

Five Suggestions for Having a Successful College Career

In his widely discussed book *Excellent Sheep*, William Deresiewicz ponders why the interests and imagined possibilities of so many students tend to narrow rather than expand during higher education. As freshmen, he notes, many enter with big plans to be poets, statesmen, teachers, filmmakers, or whatever, but are funneled into narrow tracks of career options and interests. The university hasn't, it would seem, enriched and enlarged their worlds, but instead has constrained and hampered them.

There are several reasons for this: fears concerning a tough job market, ballooning costs, large student loans, the failure of the humanities, and the ascendancy of STEM. In addition, Deresiewicz notes that many high-achieving students are driven by success, or a version of success that has very little content in terms of character, purpose, and a life well lived. If one seeks success for its own sake, and success is judged by nothing other than keeping up with one's peers, it's all but inevitable, he thinks, that students will simply imitate the lives and careers of each other, all the while trying to be the most successful imitators.

Of course, not all of us think that success means nothing more than winning a race to nowhere, but then what does a successful college career look like? Here are five suggestions to consider.

1. Education is for your whole person for your whole life.

While it is true that aspects of the university are preparation for the next steps, too often students picture these years as an odd "time-out" from life, as if the entire point were preparation for what was to come. This isn't quite right; it seems very strange to spend three or four or six years ignoring certain aspects of human well-being. Certainly,

the university years have an intense focus on study, but study and intellectual pursuit is not divorced from the life well spent at any stage, and it is a distortion to ignore the other human goods that constitute integral flourishing.

So, study, yes, and hard and well, but a life devoid of friendship, and virtue, and beauty, and religion, and health, and integrity is not a fully human life. A successful college career, thus, already incorporates the whole range of a good life even as it sets down the pathways for the future. But your future good, however different it may look in terms of circumstances and context from your current life, does not consist of some radically distinct version of human happiness. Build well now, for this already contributes to your happiness; it's not just for some distant future.

2. Read good books with good professors.

You could take the easier class for the easy grade, or you could take the hard course with the difficult reading list with the demanding professor. Trust me, in twenty years, no one, not even you, will care about your GPA. But the books you read will form you now and remain with you then. Find the best professors, read the best books, study the most beautiful music and art, struggle with the first and most abiding questions. Don't waste your (quite) short time with things that are a waste of your time. If you graduate and can count Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Austen, Augustine, and Moses as your friends, and are a student of those professors who count those same people as their friends, you'll have succeeded.

3. Form broad and deep patterns of relationship.

As those "BFF" notes in your high school yearbook may remind you, you don't always remain best friends forever, but you can tell the content of your character by those you do continue to count as friends. Commit yourself to people, and not just people who enjoy the same pastimes and entertainments; form abiding relationships with people, including those with whom you disagree. So long as they are also committed to things

true, good, and beautiful, they're worth knowing, and knowing for the rest of your life. Try, too, to find these people from other schools to befriend, and spend life together, not just study (although that too)—that is, alongside them, seek to discover and integrate the full range of a good life. (See point one, above).

4. Serve.

It's very odd to chunk several thousand young people together in isolation from family, neighborhood, and synagogue/parish/temple. You should try to spend time with the very young and the very old, but not where you receive from them but where you give. Volunteer to teach church school or visit the nursing home. If you learn to be a man or woman for others, you'll be a success.

5. Think family.

You may or may not marry and have a family, but for most of us, family life is where we will live (or fail) human flourishing. It would be a failed opportunity, if you ask me, to graduate and only then to think about marriage and family. I'm not saying you need the proverbial "ring by spring," but if you've been doing college without preparing and seeking family, you'll not have spent that time very well.

Grades are good, internships are good, publications are good, GRE scores are good, but these are merely instruments of life and not its point. The wise student, the successful student, will already seek the point of life and live it well, not in some hazy future, but now and already.

So get busy living, and living well, even now.

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