

# The Eight Career Arts

*Re-making the case for higher education as the gateway to career success*

**W**HAT DOES IT TAKE TO GET AHEAD? My new book, *The Career Arts*, aims to provide a corrective to the widespread and misleading notion that there is a direct trade-off between going to college and acquiring practical job skills. My goal is to give readers a handbook for career success in a changing world by offering a set of recommended practices for how learners can best equip themselves for the future by acquiring a mixture of broad education, targeted skills, and social capital. I call them the Eight Career Arts:

1. Go to college (yes, it's a good idea)
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

## 1. Go to college (yes, it's a good idea)



Public discussion about education after high school is often distorted by the claim that a movement promoting “college for all” is somehow forcing too many young people into a lockstep four-year undergraduate experience for which many are ill suited.

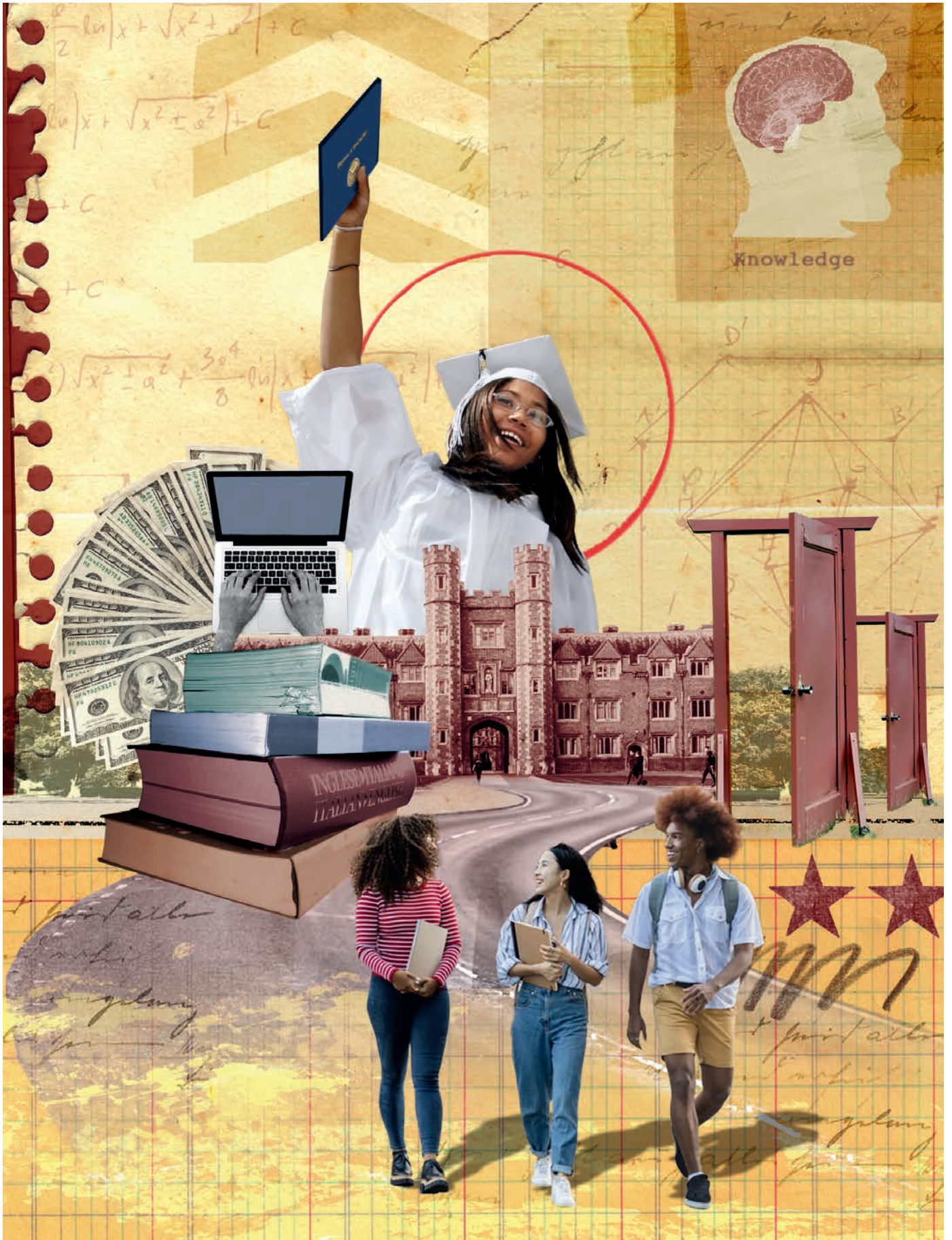
But the idea that a college-for-all juggernaut is crushing all alternatives in its path is largely a straw man. Promoting

college *readiness* to give more students a plausible shot at some kind of postsecondary education is undoubtedly worthwhile. History provides good reason to fear that late bloomers, or bright but disengaged students, or teens who school officials just don't see as college material, will be steered toward vocational tracks that typically don't offer the long-term promise and flexibility of traditional degrees. The concern is all the more pressing when race and class are added to the discussion. As the nonprofit initiative Accelerate ED notes, two-thirds of today's jobs require education and training beyond high school, but just six in ten Black and Latino high school graduates enroll immediately in a postsecondary program after high school, compared to seven in ten of their white counterparts. Degree completion gaps disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and class remain dismayingly large.

Alternatives may well be necessary or useful at times, and in any case the different paths individuals chose should be treated with respect. Still, whether it comes in the form of imagining an economy filled with happy, well-paid plumbers and welders, or decrying the “paper ceiling” that forestalls hiring minority job candidates with skills but without degrees, it seems patronizing to steer minority groups away from the degrees that are so widely understood, with good reason, to be extremely useful stepping stones to financial and career success.

Building one's own human capital through education is like investing in a lasting asset. True, earning a bachelor's degree is no guarantee of career success. But the odds are generally good. Extensive evidence shows the economic benefits that typically accrue to people with degrees. For the many people who could benefit, raising college attendance and completion rates simply makes sense.

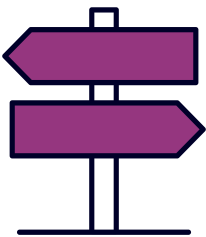
By **BEN WILDAVSKY**



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## Promoting college readiness to give more students a plausible shot at some kind of postsecondary education is undoubtedly worthwhile.

### 2. Find the best *kind* of college and program



College is not a one-size-fits-all experience. Anybody considering college does not have to make a stark choice between an arcane academic experience and practical vocational preparation. This notion continues to dog discussions about broadening postsecondary educational access. Yet it remains a false dichotomy. The world of two- and four-year degrees includes a multitude of options.

An undergraduate interested in exploring the life of the mind, or immersing herself in a traditional, rigorous academic field, can opt to major in a field like philosophy or theoretical physics. Graduates with those majors are also likely to have written papers, studied history or social science, analyzed data, and perhaps studied a foreign language. They might go on to a job, to a master's or PhD program leading to an academic or research career, or to a professional school in fields like law, medicine, or engineering. But many other bachelor's degree students graduate with majors that have immediate, practical career value: nursing (about 13 percent of all undergraduate degrees are in health professions), computer science (about 5 percent), teaching (about 4 percent), engineering (about 7 percent), and more. The single most popular college major is business (making up about one in five bachelor's degrees when subfields like marketing, finance, and accounting are included), which is hardly an abstruse, theoretical subject.

For a large number of students—around 33 percent of the national total—undergraduate education means community college. Many who opt for community college aren't seeking a cloistered undergraduate campus but welcome a college experience that can be integrated fairly smoothly with jobs, family obligations, and other important aspects of their lives. This, too, is college. And despite challenges, community colleges remain extremely well positioned to offer large numbers of students an educational opportunity squarely at the intersection of broad academic skills, professional training, and workforce needs.

For the expanding number of middle-skill jobs in fields that are being quickly transformed by technological

innovation, employers are seeking precisely what community colleges can deliver.

### 3. Complete college



Degree completion remains valuable currency in the labor market and a prerequisite for numerous advanced credentials. Disappointing national completion rates help account for the enormous number of Americans—40.4 million at last count—who report their highest level of education as “some college, no degree.” Community colleges, who serve a different mixture of students than do four-year institutions, report even more dismal associate degree completion rates, particularly given the high percentages of students who report that they begin at community college with the intent of transferring to bachelor's-granting institutions.

Although rising college costs, along with rising student debt (as well as loans taken out by parents) have alarmed many Americans, low-income students in particular often overestimate the cost of college and underestimate the amount of financial aid that's available. Some undergraduates trying to make ends meet work long hours at part-time jobs in order to avoid borrowing. But excessive work hours can lead students not to complete their degrees. Conversely, borrowing at a reasonable level in order to make timely progress to graduation makes as much if not more sense as other common borrowing behavior—for a house or a car, for instance.

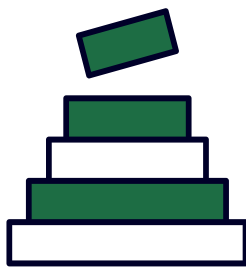
Just as students should make a priority of making it to graduation, colleges and universities themselves have a significant role to play in improving their prospects of success. Weeding out struggling students is no longer regarded as something to brag about or as an indicator of a degree program's rigor but is now seen as a problem to be solved. Growing recognition that academic deficits are by no means the biggest barrier to persistence for many undergraduates has led many campuses to focus on wrap-around supports that range from personalized advising to emergency loans or food assistance to academic and financial assistance.

Data analytics play a growing role on many campuses as a sort of advance-warning system that flags students

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and professors about the need to check in more regularly about assignments and exams. A major analysis of twenty years of randomized control trials found that two approaches were most likely to help community college students make academic progress: a multifaceted set of supports to address multiple barriers faced by students, and promoting full-time enrollment. The research also found promising results from students' use of advising and academic tutoring.

### 4. If pursuing nondegree options, purposefully build education, skills, and networks



It's important for everyone hoping to improve their career prospects to understand just how much economic changes over time have made some kind of education and training after high school more important than ever for economic advancement.

The good news is that large public demand for affordable, short-term, nondegree credentials and training has led to a huge number of these offerings—more than three quarters of a million. Making informed choices based on the quality and return on investment of these options requires close scrutiny of much more than the costs and time required for a program or credential. Proven models like Year Up and Per Scholas are fairly short and are carefully constructed to provide participants with a mixture of broad professional soft skills and targeted skills connected to job market needs. They include practical, hands-on work experience and access to new networks. They can be completed concurrently with community college classes, or for those who want to start on a career immediately, they certainly leave the door open for more study at some point in the future.

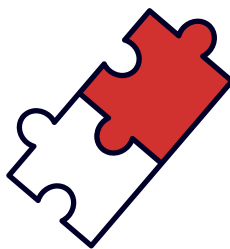
Seeking career-focused education that leads to occupations with good starting wages and attractive benefits is an important starting point. Research points to the value of occupational training in high-growth sectors like health care, information technology, and manufacturing. Finding pathways that have opportunities for advancement is also a key consideration.

The majority of people seeking to build specific skills through tailored education programs actually possess degrees already. At the same time, interest in alternative credentials, fueled partly by rising college costs, has grown among people who either have never attended college or didn't complete their degree. Identifying programs in fields with strong labor market demand is a good place to start.

Seeking stackable credentials that lead to credit and can ultimately be combined into degrees is also an especially promising approach to picking nondegree education options, especially for people who either didn't start college or never finished. Earning a short-term credential, which may be useful for earning a raise or a promotion, or switching to a new job or even a new field, has even greater appeal when it bears academic credit.

This increasingly popular approach allows learners to seek the best of both worlds: they can acquire targeted skills quickly, at modest cost, while incrementally making progress toward full degrees.

### 5. Seek a both/and combination of broad and targeted skills



Long-term career success requires a mixture of broad capabilities and targeted skills. So whether an individual is pursuing a college degree or an alternative such as a skills-based credential, it's best not to think of these options as completely separate pathways. To equip people with the best mixture of education and skills they need to find a both/and strategy for acquiring what they need.

Degrees come in many shapes and sizes, with varying returns, but generally speaking anyone pursuing that route may be in luck simply because the package of a subject-specific major and a series of more general classes should help graduates develop necessary analytical and communications skills along with more targeted skills. At the same time, it remains important for students and the institutions that serve them to be purposeful about ensuring that both broad and focused skills developed in college studies are connected to careers.

The fundamental aims of postsecondary education certainly include pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Yet many students go to college to prepare for careers.

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Recognizing this common goal is by no means a betrayal of the university's mission.

Academic leaders can do a lot to build awareness of how particular experiences and skills, from working in teams to clearly synthesizing research findings, are useful in the workforce. Professors also have vital career guidance to offer as trusted sources of information and connections: explanations of how their classroom studies are connected to career possibilities and the range of specific and broad skills employers value.

Even more than being taught about how education and careers are connected, students have much to gain by trying out different professional experiences themselves as undergraduates. Career-relevant part-time and summer jobs, along with internships, are extremely useful for this reason. The value of gaining experience, learning firsthand about translating classroom skills to the workforce, proving one's abilities, and building professional relationships is hard to overstate.

**6. Take advantage of employer-funded education benefits**



Building general and targeted skills by taking college classes or other kinds of education and training does not require dropping everything else going on in a person's life, including paid work. Nor does it require having large sums of money saved up for education

or taking on student debt. A growing number of employers, including corporate giants like Walmart, Amazon, Starbucks, and McDonald's, have introduced or expanded employee education benefits that allow workers to learn and earn at the same time.

Historically, corporate education benefits have been underused. A big obstacle was the policy of many employers to reimburse tuition costs only after classes were completed; being required to pay tuition out-of-pocket served as a disincentive for many workers to participate. Now many firms pay employees' tuition up front, which has boosted participation rates.

Acquiring new skills is extremely helpful to make

progress within a job or switch to another. Amazon, which has significantly expanded its education benefits through its giant Career Choice program, works with nearby education providers to offer classes that are closely connected to open jobs in the local community that pay at least 10 percent more than Amazon's wages. "It needs to be a job that has a career path," says Ardine Williams, who oversaw the initiative as Amazon's vice president for education. "Not a cul-de-sac job, like a pharmacy tech, where once you get certification you're sort of stuck. The credits earned should serve as the scaffolding to that next career level, certification, and pay rise." The company helps hourly workers change their schedules to allow them to attend classes, which are often offered in on-site classrooms with outside instructors. Offering education benefits to open up new career paths is "the new minimum wage," Williams says.

**7. Find effective ways to build social capital**



A broad education and targeted skills are two vital components of career success. But neither will be effective without the third leg of the stool: social capital. Personal relationships, connections, and introductions play an instrumental role in how individuals learn about

which employers are hiring and which jobs are open. The same networks help people get recommended, get hired, and gain experience. Then the skills and working relationships they develop in turn allow them to progress through the labor force.

Building social capital can take place in many settings, both formal and informal. Beyond the network building that should take place on college campuses or in alternative credential programs, but too often does not, a number of programs explicitly aim to tap latent social capital. Some are designed for degree holders. Other nonprofits focus on individuals who may not have degrees and seek to move beyond the gig economy into jobs with more promising career ladders. Groups such as Social Capital Builders offer a range of classes and training sessions for teens through partners like Catholic Charities and regional workforce organizations. Platforms like LinkedIn and Handshake offer

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users the chance to take the initiative to connect with existing and potential professional contacts.

Many proponents of building social capital urge individual students and those who advise them to take an asset-based rather than a deficit-based approach to developing networks. The point is to build on the strengths and existing social capital people possess rather than assuming that something in their background is broken and needs to be fixed. The practical advice is useful because it tells students that they can adapt their existing social skills and familiar customs to be successful in what might otherwise be an intimidating professional networking process.

### 8. Prepare for the world as it is, not as you wish it were



A couple of months into my book research, I walked along the Charles River near Harvard’s Kennedy School with David Deming, the policy school’s academic dean and the Isabelle and Scott Black Professor of Political Economy. One of the first things he told me

was that before thinking about which credentials to recommend, it’s important to evaluate the labor market’s need for different kinds of skills. He contrasted the broad skills college provides with tailored, short-term skills programs that operate more like “finishing schools.”

Each has its place. Deming is sympathetic to the need to provide more pathways for people who want to learn practical skills without going through a full degree program. But targeted skills become obsolete. Broad skills acquired in degree programs can be useful throughout an individual’s career and can be supplemented as needed with market-ready education and training. That’s why Deming would like to improve the access and affordability of publicly funded higher education and thus create a bigger pool of people with the most flexible educational background for lifelong career progress.

There’s no mistaking strong public interest in expanding affordable short-term options for education and training beyond degrees. For many people,

growing calls for more hiring and promotions based on skills rather than formal degree qualifications hold intuitive appeal. It makes sense for anybody seeking to advance professionally to pay careful attention to changes in formal credential requirements and, more importantly, actual hiring behavior.

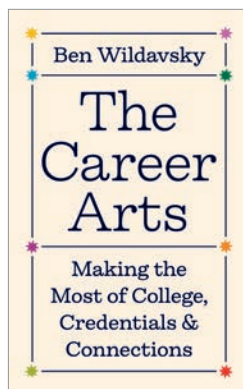
Yet students and those who work with them need to know about present-day realities along with emerging and future trends. It still makes sense to be prepared for the world as it is, not the world others are hoping for. It would be a terrible mistake if we pretended degrees weren’t a huge advantage in getting ahead. Yes, degree requirements can be a barrier, but so is a failure to build human capital. Equipping more Americans with degrees, including more from low-income backgrounds, more African Americans, and more Latinos, will help those individuals and help the nation.

### Conclusion

At a time when long-term economic changes increasingly require education beyond high school for career success, too many Americans doubt the proven value of college. They also receive too little guidance about the best alternatives or supplements that will provide them, over time, with the optimal combination of broad and targeted skills needed to keep them productively employed in a fast-changing labor market.

It’s time for us to do better. The United States can do more to adopt a both/and approach to improving people’s career prospects and to fostering upward mobility. Policy makers, educators, employers, students, and engaged citizens need to understand, replicate, and pursue the best models for success in both traditional and nontraditional educational pathways.

They should also embrace the need for greater attention to social capital. We can build on our many successes, and also learn from our shortcomings, as we forge a fresh approach to expanding broad and targeted educational opportunities for more Americans in order to improve their chances of lifelong career success.



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