

No. 27: College

When I ask students why they are in college, the most common answer is “to learn about the world.” This is a noble goal, but a better place than college to learn about the world is...well, frankly...the world. Your goal in college should be to learn about “how to learn about” the world. Learning “how to learn” will guarantee that you will continue to grow intellectually beyond graduation and be a valuable employee to any company, government agency or other organization you choose to work for. I mean, let’s face it, no employer is really going to care whether you can recite the five factors that led to the French Revolution (unless of course you plan to be a professor specializing in the French Revolution). Your employer will be more interested in your ability to think critically, anticipate problems and devise solutions. Most liberal arts majors think that they will be disadvantaged on the job market in comparison to their counterparts who are majoring in business administration. Not necessarily. Most companies essentially retrain their employees to the specific procedures and goals of their firm. Employers like to hire people who are intellectually flexible and this is the comparative advantage a (properly-trained) liberal arts major can bring to the table. Moreover, if you want to stay intellectually active and understand our ever-changing world, you will need the same intellectual skills that any employer seeks. You should know all of this when you start college, and not wait to find this out at the graduation ceremony. With that said, here are some things I consider an important part of a well-rounded college career:



- **Methods, not just facts.** Students often equate intelligence with a detailed knowledge of “facts.” While a strong memory may help you go far on Jeopardy,TM real intelligence is the ability to think up answers to questions nobody has yet asked or answered. In other words, intelligence is problem solving. (Dr. T often likes to teach subjects he is not intimately familiar with because it forces him to learn a new subject and keeps his mind fresh. He may appear “stupid” to his students, but the ability to quickly learn a new subject and teach it is quite an amazing intellectual feat.) While in college, you should try to learn how your professors (trained scientists) conduct research. Methodology is the study of how research is conducted.**
 - *Take a methodology course.* While most political science majors would rather be tied to an anthill than take a research methods course, this is probably the best decision you could make. Yes, this means learning statistics, but it also means learning how to ask questions, devise hypotheses, craft measurements and gather data. The UW Political Science department offers POL S 205 as a basic introduction to methodology for political scientists. Consider this course or other

** Please note that I am not advocating some of the new and whacky pedagogies that are currently en vogue in many K-12 schools, such as “learning through self-discovery.” I am still old school in many ways and consider “factual-based” education to be very important. What I refer to here is the scientific method of inquiry. Learn it.

methodology courses. (Dr. T also recommends that all students should take a microeconomics course, but this is particular to him.)

- *Write a Senior Thesis.* It is very easy for a student to escape the UW without ever having to write a major research paper. This is unfortunate. A senior thesis should be one of your prized academic accomplishments. Find a professor who is willing to supervise your thesis and work with them for two quarters – the first quarter doing research, the second quarter writing. It is strongly advised that you take a research methodology course before choosing this path though. Most professors only like to work with students who know what they are doing from the outset.
- *Work with a Professor on a Research Project.* There are many opportunities to work with a professor on his/her research. The UW does provide a list of professors/projects that are in search of undergraduate research assistants, and our departments Center for American Politics and Public Policy offers a fellows program to get undergraduates involved with faculty research. Look for other similar opportunities and be “aggressive” in asking a professor if they need help on a project. You can often get course credit for your work (and sometimes your name will be cited in a book or article that is produced). Be advised that most professors will only want to take on an undergraduate once they have been trained in methodology. A methods class is really important. Also, when working with a professor, approach it as a mentoring situation and always be asking to do more than just “envelope stuffing.”



- **Present Yourself Accordingly.** If you do develop a strong methodology background, be proactive in telling potential employers (or law school and graduate school recruiters) that you know how to do research. The difference between an employed and unemployed liberal arts major is that the former usually champions his ability to solve problems.
- **Remember, You Determine Your Success.** You are likely at the UW because you were one of the top academic performers in your high school. Now realize that this is true of nearly everybody at the UW. As you move up the academic food chain, the competition becomes more intense. In such an environment, there is one thing you will need to succeed – the desire to work towards success. It is that simple. Everyone at the UW has the intellectual firepower to succeed. The question is how that firepower will be deployed. In a large university, it is easy to sit back and let things happen to you. However, successful students are those that spend the time to chart out their own path to graduation, develop a set of goals, and then aggressively pursue these goals. Challenge yourself to write a senior thesis. Figure out a way to work with a professor on a research project. Don't shy away from difficult course for electives. Work up the courage to visit a professor in his/her office and ask some questions about class. Vow to become an active participant in class discussions.



A Few Other Things to Do

- **Great Speakers & Great Literature.** As Stephan Hamburg once said, students should take advantage of the many great opportunities to learn outside of the classroom. The UW frequently invites world-renown speakers to present lectures, and our own faculty often give talks outside the confines of a formal course. Movies, theatre, concerts and other cultural events are readily available to students. Don't leave college without sampling from this smorgasbord of events. When you are bogged down in a career and/or with a family later on in life, you will regret not having done this. And in between taking all those methodology courses, take a course in art, literature or music that you enjoy (and that might not be required).

- **Get Involved.** If you have the time and energy, get involved with some group at the UW. There are dozens of official student organizations, and numerous other groups that you can join. Several benefits come along with joining a group. First, it makes a large university seem less impersonal. Second, you become engaged in an activity outside of academics. This activity will allow you to refocus attention away from academics at various points throughout the year thereby keeping your brain fresh. Third, you will build a network of friends who might be able to help out when times are tough. Finally, these friends may well be future job partners or contacts. Realize, though, that academics must come first.



You are in college to get an education and the diploma that comes with the happy meal. Do not get involved in too many things and realize when you are overcommitted. It is okay to step back from activities at times. And it is okay if you aren't able to participate a great

deal in campus life. Some folks need to work through college and there is no shame to that at all.

- **Have fun. Make friends. Be proud!** College is a great time in your life. Sure, there is a lot of stress involved (exams, papers, presentations), but it is a time of unparalleled freedom. Soak up the whole college experience. Attend at least one football game and cheer loudly. Play frisbee on the Hub lawn. Go out to a movie with friends on a Friday and stay up all night talking. Buy yourself a UW sweatshirt and wear it with pride. Getting a college degree is a great accomplishment; let the world know it!

- **Graduation.** Most people only graduate once from college. Make it count. Attend the graduation ceremony, either for the entire university and/or for your specific department (if they have one). While the large university ceremony may seem impersonal, you will never get another chance to do it again and you don't want to have any regrets. And if not for you, do it for your parents, other family or friends. It is likely that they supported you in some way throughout college and you owe them a big thanks on that important day. Plus, give them the opportunity to pat you on the back and say, "a job well done!"

