

Achieving Success in College:
An Education that Endures

An Address to the Opening Convocation
Hope College
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President Bultman, Provost Nyenhuis, Faculty and Staff Colleagues, Parents and Friends, and—especially—the Class of 2003:

Twenty-five years ago this fall, in September of 1974, I started college. I was an awkward 17-year-old from a working-class neighborhood in Nashville, Tennessee—nervous and excited, apprehensive but ready to get going. I had planned on moving into the residence hall on a Saturday, but learned through the grapevine that if I came in on Friday I would be admitted. Since I was going to college in my hometown, the move itself wasn't such a big deal. I had finished my summer job the week before, so on Friday afternoon I packed up my things and hauled them across town. I was very pleased with myself for remembering to call my mother at work to tell her that I had left home and she needn't wait supper for me. It was not until I was a parent myself that I realized that what was supposed to be my last night at home might have meant more to her than it did to me.

We gathered in a chapel—not as beautiful as this one—and listened to some guy give a speech. Then we went to the gym after supper and played crazy “getting to know you” games. I got tied up—literally—with the young woman who would later be the maid of honor in my wedding. The young woman who would later be my wife paid no attention to me at all.

Nearly four years later, in the same gym, I received my diploma and joined the ranks of college graduates. I loved almost every minute of my time in college, and I wouldn't do it again if you paid me.

College *is* a wonderful time; the question is how to make the most of the opportunities it presents. Interestingly enough, “how to succeed in college” has been the subject of hundreds of research studies conducted over the past 60 years. It's an important area of investigation, considering the fact that this year there will be nearly 15,000,000 students in college in the United States alone. Although empirical research has its limitations, reading the research on success in college is like taking a peak at the accumulated experiences of millions of people. What can they tell us? What can *you* learn that could make it more likely that you will succeed in college?

Of course, researchers have to begin by defining their terms: What does it mean to be successful in college? There are lots of possible definitions: getting good grades, getting a diploma, being satisfied with one's education. A surprising number of studies, however, attempt the difficult work of evaluating success in college in terms of the lofty language of college catalogs and admissions brochures. These studies examine the intellectual, social, and personal growth that colleges themselves claim are the real

fruits of an education. There are dozens of research models that attempt to describe student growth in college—cognitive development, moral development, interpersonal development, identity development, spiritual development. You name it, and somebody has studied it. We don't have time to examine any particular theories, but most of them, although differing on specific points, focus on two chief characteristics of success in college.

The first characteristic is the ability to accept and deal with complexity. This is more important than it may seem at first glance, for lots of people are either too lazy or too scared to acknowledge the fact that the world can be convoluted and downright perplexing. You will spend a lot of time in college learning about the world's complications. Sometimes you find out that things you thought were straightforward are actually rather zig-zaggy. Things you assumed were clear can turn out to be hazy around the edges. Experts disagree. Research results can be inconclusive. Professors in one discipline say one thing; professors in another discipline say something else. Some people, when faced with greater complexity, retreat or run away. Some decide that the world isn't complicated after all. The world is simple. It's education that's complicated, and if one just avoids becoming educated one can avoid all that annoying complexity. This is what President Kennedy called the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought. Or, as one wag put it, "the only reason some people get lost in thought is because it's unfamiliar territory." You may know people like that; many of them good, well-meaning people whose way of coping with the world is to refuse to learn anything more about it. Some of them are political and social conservatives. Others are staunchly liberal. Some find comfort in a simple-minded religion, and others revel in an equally facile secularism. The thing they have in common is a life-long commitment never to learn anything new. Needless to say, those who study success in college argue that growth to maturity depends upon muddling through confusion as best one can and refusing to take refuge in simplistic views of complex issues.

The second characteristic of success in college is the complement of the first. Those who succeed in college do not ignore complexity, but neither do they use it as an excuse. Making sense of complicated issues is hard work, but those who grow and mature in college do it anyway. Complexity need not mean dis-order—in fact, it rarely does. One of the most interesting new areas in science, chaos theory, focuses on finding order in apparently random and unrelated events. They are complicated, to be sure, but patterned and meaningful nonetheless. This is a very important point, because many people use complexity as an excuse not to make decisions or take stands. That's not facing complexity—it's hiding behind it. We talked earlier about people who don't want to admit that the world is complicated. They think they understand everything just fine. But other people wallow in complexity, and, as a result, they believe that no one can really understand anything. In a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a writing composition teacher wrote about the increasing tendency of her students to refuse to have an opinion. On anything. Does a society practice human sacrifice? Who are we to judge? Does an essayist use faulty logic to make a point? Who are we to prefer one form of reasoning to another? You say potayto; I say potahto. It's all a matter of preference.

But success in college involves acknowledging complexity without surrendering to it. It means working through confusing issues and deciding what you think about them. It means taking a thoughtful and principled stand on the tough questions. It means being open to changing your mind in response to evidence and reason as well as acknowledging when you just plain don't know. It also means respecting those who differ from you, being charitable in your characterization of their viewpoints, and speaking the truth in love when you disagree. And it means having the courage of your convictions, being willing to act on your commitments because you know that you've done the hard work necessary to be confident in them.

Notice here the intimate interconnection of knowledge and will, and the inherent morality of education itself. The late Bartlett Giamatti, president of Yale University and later the Commissioner of Major League Baseball, once wrote that “the joy of intellectual pursuit” and “the pursuit of the good and decent life” are fundamentally inseparable one from the other. When you succeed in college, your education informs your moral vision and your moral vision informs your education. Somehow, in our culture of pragmatism and specialization, we have come to see education as *only* the stuff you know, or *only* the stuff you can use in a career to make yourself some money. We even joke about education's irrelevance to life. But education does not—and can not—work like that. I'm warning you now: If you succeed in college, education will seize a foothold in your life. It will move in and take over. A college degree is a license to hunt for a job that will land you safely in the nation's middle class. But an education is a transformation from being one kind of person to another: The kind of person who acknowledges complexity but works through it to reasoned, thoughtful, and principled commitments. You can get a degree at Hope College without getting an education, but you should know that we've got 200 faculty members here who will do their very best to make it difficult for you.

The late behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner defined education as that which endures when what has been learned is forgotten. Much of what you learn over the next few years will fade with time: Why the Roman Empire moved to Constantinople, the steps in figuring derivatives and integrals, the social conditions that gave rise to Renaissance art. But if you have been successful in college, your education will endure because the habits of mind and heart you form here will continue to shape the way you think for the rest of your life.

According to our mission statement, Hope College offers a liberal arts education in the context of the historic Christian faith. Therefore, we at Hope are interested in your faith development as well as your intellectual development. I am struck by the similarities between researchers' definitions of success in college and biblical descriptions of spiritual maturity. I encourage you to attend to your spiritual development here at Hope. Some people think college is a good time to take a sabbatical from faith. But if you succeed in college—and we certainly want you to—you will want a relationship with God that is as well-developed as the other aspects of your life. Too many people who believe that religion is inherently childish simply never allowed their faith to grow up along with the rest of them. It's rather like having the body of an adult and the head of an infant. Your faith in God, like your understanding of the world God created, must comprehend complex and difficult issues, and must enable you to take principled stands

on difficult matters. In a recent issue of a magazine entitled *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, Reformed Church pastor David Landegent argued that both mature and immature Christians are “certain” about their faith. But the nature of their certainty differs. Immature Christians have a “fortress” certainty that protects them from the onslaughts of the world. Mature Christians, on the other hand, have a certainty of hope that allows them to wrestle with important questions—indeed, like Jacob, to wrestle with God. Immature Christians have a certainty of arrogance that leads them to be intolerant of others. Like the Pharisee praying in the temple in the parable of Jesus, they define themselves largely in terms of who they are not. But the mature Christian finds certainty, not in arrogance, but in love, a love that cares for those with whom we disagree, that gives us both humility and courage to live out the faith God has given us. Finally, Landegent says, immature Christianity is like an ideology—brittle, rigid, afraid of being tested and found wanting. But mature Christianity has a confidence born of faith in the God who creates, redeems, and sustains us, willing and able to face the tests of life, and eager to grow and change as a result.

In his epistle to the church at Philippi, the Apostle Paul wrote, “This is my prayer for you: That your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” Do you see there the marvelous interconnections between knowledge and love, wisdom and purity, between what Giamatti called “the joy of intellectual pursuit and the pursuit of the good and decent life?” In her wonderful book, *Amazing Grace*, poet and author Kathleen Norris says that the New Testament concept of perfection has, in the original Greek, a strong rootedness in our notion of maturity. “Be ye perfect,” in one sense means, “Grow up.” Become what you were intended to be. Ripen. Bear fruit. Fulfill the promise inherent in your creation.

I’ve spent a lot of time talking about what it means to be successful in college, because it’s terribly important to be clear about the goal. But research results offer some information about how to attain the goal as well, and there are some interesting things we can learn from them.

The most important thing you need to know about succeeding in college—the strongest and most consistent finding across many different research studies—is this: Work hard. Go to class. Do your homework. Spend time on your assignments. Study for your tests. Edit and re-write your papers. Work hard. This seems a little like the fact that, after years of research and hundreds of millions of dollars the National Institutes for Health now says that eating fruits and vegetables is good for you. My mother knew that 40 years ago and didn’t need the *New England Journal of Medicine* to tell her. And *your* mother could have told you to work hard in college without having a boatload of social scientists do hundreds of research studies. But there you have it. Quality and quantity of effort are the best predictors of success in college. Taking your time and doing your best. There are no shortcuts, no magical formulae, no secret incantations. Hard work does not guarantee success, but it is highly correlated with it, and its absence almost always results in failure.

Several students and I did a study of our own a couple of years back on how Hope College students spend their time. Among other things, we found that the average student here works about two hours outside of class for every hour she spends in class. Fifteen hours in class (on average) and thirty hours outside of class (on average) means that the median student is putting in about a forty-five-hour week on his studies. Half do more, and half do less. You may need to do more, or you may get by with less. But I recommend that during your first semester you use this as a benchmark. If you're not putting in at least that much time, you should stop and take stock of how things are going.

A second finding from the research on success in college is that the people you spend time with will have a profound effect on who you become. Successful students are more likely than others to know their professors and to have conversations with them outside of class. In particular, they talk with their professors about course-related material. You don't need to do this with every instructor you have, but you should get in the habit of doing it with some of them. Aim for having one professor each semester you get to know a bit better than the others and with whom you discuss ideas that are raised in the course. That doesn't have to take all day—neither you nor your instructor can afford that much time. It can be as simple as taking a few minutes to walk with your professor back to her office after class to explore an interesting point more thoroughly.

Even more important than interacting with your professors, however, is establishing deep and meaningful relationships with your fellow students. Alexander Astin is the Director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. He has done several massive studies of *What Matters in College* (which is the title of one of his books) and he finds that successful students generally do not succeed in isolation. They typically are found in small groups of other successful students. People who are growing and maturing in college seek out others who are doing the same thing. Sometimes they play frisbee golf together or just go to a movie. But sometimes, usually in spontaneous conversations—perhaps in the cafeteria or over a coke in the coffee shop—they talk together about what they are learning. They talk about things that matter, things they've been thinking about and questions they've been trying to answer. Although it comes as something of a blow to my pride as a professor, Astin finds that interactions with other students are significantly more important in predicting success in college than are interactions with faculty and staff.

Some years back, Prof. Perovich of our Philosophy Department loaned to me Alec Guinness's autobiography, *Blessings in Disguise*. Sir Alec is best known for his portrayal of Obi-Wan Kenobi in the original *Star Wars* trilogy (although I suspect he was knighted for his other theatrical achievements). Guinness's book, unlike most autobiographies, is not a chronological account of his life. The chapter titles are the names of people Guinness has known, mostly other British actors such as John Gielgud and Lawrence Olivier. Reading through the book, however, one realizes that while the *chapters* are about Guinness's friends, the *book* is about Guinness. In his recounting of his friends, he is revealed. Guinness understands that we are a reflection of those who have been important to us. Parents, obviously (though how thoroughly you are your parents' child may not be clear to you until you become your child's parent).

Friendships you develop in college play an especially important role in shaping the person you will become. Spend time with people you would like to see reflected in yourself. Remember, though, that Guinness's book is entitled *Blessings in Disguise*. Guinness's friends are a lot like our friends: Real, eccentric, annoying, demanding. The moral? Hang around with people who are worth the trouble.

Work hard. Invest yourself in people. And, finally, a third significant finding from the research: Seek out experiences that are unlike any you've ever had before, and get to know people whose backgrounds are different from yours. Go hear a speaker you expect to disagree with. Find a church that's different from the one in which you were reared and attend it regularly for a semester. Talk after class with someone who's just said something you don't really understand. A great deal of recent research explores the impact of learning about cultural diversity on success in college. Contrary to the assertions of some that learning about different perspectives and different cultures somehow waters down one's education, researchers are finding that students who encounter and learn about diverse groups of people are *more* likely to do well on traditional measures of success in college. There are significant benefits to taking courses on cultural diversity; joining organizations that address diversity concerns; and getting to know people from a variety of national, racial, and ethnic groups. When we talk with people whose life experiences are different from ours—when we come to understand what life looks like from a different perspective—we gain new insights into ourselves and we learn new ways of thinking about old things. That kind of intellectual stretching—of dealing with complexity and thinking through difficult issues—is what success in college is all about.

There are lots of opportunities to become involved in diversity initiatives at Hope College. As you select your courses each semester, look for those that will help you see the world through someone else's eyes. Spend a semester or a year abroad. Take advantage of the fact that there are students at Hope from around the world as well as students who may have grown up near you but still have a different perspective on things than you do. You'll be increasing your odds of succeeding, and having a good time in the process.

In 1851, when Albertus C. Van Raalte founded the school that later would become Hope College, he said it would be an "anchor of hope" for the future. If you work hard—if you establish meaningful relationships with students and with faculty—if you seek to understand the experiences and perspectives of a wide range of people, this place can be an anchor of hope for you. Here you can achieve success in college. Here you can get an education that endures.

Let's have a great year. Thank you very much.

August 24, 1999