These days, college graduates are having a hard time finding meaningful entry-level jobs and achieving financial independence. Following the Great Recession of 2008-2009, the employment rate among college graduates reached 9 percent and it remains stubbornly high. Equally disturbing, about half of recent graduates are underemployed, holding jobs that do not require a bachelor’s degree. And about 6 in 10 college graduates have borrowed money (on average, about $33,000) to pay for school, with payments set to begin six months after Commencement.

In There Is Life After College, Jeffrey Selingo, a former editor of The Chronicle of Higher Education and the author of College (Un)bound and MOOC U, draws on survey data and interviews with students, college administrators, and employers to examine the transition from classrooms to workplaces in the twenty-first century - and provide advice about what employers want and how students can improve their job prospects.

Selingo claims that colleges “are woefully out of sync” with an economy that demands knowledgeable, flexible workers with job-ready skills. Only 11% of business leaders, he reports, believe that colleges adequately prepare their graduates for the workplace. Institutions of higher education, he writes, “risk irrelevance if they continue to educate students for a world that no longer exists.” To enhance students’ chances of becoming “sprinters,” rather than “stragglers” or “wanderers,” Selingo advises parents and teachers to praise persistence more than intelligence to make it more likely that they will not give up when they encounter a problem they do not know how to solve. He recommends that students acquire “baseline skills,” including communication, writing, organization, competence in Microsoft Excel and Word, in college; find summer internships (which have become “a critical cog in the recruiting wheel” for large companies); and, if they can afford it, to consider a “gap year” between high school and college (involving travel and/or substantive work) and a post-graduate “launch” program.

Selingo’s indictment of higher education is, at times, spot on. Undergraduates don’t work as their predecessors. Grade inflation sends misleading signals about what they have - and haven’t - mastered. And faculty and administrators have often been slow to revise the curriculum and degree requirements.
That said, in my judgment (though, admittedly, as a professor and administrator at Cornell University for four decades, I am by no means an unbiased observer), Selingo’s indictment is not always fair. *There Is Life After College* does not account for the many functions and responsibilities of colleges and universities, including the discovery and dissemination of knowledge; preparation for citizenship in a multi-cultural world; and enhancing our understanding of beauty, morality, truth, equality, freedom, and the good life, that may not contribute directly to job training. Nor does Selingo fully capture the pedagogical and curricular changes in higher education designed to address the conviction of increasing numbers of students and parents that getting a job is the most important reason to go to college. Team work, hands on projects, engaged and community service learning, for example, are now embedded in many courses, in disciplines ranging from the humanities and social sciences to engineering.

Nor is it accurate to assert that “most colleges don’t worry about what happens to their students once they cross the stage at graduation, except when it comes time to solicit them as alumni for a donation.” Or that college career centers are “merely add-on amenities, somewhere just below parking as a matter of administrative priority,” that “don’t really do anything close to helping place students in jobs.” In fact, while colleges may not be inculcating “street smarts” in students, many institutions are connecting undergraduates with alumni mentors, facilitating networking, advertising (and sometimes creating) internships and externships.

Although he maintains that “what you do is more important than where you go to college,” Selingo acknowledges that Wall Street banks, consulting companies, global brands, and some tech firms “tend to recruit from the very top of the college rankings” and will reject applicants based solely on the college they attended.

In the end, sounding a lot like my colleagues at Cornell, Selingo concludes that a major in the sciences, technology, engineering and math will give students the logical and technical skills they need to do a job; history, philosophy, and sociology will enhance their capacity to develop and discover new ideas. He recommends that undergraduates avoid majors that are narrow in focus and were crafted to address the latest trends in employment, unless they prepare them “to fix things (engineers, welder, electricians) or fix people (nurses, physical therapists).” Instead, he adds, they should opt for “a good liberal arts education combined with a skills-based vocational education that provides ‘the connective tissue’ between disparate ideas and will help you navigate the ambiguous work world you are going to live in, where job requirements seem to change nearly every day and careers disappear with regularity.”