



THE OPINION PAGES | OP-ED COLUMNIST

In College, Nurturing Matters

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I was a college freshman at Grambling State University in Louisiana. It was the middle of the night, the day before a personal essay was due for a writing seminar. I had put it off for days. I had nothing — nothing but writer's block.

I threaded a piece of paper into my typewriter (back then I didn't have a laptop), took a NoDoz (we didn't have 5-Hour Energy drinks) and a swig of Dr Pepper.

I stared at the blank paper, and it back at me until I simply decided to write the first thing that popped into my mind. The day I was baptized? Well, that would have to do.

I wrote all night, and as the sun was coming up and the time for class drew near, I snatched the last page out of the typewriter and — without ever proofreading it — dashed across campus just hoping I wouldn't fail the assignment.

After a couple of weeks the professor had graded all the papers. In class he said, "One of these essays really stood out, so I thought I'd take this class period to read it to you." I was barely paying attention until he began to read. Then I perked up. He was reading my essay. The class, seemingly rapt, listened until he was done, then burst into applause. I was bursting with pride.

The professor asked to see me after class. In his office, he asked what

my major was. I had a double major in political science and English, I told him, and I planned to go to law school. We talked for nearly an hour; he seemed deeply interested in my choices and my future. By the end of the meeting, he had persuaded me to change my English major to journalism, as a hedge in case I didn't continue to law school (which I didn't) and because he thought it a stronger guarantee that I would emerge from school a writer (which I didn't).

Nonetheless, I have always remembered that professor, and how much he cared about me and wanted to help me. And he was just the first of many. I was surrounded by professors who were almost parentally protective and proud of me — encouraging me to follow my passions (*Yes, start that magazine, Charles*), helping me win internships, encouraging me to go away and work for a semester, and cheering me on as I became a member of a fraternity and editor of the student newspaper. And, because of them, I emerged from college brimming with confidence — too much at times, depending on whom you ask — and utterly convinced that there was nothing beyond my ability to achieve, if only I was willing to work, hard, for it.

As it turns out, these are the kinds of college experiences that predict whether a person will later be engaged in work and have a high level of well-being after graduation.

A report issued Tuesday by Gallup and Purdue University asked graduates several questions about their college tenures, including the six below, which are listed along with the share of students who strongly agreed with the statements.

- I had at least one professor at [College] who made me excited about learning. (63 percent)
- My professors at [College] cared about me as a person. (27 percent)
- I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams. (22 percent)
- I worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete. (32 percent)

- I had an internship or job that allowed me to apply what I was learning in the classroom. (20 percent)
- I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while attending [College]. (20 percent)

Students who strongly agreed with the above statements were as much as twice as likely to have a strong sense of well-being and engagement at work.

But the sad part was that only 3 percent of respondents strongly agreed with all six measures.

The report has a strong message for students who are asking about which school to attend, for employers who are deciding which people to hire and for colleges that are negotiating their curriculums. It concluded:

“The data in this study suggest that, as far as future worker engagement and well-being are concerned, the answers could lie as much in thinking about aspects that last longer than the selectivity of an institution or any of the traditional measures of college. Instead, the answers may lie in *what* students are doing in college and *how* they are experiencing it. Those elements — more than many others measured — have a profound relationship to a graduate’s life and career.”

I couldn’t agree more.

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