

# 10 Things Employers Want You to Learn in College

Revised

## The Skills You Need to Succeed

By Bill Coplin

"A college degree and a dollar will get you four quarters." -Anonymous

### INTRODUCTION

If you are in college or intend to go to college, the single most irritating question that your family and others may ask you is this: "What are you going to do with your college degree?" This book will provide the answer: "I'm not just getting a degree. I'm developing the skills to succeed in whatever career I pursue, and when I finish my degree, I'll be able to prove that to my future employer - and you, too!" If you master the skills presented in this book, you can make this statement confidently because you know you will accomplish much more in college than simply completing courses and getting a degree.

Both good news and bad news face all college students, which is why this annoying question is asked so often. In the face of unlimited opportunity (the good news) and a high degree of risk (the bad news), everyone gets anxious. Here's a quick overview of the good and the bad news.

#### The Good News

- Over their work life, college graduates earn an average of \$2.1 million dollars compared with \$1.2 million dollars for high school graduates.
- Someone with a professional degree (MD, JD, or MBA, for example) will earn \$4.4 million.
- College graduates live longer, seem to be happier, vote more often, and are less likely to be unemployed or on welfare than nongraduates.
- You and your parents and family will be proud.

#### The Bad News

- College tuition is likely to continue to increase at both private and public schools.
- Sixty-three percent of students who begin a four-year college do not finish in four years, and 42 percent do not finish in six years.
- Two-thirds of college seniors who graduated in 2010 had student loan debt, with an average of \$25,250.

- In 2010, 85 percent of college seniors planned to move back home according to *Time* magazine.
- The number of jobs not requiring a bachelor of arts will increase.
- Research shows that the majority of college graduates do not improve key skills while in college.

The bad news has gotten much worse since I wrote the first edition of this book in 2002. Costs have increased by 42 percent. With the increase in college costs, the average amount of debt for those students leaving college with debt has increased by 17 percent in eight years. The demand for students with college degrees in the humanities and social sciences has gone down.

College may be a day on the beach for some who live in the now, but it does not automatically lead to a beautiful life. Going to college is a risky business and getting more risky by the day. Like any investment requiring a lot of up-front money, four years of college can have a very big downside. Even if you get a good job, you may have huge debts to pay off. Paying off those debts may take a long time. If that doesn't scare you, think about this possibility: you drop out after two years and are saddled with \$25,000 in debt. That's definitely bad news.

This book gives you the tools to avoid becoming one of those "bad news" statistics. It will help you avoid those risks and disappointments and take advantage of the big payoffs that a college education can provide. Aside from luck and other uncontrollable factors – such as the state of the economy at the time you graduate or some kind of family crisis – the key to a successful career is what you can *do*. This book will describe the skills you need to acquire in order to convince a job recruiter to hire you, as well as the tools you need to master so employers will find you – and your work – invaluable. Knowing how to do what needs to be done is the key to success in your job and life – and that's what this book is all about.

## SEE COLLEGE AS A HUGE INVESTMENT IN TIME AND MONEY

Perhaps the most important aspects of making your college education work for you are time and money. A college education is a massive investment that is intended to shape your future, not just careerwise but in every aspect of your life. Failure to recognize that it is an investment and to use that investment wisely will create challenges in your life that could have been avoided. Using the investment wisely will, conversely, open up opportunities that you never thought possible.

Students who are aware of college costs and understand that college is an investment will leave college with a clear career path and a job. Those students who see college as four years of "camp" regardless of who is paying usually are faced with a more difficult path after college. All too frequently they go to graduate school with no career goal in mind or return home, where they take jobs just to get some spending money.

Serious considerations of the financial ramifications of college for you and attention to how college will help you develop your skills and explore careers can be basic training in many of the skills that will lead to a successful career.

The biggest risk you face with respect to money is the amount of debt you accumulate by the time you leave college. As noted earlier, 67 percent of college students have debt averaging more than \$25,000. To retire that debt, you will pay approximately \$250 a month for ten years (depending on the type of loan and other factors). If you buy a car, you will pay about the same amount for a car payment. Facing a huge debt may also limit your career opportunities because you might feel the need to take a higher paying job doing something you don't like to do or are not good at.

A crucial step in the right direction on treating your time and money commitment to college is to be aware of the costs of your college education. Even if your parents are paying the full freight, you should know how much they are paying. Parents sometimes make a mistake in shielding students from the cost; don't let yours do it. If you are going to graduate college with debt, always know the amount of the debt. When I talk to students and ask them whether they are going to leave college with debt, they frequently cannot even give me a ballpark estimate. They don't know whether it is \$5,000 or \$50,000. These students make decisions about taking extra courses in the summer or going on some type of special summer program overseas without ever considering the financial implications. Too often you flip through the pages of a newspaper or turn on a national news channel to read or hear a story about a college graduate who graduated from a top university with \$100,000 in debt and no job. You do not want to be like those people. These students will frequently blame the college for letting them take on so much debt when they would never complain about a car dealership talking them into a more expensive car and a higher loan.

## MAKE THE BEST OF YOUR INVESTMENT IN COLLEGE

Your college years can be some of the best years of your life. College is a place and time to make your family proud, party, get a credential, find a significant other, or grow up so people will take you seriously. College helps you discover yourself, learn your likes and dislikes, develop your mind and your love of learning, and build an undergraduate record so you can get into a professional school, if that's what you want to do.

But college should also prepare you for finding a good job and a rewarding career. Your college years can be a training period in which you develop your general skills in order both to get a great job right out of college or graduate school *and* to succeed in the workplace. By taking advantage of the opportunities that college offers, you can build the base of skills you need not only to land your first job but also to excel at it. Once that happens, you will be on your way to a lifetime of rewarding work.

College can be a truly significant time in your life. That's why it's important to use this time well, including preparing yourself for a good job after you finish. Use your college years to gain

and polish the skills necessary for a successful career. You'll be glad you did – and your employer will be, too.

You may be thinking, “Well, skills may be nice, but won't prospective employers be looking at my GPA?” Prospective employers look at your grade point average (GPA) as a measure of your persistence and your basic intelligence. However, the list below, which was published by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) in 2010, indicates that employers are really looking for skills. At the top of the list are communication skills, strong work ethic, initiative, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving skills.

#### EMPLOYERS RATE THE IMPORTANCE OF CANDIDATE QUALITIES/SKILLS

- Communication skills
- Strong work ethic
- Initiative
- Interpersonal skills (relates well to others)
- Problem-solving skills
- Teamwork skills (works well with others)
- Analytical skills
- Flexibility/adaptability
- Computer Skills
- Detail-oriented
- Leadership skills
- Technical skills
- Organizational skills
- Self-confidence
- Tactfulness
- Friendly/outgoing personality
- Strategic planning skills
- Entrepreneurial skills/risk taker
- Sense of humor

What's not on this list? A high GPA. In a previous NACE survey, it was listed as 17 out of 20. I bring this up because some students think a high GPA is the most important achievement they can have in college. It may be important for graduate schools and some employers, but it is not as important as being able to demonstrate that you have the skills employers want.

A respectable GPA reflects some of the skills discussed in this book. It also measures how well you play the system by figuring out what your professors want and then delivering the goods. In some ways, meeting the standards of professors is similar to pleasing your boss. Your boss is not likely to ask you to fill up a blue book or take a multiple-choice test, but she or he will expect you to follow directions. For these reasons, you want to have a respectable GPA. A 3.0 is respectable in architecture, the physical sciences, and engineering, but a 3.2 is the bottom line

in the social sciences, humanities, and some professional schools. However, while the GPA provides some information to employers, it is not nearly enough for them to make a judgement about your job potential. This was true before the days of grade inflation; it is doubly true today.

Your GPA alone is not a reliable indicator of your potential as an employee because your course grades do not reflect the range of skills that today's employers need. A very strong recommendation from your internship supervisor at a respected corporation about your people and problem-solving skills is much more important than a high GPA. But a high GPA may get you the interview.

Demonstration of good word-processing and spreadsheet skills will get you your first job faster than a GPA of 3.6 and even a master's degree. Just as college admissions officers look beyond SAT scores when they make their admissions decisions, employers look for qualities beyond your GPA to make hiring decisions. One of my students was hired over several students who had master's degrees in the department of education from a northeastern state. Why? She knew how to use spreadsheets. The interviewer, who was looking for the spreadsheet skills, asked about pivot tables. The other applicants had no clue what those were, even though they listed Microsoft Excel on their resumes. They may have taken an introductory course, but they clearly did not have extensive experience using Excel. (Taking a course is like being told where the swimming pool is. It does not mean you know how to swim.) The spreadsheet maven was hired; she worked her way up the ladder and eventually did policy work for the organization (and directed others to do the spreadsheet work for her). She is now a senior manager in a charter school.

The emphasis on skills may seem like common sense to you, but when you get to college you will find that courses rarely focus primarily on skill development. In fact, employers have long complained about the poor preparation of most college students. According to a *New York Times* article, a "1999 report by the Business-Higher Education Forum condemned graduates for lack of skills in problem solving, time management, analytical thinking, and basic writing and speaking."

It is not that colleges don't provide opportunities for students to develop problem-solving, time-management, analytical thinking, and basic written and verbal communication skills. Rather, most college students do not know how to take advantage of those opportunities.