

College journey shaped my destination

Every person has their own path in life. I believe that statement wholeheartedly. My experiences have taught me that the people we meet as we walk along that life path lead us in different directions than we anticipated. They guide us onto new landscapes by unlocking our untapped potential. That metaphorical twist of the key improves our lives.

My own path has been altered several times by people who have gifted me opportunity, insight, and growth. It is in this spirit that I reflect on the value of a college education.

Without a doubt, going to college positively and drastically changed my life. It is one of the many reasons I believe so deeply in a college education and why it is so important to me to invest intentionally in how we interact and support our students, faculty, and staff.

From a very practical standpoint, U.S. Census Bureau data shows that the higher a person's education level, the more income that person earns. There are also many studies that connect higher earnings to better health, more civic engagement, and other positive personal outcomes.

Similarly, many people are now looking to define value through a return on investment (ROI) proposition. That means answering the question, does your college degree increase lifetime earnings in excess of what it costs you to earn that degree? On a side note, we recently used metrics provided by the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity to review ROI. Thanks to our high value and affordable costs, we found a positive return for every FHSU program category!

At this point in my life, I know that wealth is much more than money. Like many of our philanthropists, I deeply appreciate having the resources to invest in people and opportunities to make our community and the world better.

Reflecting on a recent Future U podcast, I thought about how the college trajectory significantly changed my life. Again, from a very practical standpoint, my college education opened new doors of opportunity, providing a concrete example of raising the generational narrative of my family, as I am the first person in my family to go to college.

My story of college value is more about how college nurtured deep roots in learning about me – how I think, who I am becoming, and how I want to be present in life. My college story began with discovering the courage to do something no one in my family had done – move away from home to an area, community, and state I had never experienced.

As the saying goes, faith is about taking leaps and trusting the net will appear. Colleges, in my opinion, are in the “net-building” business. It is our job to build communities where our students feel a strong sense of belonging.

At college, arriving with a mix of hope and fear, I found a home where I felt safe enough to discover people that were different from me and to try new experiences foreign to me. I moved from the East Coast to Mid-America. I would soon learn that, even though people looked like me, the diversity of experiences, cultures, and thought processes would begin a tremendous opportunity to learn and shape my own thinking. To me, that is the real value of a higher education.

Honestly, in thinking about what I wanted to be when I grew up, my choices now seemed rather narrow. Like many students in my freshman class, I signed up to be a pre-med major. But I did not know how challenging the sciences would be for me, nor did I know I would fall in love with the social sciences. The opportunity to discover so many areas of study I knew little about, and find my passion and love of learning, was invaluable.

Probably the most valuable aspect of going to college was learning how I learned best. My faculty not only nurtured my competence but, more importantly, my confidence. Powerful memories for me were classes in graduate school where my research paper was declared a standout by my professor, and my in-class comment was labeled astute (a word I had to look up). I immediately knew that these compliments were based on the high-value education provided by caring faculty who both supported and challenged my learning as an undergraduate.

The value I gained from attending college went beyond the classroom. I began to venture “out of my shell,” exploring involvement opportunities such as undergraduate research and student activities. Through student organizations, I would learn leadership, time management, organizational development, how to navigate controversial decisions, and how to leave the world a little bit better through community engagement. I would be given the opportunity to travel and attend conferences. These lessons and experiences continue to influence my life today.

Becoming a different person than the shy east coast girl who arrived as a freshman was indeed a profound, transformational experience. I learned how to navigate personal choices and make friends. That exposure to the world, on a whole different level and intensity, opened new doors that may have been otherwise closed or simply unseen. While going to and through college was always about getting a degree, the most valuable part, it turns out however, was not the diploma but the journey.

Personally, I believe it is the journey that is the true value of a higher education. A journey designed to build knowledge, confidence, and open new doors to opportunity – or, as we like to say at Fort Hays State, unlock one’s untapped potential.

That is why it breaks my heart to see that Kansas ranks below the U.S. average in rates of students attending college directly from high school (NCHEMS Information Center). I am often asked why this is the case. I do not know – but just maybe, sharing my story, my definition of the value of a college education might help at least one high school senior to reconsider his or her choice to stop by and enroll in a post-secondary program.

At Fort Hays State University, the welcome mat is always out.

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