

Advice: A Musing, and Then Some

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President Jacobson, Provost Nyenhuis, Dean Patterson, Students, their Parents, Family Members and Friends, Honored Guests, Members of the Staff, Colleagues on the Faculty:

Introduction

Not too long ago I wrote an essay containing some advice to College students on how to succeed in college, and some particular advice on communicating with faculty. The invitation to speak at convocation was based on this essay. As I contemplated giving a speech containing advice, particularly knowing how advice-givers are sometimes received, the topic of advice came to intrigue me. It occurred to me that I had never read anything in the communication literature on advice, in spite of the fact that giving advice is very common activity indeed. When my wife and I moved to Madison, Wisconsin from California fifteen years ago this month to finish my graduate studies, we received abundant advice from native Midwesterners, most of it about surviving severe weather conditions. Let me tell you, I found much of this advice a little unnerving, even frightening. Driving on snow and ice, something I had never done, really concerned me, and advice like, "Always turn into a skid" confused me. I understood "skid," and "turn," but what did that crucial term "into" mean here? I'm still not sure I know, nor have I ever had the presence of mind to follow the advice when actually in a skid. But the advice that really struck terror into my heart was communicated in a stark public service announcement: "The Wisconsin State Police advise that you carry candy bars, candles, and matches in your car in case you are stranded in a blizzard." For five years I prepared my coffee can full of Snickers bars and candles, and ate the candy bars every April as a kind of ritual of the coming of spring. Friends from Wisconsin would just laugh at me when I told them about my coffee can survival kit, but I was ready. Of course, there was the summer survival advice as well, like: "In the event of a tornado, go to your basement, and get under a sturdy piece of furniture or hold on to the furnace." Or, "in the event of a flash flood, move to higher ground," which seemed both obvious and potentially difficult to execute in the plains states. After hearing quite a lot of this kind of weather-survival advice, I was always surprised and a little amused when people in this part of the country would say to me, "Oh, you're from California. Weren't you afraid of earthquakes? It's a lot safer here."

The idea of collecting advice for first-year college students occurred to me several years ago. I was getting ready to talk with a group of entering students and their parents before the beginning of classes. Many of you have had such a meeting with a professor this weekend. After covering some of the major issues regarding schedules and the like, and answering some questions, I said I was going to relate what I called, for want of a better label, Herrick's Seven Suggestions for Success in College. I know, it was kind of a corny title, but I couldn't think of a better one. I then made the wild claim that a student who regularly followed all seven suggestions would be likely to get good grades in her or his courses. About four years later, I was at our departmental graduation reception for students and their parents on a Sunday afternoon in May. A graduating senior's mother came up to me at the reception and said,

You know, when you gave that little talk about seven suggestions for success in college at

freshman orientation, I wrote your suggestions down. I don't know if my daughter was listening or not, but I recently went back to complete my college degree. I wanted to tell you, I followed the suggestions, and it worked. I did well in all my courses. Thanks for the advice.

How gratifying. I had given advice, someone had heeded my advice, (though someone who was not the intended target of that advice) and the results had been good.

I will come back to my advice for students entering college. But, before I do, I just can't resist speculating for a few minutes on the communication activity of giving and receiving advice. After all, with so little literature on the subject, a little musing on advice may be called for. So, four observations on advice.

1. The first one is this: Few things are more valuable, even more essential, than good advice. Because the experience of any one person is so limited, advice from those who have gone before us is essential. Without it, we are left to learn everything by trial and error. This is why before making an important decision, we often seek the advice of a wise or knowledgeable person. In fact, the Bible endorses this idea. The book of Proverbs affirms that "there is safety in many counselors," many people, that is, who can offer good advice when we are about to make an important decision.

At its best, advice is experience distilled into practical wisdom that can assist our decision-making, and thus help us to avoid error. But, we sometimes do not appreciate an advice-giver, even someone who may be offering good advice. If good advice is so valuable, why is this? There is a paradox here, which brings me to my second point regarding advice.

2. Advice can be invasive. The realm of personal decision-making is rather jealously protected territory for most of us, and thus we naturally resist the incursions of the uninvited advice-giver. When someone suggest to us, without our asking their advice, where we should work, whom we should marry, even what color combinations we should or should not wear, we can be a little reluctant to listen. Because advice-giving can be invasive, it should be entered into with some regard for the individual who will have to be responsible for and to live with the consequences of his or her decision. But now I'm on the topic of the ethics of advice-giving, which I don't have time to develop.

3. My third observation, then, and related to the second, is this: Listening to advice requires humility, a willingness on my part to hear the opinions of someone else about what I should do. Maybe it's just that listening requires humility. Listening is a difficult, perhaps the most difficult, communicative act, and listening to advice can be particularly demanding. Is this why the author of Proverbs has to urge his young readers, right at the opening of the book, to listen: "Hear ... your father's instruction, and reject not your mother's teaching, for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck."

Now, it is also, of course, evident that we do not feel obliged to follow all of the advice we have had the humility to hear. In fact, we feel quite free to ignore advice. A recent issue of The John Hopkins Medical Center Newsletter reports that 3 out of 4 people do not do what their doctor has advised them to do to improve or maintain health--things like changing diet or getting more exercise, or even taking their medicine regularly. That is, doctors get about a 25% compliance rate for their medical advice-giving. Amazing. It would be interesting to know what percentage of the people to whom you have ever offered advice actually did what you suggested. I have been know to advise people to get rid of

their television sets, and have in fact been giving this advice for years. So far as I know, not one person has ever followed my advice on this matter. Thus, I am not doing nearly as well as the doctors.

4. My fourth and final point in this musing on advice: Giving someone advice is presumptuous--it presumes that the advice giver knows better than the advice receiver on the topic at hand, and that the advice-receiver ought to recognize this fact. Does advice giving, then, require some humility as well?

There is, of course, a price to be paid for the presumptuousness of giving advice--the would-be advice-giver faces the enormous cultural animosity toward hypocrisy. That is, we are all believers, to one degree or another, in the advice that one should practice what one preaches. Once you have given advice, you are bound by the unwritten laws of culture and communication, to follow your own advice.

So, advice is valuable, even necessary; it can be invasive, particularly when unsolicited in the area of personal decision-making; it takes humility to hear advice, the same humility it takes to listen generally; and finally, giving someone advice can be presumptuous, and thus requires regard for the other in order to be well received. Now, with all of this in mind, and bound by my own observations, I am going to change roles here from advice theorist to advice-giver.

Some Advice on Entering College

Some of you students in the audience are confident that you have what it takes to succeed at Hope College--sound high school preparation, solid study habits, strong intellect, and sufficient motivation. But there may be some students in the audience, about to start four years in college, who are thinking: "I'm not sure I'm ready for this. I might not succeed. I didn't have great high school preparation. I'm not an outstanding student."

Well, I would like to bring you some reassurance: You do have what it takes to succeed in college. It has been my experience that when students encounter serious problems in their course work, the causes are not typically inadequate preparation or the absence of special intellectual gifts. My experiences with many students over more than fifteen years of teaching suggest that success in college is more closely related to planning, personal commitments, and intentional effort than it is to extraordinary natural ability, excellent high school preparation, or even exemplary classroom instruction by professors, as helpful as these may be.

I mentioned in my introduction a set of suggestions for success in college. Hope, as you know, is a liberal arts college. In the Middle Ages, the seven liberal arts were divided into two sets called the quadrivium (literally the four roads) and the trivium (or, the three roads). The four advanced studies, the quadrivium, were arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. The three lower studies in the medieval university were grammar, logic, and my own discipline of rhetoric. Well, since seven points are a lot to remember, I have decided to divide them into my own quadrivium and trivium. Let me begin with my quadrivium, four major commitments to make to yourself as you get ready to start college. I call these "the four everies." I'd like to develop each of these four briefly, along with just a little additional advice along the way on communicating with faculty.

First, attend every class. The easiest and surest way to derail your progress through college is to miss class sessions. You will be communicating to yourself and to your professor that the class isn't important, and you will, of course miss classroom discussions of material. Tests and assignments will

become more difficult as well. Make a commitment to get to every class that you aren't prevented from attending by serious illness, family emergency, or approved travel with a college organization. If a friend suggests to you that skipping a class is no big deal, realize that this person is probably not thinking principally about your success in that class.

Now, just a bit of advice regarding faculty on this point. Sometimes a student who has missed a class will come to my office later--I suppose this has happened to other faculty as well--and say to me, with no apparent malice: "I'm sorry I wasn't in class today Professor Herrick. Did I miss anything important?" This seems like an innocent enough question, but it is a hard one for faculty to hear. It suggests that only occasionally does anything important happen--which I usually hear as "anything that will be on the test"--happen in that class. This is not a good way to start a conversation with a professor about having missed a class. It's fine, even courteous, simply to explain to the professor why you missed a class. But the best policy is: Be there.

Second major commitment in my quadrivium: Read every assignment before going to class. You are going to be asked to do a lot of reading in connection with your courses, and your experience here will be richer and less stressful if you plan your schedule so that you can do all of your assigned readings before you go to classes. When you do the assigned readings, lectures and class discussion are easier to follow, and you will have specific questions to ask in class. The next four years will be, for many of you, the only period in your lives when you will have the opportunity to read, think, and converse about such a wide range of ideas, and in a community of teachers and fellow students. It isn't going to last forever, just for four years. The more consistently you read, the more you'll enjoy and benefit from the experience.

Third commitment: Do Every Exercise. Many of your courses will involve exercises or other brief assignments, sometimes not graded, which ask you to apply materials discussed in a chapter or in lecture. Don't assume that, because these exercises are not graded, or are a small part of your grade, that you need only read the chapter and then get an explanation of the exercises in class when the professor goes over them. The problem with this approach is that you will have never made the personal effort to understand how the concepts are applied, but you will get the impression that you understand them because of the professor's explanations. The formula for success here is a simple one: Do every assigned exercise, check your results, and ask questions in class about the ones that didn't make sense to you. If there are still some items you don't understand, ask the professor outside of class. If you do this consistently, you are not going to find many surprises on tests. When a student comes to me after failing a quiz or a test and asks what went wrong, I ask the student, first if they did all of the readings before each class, and then if they did every exercises on their own before each class. I start there. Those are the fundamentals.

Fourth major commitment: Visit every professor. Of course, I don't mean every professor on campus, though this would, no doubt, be an education in itself. Visit each of your professors. I have read that, on average, and this surprises me, undergraduates spend a grand total of less than thirty minutes speaking with professors outside of class in their entire four years at college. This may not be the average at Hope, in fact, I'd be surprised if it were. There is a great deal of student-faculty interaction around this College, which is one of the factors that makes it such an interesting place to teach and to study. Nevertheless, not all students take the time to talk with their professors. You should plan to visit each of your professors at least once, and probably a couple of times during each semester. Have a specific question in mind to ask about concepts being discussed in the course, about your progress, or

about an assignment. Let me let you in on a secret: Faculty members like to talk about what they teach! Show them you're interested in their courses, you'll get a conversation, believe me. Faculty set office hours to talk with students. Try to use these times, if possible, for visits. If the office hours don't work out, set an appointment.

Now, here's another conversation starter to avoid in a consultation with a faculty member: "Professor Herrick, I just don't understand what we're doing in this class." Even though I think that students seldom intend it this way, this statement sounds as if you don't think the professor is teaching the class well. Try something like this: "Professor Herrick, I think I understand the first two concepts we talked about in class yesterday, but the third one still isn't clear to me. Could you go over that one with me again to make sure I've understood it?"

I have just read, in two different places and based on two different studies, that contact with faculty outside of class is very closely associated with student intellectual growth in college. You have unusual opportunity to talk with you faculty here at Hope compared with larger institutions; take advantage of that fact.

Well, those are my quadrivium, "the four everies":

- attend every class
- read every assignment
- do every exercise
- visit every professor

Now, here's my trivium. If my quadrivium were four roads to take, these are four paths to avoid in college. I will call them "the three avoids."

1. First, Avoid the Back Row: It sounds too strong, but I don't think it is: Some students undercut their potential for doing well in a class on the very first day by picking a seat in the back row. Does it really matter where you sit? I think it does, based on my experiences with students, and conversations with colleagues. Why? Here's the reason: The back row can become a place to disengage mentally from what is happening in class. There is a section of every classroom that I once heard referred to as The Zone of Participation. It's an odd label perhaps, but there's something to the concept. The Zone of Participation is the front row, and the center sections of other rows, and little or nothing of the back row. Some faculty never even learn the names of students in their back row, and on the extreme edges of the class, areas which typically become Zones of Non-Participation.

Try it: Sit up front, or near the center in a row near the front. You'll get more out of the class, you'll find the course more interesting, and the professor will know who you are, which doesn't hurt.

2. Second: Avoid requesting extensions on tests and papers. Hope College is an activity-rich environment. There are numerous ways of becoming involved in the life of the campus which will enhance your college experience. The Student Development Office lists 35 officially recognized student organizations, and 21 departmentally sponsored clubs. And these 56 organizations are just the beginning. Now, you should get involved in activities beyond your courses. But remember: each one demands time. In addition, I know that a lot of our students hold down jobs. A typical class meets three hours a week, and can require two hours of study to prepare for one class session. If you have

five courses, 15 credits, which most of you will have, that adds up to about 45 to 50 hours each week devoted to classes and studying. That's more than a full-time job.

You are going to have to plan your schedule very carefully, and make your studies a high priority in your planning. The first year at college is for many students the most difficult one academically. The demands of studies will be, for most of you, considerably greater than they were in high school. Are you going to be involved in one of the Christian organizations on campus, work a part-time job, and take fifteen credits? Then maybe this isn't the year for you to be an officer in a departmental club.

Plan so that you don't end up having to ask for extensions on papers and tests. Faculty will expect you to be responsible for your own schedule. Take a look at your syllabuses early in the semester, note when assignments and tests are scheduled. Note the weeks when you are going to have to put in some extra time on studies. You will likely have papers due in different classes the same week. If you plan ahead, you shouldn't have to ask for extensions; start to make such requests, and it can become something of a habit.

3. Third, and finally: Avoid letting friends plan your schedule. Some of your friends may have ideas of their own about what courses you should take, when you should study, how much time you should spend studying, and even what groups you should belong to. You, however, are the one who has to live with the consequences of all of those decisions. Take charge of your own schedule, and make sure you have planned it in a way that makes sense to you. And let me add this note as well: The fact that a friend of yours did not like a course or a professor does not mean that you will not like that course or that professor.

When I was an undergraduate, I took a course in the political science department at my university. The class was taught by a former Washington lobbyist named Professor Beach. Now, for all of Ross Perot's criticisms of the folks down in Gucci Gulch, Professor Beach did an excellent job with this course. His explanations of how our legislative processes work have to this day influenced my thinking about government in the United States. It was a great class, in spite of the fact that Professor Beach was, frankly, a rather dull lecturer. But he had a tremendous grasp of his area, and a very subtle sense of humor. My experience in the course was so good that I wanted to take a second class in poli sci. I asked someone's advice about other courses in the department. I will never forget that individual's reply: "Well, that's a good department. The only negative thing I have heard is that Professor Beach is a dull lecturer, so you might want to avoid his classes." Had I heard and followed that advice before taking Professor Beach's class, I would have missed one of the most important courses I had in college. It's great to have friends, but you, not your friends, should plan your schedule. Select courses intentionally based on what will likely contribute the most to your education. Talk with friends about their experiences, but also talk with your adviser, and with other faculty as well. And take some risks--some of your best courses may be ones that you take not knowing what to expect, even ones that other students would steer you away from.

So, that is my trivium, "the three avoids":

avoid the back row

avoid extensions

avoid friends planning your schedule

And "the four everies," again:
attend every class
read every assignment
do every exercise
visit every professor

Conclusion

Now, you have heard my musing on advice, as well as some advice on entering college. Thanks for bearing with me as I engaged in that invasive and presumptuous activity. I hope some of the advice is valuable, and helps you as you face a demanding but exciting opportunity. I also hope that if you ever come to me with advice, I will be willing to listen.

I envy those of you who are about to start college--it's a wonderful experience, a life-changing experience. You will meet people and ideas here that will challenge you and enrich you in ways that you cannot now anticipate. Everyone at this college has something to contribute to the quality of the educational experience available here, especially the faculty. When I go into a classroom, I had better be prepared to teach, and to teach as well as I know how. However, I am convinced that the person who, more than any other, is responsible for the quality of your educational experience is you.

You know, all of the advice I have given today can be boiled down to one statement: Take responsibility for your education. Any efforts you make in that direction will be rewarded many times over, and your time here will be a great deal more satisfying than it would be otherwise. Take responsibility for your education, and when you walk across the stage in the stadium four years from now at graduation, you will have a deep sense of accomplishment, as well as the confidence that you are prepared, not just to enter, but to contribute significantly toward the improvement of, a bewilderingly complex, often confusing and confused, and constantly changing world.

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