefits, increased salaries, and long-term success in a designated field of study, however, a student's prospects do not always align with their specific educational background. In fact, **64% of the American workforce is in a position that does not match their undergraduate degree.**

Only 62% of graduates of bachelor programs report their education as being worth the cost. Of these 62%, a majority were enrolled in degrees associated with specific jobs, with healthcare and engineering ranking at the top of the list for both career and cost value. Students and graduates in other fields, such as Liberal Arts & Sciences, have less tangible career outcomes. These statistics may reinforce the myth of the aimless English major; however, any degree can generate high ROI with the appropriate strategy in place. This is demonstrated by the widespread mismatch in positions and degrees held by undergraduate alumni across the US.

"Life should come with a disclaimer that all things are subject to change. What you want to do now may not be what you want to do at 40. With that in mind, you see so many people come out of college with no plan, and you realize that so many people take on \$50,000 to \$100,000 in debt just to check the box of having a degree," says James Philip, Managing Director at Heavy Hitter Holdings and author of the upcoming book *Headwind*. "Wouldn't it make sense then to invest the requisite time and energy into developing a proper college plan? For example, a lot of people get pushed into communications and psychology by college counselors. But last time I checked, that's not what corporate America is looking for."

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Angela Vaz, Founder of straycurls.com, studied engineering and computer science in college before finding her place as a business-savvy blogger and illustrator. "I pretty much went with the flow of my class," says Vaz. "Everyone was choosing engineering or medicine, and I didn't think twice before picking the same. It was only when I was doing my degree, I realized that I was spending all my free time drawing apart from my studies. By the time I completed the course, I realized that I had zero interest in becoming a Software Engineer or working in the corporate sector."

Daniel Kuang, Owner of Dear White, expressed similar sentiments when reflecting upon his career trajectory. "When picking my majors, I initially thought about what would provide me with a stable income as well as something that had a high earning potential. I studied Business majoring in Accounting and Marketing but with just a single paper to go, decided to drop out and pursue a career in photography. That was over 4 years ago. I'm now an award-winning wedding photographer and have never looked back."

These sentiments are shared by thousands of job seekers across the US, many of whom diverged from their initial track in undergrad. Students often pursue degrees that are financially appealing but realize—quickly or otherwise—that the field of study is not necessarily in line with their interests, goals, and skillsets.

“Looking back, I think it's simply too hard to be picking a lifelong career in your late teens or early twenties,” says Mr. Kuang. “You don't know enough about yourself—let alone the world—to start thinking about what you're going to be happy doing for the next 30-40 years. That said, I still feel having a university degree is very useful.”

It's true – job seekers with an undergraduate degree earn 56% more than high school graduates on average. This salary potential rises when associated with high-demand fields such as technology, healthcare, or engineering. In order to maximize their return on investment, students should be strategic about the degree that they receive – and they should understand that an industry-specific degree does not necessitate an industry-specific function.

“I have a degree in Science, but I have worked in business my entire life,” shares Anna Kagan, Director of Operations at Deleese Stone. “If you get a science degree, you can always switch to business because science degrees cover math and teach logical thought. It gives you more flexibility and career options as employers understand and appreciate this.”

A Georgetown University report on the economic value of college majors lists STEM degrees as among the highest paying. Despite this, only 28% of STEM graduates enter an occupation that aligns with their major. These degrees carry an implicit value, even without the intent to enter the field. For students who are undecided on their future career path, pursuing a technical degree can open doors that may not be available to graduates of other disciplines.

Ultimately, the degree that will generate the most successful career outcome is the degree that is most attractive or applicable to the student's goals. However, it is important to remember that financial return is not the only factor that leads to career success. A growing emphasis on mental health and work-life balance has fundamentally altered how graduates seek new roles.

“In the past, people treated a job as something that you put up with because you need to make money,” says Ms. Kagan. “Now, people seek fulfillment and want to be happy at work. At some point people figure out their “loves and hates” - the types of things that makes them feel energized and they're happy to do, and what sucks the energy out of them. For many, this means a job change or a complete career shift.”

Entrepreneurs like Ms. Vaz and Mr. Kuang have proven that a successful career shift is more than possible, however, students looking to maximize the return on their education should be advised to consider these factors when planning for college. One avenue for aspiring professionals to consider is consulting with a career coach. By working with a certified coach in the field of career services, students can gain valuable insights into the different job paths available to them based on their prospective degree.

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