Does it matter where you go to college? You might be surprised

February 9, 2016 by [Dr. Tim](http://drtimjordan.com/author/anne-jordan/) Jordan

The prevailing mantra being played out by many teens these days is, “Attend a top tier university or bust”. The perception is that where you go to college is the most important determinant for your future success. Charlotte, 18, recently told me that she’d consider it a failure if she weren’t admitted into her top choice, Yale. A whole cottage industry of college prep has sprung up around this concept, with specialized tutoring, camps, publications, consultants, and ACT/SAT prep classes. According to research, this Ivy League mythology is just that, a myth.

Frank Bruni, in his book, [Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be](http://www.amazon.com/Where-You-Not-Who-Youll/dp/1455532703/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1454704375&sr=1-1&keywords=where+you+go+is+not+who+you%27ll+be), cites research showing that the majority of American- born CEO’s of the top 100 Fortune 500 companies did not attend elite universities, and there was no pattern in where they went to school. The [Platinum Study](http://viewfromthetopbook.com/) by Michael Lindsay studied 550 American leaders including 250 top CEO’s, and he found that over two-thirds graduated from non-elite schools. This finding is consistent whether you are talking about Pulitzer Prize winners or leaders in the fields of science and engineering. Many studies have documented that where you go to college has little predictive value for future earnings or levels of well-being.

We need to focus young people on a different model. Going to a prestigious college doesn’t make you successful; you must do that for yourself. It’s not **where** you go to college that matters, it’s **how** you go to college. What really matters are how well you use the university you go to and what you demand of it. Focus on using those years to come of age, bust out of your comfort zone and try new subjects and activities, reinvent yourself, create fresh outlooks on life, re-examine and question everything in your life, and draw strength and confidence from navigating new experiences and connecting with diverse people.

I discourage co-eds from just reproducing their high school experience with the same kinds of friends and activities. College is an opportunity to expand yourself in so many ways, so be open to change. Approach the whole college process with excitement vs. anxiety. Let go of the regimented, linear path to success that has been beaten into you since birth and instead create your own story. Trust the process of life, and most importantly, trust yourself.

Finally, **why** you are choosing a college is more important than **where** you end up. [The American Freshman 2011 survey](http://heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/pubs/TFS/Norms/Monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2011.pdf) showed that 73% of college freshman had making more money as a very important goal, up from 42% in the 1960’s. My worry is that being driven by being accepted into an elite college turns into a pursuit of a prestigious job and getting rich. None of those things in and of themselves is wrong. But people driven by these externals end up less happy and fulfilled than those motivated by things like finding a purposeful career and making a difference.

Young people have been conditioned to overvalue things like popularity, fame, being rich, being special, being the best, and externals like praise, rewards and awards. In the end, what really matters is who you are, not what you have. The college experience should be more about making good people and citizens than making careers. Graduates should emerge as people who are original thinkers, problem-solvers, creative, and risk-takers. I’d recommend that students focus more on personal development and less on packaging themselves.

You can’t measure a high school student by their GPA or test scores, nor can you evaluate a college grad by what school they attended or their grades. What is harder to measure but far more important is a young adult’s level of grit, engagement, optimism, integrity, people skills, street smarts, stamina, and determination. If developing these qualities is our intention for people entering college, then we need to shift our focus starting in childhood.