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## Taking Risks and Forming Identity

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Chapter 4 integrates these topics by advising students to consider the ways that students exercise personal agency in making key decisions during college, while warning students to appreciate the difficulty of these choices and pay attention to the realities of the options they have available to them. The fourth chapter explains how exploring and forming a personal and social identity is vital to navigating college. In chapter 4, students learn that one key to college success is taking ownership of learning and exposing themselves to a variety of classes and majors in order to decide which is the best fit for them.

This chapter discusses the ways that social context and personal choices interact to shape individuals' paths through college and life. We discuss the importance of self-efficacy and ownership of learning in making important college decisions. In considering these ways to gain a sense of control over where one's life is headed, we also address how *feeling* that one has control is a mixture of belief and circumstances. In other words, it

is hard to feel one has control if opportunities are limited, but even when opportunities abound, people might not believe that they have the ability to change their circumstances. Making choices, then, entails a complex balance between owning one's decision-making and accurately recognizing which opportunities one has (or does not have) available. Emphasizing personal transformation as a way to deal with all that life throws one's way can burden students with an excessive sense of responsibility for how their life turns out. We want to avoid this pitfall. At the same time, it is important not to accept a passive role in one's life, either. We talk through how to balance those ideals in creating value orientations that will help students choose a path with intentionality, ultimately making a meaningful life. Students must accept that, as with navigating via a GPS, they remain responsible for choosing a direction to travel, although there are many possible routes, and occasional "rerouting" is normal.

## STUDENT STORIES: WHAT WE EXPERIENCE

The student stories in this chapter highlight how students establish their identities in a variety of ways in college: through sororities or fraternities (**Abby**), deciding not to pledge (**Austin**), or in other ways finding self identity (**Kyndal**), especially by breaking out of high school cliques (**Emma**). Other students describe questioning the future of their childhood dreams (**Melissa**), including whether it is time to switch majors (**Chikako**), choosing from a myriad of interesting options (**Camille**), and considering how to commit to a major that will lead to a desirable career (**Mateo**).

**#greeklife #IamASororityWoman:** Best day ever! I am so proud of all the girls for rallying today for the pledges. The letters looked fantastic, and the photo booth was a definite hit. Here's to another great year together as sorority sisters 😊

**Abby** said the following about her identity as a sorority member:

Ever since I was little, I had dreamed of joining a sorority just like my mom, aunt, and older cousins had. Recruitment was incredibly rough and very much felt like being excluded by new people each day. However, on bid day I was welcomed home into the sweetest girls' arms . . . Within a few weeks of being part of the sorority I had found my best friends. We were thrown right into freshman sessions once a week, chapter once a week, and pep rallies most Fridays. We were taught how to act and carry yourself appropriately and were given numerous rules to follow. Not so surprisingly, I have found that almost all of my best friends are in my sorority. I hang out with these women almost every day of the week and have so much pride being able to wear our letters and throw our sign.

**#notgoinggreek #onbeingme:** To all the brothers who made pledge week so much fun, THANK YOU! Even though I decided not to go Greek, I had a blast this week and hope we can keep the good times going anyway. Who's up for going to check out a concert next weekend?

**Austin** described his decision not to go Greek in the following words:

My father works in a factory, and my mother is a social worker. I was never embarrassed by my . . . class origins until coming to college. The summer before my first semester, I decided I was going to rush. When you first decide to rush, you have to pay a substantial sum just for the chance to rush and then they give you a list of recommended outfits and items to bring for the occasion. I spent entire paychecks buying name-brand shorts and shirts that summed up who I was [supposed to be] as a person—having stains on them [implying that the person I was, and the clothes I wore, weren't good enough]. I did everything in my power to cover up my middle-class background to get into an organization that, three days after rush began, I decided was not for me. The

pressure to be something I was not and conceal my origins was exhausting, and not how I wished to spend my college years. *College is the first time many get any true independence to make their own life decisions* [emphasis added]. I didn't want to give up my first chance to control my own life, to have some organization tell me how to dress, where to go, and how to live.

**#collegainhighschool #findingyourself:** To all y'all back home, I miss you! College is so different than life back in YoJo!! For better and for worse. But I think I am starting to figure this whole college thing out and learning a lot about myself in the process.

**Kyndal** also reflected on the identity work involved in starting college:

The biggest change in my life in every way, shape, and form came when I moved to college. College is a shell shock to everyone because for the first time everyone is on their own without the reliance of their parents. I was so used to following the rules of my parents; I was also used to the culture of my hometown because I had never moved anywhere in my entire life . . . As I look back and compare high school Kyndal to college Kyndal there is a clear shift in identity. My high school definitely relied heavily on materialistic mindsets and popularity . . . My town is commonly referred to as the "YoJo bubble" . . . Most of the families that live in "YoJo" are ones with a lot of money, even more so, wealth matters more which is why the average car that was driven at my high school was either a Jeep, Lexus, or BMW . . . The "popular" kids had parents who had some form of high paying job who would buy them the newest fad the second it came out, making those who did not have those things, like myself, feel like an outsider, or like I did not belong. The "popular" kids through all four years of high school maintained the exact same friend group the entire time, something Adler and Adler (2018) call cliques.

College culture is one that really does not have a “set norm.” Everyone in college does their own thing. No one really tries to impress anyone because some days I will see girls wearing onesies to class because it is just “one of those days.” Everything you once knew as normal almost goes out the window once you go to college, because it is a fresh start and very few, if not anyone, knows you or your “reputation.” The biggest thing that college throws at everyone, but mainly girls, are frat parties. The third day after I moved in, my roommates and I saw that everyone was going out, so we felt pressured to go out too. I never really partied a lot in high school, so experiencing a frat party for the first time was something new that I knew I would have to adjust to . . . *College comes with many new hardships and struggles, but I firmly believe college is where you find yourself; I have found myself*” [emphasis added].

**#findingnewfriends #nomorecliques:** So some people in my Friday class act like they are still in high school. First off, that’s annoying! Please stop. Ok, but second, that reminds me how the rest of college is so different than high school. Cliques are so over with, and I couldn’t be happier about that. To all my new friends, follow me, and I’ll follow you back.

Also noting the monumental changes that college can bring to social identities, **Emma** had this to say:

[High school] freshman year friend groups included many girls, as everyone was trying to get to know each other. As the years went by, groups got smaller as people started to realize who they related to more . . . This year in college I started to grow apart from my [old] friend group and became closer with girls from a different clique. I quickly noticed how much more I related to them, and so I began to try and hang out with them as much as possible, to grow stronger friendships . . . I have quickly become very close, and consider them some of my best friends. However,

there are numerous ways in which I have [also] experienced exclusion . . . In a high school setting, many girls are learning a lot about themselves and differences between others can be very apparent. Thus, I feel many cliques leave out outsiders because they are nothing like the other members of the group. Personally, I have experienced exclusion in that my friend group kicked out a girl because of constant fights and disagreements that were built up with multiple members of our group. Certainly, the exclusive and inclusive tendencies of friendship cliques have played a major role in my social life. *Although I have been in college for barely a year, many of my social experiences have already reshaped my life as a whole* [emphasis added].

**#whatamidoingwithmylife #stilldreaming:** Have I settled for the “easy” way out? Ever since I was little I have had a dream for what I wanted to do with my life, but everyone keeps telling me to be more “practical.” Is it practical to give up on a dream, or is it selling out for safety?

**Melissa** shows how these social identity issues can affect decisions surrounding what to study and how that will affect life after college. As far back as Melissa can remember, she’s been a dancer. Her mom often tells her she could do a perfect pirouette before she could spell her name. Melissa shows so much passion and talent when she dances. She is torn between wanting to pursue dance as a career and going the “practical” route of getting a traditional college degree. Melissa knows it is tough to make it in dance. She decided to enroll at her local university where she could remain a part of her dance company while completing college basics. As the first year draws to a close, she finds herself growing more comfortable with the idea of finishing college and letting go of her dream, but she struggles with wondering what will come next for her.

**#wrongmajor #wronglife:** I’ve told people for years that I’m going to be a lawyer. Now I find myself wondering if this is what I really want to do. Some of the classes are such a drag, and hard, because I’m just

not that into it. There are so many other classes and majors that seem infinitely more interesting. Should I switch?

Both **Chikako's** mom and dad are lawyers, and it's always been assumed that he will follow in their footsteps. But to be honest he's never liked the idea. He hates his ethics class (just as a student aspiring to be a doctor might find he or she hates biology), but he likes his volunteer work at the local elementary school. He's a member of a fraternity and organizes all of their functions. He's thinking of switching to an education major, and he is trying to figure out how best to break the news to his parents. Luckily, he has a great relationship with one of his professors and has frequently visited during office hours to discuss his new path and how to approach this issue with his parents.

**#toomanychoices #howdoidecide:** Do you wonder where you want to end up? I keep hearing everyone else talking about their career plans, and I just don't have it figured out like they do. Everything interests me! How do you decide when there are so many exciting options?

**Camille** is a good student. She has always been a good student. In high school, she did well and made the grades that everyone expected. In fact, she did well in all subjects, and that is the problem. She is in her first semester and taking university core classes. While they are all going well, there isn't anything that she can see herself studying for the next four years. Her lack of direction is a constant weight on her shoulders. It seems like everyone she meets asks her how the semester is going and quickly follows it up with, "What's your major?" Her parents find a way to bring it up in every conversation, and she's started screening their calls because she doesn't have the answer they want. Her advisor assures her that this is normal and suggests she take some interest inventories and meet with a career counselor to guide her to a possible major. She has made those appointments, but secretly she worries that they won't help and wishes someone else could just tell her what to do.

Similarly, since high school, **Mateo** has been interested in a lot of different things and has generally found something he likes in each of his classes. While registering for his first semester, he picked a major in history because he really loved his high school history class the year before. He's doing well now and has been pretty happy with his choice. However, he has a friend who is studying computer science, another in engineering, and another working on a criminology degree. When they talk about the classes they're taking, they all seem really interesting, and he could see himself taking all of those classes too. He thinks, "I'm at a university with dozens of majors and hundreds of courses to choose from . . . am I choosing the right major? What happens if I finish my degree, and I would have been better off with one of the other majors?" The choices seem overwhelming and irrevocable. He wishes there were an easier way to sort it all out.

## SCIENCE: WHAT WE KNOW

It is important to note, after the discussion of chapter 3, that family backgrounds are not *determinative*: one's resources play a major role in individual experiences but do not prevent individuals with similar resources from acting differently. Connecting earlier discussions of cultural inequalities with the identity construction process of emerging adulthood, we think this is why *self-efficacy* and *ownership of learning* are important predictors of college success. We prefer the term "social self-efficacy" because the concept refers to having confidence in one's competence to acquire and respond to the social norms of different settings—for example, college. In this sense, feeling that one has control over one's life is a mixture of belief and circumstances. Ownership of learning, or a sense of personal involvement and investment in one's education, is "not sufficiently taught or measured" in college, but it "can be developed systematically" and has the greatest effect on students for whom college is a challenge initially (Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdock 2013: 1019).<sup>1</sup> Wright and colleagues find



that these “extra-cognitive” factors are becoming more important in navigating college because of increasing class sizes and a heightened focus on independent learning. In other words, academic knowledge of class content is necessary for success in college, but it is not sufficient. Students also need general skills for directing their college experiences. It turns out these skills also promote improved health and well-being.<sup>2</sup>

It is important, then, to understand that college presents students with the freedom to make decisions and have fun while taking into account their particular social and economic circumstances. As **Kyndal** illustrates, students can experience a culture during their first year that is quite different from what they are used to. Learning to thrive in this new culture involves figuring out who to ask for help when needed and how to ask for it. The challenge for new college students is to adapt to a new culture without feeling like they have lost their fundamental character. This process is among the most exciting and rewarding experiences of college for many students—learning how to adapt while also learning more about who one is and establishing who one wants to be. Many of the student stories in this chapter demonstrate the importance of selecting which groups of friends to have and what activities to get involved in. On every campus there is a wide array of options. Finding the right fit can promote well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Moving beyond the overview of social class and cultural inequality dynamics that we summarized in chapter 3, we focus in this chapter on the ways that social experiences affect our everyday decisions. This is most in line with a branch of social theories that is referred to as *symbolic interactionism*, as well as with the sociology of culture. This branch of social thinking pays attention to the subjective meaning we derive from everyday experiences, and the interaction between the circumstances that people are in (*social structure*) and the choices they make in response to these circumstances, which also can change their circumstances over time (*agency*).<sup>4</sup> In interpreting social interactions, people react based on a combination of their view of themselves and what they think others think about them. Focusing on this iterative process highlights that people do not form their identities in a vacuum. Someone could think they belong in a certain social group, but if people do not accept them in that group,

then they will likely reevaluate whether they want to belong in it. For example, students could enter college thinking they want to be lawyers, but if spending time in the pre-law group makes them feel like outcasts or gives them the sense that they are different from the other students in that group, then they may reconsider whether they truly want to be lawyers.

Having these kinds of experiences can result in what Dalton Conley<sup>5</sup> refers to as the “*intravidual*.” The term conveys the idea that we as individuals are penetrated by society, meaning even our most personal thoughts and feelings are punctuated by our experiences within multiple social groups. This is why it is important to think of self-efficacy, and well-being generally, as situated within a social context that presents challenges for personal integration. Conley describes modern life as presenting a “competing cacophony of multiple selves all jostling for pole position in our mind” (Conley 2013: 169). In the face of such a cacophony, it is important for students’ well-being to do the work of self-reflection, and to focus on how to gain self-efficacy in navigating their lives effectively. For example, **Aaron** of chapter 5 describes the following:

Even though I began to conform to the ideals of the upper class, I still interacted with people of the middle to lower class through my church. These people had completely different ideals and values than the people of the upper-class that I interacted with daily at school. Because of this difference, I would act different at school than I would at church.

Aaron continues by explaining how multiple interactions can cause a sense of fragmentation:

My “self” had become fragmented because I was being socialized by two different groups, and this made me an intravidual (Conley 2013). Because of this, I almost never brought the two groups together. On occasion, I brought my school friends to church, or I would bring someone from church to a school dance or football game. When this did happen, I was confused on how to act. Although my personality

did not completely change when I switched groups, I still acted different in the slightest way, and this caused friction.

Reflecting on his experience of fragmentation, he connects this to his prior family experiences:

Not only was I fragmented between my friend groups, but it also happened between my divorced parents' houses just like Conley pointed out (2013). While one parent would be strict in one area, the other parent would be relaxed in that area. This caused many fights between me and both of my parents. After realizing this difference in the enforced norms in each home, I began acting differently around each of my parents, just as I did between my different friend groups.

Conley explains that growing up in a highly networked era, with social media connecting people across the globe, confronts individuals with limited participation in a broad array of social groups. We can get the sense that we are one self when we interact in one group, and another self when in other groups. When we think about all these different groups together, we may feel that they do not add up, that we have "lost ourselves" in the bustle or have to devote concerted effort to "finding ourselves." This experience of fragmentation can be profound for college students, who may be confronted on university campuses with a greater range of options in terms of who to be, who to hang out with, and what to do. For example, **Troy** (a student discussed in chapter 2), reflected on the dramatic change from high school to college, stating the following:

Pieces of myself are still invested back home in my family and friends, but at the same time, I am actively expanding my individuality in town through clubs, school, and the new people I have met. This expansion has led to a feeling of fragmentation because the intra-individual pieces of myself are much more distant than they were in the past. Luckily, I found other things to invest myself into.

These sentiments from Troy represent a healthy way to respond to a moderate degree of fragmentation in a fairly normal college experience.

A degree of fragmentation, and distress over the challenges of reintegration, can be normal during college, and in life generally. For some, however, this issue can become overwhelming. Long-term fragmentation in the absence of integration can be linked to disorganized thinking, which is a key aspect of what psychologists call schizophrenia. The key then is to acknowledge the normality of experiencing fragmentation in modern societies, with such a diverse array of interactions, while also understanding that moderation is the key differentiator for health and well-being. Becoming stuck in fragmentation, being overwhelmed by the task of reintegration work, or ruminating for long periods of time over the difficulties inherent in fragmentation can be well-being issues. From a sociological approach, schizophrenia and other mental health issues can be understood as an outcome of the modern condition, which can promote too high a degree of social disorganization.<sup>6</sup> This approach is important for recognizing factors in the broader social context that create negative, and positive, personal experiences. From a psychological approach, schizophrenia and other mental health issues can be viewed as an individual condition, which needs medication and personal reconstruction to treat.<sup>7</sup>

As discussed in chapter 1, sociologists describe the *socialization* process as meaning “that societal values, identities, and social roles are learned, not instinctual” (Granfield 1991: 145).<sup>8</sup> To the extent that higher education boosts social mobility (as discussed in chapter 3), it provides students with a greater sense of control of their lives. Here is a student description that exemplifies this sense of control:

Controlling one’s own life means exercising authority and influence over it by directing and regulating it oneself. People vary in the control felt over their own lives. Some feel they can do just about anything they set their minds to. They see themselves as responsible for their own successes and failures and view misfortunes as the results of personal mistakes. Others feel that any good things that happen are

mostly luck—fortunate outcomes they desire but do not design. They feel personal problems mostly result from bad breaks or the callous selfishness of others and feel little ability to regulate or avoid the bad things that happen . . . Sociologically, the sense of personal control reflects the real constraints and opportunities of one’s ascribed and achieved statuses (Mirowsky & Ross 2007: 1340–1343).<sup>9</sup>

Education, especially during college, builds a greater sense of control, which is a key aspect of long-term well-being. While other adults experience a diminishing sense of control as they age, those with a college degree feel an increasing degree of control. The reason for this difference seems to be that college regulates access to opportunities, and access to opportunities facilitates a general sense of control over the direction one’s life is headed.

Part of acknowledging the importance of students’ different social and economic resources (discussed in chapter 3) is recognizing how class backgrounds can affect cognition and thus shape decision-making. For example, **Chen** of chapter 5 reflects on differences in social resources by describing the emotional labor of her childhood:

Emotional labor, as defined by Loe, “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain an outward countenance that produces the desired state of mind in others” (2013: 83).<sup>10</sup> I had no term for what I was doing [back then], but I was learning to do emotional labor in all parts of my life, even my home. It is easy to see how it became difficult for me to express anger in the way an adult would because I learned how to conceal anger.

Research finds that students from less resourced backgrounds can use “resistance strategies”<sup>11</sup> that are intentional efforts to conceal any ways they may not fit into the middle-class culture of college. Jennifer M. Silva<sup>12</sup> refers to this as a “mood economy,” in which students—especially those from working-class backgrounds—adhere strongly to the idea of therapeutic self-transformation:

The need to continuously recreate one's identity—whether after a failed attempt at college or an unanticipated divorce or a sudden career change—can be an anxiety-producing endeavor. In a world of rapid change and tenuous loyalties, the language and institution of therapy—and the self-transformation it promises—has exploded in American culture (Silva 2013: 18–19).

Silva continues by explaining what is entailed in the therapeutic culture:

[The] therapeutic narrative . . . provides a blueprint for bringing a reconstructed, healthy self into being. It works like this: first, it compels one to identify pathological thoughts and behaviors; second, to locate the hidden source of these pathologies within one's past; third, to give voice to one's story of suffering in communication with others; and finally, to triumph over one's past by bringing into being an emancipated and independent self (Silva 2013: 19).

Contrary to the widely held belief that individuals can choose freely which path to take in life, the educational process presents a number of “institutional sorting mechanisms.”<sup>13</sup> People do make choices, but these choices are not free-floating options. They are pathways; they are akin to a GPS's presentation of several preexisting routes. Choosing one versus another affects one's likelihood of getting stuck in traffic or having to take a detour because of construction. Anyone who has tried different map apps knows they are not all equally good at predicting which route is the best to take, in part because they rely on different sources of data, including potentially outdated information. Likewise, college pathways sort students in different ways.

As one example of thinking about how social class background and individual behavior affect the routes students take through college, Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton<sup>14</sup> describe three college pathways: the professional pathway, the party pathway, and the social mobility pathway. They state, “Just as roads are built for types of vehicles, pathways are built for types of students. The party pathway is provisioned to support

the affluent and socially oriented; the mobility pathway is designed for the pragmatic and vocationally oriented; and the professional pathway fits ambitious students from privileged families” (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013: 15). All these pathways return students skills, and which pathway students regularly engage in during college has ramifications for the kinds of skills they develop.

For those on the *professional pathway*, the university is a means for achieving a professional career. Students on this pathway typically come from affluent backgrounds and have set their sights on entering a profession as a career and life identity. They typically focus on studying during college and tend to form their friendship groups around their professional identity. Often hailing from the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, those on the *mobility pathway* tend to see the university as a means for striving to be upwardly mobile. Although getting a college degree may be their end goal at this point, as they may not have settled on pursuing a certain job or career after college, students in this path tend to work hard and befriend others who do the same. Between the focus of these other two groups lies a third group, the *party pathway*, and students on this path tend to see the university as a means for socializing and fun. Armstrong and Hamilton describe how these students and the university have a “mutual agreement” to demand little of each other. Thus, many students on this path prioritize participating in campus life over attending classes.

Importantly, people on all three pathways can be successful after college, and people on all three paths can also struggle to carve out comfortable careers and lives after graduation. Students’ post-college lives are determined less by the paths they select than by the degree to which their resources, choices, and behaviors align with the path that they are on. For example, the professional pathway is home to both “achievers” and “underachievers,” in Armstrong and Hamilton’s terminology. Achievers, who earn good grades in difficult classes, accomplish a relatively smooth transition into careers after graduation. The “underachievers” often struggle to balance their social lives on campus with the rigorous studies that the professional pathway demands. The post-college success of these

students is mixed, depending on whether they switch course during college to better align their major and career path with their actual behaviors.

Likewise, there are more successful and less successful groups within the party pathway. In this case, the groups are “socialites” and “wannabes.” Socialites make the most of their high degree of social engagement, and build strong networks during college that position them well for careers that rely upon networking. Advertising, PR, and other business positions, for instance, are well-suited for students on the party pathway. Wannabes, on the other hand, may attempt to take that pathway but never fully fit into the social scene, often due to a misalignment between their desires and the path they are traversing. In some cases, these students attempt majors that require strong academic performance, which proves incompatible with their entrenchment in the party scene. Students in this situation must often confront hard choices related to downgrading their expectations for their major and career to better align with their social participation. Other wannabes on the party pathway are the students who do not have enough resources to pay for the fashion, entertainment, and extra expenses involved in partying. These students struggle to fit in, and among the students Armstrong and Hamilton studied, their outcomes were sometimes worse than those of students on the social mobility pathway who were not trying to juggle multiple social identities.

For students on the third path, social mobility, results vary as well. All the students on this pathway are striving, motivated to establish a better life than they had growing up. Armstrong and Hamilton describe such students in this way: “They came ‘motivated for mobility,’ making it to college despite considerable odds and leaving communities where college attendance was far from the natural next step in life” (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013: 148). Some of these students are “creamed” from the group, referring to the “cream of the crop.” In other words, the best students are plucked from the mobility pathway by intervention programs designed to facilitate their move into the professional pathway. Many others on this mobility trek find the path to be “blocked.” Weighed down by the struggle to cover everyday expenses, they come to feel isolated in their attempts to handle financial difficulties while matching the academic



accomplishments of their peers on the professional path or finding the resources to socialize with their peers on the party path.

Key for our purposes, those students who best align their interests, desires, social capital, and other resources with the path most likely to reward them are more likely to be successful. In tracking the post-college trajectories of the students they followed, Armstrong and Hamilton found that the achievers of the professional pathway made a quick and smooth entry into professional job markets or graduate programs, successfully reproducing an upper-middle-class trajectory. Meanwhile, the underachievers of that same path struggled with underemployment or unemployment and continued to depend on their parents financially, facing a risk of downward mobility. Among those on the party pathway, the socialites secured solid jobs in big cities thanks to the connections and continued support of their parents, reproducing their middle-class standing. The wannabes, however, struggled with unemployment due to under-qualification, and they lacked the parental funds or social ties to support their trajectory, placing their future class standing in jeopardy. Finally, the results of graduates of the mobility pathway also diverged. Students who were successful on this pathway (the creamers) landed jobs that launched them from working-class to middle-class lifestyles. In contrast, those who were less successful (the blocked) often ended up encountering difficult financial situations that undermined their chances of upward mobility. In many cases, they ended up back at home in jobs that did not require a bachelor's degree. Thus, pathways through college reflected a combination of the following: parental resources upon which students could rely; the particular pathway selected; and the ways students aligned their everyday choices (or not) with the pathway they were attempting to take.

Another college navigational choice relates to the degree of engagement online, especially social media interactions. For emerging adults, friendships are fluid and disjointed and social networks are loose.<sup>15</sup> In studying the role of social media sites on friendships, scholars found that these sites help emerging adults maintain large and dispersed networks of friends.<sup>16</sup> The increased mobility, use of social network sites, and the overall casual attitude toward friendships can benefit emerging adults

through expanding their social networks and increasing their connections to many people who have access to a wide variety of social and economic resources.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, for socially anxious individuals, interacting online can provide greater support than interacting face-to-face, resulting in improved well-being.<sup>18</sup> However, there are eventually diminishing returns to the number of friends on social media, and likewise drawbacks to obsessively posting on social media.<sup>19</sup> Plus, researchers have found that intense engagement on social media is related to lower levels of academic engagement and to less involvement in extra-curricular activities during college.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the results of social media in college are mixed.

In summary, navigating college well requires continual work to align and realign one's progress as an individual with one's structural position within the institution of higher education. When navigating by a GPS, it is not wise to take a route plotted for a car if one does not have a car. However, there are many ways to get to every destination, and taking public transit, riding a bicycle, or using a ride share app can prove just as effective, as long as the navigator understands that is the method they need to choose and acquires skills for using it. Technology enabled navigation systems are one of the beauties of modern existence. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for getting lost. One of the most "adulthood" experiences one can have is to drive to a new city with only a paper map and the willingness to ask people for directions. As hard as it is to believe, many people made it into adulthood without having a cell phone, let alone with a navigation device. This sense of being untethered,<sup>21</sup> on one's own two feet without constant access to calls or lookups for help, may be one of the best ways to craft a path into adulthood.

#### ADVICE: WHAT WE (CAN) PROVIDE

This advice section switches from the previous voices of faculty members to the voices of student development and student support practitioners that follow. To some extent, the advice offered here is a bit generic, as it must be general in order to write to a wide variety of readers. But tailoring

different pieces of advice toward particular student stories can aid students in understanding how and why to access different resources on college campuses. In our experience, students are smart people who generally know about the existence of campus resources. Typically, the problem is not ignorance of their existence, which seems to be presumed by many available books that just provide students with lists of campus resources. Rather, we find the problem to lie with students knowing which resources can be helpful for what sorts of problems. Thus, in what follows we offer examples of the kinds of support that students can seek, relative to the kinds of issues they face. In reality, the support that real students receive would be even more personalized than these general pieces of advice suggest, which is why this book does not replace students actually reaching out for real support. Our aim instead is to help students feel less embarrassed and more knowledgeable about who to go to for what, and ultimately to feel empowered to ask for the help that they need.

**#greeklife #IamASororityWoman** The first student in this chapter, **Abby**, has a story that is relatable for many students. She does not mention that academics are difficult for her, and she does not mention any particular problems. She enjoys following the rules that her sorority sets for her. She has found a place within her sorority and appears to be on the party pathway. Though it sounds like she is well-aligned with this route, we encourage students like Abby to meet with an advisor to ensure they balance their effort and attention between academics and their social lives. In addition to making connections that can become lifelong friends, it is key to keep track of academic deadlines, attend classes, complete assignments, and prepare adequately for exams. Academics will help Abby, and students like her, to wind up with a degree along with valuable network connections. Both will be important for launching her career.

**#notgoinggreek #onbeingme** In contrast to Abby, the second student, **Austin**, appears to be on the mobility pathway. He attempted to get on the party pathway by seeking to join a fraternity but realized early on that he was not meshing well there due to his limited finances. As Austin's situation illustrates, students have choices; they can still participate in the social scene as long as they have enough awareness to recognize whether

heavy participation will set them up for misalignment. Austin could have become a “wannabe,” but instead he makes a choice to have intermittent involvement in the social scene while focusing on making sure he is upwardly mobile. We advise students like Austin to consider with care what their ideal fit is within different student organizations.

At most universities, there is a group for every kind of student, so even though it was good for Austin to pull back from fraternity life, he should still scout out other options. Also remember that there are many other students on campus who have similar challenges, concerns, and desires. Next, we encourage students like Austin, who do not benefit from the informed guidance of family members who graduated college, to be mindful that it is especially vital for them to meet with an advisor who can help them manage their class schedules and direct them to people on campus who can help set up tuition and other payments, such as financial aid counselors. Many campuses feature ways to set up automatic payment reminders and other resources that can help a student like Austin ensure that he keeps on top of things. Plus, students often find that these advisors and counselors can be good sounding boards, providing someone besides fellow students to discuss these issues with more comfortably.

**#collegeainthighschool #findingyourself** With **Kyndal**, it is clear that she shares aspects in common with both Abby and Austin. Like Abby, Kyndal appears to be on the party pathway, especially since she does not mention a professional identity. However, like Austin, Kyndal mentions her socioeconomic background and alludes to how it has barred her from certain cliques. Drawing on Kyndal’s description of her background, it seems that she comes from the middle class, but perhaps she is not as affluent as the students that surrounded her in her hometown. Now she is in college, and it sounds like she may feel some of the same pressures to fit in among college circles who also may be more affluent than she is.

As an advisor, we would be interested in talking more with Kyndal about the ways she has “found herself” in college. One concern her story raises is whether participating in the social scene, attempting to be on the party pathway, is the best fit for her. We would ask Kyndal to reflect on whether she may instead be best aligned with the mobility pathway.

Perhaps, like Austin, she would benefit from investing less in the social scene and instead finding student organizations in which she could be her authentic self and gain support from other less affluent students. Or she may be interested in finding an organization in the community that she can participate in or volunteer for, working with people outside the “university bubble.” Stepping back from the social scene would also give Kyndal more energy to devote to academics and to cementing a secure career path.

By whichever route, we advise students like Kyndal to find a group or activity in which they feel some ownership, and where they feel like they truly fit in. Doing so is part of navigating their own pathway. Not only will this generally feel better and be more enjoyable in the long run, but it may also boost their chances of completing college and launching a successful career afterward, as the research summarized in this chapter suggests. This knowledge can empower students to navigate their own way, with others, but without feeling like they have to do what they think everyone else is doing. Finally, we advise students like Kyndal not to attempt to do everything at once and instead to understand the first year of college as a critical time to lay a strong foundation for success in the years to come. It is important for Kyndal to remember why she came to college in the first place, and to avoid getting too caught up in what everyone else is doing.

**#findingnewfriends #nomorecliques** Sharing similar experiences with Kyndal, **Emma**’s story shows students that they are not the only ones who feel like they do not always know how to belong. We can imagine that, by exploring other organizations and opportunities on campus, students like Emma could wind up participating in the same student club, or volunteering together. They could find common ground in that they have not really been on the professional pathway but are also having trouble along the party pathway. Of course, they would probably not use those terms, but they could share that—unlike everyone else, it seems—they do not know what career they want to have, and though they have tried going out, they find it hard to keep up with the social scene without falling behind in their classes. We recommend that students like Emma and Kyndal complete the activity described in the next section so they can discuss with others their

experiences with feelings excluded. This is one way to find people who are like-minded, and to form a group of friends who can support each other's academic success by studying together, instead of, or before, going out together.

We also advise students like Abby and Kyndal to recognize the ways that college is different from high school, and also how college presents opportunities to break out of previous patterns. Most students attend universities that are larger than their high school, which means there are more of every kind of student, making it easier to find an entire subgroup of friends that are not the typical kind of student that, it seems, everyone else is. As a point of reference, we have taught many students in class who confide in us as professors that they are different than the “typical student in here,” but we look around and think, “that is what nearly every student in this class has said.” Be mindful that the typical college scene actually entails many different kinds of student groups, and that some may simply be more visible than others, especially early on in the first year. Our main piece of advice, then, would be to reject the assumption that everyone is the same and instead talk with people to find out about the many groups on campus. All phases of life involve cliques and subgroups, so college is the perfect time to gain skills in navigating group dynamics. (Notably, students who find these relational tasks to be exceedingly difficult should consult counseling services and other coping strategies, such as group therapy.)

All these students, and the four to follow, should know that it is common to be swept up in what everybody else is up to, or what it seems like everyone is doing, when college begins. But now is the time to take ownership of this journey. It is no fun being bored, so explore what is exciting, and find those personal passions. Perhaps surprisingly, researchers find that exploring (switching majors and switching jobs) during college is linked to *better* outcomes after graduating.<sup>22</sup> But job-hopping while not enrolled in college is linked to worse outcomes. So now is the time: explore with the protection of the college safety net.

**#whatamidoingwithmylife #stilledreaming** An example of a student who is on the professional pathway, **Melissa** is clearly focused on choosing

a professional identity. However, she is having doubts about whether she needs to change career plans from the dream she thought she had. That too is a very normal part of college, and it does not mean that Melissa is getting off the professional pathway. Students can still take that route without knowing exactly which profession they will enter. The key is that figuring out that professional identity is core to their college experience. It is common for students to enter college with a dream of something they have long seen themselves doing and then have that dream shaken. We advise students like Melissa to meet with an advisor to discuss these questions about changing their intended career.

As an advisor, we would ask Melissa what it is about dance that makes her feel good. What is she drawn to—the performance, the freedom of her body movement, or something else? We would then help her to consider other career options that may provide her some of the same rewards, but perhaps in a different way. One option, for example, would be to become a dance teacher. To explore whether she would enjoy and gain the same satisfaction from teaching dance, we would advise Melissa to check into dance programs in the community, and to investigate whether she could get involved in one. More generally, we encourage students like Melissa to view changing their mind about their childhood dreams to be a normal part of the college experience and to explore other options. All the answers do not have to be clear from the beginning. It may have been nice at earlier ages to tell friends of the family and teachers about a clear dream or career path, but students do not have to cling to that plan in college merely because that is what they always said.

College is a journey. It does not begin and end in a single semester. Students need to be able to test different options and find what truly motivates them and channels their passion. Typically college is not strictly vocational in nature. The skills that students gain throughout their education, in coursework and through other experiences, can serve them well in many areas of life after college. Enjoy the fact that college presents the chance to explore; take in all the skills and experiences possible; and think about how to translate those attributes into viable options that still fulfill

one's dreams. For example, maybe one day Melissa will open her own dance studio, and in the meantime, she can take some education courses to learn techniques for teaching and some business courses to learn how to manage a small business. Classes in the social sciences would teach her more about working with people, and those in the arts would enliven her passion. All of these courses can culminate in her living her dream, in a different way than she imagined.

**#wrongmajor #wronglife** In a story somewhat similar to Melissa's, **Chikako** is on the professional pathway while reconsidering which particular career option to pursue. Chikako was raised in an affluent background, and he feels pressured to match his parents' status. There are many students who do the same—arrive to campus with a declared major and a plan that was never really declared by them. We encourage students in the same boat as Chikako to meet with an advisor to discuss more options. Chikako's dislike of his ethics class is an indication that law may not be the right fit for him (the same is true for someone who detests a biology class and is a pre-med major, and so on). A college degree provides beautiful flexibility in that students can check out a variety of class options to explore other departments, majors, and careers. We advise students to take the courses that look most interesting to them, seizing the opportunity to talk with the instructors of those courses about related career options.

We also recommend that students inquire about ways to shadow a professional or conduct an informational interview with someone in the career that interests them. See what it would really be like to be a lawyer, or a doctor, or a teacher. Do not assume that the TV version is accurate. In fact, it is best to assume it will not be nearly as exciting as those sensationalized portrayals. Long-term excitement comes rather from being authentically passionate about a career, which depends on “gelling” with the reality of that profession. Shadowing someone in a student's intended career can also provide him or her with material for explaining to parents what is attractive or unappealing about career options, rather than attempting to explain less informed ideas about this to parents, which may raise their concerns regarding whether the student has really thought through



a change of plans. Taking the initiative to scope out a future career and relaying specific information goes a long way to reassuring most parents that the student is being responsible and thorough. When it comes down to it, most parents simply want their children to be successful, happy, and secure. Showing parents how the path they are charting can achieve those goals, even if it is different from what the parents have in mind, may go a long way toward relieving the pressure students like Chikako feel. It also helps parents to be supportive, as they can feel assured their children have “done their homework.”

Another piece of advice for students in a similar situation to Chikako is to develop a network of people who share their passions. Like shadowing a professional, spending time with other students who intend to pursue the same profession can be revealing. This step can help students distinguish between not enjoying a single class, which they may have to just get through, and an indication that there is something about the overall profession that does not fit. Student groups devoted to a given profession are a decent representation of the people who practice that profession, so this is a great way to get a sense for whether these are the people with whom one wants to interact regularly for the foreseeable future. If students do not enjoy the company of the other people in a pre-professional group for their intended career, it is time to consider a switch. If this non-enjoyment of social interactions is a long-term pattern across multiple groups, regardless of the professional and social interests of that group, then students should seek more intensive changes, such as individual counseling or social group therapy.

**#toomanychoices #howdoidecide** To **Camille**, the possibilities seem endless, and that is keeping her up at night. With every semester and each course she takes, though, she is figuring out who she is and what she wants out of life. While it may not feel that way to her right now, emerging adulthood is giving her the freedom to gain exposure to what, until recently, she may have seen as unusual education choices or simply never have heard of. That she is comfortable in so many different disciplines allows her the opportunity to try out the possibilities until she finds the right path for her.

A caring adult in her life could help Camille to see her confusion not as a problem but as an understandable and desirable part of the process of figuring out what major and career will fit her newly forming identity. Research shows that the “cost” of a mistake, such as initially choosing the wrong major, is relatively low during this time in life, so a caring adult could assure Camille that—while enrolled in college—she has the flexibility to explore without the pressure of believing that every step she takes is set in stone. We recommend that Camille visit an advisor to discuss the pressures she is feeling. College offers a bewildering array of choices, but of course making choices doesn’t end after graduation. We encourage students to think of college as a time to take charge. Now Camille gets to be the one who decides what she will study. An advisor can work with her on ways to get engaged outside the classroom, reminding her that college is more than the content of her particular courses. Getting involved in student government, or housing, or any of the different options available could give her an idea of where to head next.

**#toomanychoices #howdoidecide** Along with Camille, **Mateo** represents how having seemingly infinite options can be overwhelming. Emerging adulthood is a time of possibility and hope—a period of “unparalleled opportunity to transform.” Nevertheless, the instability of this period can be stressful.<sup>23</sup> Mateo’s struggle to settle on a major reflects the broader challenge of shaping one’s present identity and simultaneously creating a plan for the future. Both Camille and Mateo fear that even routine choices may have long-lasting consequences. Yet emerging adults usually pay a lower price for their choices than adults do. We thus advise students like Mateo and Camille to think of their choices as explorations, not permanent decisions. Picking a major, even completing a college degree in a certain field, does not mean that one cannot change one’s life plan again. Instead of worrying about that, it is better to focus on developing basic academic and social capabilities, as those open doors to many career options. Research comparing college students making such changes to college graduates or young people not enrolled reveals that college is like a protective bubble in which young people can actually *benefit*

from changing their majors or career paths without major problems, but, in fact, with benefits. Conversely, people not in the protective environment of college making these changes tend to fare worse. Knowing this information, Mateo and Camille can continue to explore during college, and the adults in their lives can relax knowing that they are “on track” for success.

Mateo’s concern about the appropriateness of his major, as for many other students, probably stems from a combination of general indecisiveness and the social and cultural skills he brought to campus. In chapter 3 we summarized how Stuber (2012)<sup>24</sup> notes that social class background structures a student’s ability to navigate their campus life. Whereas privileged students typically begin college with the necessary tools to guide their academic decision-making, “less privileged students are often less equipped for the journey” (Stuber 2011: 12). As a result, middle- and upper-class students may seem more likely to “have it all together” than students who are from working- or lower-class families. One solution for Mateo might be to speak with his professors and advisors, all of whom can equip him with new skills and ideas for navigating college life inside and outside of the classroom. They may say, “Now is the time to try out different things within the safer confines of college, and engaging adults across campus can help you (a) identify the right places to build social and cultural tools and (b) use them to make more strategic decisions about your major.” Rather than beating himself up for feeling indecisive and unsure of his career trajectory, Mateo needs to recognize that other students may have worked through the same processes prior to coming to campus, and that he can master the same skills before he graduates.

Important here is to recognize the difference between a short-term setback and a longer-term debilitation. Short-term setbacks and failures of various kinds during college can provide important opportunities to recalibrate and shape oneself in better and more positive life directions, which will ultimately promote better health and well-being outcomes. For a subset of young people, however, what could be short-term setbacks

instead preempt longer-term debilitation, rumination, and other personal problems. Rising to the challenge is a key differentiator for encountering the normal failures of college as opportunities for positive growth, or not. If students find themselves consistently unable to overcome short-term setbacks and repeatedly find themselves responding in destructive patterns to these opportunities for growth, then more intensive personal interventions may be necessary. In the absence of debilitating personal issues, the challenges and opportunities afforded by college experiences present young people with new chances to figure out what fits them and to construct a balanced life.

The challenge both Mateo and Camille face in finding a major that “fits” them is, in fact, a valuable exercise that will pay off in the future. Many students feel anxious about such decisions for a wide variety of reasons. Perhaps they have limited budgets that constrain the time available to explore different majors, or maybe pressure from their family to choose a particular field of study weighs on them. Yet one of the goals of higher education is to provide the skills and resources to shape one’s own life. Not every student arrives with the same familiarity and social/cultural tools for finding the right discipline, and some students may need stronger social support networks to navigate these choices. Yet, coupled with insights from our discussions of cultural inequalities and emerging adulthood, we would give Mateo and Camille the same advice: this is part of the process of developing competence and confidence to respond to different expectations in diverse settings. Put simply, they are both being asked to take ownership of their learning, and to achieve what sociologists would term social self-efficacy. Both of them will have to make many decisions on their own in the future, and college is one place where they can practice doing so with fewer consequences. In summary, the point for many of these students is to reflect on what they want and own it. This can be especially important for students who want to take the professional pathway or the social mobility pathway: having a clear plan will ensure they do not get swept up in the party pathway, only to realize later that their lifestyle is incompatible with their goals.

## FURTHER READING ONLINE

- For additional reading, here is a book chapter available online that offers short quizzes and other activities to understand the values students hold in college and how those interact with their personal and social biography: Smith, Wayne, “You and Your College Experience,” OpenCourseWare, retrieved from <http://ocw.smithw.org/univ100/textbook/beiderwell.pdf>.
- Here is a values worksheet that helps students identify their highest values: Brown, Duane and R. Kelly Crace, 1996, “Life Values Inventory.” Life Values Resources. Retrieved from: [https://bhmt.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/BHMT\\_CC\\_Life-Values\\_Inventory.pdf](https://bhmt.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/BHMT_CC_Life-Values_Inventory.pdf).
- After completing the personal values worksheet, students can use this worksheet to assess their highest work values: “Work Values Inventory,” Humanists at Work, retrieved from <https://humwork.uchri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Workvaluesinventory-3.pdf>.
- Here is an example of a person owning their story, even the messiness of their life, to make it into something of their own—in this case a profitable business: Carles, Mayi, 2019, “Life Is Messy Bootcamp,” <http://lifeismessybootcamp.com/>. We are not endorsing this business, or even this approach, but we do more generally see this as a way of thinking about how to own your own story.
- After spending time analyzing personal and work values, the next step for students is to assess changes that they may need to make to actualize those values. In other words, it is one thing to have an ideal but quite another to carry it through. Some of the common barriers to becoming the people we intend to be are conflicts of time and competing priorities. In order to evaluate what tweaks need to be made to prevent these barriers from getting in the way of goals, here is one way to assess time management skills: “Assessing Your Time Management

Skills,” Aventri, retrieved from [https://www.eiseverywhere.com/file\\_uploads/a071b60da1a6ed23b6008fbe5cda8294\\_AssessingYourTimeManagementSkills.pdf](https://www.eiseverywhere.com/file_uploads/a071b60da1a6ed23b6008fbe5cda8294_AssessingYourTimeManagementSkills.pdf).

- Along similar lines, here are tips for scheduling strategies: Sicinski, Adam, “How to Manage Your Time and Boost Your Levels of Productivity,” IQ Matrix, retrieved from <http://blog.iqmatrix.com/manage-your-time>.
- To think about how to prioritize tasks relevant to different kinds of student situations (for example, being a student with children, athlete students, and so on), we recommend this resource: “Organizing Your Time: Learning Objectives,” Lumen Learning, retrieved from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/freshmanexperience/chapter/2-3-organizing-your-time/>.
- Some recommend thinking about time as a “life pie” with a balance between school, work, and leisure. See here for more on this: Wong, Linda, “Essential Study Skills. Chapter 3, Interactive Pie of Life: Leisure,” Cengage Learning, retrieved from [http://college.cengage.com/collegesurvival/wong/essential\\_study/5e/students/additional/pie/leisure.html](http://college.cengage.com/collegesurvival/wong/essential_study/5e/students/additional/pie/leisure.html)
- As a last suggestion related to time management, we recommend completing an evaluation such as this one on the aspects of timing and scheduling that seem most changeable: Chapman, Alan, 2002, “Time Management Questionnaire,” Business Balls, retrieved from <http://www.businessballs.com/timemanagementsurvey.pdf>.
- Related to discussion in this chapter on anxiety, alcohol or drug abuse, eating disorders, unwanted sexual activity, and other issues that many college students face, we recommend completing a wellness inventory, such as this one: “TestWell—Making Life Easier,” retrieved from <http://www.testwell.org/>. This kind of activity can be completed alone as a way to learn what kind of help and support students may need to seek. There

is absolutely no shame in visiting with counselors through a campus health center.

- For academic integrity, we encourage students to search on their university website for the academic policy. Most universities make this publicly available. Some are written by students, some by faculty. Make sure to read this statement for an explanation of how particular campuses treat academic integrity. Many classes will also include academic integrity statements in the course syllabus that provide the particulars of each instructor. Many online resources give more general understandings of academic integrity. Here is one we recommend: International Center for Academic Integrity, “What Is So Important about Academic Integrity,” May 23, 2012, YouTube, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSfmWlIEhSg>.
- For considering the student expectations and experiences in the digital environment: Beetham, Helen, June 10, 2014, “Students Expectations and Experiences of the Digital Environment,” Glasgow Caledonian University, retrieved from <https://digitalstudent.jiscinvolve.org/wp/files/2014/06/Outcomes-from-Glasgow1.pdf>.
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