Make College Work for You

Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez

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Dr. Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez is Caterpillar Inc. Professor of English at Bradley University. Professor Brill de Ramírez also has an M.B.A. in management and human resource development from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with prior work experience as a research analyst for a management consulting firm and additional training focused on the success of women in the higher education workforce (HERS Summer Institute, MLA workshops). Brill de Ramírez’s humanities studies began at St. John’s College in Maryland, continued at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Chicago, culminating with nonwestern indigenous studies at the University of New Mexico. As a literature scholar, she is a specialist in the fields of Native American literatures, ecocriticism, folklore, and literary criticism and theory.

Deeply committed to each student’s capacity to learn and succeed at the highest of levels, she is a national Councilor for the Arts & Humanities with the Council for Undergraduate Research, a member of the PMLA Advisory Committee for the Modern Language Association, and the Book Review Editor for the CUR Quarterly. She is an innovator in teaching with extensive experience in college success, undergraduate research, service-learning, ecocomposition, business writing, and digital pedagogies (including using videoconferencing and learning management systems for teaching students in the United States and Middle East and bringing distinguished speakers into virtual classrooms for presentations—from globally distinguished writers and scholars to a Fortune 100 CEO).

Preface

Humanity may be likened to a tree. This tree has branches, leaves, buds and fruit . . . The only real difference that exists between people is that they are at various stages of development. Some are imperfect—these must be brought to perfection. Some are asleep—they must be awakened; some are negligent—they must be roused; but one and all are the children of God. Love them all with your whole heart; no one is a stranger to the other, all are friends.


See ye no strangers; rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when you fix your gaze on otherness. And in this new and wondrous age . . . we must be at one with every people . . . Therefore they are not strangers, but in the family; not aliens, but friends, and to be treated as such.

— Selections from the Writings of Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 23 (1978) Haifa, Israel, Bahá’í World Centre

A number of years ago, the news media began to regularly publicize the crisis in education. News stories reported and continue to report college students adrift and unprepared for post-college jobs, colleges unsuccessful in producing critical and creative thinkers with strong communications skills, and American employers recruiting skilled workers from other countries in order to find employees with the needed skills. The PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) documents had started presenting a clearer picture of the state of global education with stark U.S. statistics. And the current generation of students were being described as needing a stronger work ethic, needing “grit.” Around this time, I had an upper-level composition class. Most of the students were excelling; a few were not and accordingly received invitations to meet with me to see how we could turn around their performance.
One young man received such an invitation. As we met in my office, I asked if I could review his records. With his permission, I looked at his low G.P.A.—both overall and even in his major. He said that he was a senior graduating in a few months. I inquired about job interviews, internships, organizational involvement, and leadership experiences. All of his responses were in the negative. When he spoke about college graduation—a time that he should have been looking forward to with excitement, happiness, pride, and a sense of accomplishment—the idea of graduation filled him with dread. He had no clear plans. He did not know what he was going to do; graduation was just a directionless void. I asked if he could put off graduation by a year or two and add to his skill sets, add an extra minor or two, and procure a plum internship or two. But he felt hopeless and resigned to his impending and expected graduation and loans that would need to be paid.

I lost sleep over this one bright student whose potential was being further compromised by a disheartened sense of incapacity. I began to research the published resources for college success to see what would help my students to work harder and to achieve greater success—to “get grit.” I wanted to find an inspiring and informational text with concrete advice to help students successfully navigate the trajectory through college and into continued education and professional careers. Having a master’s degree in management and human resources and having previously worked as a research analyst for a management consulting firm, I wanted a text that took a behavioral and strategic human resource development approach. I wanted to find such a text for my students, but I also wanted such a text available for every college student. There was no such text available, so I realized that I would have to write it. Thus began the journey forward to produce Make College Work for You.

To help remedy the need for such an applied text, Make College Work for You is designed to provide current and future college students with a clear pathway forward through college and in life. This book is about each and every student and how students can use their college experiences as catalysts for fulfilling lives rich with meaningful work, rewarding experiences, and wonderful relationships.

Specific areas of strategic decision-making addressed throughout the book:

- Personal health and well-being to provide a better foundation upon which students can achieve their desired goals in college and in life.
- Majors/minors and courses to gain strategic skill sets and important credentials.
- When and how and where to study to yield higher levels of academic success.
- The joy that is part of hard work and engaged learning that, in turn, will renew and reinforce each student’s childhood love of discovery.
- The extracurricular activities through participation in clubs, volunteerism, internships, and jobs to gain valuable teamwork and leadership skills.
- Professional networking and mentoring skills for students to practice while they are still in college.
- Oral, written, and digital communication to prepare students for 21st-century jobs.

This book will guide students’ progress through college so that they will be better able to develop the needed skills, attitudes, and behaviors to become desired and highly successful employees. And there is no other book that will give your students the complete range of guidance that you will find here.

There are many books that provide extensive guidance for high school students’ success in getting into college. There are many books that provide information for college students to make their time in college fun, safe, and active; but the proviso here is that most of these books look at college through the lens of their writers whose college experiences were back in the 20th century. The reality is that students, parents, high school guidance counselors, and college advisors need advice that is relevant for the 21st-century college experiences and the 21st-century workplace.
If, right now, your students are not ready to compete with their hard-working, multilingual math, music, and computer whiz peers in Shanghai, Seoul, and Helsinki, this book will give you the guidance your students need so that by the time they graduate, they will be highly competitive for jobs, graduate and professional schools, and fellowships, and in the workforce, they will be highly valued employees.

If your students follow the advice in this book, fill out the worksheets thoughtfully and thoroughly, and put into action the specific recommendations, this book will help them make the most of college as they learn how to expand and deepen their knowledge base; develop specific and useful skill sets; think critically, creatively, deeply; gain many valuable experiences; discover the joy of learning; and do all of the above strategically, passionately, thoughtfully, enthusiastically, and with relevance for their lives, careers, and service to family, community, and world.

In learning how to navigate their college years in strategic ways to make their college experience as successful as possible, your students will learn how to make strategic choices regarding credentialing and skill sets (e.g., majors, minors, concentrations, classes, workshops) and the various campus organizations (social, service, academic) that they will get involved with. Students will learn the importance of networking while in college, of developing strategic mentors on and off campus, and of using the classroom and study time in effective ways to develop valuable skills and practices for the workplace. And they will learn specific changes they can make to improve their performance in classes, on the job, and in their extracurricular activities.

This textbook is about college, college students, college life, and college success, but perhaps more than anything else, this really is a book about your students, their dreams, and their service to the world. If students play their cards right and “play” the game of college honestly, honorably, with energy and passion, and in smart, deliberative, and strategic ways, they will be well prepared to contribute in big ways to the world, to their country, community, and families: whether that is through their paid jobs and careers or through volunteer service.

Chapter 1, “Daily Habits: Fitness and Wellness,” introduces students to a range of successful strategies to make their time in college happier and more fulfilling. Students will discover very specific aspects of their lives that either work well for them or do not, and they will begin to evaluate their lives from a critical and creative standpoint in order to see very concrete changes that they will want to make. In this way, they will see how relatively small changes can effect significant benefits in their everyday lives for their success in college and beyond. The chapter teaches how to take charge of one’s overall well-being by (1) learning how to have a victorious attitude, (2) becoming more interested and enthusiastic in life and in different things, (3) discovering ways to nurture one’s spirit, (4) learning how to make one’s surrounding environment aesthetically pleasing and effectively productive, (5) having fun and learning how to socialize in positive and productive ways, and (6) caring for one’s physical well-being. The theme of this chapter relates to three key terms: discipline, balance, and moderation.

Chapter 2, “Class Performance: Preparation and Participation,” and Chapter 3, “Academic Skills: Commitment, Time Management, Study Habits,” provide the information and tools necessary to improve study habits, increase grades, and make class time much more effective. Students want to make college work for them; they just need to learn what they need to do to make this happen. Most students want top grades and would like their professors to recognize and respect their intelligence and abilities, but most students have simply not learned how to be top students. If implemented effectively, the guidance in these chapters will enable them to dramatically improve their academic performance.

Chapter 4, “Strategic Credentialing: Majors, Minors, Skill Sets,” will help your students in their decision-making processes regarding the selection of a major and
other areas of skill development. The demands of the 21st century require different
skills and abilities, which can often be met through a mix of majors, minors, and con-
centrations. Gone are the days where one major was sufficient preparation for most
post-college careers. Now, more students will decide to double major or add a minor
or two. Chapter 4 will help them be strategic about what they want to learn, about what
skills they will want to develop, and about what academic experiences they will want
to take advantage of while in college. Various worksheets in this and the other chapters
will aid students in their strategic decision-making process.

oral, written, and digital communication skills that are crucial to develop as much as
possible while in college. Students’ classes in speech communications, composition/
writing, and digital media are among the most important during their undergraduate
years. Students should want to work hard in these classes in order to develop their
communication skills in preparation for their later careers. All jobs demand skillful
communications in one form or another, so it is to your students’ benefit to get as
much as possible out of each class in which they have opportunities to develop and
practice their communications skills.

Chapter 6, “Campus Activity: Clubs, the Arts, Athletics,” turns to the many
campus organizations with which students can get involved and helps them to under-
stand the importance of active involvement to their developing teamwork, leadership,
and problem-solving skills. They will learn why they want to make strategic and bal-
canced decisions regarding which organizations to get involved with and at what level.
This and the next two chapters turn more explicitly to the wealth of experiences that are
available to college students. College years provide your students with many experiential
learning opportunities that are invaluable in preparing them for their post-college years.

Chapter 7, “Off-Campus Endeavors: Internships, Jobs, Volunteerism,” addresses
the various experiences that students will have off campus in the form of internships,
volunteer activities, part-time and full-time jobs, and so on. This chapter provides addi-
tional knowledge to help students appreciate and utilize these experiences more fully and
effectively as they support their academics and help to prepare them for their careers.

Chapter 8, “Networking and Mentoring: Teamwork, Leadership, Strategic
Relationships,” introduces students to the world of professional networking and
mentoring. College is ideal for beginning to develop professional networks. The first
half of the chapter explains the whys and hows to get professional networks started.
The chapter then turns to mentoring partnerships, providing guidance to help stu-
dents find the right mentors for them and their future professional career and to learn
the basics in developing and maintaining important mentoring relationships.

The book ends with an epilogue that summarizes the importance of achieving a truly
outstanding undergraduate education and experience for students.

Remind your students that they can really make college work for them . . . as long as
they remember that “what counts most is not who you are or where you are but what
you do” (Pace, p. 31). It is strongly recommended that students take the worksheets
and recommended activities that intersperse the book very seriously. They can do
these on their own, with friends, as part of a planning program within their fraternity
or sorority, as a structured activity for students in their church, synagogue or other
religious organization, as part of your class’s series of assignments, or as a required
core curriculum for incoming first-year students at your college or university.

As students work their ways through each chapter and as they accomplish the
various worksheets and activities, they can mark them off on the “Worksheet for
Success in College” along with the dates that they completed each assignment. [This worksheet could be made available on their course website.] As your students complete more of the book’s strategic decision-making exercises, you will begin to see their progress as they learn how to make college work for them.

Instructor Resources

Online Instructor’s Manual  This manual provides a framework of ideas and suggestions for activities, journal writing, thought-provoking situations, and online implementation including MyStudentSuccessLab recommendations.

Online PowerPoint® Presentation  A comprehensive set of PowerPoint slides that can be used by instructors for class presentations and also by students for lecture preview or review. The PowerPoint presentation includes summary slides with overview information for each chapter. These slides help students understand and review concepts within each chapter.

Acknowledgements

Many students have inspired this text as they championed their educations and career paths, struggled, and even temporarily met with failure along the way. Each and every one has contributed to the crafting and development of the book. Students who “test drove” earlier draft versions would proclaim, “I haven’t been a student like this since seventh grade! It is all your book, Professor Brill de Ramírez;” “In my four years of high school, I only studied for a few hours each year during finals, but now I’m taking college seriously. I tell my Mom what I’m doing, and she just cries”; “I always loved music, but I thought that as an engineering major I couldn’t do anything else. Now I understand that music can help me be a better engineer, so I just added a minor in music. I am so happy! Thank you, Professor Brill de Ramírez!” These and the other students who have found value in this work have confirmed its importance and spurred me on despite the very real challenges of time and energy. This book is a gift to every student—those I’ve had in my classes and those who are helped in whatever way possible through my guidance.

My faith in all students and in every person’s ability to contribute to the world was instilled early on by my parents, Dr. Robert M. and Dorothy Ann (Retallack) Brill. The quote that begins the Preface speaks to my lifelong belief in the value of every person.

Along the way there have been various guides and networking mentors, both personal and professional who propelled my commitment to education: Tutor Harry Golding at St. John’s College, ever-present Professor Alexander B. Chambers at the University of Wisconsin; Professor Heshmat Moayyad at the University of Chicago; Professor Herbert Heneman in the University of Wisconsin’s graduate Management and Human Resources programs; Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty at Trinity University, Michael R. Fischer—previously Dean and Professor of English at the University of New Mexico and my dissertation advisor; Baha’is Jim and Roan (Orloff) Stone in Gallup, New Mexico; Diné (Navajo) artist Chester Kahn and traditional herbalist and healer Annie Kahn; gym owner and weightlifting expert Bob Rosa of the Central Illinois Weightlifting Gym; storyteller and inner-city teacher Miss Juliette

I lost both of my parents as a young graduate student, not long after my own undergraduate years. I understand the major tragedies and challenges that can waylay students. If certain people cannot be there as guides, then find others to turn to. It does take a village, only these days our villages are far flung and digital.
Preface

Whittaker (the drama teacher who inspired a future comedian, Peorian Richard Pryor); friend and support in the Peoria Bahá’í Faith community over the last twenty plus years Mrs. Caroline Delaney; brilliant contemporary scholars and creative writers Simon J. Ortiz, Leslie Marmon Silko, Evelina Zuni Lucero, Kimberly Blaeser, Gordon Henry, Margaret Noodin Noori; and many remarkable scholars who have actively supported my work through the years: Kate Shanley, David Moore, Richard and June Thomas, Chris Teuton, John Miles Foley, Ellen Arnold, and others too many to name. It has been a great blessing and honor to have known you all. And I would be remiss to not acknowledge the invaluable caffeine provided by the remarkable café 30-30 Coffee and Starbucks in Peoria when a work venue away from home and office was needed.

At my own university there have been many who have supported my professional development. The century-long mission and commitment of Bradley University to educate the whole student has brought to fruition my passion for education and found support in many outstanding colleagues who early on saw the larger needs for student success that this text addresses. Distinguished scholar and professor of management Dr. Larry Weinzimmer encouraged this project from the outset, understanding the value of individual management practices for overall student success in college. It is an honor to have Professor Weinzimmer as the author of the foreword to the book. University President Joanne Glasser also realized early on the importance of this book, and the Office for Teaching Excellence and Faculty Development (now the Center for Teaching Excellence and Learning) provided grant funding for specific stages of the research. My department chair Robert Prescott, departmental secretary Shelly Walker, and graduate assistant Lisa Dooley have supported and contributed to the project in different ways. During the final writing crunch stage, Lisa Dooley stepped up to assist with references, logs, and other needs. And Dr. Dawn Brill Duquès—teacher, education administrator, and lifelong learner—provided a sharp editorial eye from venues as far afield as Turkey and the Ukraine.

I can think of no better publisher for this project than Pearson. Pearson’s reach is global; Pearson’s growth is visionary; Pearson’s commitment to education is stanch and sincere. This book is a pioneering project, shifting the dialogue of college success into a human resource development language and orientation. The needs of students today are paramount, and I am deeply indebted to everyone at Pearson for seeing the value of this work and helping to move this project forward. I have been deeply impressed by Pearson vice presidents Joe Terry and Jodi McPherson (who championed the book early on), acquisitions editor Katie Mahan, executive marketing manager Amy Judd, editorial assistant Erin Carreiro, production project manager Mary Sanger, developmental editor Claire Hunter (who helped manage me and the text through the final stages of writing and through to the production process), and the many other phenomenal people at Pearson commited to the highest caliber of materials for education, learning, and teaching. I am continually humbled by the excellence to which Pearson is dedicated. Thank you all.

For many years, people whom I know who were not academics would ask, "When are you going to write something that we can read?" Here it is. My most heartfelt thanks go to my husband Antonio Ramírez Sánchez Barron and son Jose who have endured my long absences of attention during the processes of research, writing, and revision. I hope that we all have learned through this process as the knowledge and insights in this book guide our own lives and work.

I want this book to be of value in helping college students to grow and develop and make their college years work for them in big ways. Accordingly, I want this text to grow and develop so that it can be of increasing assistance over the years. I welcome suggestions for development and improvement. Please share with me your stories, insights, knowledge, and experience, so that we can all make college work for each other, our communities, our nation, and the world.
A couple of months ago, I had the inevitable task of dropping my oldest daughter, Kayla, off at college. Although it was difficult for me—more difficult than I would have ever imagined—for her, going off to college was literally the biggest challenge she had ever faced. Not knowing anyone on campus, living away from home for the first time, and trying to figure out how to succeed in a competitive collegiate environment seemed like insurmountable obstacles. But once she learned to navigate these challenges, she realized they were actually incredible opportunities.

As a specialist in management decision making, I have assisted corporations and executives in the tools and methods necessary to improve their companies’ and employees’ success. As Professor Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez articulates beautifully in *Make College Work for You*, students can learn how to approach their college years in smart and strategic ways with a significant return on that investment. Trying to figure out how to strategically traverse the course is not only about how to succeed in college, but also about how to create a foundation that will benefit you long after you have graduated. So how can you make college work for you? Start by knowing the difference between effectiveness and efficiency.

### Think Strategically: The Difference between Effectiveness and Efficiency

In order to be strategic about making decisions in college, you will need to make sure you are effective before ever considering efficiency. Effectiveness focuses on “doing the right things.” Efficiency focuses on “doing things right.” Strategic decision making ensures that you are doing the right things, such as choosing the right major, joining the right organizations, and getting the right experiences.

- **What is the best major for me?** Let’s face it. Trying to decide what you are going to do with the rest of your life is a big deal. I have advised hundreds of students about their majors, their classes, and their careers. Remember that college is a chance to learn and to grow—not only to learn from textbooks, but to also learn about you. Often there is no right or wrong and no one best major for many students. So how do you know what major is right for you? It will be a combination of knowing your interests and passions, leveraging your skills, and being strategic about your opportunities in the marketplace.

- **Which campus activities are right for me?** At most colleges and universities there are literally hundreds of student organizations. Some are professional, some are social, and some are academic. And each organization has different benefits and different levels of commitment. How do you know which ones are best for you—socially, professionally and academically? With so many choices, it is tempting to reach out in too many directions and run the risk of spreading yourself too thin. So how do you strategically choose the right organizations for you when the opportunities seem virtually endless?
The experience paradox. When you finish college, you will find that most employers require experience; but how can you gain experience until you get your first job? Therein lies the paradox. Internships are a great way to get experience before you graduate. Not only do you receive invaluable experience, but you become more employable when you graduate.

Most employers take a very holistic approach when making hiring decisions. Employers today consider many soft-side issues, such as leadership potential, communication skills and the ability to work well in a team environment. Therefore the experiences you have outside of the classroom have become increasingly important. As Professor Brill de Ramírez makes very clear, there are many ways to gain the experience that employers desire, whether that is in internships, part-time jobs, volunteerism, or undergraduate research. You want to follow her advice and guidance in making strategic decisions to ensure your readiness for the job market.

How to Make Intentional Decisions for Success

Where can you go to find the information you need to make the strategic decisions necessary to succeed? Parents? Friends? Facebook? Wouldn’t it be great to have a roadmap to guide you through the complexities and obstacles? In Make College Work for You, current and prospective students will be guided step by step through this transition so that they can be strategic about the decisions they need to make to maximize their experiences—academically, professionally, and socially. The practical advice in this book will be critically important, not only to your college experience, but also to create a solid foundation for the rest of your life.

In this text, you will gain the tools you need so that you will get the most out of your college experience. Throughout this book, Professor Brill de Ramírez offers both the how and why for incorporating critical processes into a student’s life. You will learn how to strategically choose a major and develop specific skill sets for the workplace. As stated in the text, four years of college prepare you for upwards of forty years of work. Additionally specific tactics are offered regarding how to get the most out of in-class time. As I explain in my book The Wisdom of Failure, "Attending to how goals are achieved, rather than the goals themselves, builds strong relationships and solid business acumen" (p. 10). As a college student, you want to attend to how your college, career, and future life goals are achieved. Make College Work for You is not only a must read for every student entering college, it is also an important resource for parents, guidance counselors, and college advisors. Professor Brill de Ramírez provides everything you need to know to get the most out of your college experience—and beyond.

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