When thinking about the ultimate outcome of a college degree, there is almost universal agreement about the value people seek and expect: to increase the probability of getting a good job and having a better life. Yet, there is not a single college or university in the U.S. that has rigorously researched and measured whether their graduates have “great jobs” and “great lives.”

Findings from the inaugural administration of the Gallup-Purdue Index — which includes interviews with more than 30,000 U.S. graduates — yield important insights for colleges, educators, employers, and students on the factors that contribute to these outcomes for college graduates.

Chief among these is that where graduates went to college — public or private, small or large, very selective or not selective — hardly matters at all to their current well-being and their work lives in comparison to their experiences in college. For example, if graduates had a professor who cared about them as a person, made them excited about learning, and encouraged them to pursue their dreams, their odds of being engaged at work more than doubled, as did their odds of thriving in their well-being. And if graduates had an internship or job where they were able to apply what they were learning in the classroom, were actively involved in extracurricular activities and organizations, and worked on projects that took a semester or more to complete, their odds of being engaged at work doubled also. Feeling supported and having deep learning experiences means everything when it comes to long-term outcomes for college graduates.

That these six elements of the college experience are so strongly related to graduates’ lives and careers is almost hard to fathom. When it comes to finding the secret to success, it’s not “where you go,” it’s “how you do it” that makes all the difference in higher education. Yet few college graduates achieve the winning combination. Only 14% of graduates strongly agree they were supported by professors who cared, made them excited about learning, and encouraged their dreams. Further, just 6% of graduates strongly agree they had a meaningful internship or job, worked on a long-term project, and were actively involved in extra-curricular activities. Those who strongly agree to having all six of these experiences during their college time are rare — only 3%.

The implications are broad. When a student is trying to decide between an elite Ivy League school, a large public university, or a small private college, what should he or she consider to help make the decision? When an employer is evaluating two recent graduates from different backgrounds and institutions, which educational background should distinguish one applicant over the other, and why? When colleges and universities are setting internal strategy, designing new programs and curricula, deciding what performance measures faculty should be compensated for, and attracting future students, what are they to do?

The answers to these questions are not simple enough to answer in one paragraph or one report. The data presented in this report suggest, however, that the answers lie in thinking about things that are more lasting than selectivity of an institution or any of the traditional measures of college. Instead, the answers may lie in what students are doing in college and how they are experiencing it. Those elements — more than any others — have a profound relationship to a person’s life and career. Yet they are being achieved by too few. It should be a national imperative — owned by higher education institutions, students, parents, businesses, non-profits, and government alike, to change this.
SOME OF GALLUP’S MOST IMPORTANT FINDINGS INCLUDE:

WORKPLACE ENGAGEMENT – GREAT JOBS
- Thirty-nine percent of college graduates are engaged at work.
- There is no distinction between graduates of public versus private colleges on employee engagement, but there is a substantial difference between graduates of for-profit institutions and the rest.
- There were no differences in employee engagement by race or ethnicity, or by whether the graduate had been the first in the family to attend college.
- As many graduates from the Top 100 U.S. News & World Report schools are engaged in their work as graduates from other institutions.
- If an employed graduate had a professor who cared about them as a person, one who made them excited about learning, and had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their dreams, the graduate’s odds of being engaged at work more than doubled. Only 14% of graduates have had all three.
- If employed graduates feel their college prepared them well for life outside of it, the odds that they are engaged at work increase nearly three times.

WELL-BEING – GREAT LIVES
- Fifty-four percent are thriving in purpose well-being; 49% are thriving in social well-being, 47% in community well-being, 42% in financial well-being, and 35% in physical well-being.
- Only 11% of college graduates are thriving — strong, consistent, and progressing — in all five elements of well-being. More than one in six graduates are not thriving in any of the elements.
- If college graduates are engaged at work, the odds are nearly five times higher that they will be thriving in all five elements of well-being. The odds of thriving in all areas of well-being more than double for college graduates when they feel their college prepared them well for life outside of it.
- There is no distinction between graduates of public versus private colleges on well-being. However, there is a big difference on well-being for graduates of for-profit colleges.
- As many graduates from the Top 100-ranked schools in U.S. News & World Report are thriving in all elements of well-being as graduates from all other institutions.
- Higher well-being is related to graduates’ experiences. Graduates who felt “supported” during college (that professors cared, professors made them excited about learning, and had a mentor) are nearly three times as likely to be thriving than those who didn’t feel supported.
- The higher the amount of school loans that graduates took out for their undergraduate education, the worse off their well-being is. Fourteen percent of graduates who did not take out any loans are thriving in their well-being, compared with 4% of graduates with $20,000 to $40,000 in loans — the current average loan debt.

ALUMNI ATTACHMENT TO ALMA MATER
- Graduates who felt “supported” during their time in college are six times more likely to be emotionally attached to their alma mater.
- Overall, only 29% of college graduates “strongly agree” that college prepared them well for life outside of college, but agreement raises the odds of graduates’ attachment nearly nine times.
- Twenty-nine percent of graduates who are attached to their alma mater are thriving in well-being, versus 4% who are actively unattached to their colleges.