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FUTURE OF WORK • EDUCATION

Malcolm Gladwell tells young people if they want a STEM degree, 'don't go to Harvard.' You may end up at the bottom of your class and drop out

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Reporter

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Malcolm Gladwell said that when it comes to picking a college, it's better to be a top performer at a less rigorous school than to flail at Harvard. If you want to get a science and math degree, don't go to Harvard, Gladwell said in a Google Zeitgeist talk in 2019.

Gladwell clarified in a recent episode of the *Hasan Minhaj Doesn't Know* podcast the risk of applying for Harvard University to pursue a STEM degree is fine if you're able to compete with the top students in your major. But for many students, matriculating at an elite institution means flailing, increasing the risk of dropping out and finding a dream job.

"If you're interested in succeeding in an educational institution, you never want to be in the bottom half of your class. It's too hard," Gladwell told podcast host Minhaj. "So you should go to Harvard if you think you can be in the top quarter of your class at Harvard. That's fine. But don't go there if you're going to be at the bottom of class. Doing STEM? You're just gonna drop out."

Gladwell instead encourages prospective college students to pick their second or third choice school, somewhere they have a shot at being at the top of their class.

For all of Gen Z's interest in pursuing trades as they navigate fears of AI displacing entry-level workers, STEM degrees remain a key ticket to secure white-collar employment. According to a Federal Reserve Bank of New York analysis released in July 2025 about job market conditions for recent college graduates, degrees in animal and plant sciences, and earth sciences, as well as civil and aerospace engineering, are among the undergraduate majors with the lowest unemployment rates. To be sure, information systems and management, and computer science degrees, ranked among majors with the highest unemployment rates.

Ivy League colleges continue to be among the top-ranked universities based on graduation rates, peer assessment, and other factors, according to U.S. News & World Report data.

Gladwell's 'big fish, little pond' college application theory

Gladwell's opposition to most students attending an elite university is based on the relative deprivation theory, or the idea humans base our self-assessments relative to those around us, not based on our position relative to the rest of the world. In his 2013 book *David and Goliath*, Gladwell also called this the big fish in a little pond phenomenon.

He cites data about two universities: Harvard and Hartwick College, a small liberal arts school in upstate New York. He saw at both schools, despite their differences in size and rigor, both have similar distribution in STEM degrees based on high-scoring and low-scoring SAT results, with lower-scoring students dropping out from STEM programs at a higher rate than higher-scoring students. He concluded one's success is based not on their raw skills, but rather on how they stack up compared to their peers.

"Persistence in science and math is not simply a function of your cognitive ability,"



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Gladwell notes getting a degree—more so than the institution where the degree is from—is key to building confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy in young graduates.

It's not just on the students to succeed, however. According to Gladwell, the benefits a student gets from being at the top of their class warrants a change of paradigm in how workplaces select new hires. He said workplaces should even go so far as to implement a practice of not even asking from which college prospective hires graduated from, but rather where they ranked among their classmates.

"When you hear some institution, some fabulous Wall Street investment bank, some universities, say, 'we only hire from the top schools,' you should say: 'You moron, hire from the top students from any school under the sun.'"

A version of this story was published on Fortune.com on Dec. 27, 2025.

More on Gen Z and college:

- Gen Z are arriving to college **unable to even read a sentence**—professors warn it could lead to a generation of anxious and lonely graduates
- Gen Z is **snubbing college** as a dismal job market and sky-high tuition forces them to weigh ROI: 'No schools are immune'
- Gen Z has regrets: 1 in 4 say they **wish they hadn't gone to college** or would've picked a higher-paying industry