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OPINION

What picking a college is really about

by RICHARD GUARASCI

Last week, first lady Michelle Obama's Reach Higher Initiative promoted more than 1,000 College Signing Day events across the country to celebrate students getting admitted to college, in the same way we celebrate student athletes signing to play on college teams. She's also been outspoken about her experience choosing a college and how she's been trying to guide her girls.

As a college president, I agree with her advice to focus not on big-name schools or even what career a student hopes to have, but rather on the bigger picture — how will they leave behind a better community and world?

"I always tell people, the question of what you want to be when you grow up is one that you will eternally be answering. I'm still asking myself that question!" Mrs. Obama says. "What am I going to do when I leave here? How do I want to impact the world? I've gotten used to the fact that I don't have to know. I'm always going to be discovering new parts of myself, and you'll find that you will be too."

Here are two ways we can help teens research how a school best prepares a student for a career and a life with real value:

(1) Look for schools that offer more than just solid classroom instruction. Many schools now take their students outside of the academic world to teach them to respond to real-world situations and to work with groups of people they are not familiar with through civic engagement programs. According to a 2015 survey of business leaders by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, these experiences are invaluable for young people just starting their careers. The survey found:

- Nearly all employers (91 percent) agree that for career success, "a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly and solve complex problems is more important than his or her undergraduate major."
- Nearly all employers (96 percent) agree that "all college students should have experiences that teach them how to solve problems with people whose views are different from their own."

You can review a list of 240 colleges and universities the Carnegie Foundation determined have a strong focus on enhancing their curriculum with partnerships with businesses and local governments. The foundation says that these schools have all proved they have an enriched program of curriculum that better educates their students and engages them to contribute to the public good. See more at <http://www.nerche.org/>

(2) Look at a school's alumni — not just the famous folks. There's so much more to a happy life than how much your salary is. Consider those alumni who have taken what they learned at a school and made it the basis for becoming a lifelong learner, and a significant contributor to their community.

For instance, on the Wagner College website's alumni page, you can read about Nadia Lopez, who graduated from Wagner in 1999. She founded Mott Hall Bridges Academy in 2010 because she wanted to create "a learning institution that shows our scholars why they matter and

how they too can become successful.” You might recognize Lopez’s name because she was featured in a viral “Humans of New York” campaign in the spring of 2015 that recognized her tireless work with low-income students. That campaign eventually raised \$1.4 million for a program that encourages her students to prepare for and attain a quality higher education.

Getting the most bang for the buck from a college experience is extremely important. But there’s more to calculate than numbers and dollar signs — one should take into account the ways that the college will shape the student as a professional, a community member and a human being.

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