

A Caring Professor: the Key, All Too Rare, in How Graduates Thrive

By SCOTT CARLSON

IF YOU BELIEVE the new Gallup-Purdue Index Report, a survey of 30,000 American college graduates on issues of employment, job engagement, and well-being, it all comes down to old-fashioned

STUDENTS

values and human connectedness. College graduates, whether they went to a hoity-toity private college or a midtier public university, had double the chances of being engaged in their work and were three times as likely to be thriving if they had connected with a professor on campus who stimulated them, cared about them, and encouraged their hopes and dreams.

The Gallup-Purdue Index, which was announced late last year and released its first results last week, strives to measure the components of “great lives,” as the report puts it. The study—based on an online survey and supported by the Lumina Foundation and Purdue University—is to be conducted with a new cohort of 30,000 graduates each year over five years, eventually surveying more than 150,000 people. It assesses the well-being of graduates not only in terms of their finances but also related to their sense of purpose, their social lives,

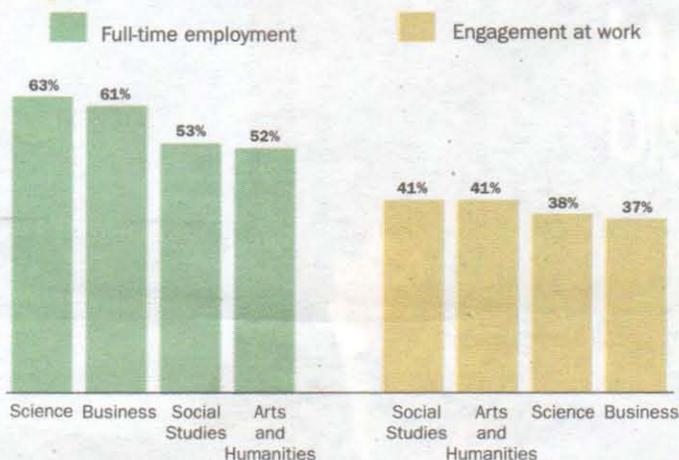
The survey assesses the well-being of graduates in terms that include their sense of purpose, and their connectedness to community.

their connectedness to community, and their physical health.

“The thing that I think that is of particular value of this survey is that it is looking at outcomes of college that are different from the outcomes that we typically look at—like did you get a job, what is your salary, and those kinds of things,” says Harold V. Hartley III, a senior vice president at the Council of Independent Colleges, who got a short

Jobs and Engaged Jobs

The Gallup-Purdue Index, a survey of 30,000 college graduates, shows that a higher proportion of science and business majors report full-time employment, compared with graduates who majored in the social sciences or the arts and humanities, but the latter two groups of alumni are more likely to be “engaged” with their work.



SOURCE: GALLUP

briefing on some of the results last week.

Of course, the Gallup-Purdue Index is also a commercial venture for the polling company. Gallup offers colleges the opportunity to sign up to let it survey their students and alumni and find out how the institution measures up to the national benchmarks. That has been a point of skepticism for some observers. “I think they are doing this as a public service, but also as a campaign to get colleges to buy their products,” says Mark S. Schneider, who studies college data and education policy as a vice president at the American Institutes for Research.

‘ENGAGEMENT’ ON THE JOB

The Gallup-Purdue Index includes an assessment of workplace “engagement,” a term that goes beyond job title and salary to indicate that employees are doing something they are good at, something they like, at a company where people care about their work. Engagement has positive impacts on absenteeism, turnover, safety, productivity, and profit.

The survey found that while nearly 40 percent of graduates had a sense of engagement at work, half

of graduates did not, and 12 percent were actively disengaged. The liberal arts scored a win in the survey: While people who majored in science and business reported more full-time employment, those who majored in the social sciences and the arts and humanities were more engaged at work.

Although higher education is built on a hierarchy of institutional prestige, the Gallup-Purdue Index found almost no difference in workplace engagement and well-being between graduates of public and private colleges, highly selective colleges and others, or the 100 top-ranked colleges and the rest.

Brandon Busteed, executive director of Gallup Education, says that when he has described the results of the study to college officials, that result has been the most jarring. (He notes that graduates of for-profit colleges are significantly less likely to be engaged and thriving at work, but that the survey cannot show where those students started on those measures and what progress they might have made.)

College graduates had double the odds of being engaged at work and three times the odds of thriving in Gallup’s five elements of well-being

if they had had “emotional support” while in college—professors who “made me excited about learning,” “cared about me as a person,” or “encouraged my hopes and dreams.”

Graduates who did a long-term project that took a semester or more, held an internship, or were very involved in extracurricular activities and organizations had twice the odds of being engaged at work and an edge in well-being.

The bad news, in Mr. Busteed’s view, is that colleges have failed on most of those measures, on the basis of Gallup’s findings. For example, while 63 percent of respondents said they had encountered professors who got them fired up about a subject, only 32 percent said they had worked on a long-term project, 27 percent had had professors who cared about them, and 22 percent had found mentors who encouraged them.

Mr. Busteed believes the numbers point to new directions for higher education.

“We have a formula here for something that alters life and career trajectory,” he says. “These are pretty specific things that we can think about how we move the needle. It’s all actionable, by way of who we hire and how we incentivize and reward.”

BENEFITS FOR COLLEGES

An addendum to the report plays up benefits to colleges that cultivate “emotional support” and experiential opportunities for students. Gallup asked graduates about their “emotional attachment” to their alma maters and, naturally, found that students who felt they had been well prepared, nurtured, encouraged, and so on were much more connected to their institutions. (The report did not specify how that connection translates into donations.) If further study shows that emotional support starts to build a foundation for a meaningful and happy life, “we need to be more intentional about offering our students these things,” says Carol Quillen, president of Davidson College.

The report raises questions about higher education’s increasing reliance on part-time instructors, who

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may not be able to connect with students as readily as full-time faculty members can.

The survey also looked at debt's effects on well-being—as one might expect, the data indicate that a graduate's sense of well-being declines with the amount of debt he or she carries.

A more compelling point focused on entrepreneurship: As loan debt increases, the number of students who start businesses decreases. Twenty-six percent of students with no debt started their own businesses, compared with 16 percent of students who had \$40,000 or more in debt.

"That suggests that we need to think differently about debt. Is it really important to graduate a significant number of students with zero debt?" Ms. Quillen says. She is

looking forward to more information about that question in future Gallup studies.

The Gallup results do have some holes. Mr. Busteded concedes that there is a "chicken-and-egg problem": It's not clear whether the respondents who are thriving in the workplace do so because of some internal drive, one that led them to find internships, proactive mentors, or long-term projects. Nor is it clear whether the employed and thriving graduates look back on their college experience with a rosier view.

"I am worried about the extent to which this is so correlational, no before or after, no causal modeling, with all kinds of self-selection problems hidden in this data," says Mr. Schneider, of the American Institutes for Research. While nothing in the results rings untrue, he says, "I don't know how valid they are."

On the upside, says Mr. Schneider, is that the major points of the report have been validated in other studies of higher education. And

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because of the Gallup's visibility, he says, its findings will get more public attention than "putting these data into an education journal that five people read."

But he wonders whether the company's plan to survey alumni of individual institutions will yield useful results. "If you are talking

to alumni 10 years out, the school that they went to is not the school that it is today," he says. "The president is different, the deans are different, half the faculty might be different, programs have grown or shrunk. ... You are talking about a school that might be radically changed."

Still, a handful of colleges have signed up for the follow-up surveys, including Arizona State University, Bentley University, Creighton University, George Mason University, Ohio State University, and Western Governors University. Fees are undisclosed.

Mitchell E. Daniels Jr., president of Purdue University, says it would pay Gallup something in the "low six figures" to survey alumni to find out what practices are working at Purdue.

J. Andrew Shepardson, vice pres-

ident for student affairs and dean of students at Bentley, wouldn't reveal what his institution will pay Gallup to survey 30,000 alumni, 4,000 undergraduates, and 1,400 graduate students this fall. But he was open about what Bentley hoped to learn.

"We all believe that a residential experience and all that goes along with a traditional American higher education is valuable," he says, "but we have never measured it."

Mr. Shepardson says he and his colleagues hope to find the elements that "move the needle" on well-being and engagement as a result of the Bentley experience. "For me it's a bit about, **Why spend the money for a place-based education when you can get 120 credits from your parents' basement? Can we articulate that there is a value?**" ■