

College 2 Career

How WNY Colleges are
Preparing Students for
Career Success

By Steven J. Harvey, Ph.D.



"We want our students to grow and mature, to learn and develop, both academically and personally. Our goal is for our students to become the best at their professions, and also the best public citizens and the best people." — Michael V. Drake, University of California at Irvine chancellor, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "What is College For?" 2013

"A college education is to impart the tools to live a principled, significant, and meaningful life, and thereby to ultimately and collectively improve our society." — John Cardinal Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 1852

As evidenced by these two quotes written 160 years apart, the purpose of education from the educators' perspective has largely remained unchanged. A century ago, college was about philosophy, learning about great literary works, and expanding one's horizons in order to become an educated citizen ready to serve our greater society. For those with college degrees, employment was almost a certainty. Today, while there are still strong components of this past philosophy, the goal of American higher education for educators and most higher education institutions has evolved to also include the achievement of their students' career goals.

In distinct contrast to educators, most students identify the top reasons for going to college as career-related. According to a CIRP Freshmen Survey, UCLA's survey of incoming freshmen at four-year institutions, eighty-eight percent go to college to "be able to get a better job" with seventy-five percent wanting to "earn more money." This economic motivation is perhaps why the more recent perspectives shared by educators acknowledge the importance of providing students with both cultural and social awareness, as well as career readiness. It is becoming apparent, and something many WNY colleges and universities already acknowledge, that these two objectives are not mutually exclusive and in fact go hand-in-hand.

Finally, it would be remiss to exclude the perspective of employers, those who hire our graduates. What is interesting about employers is that although they need to find job candidates with "higher order" skill sets like conceptual thinking, complex

reasoning, and advance communication, their emphasis tends to be on practical skills and at times contradictory. In an article by CNN Money titled "Employers value skills over college degrees, workers say," employers credit their college degrees for getting them in the door, but found little connection between degree and the skills required for the job (July 2, 2014, Les Christie). This contradiction was also emphasized in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, "A college degree sorts job applicants, but employers wish it meant more," which highlights the results of an employer survey (August 20, 2014). The survey administered by the *Chronicle* states, among other findings, that "Employers value a four-year degree, many of them more than ever." Immediately following this result it was illustrated that while fifty-three percent of employers found it difficult to find a qualified candidate, sixty-nine percent said that "colleges do a good job of producing successful employees." Additionally, the article articulated the concern by employers that to "expect employers to bring graduates up to speed" is too much to ask.

Currently, we have three distinct perspectives from educators, students, and employers—with some overlap, big variances in perspectives, contradictions within groups, and a clear need for some level of convergence. The challenge becomes determining how colleges and universities can achieve their goals in a manner that allows students to reach their personal aspirations, provides colleges and universities the opportunity to advance cultural awareness and social responsibility, and is responsive to the evolving needs of the business community. This is of particular

importance to WNY's growing industries including life sciences, business services, financial services, and tourism, which often describe finding qualified job candidates challenging at best. It is also equally important to WNY's colleges and universities.

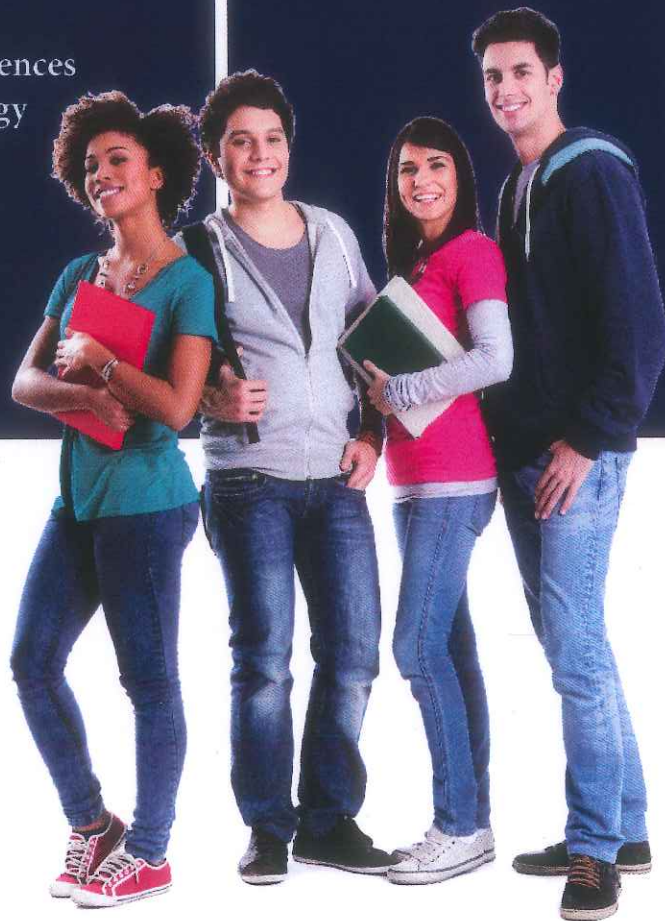
The Path of Today's American College Student

Before we explore the role of higher education in the education of our sons, daughters, and the thousands of adults looking to expand their opportunities, it is important to understand why the achievement of mutual college and student interests is so challenging. At the start of the twentieth century, John Dewey, often referred to as the "father of American education," warned that if our educational system did not change it would lead to dire consequences for our nation. He successfully demonstrated the importance of a more progressive educational model that utilized "real life occupations" in the education of students in his famous lab schools at the University of Chicago. It was there that he advanced the perspective that American education was becoming "unnatural" and would limit students' abilities to be creative, think at higher levels, and solve problems that would undoubtedly grow in complexity and become critical to our future. Students at the lab schools participated in classrooms dedicated to cooking, industry, and sewing—not to learn to become chefs, construction workers, and seamstresses, but rather to engage in activity that was natural, fluid, and provided the opportunity for students to take their

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academic knowledge and apply it to real life situations. Dewey's model reached WNY when he actually visited the Park School during its first years of operation, playing a role in the development of Park's progressive education model.

Dewey was most concerned with the notion that in our haste to implement mass education—a very noble cause—we created an educational model that “produced” passive learners, which as a nation we have struggled to change through various educational reforms ever since.

Today, you will routinely see Dewey and his educational theory cited, as it is in this article. Edmonson, in his book *John Dewey and the Decline of American Education* noted that, “. . . similarities between Dewey's progressivism and the Common Core prove that Dewey's thought still penetrates American educational philosophy.” For example, Dewey advocated “schoolhouse experimentation,” meaning that educators should continually reject old methods in favor of new ones. The Common Core is this kind of “schoolhouse experimentation” (2006). The

very same “schoolhouse experimentation” is going on at every level of education. The result is evident in our educational environments, transforming from rows of desks, quizzes, and tests, to community engagement, entrepreneurship, internships, and technology-driven student-centered teaching. One example of this movement is the increasing role of iPads, in which the student becomes the educator of his or her peers by using iPads to research and explore answers to questions raised in class. Another example is the use of various apps to apply diverse presentation methods like pictures, movies, songs, papers, and interactive audience technologies. These are just a few examples of innovative techniques you will find in districts across WNY and another reason to be proud of our family, friends, and neighbors who have taken on the noble challenge of educating our next generation of leaders and college students.

Charting Our Own Future

When you take into consideration the fact that change often occurs from the top down—especially change that occurs across a system like K-12 education and higher education—it might be natural to assume that the changes occurring or which have occurred across our twenty-one WNY colleges and universities were driven by college presidents and boards of trustees. If that is what you thought, you are both right and wrong. WNY has one of the most progressive collaborations among colleges and universities in the nation. This collaboration, known as the WNY College Connection, has given birth to some of the most innovative educational collaborations in the nation. This is largely due to the fact that our twenty-one college and university presidents saw it as their vision to find common ground through collaboration in order to improve the collegiate experience of our diverse students while serving as an economic driver for WNY. To achieve this, they provided the vision and left it to their professional staff and faculty to conceptualize, develop, and implement the various programs and educational strategies that have garnered local and national attention. We are doing things here that few, if any other regions are replicating which will directly benefit our 119,000 WNY college students. In fact, one of the top three goals of the WNY College Connection is to recruit students,

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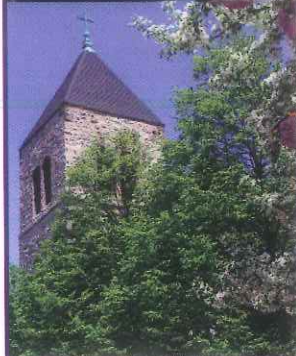
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engage them in experiential/active learning, and retain graduates in WNY.

At the encouragement of the presidents, professional staff and faculty have engaged in a number of activities that not only prepare our secondary students for college and career success, but also create and foster a more cohesive bridge between college and career. A great example of this is the WNY Student 2 Biz Challenge, our student entrepreneurship pitch competition. During the process of determining if the Consortium should back this competition, one president said, "You just can't teach entrepreneurship. You have to experience it." With 100 percent agreement, the Presidents' Council approved and funded the initiative. From there, individuals from across the twenty-one members of the WNY Consortium of Higher Education developed what would become the foundation for WNY's entrepreneurial ecosystem; students pitching and even launching businesses right here in our own backyard. We knew from the start that this was exactly what we needed and, more importantly, what our students needed to

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prepare them for their careers. With the average age of an entrepreneur in this country being forty-two, it was highly unlikely that the Student 2 Biz Challenge would produce a large number of successful businesses. However, we can say with a high degree of confidence that the experience united what our students learned in the classroom with a real life situation, or as Dewey might say, "a more natural" experience that would foster the development of the very skills sets they need to be successful in their careers. This effort proved to be an extraordinary example of what we are capable of, and solidified what direction we would move in.

Building a Bridge to the Business Sector

As most would acknowledge, changing the way things have always been done can be tedious and frustrating, yet extremely rewarding. Some also feel, "is it isn't broken, don't fix it." There will always be a need for students to master the content knowledge of their chosen discipline. Therefore, the classroom

experience, while it will evolve over time, will likely remain a part of the educational landscape for a long time to come. As a society we have been known to address complex social problems with broad strokes. In the situation of WNY higher education, faculty and staff agree that what students learn and how they learn it in the classroom is paramount to what they will be able to achieve outside of the classroom. After all, it is the practical application of theory and knowledge that allows students to advance their skill sets and develop mastery in their chosen discipline. That being said, faculty and staff also fully appreciate that "schoolhouse experimentation" takes time, expertise, passion, and the combined expertise, at the point of conception, of those who will be impacted by strategic initiatives. This is exactly the intent of the Consortium's future initiative, College 2 Career. This ground-breaking collaboration will involve presidents, chief academic officers, chief student affairs officers, career counselors, faculty, faculty development professionals, and alumni, as well as CEOs, vice presidents of human resources, and other business professionals in the analysis of how to better prepare

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students for personal and professional success. The focus will be on how to cultivate the skills that are necessary for the next generation of employees by building stronger cross-sector collaborations.

The strategy for the College 2 Career collaboration is to bring together the diverse stakeholders that work in higher education and WNY's growth industries to identify the skills necessary for the careers of the future and to develop collaborative strategies to develop those skills. This is no small task considering that the top ten "in-demand" jobs for 2010 did not even exist in 2004. (Statistics from "Did You Know?" video created by Karl Fisch, Scott McLeod, and Jeff Bronman, for Corinthian Colleges, Parthenon IV, 2009.) Yet, we understand more about transferable and higher order skill sets than ever before, and the combination of those responsible for educating our future workforce and those who will hire them is a strategy not always implemented at the system level. The potential benefit is enormous. Modeled on previous initiatives by the WNY Consortium of Higher Education, it is likely to yield innovative and impactful solutions that most colleges and universities are attempting to address with varied

success. In WNY, however, it is different. This initiative will involve both sides of the house among our colleges and universities, student affairs and academic affairs, and provide for the development of creative opportunities for students that go beyond traditional internships. It will also involve a more meaningful collaboration between businesses and higher education, bringing more business professionals into the classroom as well as creating more off-site opportunities for our students and for the businesses that host them.

Surely you can easily walk into every one of the twenty-one colleges and universities in WNY and find innovative programs and services that involve local partnerships with businesses. Many of our institutions already celebrate meaningful collaborations with trusted business and community partners. However, this initiative targets the entire sector and, like a rising tide, will raise the bar for all of our students. This is critical for WNY because it becomes a collective responsibility to elevate the quality of the student experience by wrapping real life, experiential opportunities, and content mastery into the fold of career readiness. When this occurs, not only do students and employers gain,

all of WNY gains, and the economic renaissance that Buffalo and WNY are currently enjoying will remain strong long into the future.

Why This is Amazing for WNY College Students

Each year in late August, college freshmen step on campus for the first time. If they are like I was, they are excited, nervous, and just trying to go where they are supposed to go and do what they are supposed to do. In the first few classes of their courses, students learn what it will take to pass the class, and even earn an "A," which is critically important to their success. However, as the twenty-one WNY colleges and universities will proudly tell you, there is a world of opportunities on college campuses to "test" your knowledge and develop the skills you do not gain simply by learning content knowledge. Our colleges and universities provide the kinds of opportunities that employers are looking for and professors know will result in better grades. These opportunities exist right now on every campus in WNY. What will be different, and why WNY is an amazing

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opportunity for all college students, is the sharing of knowledge through the network of twenty-one colleges and universities which will be developing numerous "schoolhouse experimentations." Similar to the WNY Student 2 Biz Challenge, we will be exploring new ways to raise the tide of success of all our students by forging innovative, experiential, and cutting edge opportunities. This effort cannot be successful without everyone coming to the table at the beginning of the conversation and sharing in the collective creation, development, and implementation of the vision. The Consortium has engaged in these types of systemic initiatives before with great success and expects the same for this initiative. The vision for this will meet the goals of educators, students, and employers by enhancing the existing collegiate experience in order to prepare our students to be responsible citizens who are capable more than ever before of providing value to their future employers through their advanced, multi-faceted skill sets.

Value is the consistent theme that cuts across all of our goals. Value prepares students for the jobs of the future and comes not simply by providing content, but by providing

opportunities in the classroom and outside of the core curriculum. Value challenges students, engages teams to solve complex problems, provides opportunities to synthesize data and develop and measure alternative solutions, and cultivates the higher order skill sets that will undoubtedly become the markers of a qualified job candidate and responsible citizen. Examples of these strategies already exist in the forms of student and faculty response teams that help employers find solutions to complex problems, graduate teams that examine not-for-profits and assist them with long-term sustainability, project-based opportunities within the business community, and so on. The future examples remain unseen but will likely be exciting, innovative, academically engaging, mutually beneficial, and tremendous opportunities for students to build the skills that will lead to personal and professional success.

The reason why this is awesome for WNY college students is that in a very innovative, cutting-edge manner, WNY's twenty-one colleges and universities and the businesses that drive our regional economy are working together and committed to educating the whole person through

classroom and real life experiences. The outcome of this effort will be more immediate than most systemic efforts. College 2 Career will promote more responsive and flexible educational environments that will continue to drive WNY forward in ways consistent with the current economic renaissance and in ways we have yet to envision, but we know will be exciting, innovative, and awesome.

Steven J. Harvey, PhD, is the executive director of the WNY Consortium of Higher Education.

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