

SUCCESS AT COLLEGE REQUIRES NEW ATTITUDE

An open letter to the incoming freshmen at Western Michigan University.

It is tempting to gush about how much the college experience will change your lives.

The excitement of integrating into university life, the prospects of self-discovery, the social experiences — these Hallmark moments tend to color the start of one's baccalaureate education. But sappy paeans to "seize the day" are as trite as they are irrelevant.

So let me give you one critical piece of advice that is too often overlooked: Take personal ownership of your need to balance competing priorities.

I had to learn this lesson the hard way. I came to WMU many years ago with the world at my fingertips. I was on a three-year advance-designee scholarship in the Army ROTC program. I had been welcomed into the Lee Honors College, largely because of my combined ACT score of 31 and six hours of AP history credit. I was smart, ambitious and ready to crack open life's oyster.

One problem, though — I really wasn't ready.

Let me be perfectly clear: College life is not high school writ large. Mommy and daddy aren't going to get a call from the guidance counselor because you missed a few classes. Failure isn't just possible; it's routine. And the only one who will guarantee your success is you.

I came to WMU as a model student. I left, the following April, having been dismissed for academic non-performance.

Oh, I could rationalize what happened. I mostly blamed the melodrama of my living arrangements — I shared a four-person suite in Garneau Hall with my best friend from high school, who chose to take his freshman year to have an identity crisis, complete with a rumored suicide attempt and struggles with his sexual orientation.

I also resented the lack of intellectual challenge in my first-year courses. Having come from a rigorous Catholic high school, I (and my friends who came to WMU with me) were well beyond much of what we were expected to master in our 100- and 200-level classes. Frankly, I was bored, so I stopped going to class and refused to complete assignments I thought were an insult to my intelligence.

So I failed out of WMU, and I blamed WMU for what had happened. Then I spent a year working full-time and realized that a life of drudgery in the lower economic ranks was an even worse prospect than life in the academy, so I successfully negotiated re-entry into the university with the help of the good people in the Arts and Sciences advising office.

In the following years I developed more effective methods of self-assessment. I watched my friends and peers struggle with many of the same problems I did and make many of the same mistakes I did. These experiences led me to conclude that a major barrier to student success is an inability to balance competing priorities and a concurrent unwillingness to accept responsibility when the results of that imbalance finally hit home.

There is a world of difference between knowing something, and internalizing the logic of that knowledge. I doubt that few who join WMU's community of teachers and learners will fail to appreciate the sentiment of my advice; they will agree with what I've written and move on without further reflection.

Yet college life is not without its seductions. The freedom from direct parental supervision, the lure of friendships, the temptations of the body, the call of the keg — each of these will become a priority, competing with the goal of academic success and healthy personal growth.

Balancing the often onerous burden of achieving academic excellence with the enticements of undergraduate life is not as easy as it sounds. When it's 11 p.m. and you want to study, but your friends

want you to go to a party, will you have the strength of will to resist? Few do, regardless of intention. Too many are happy with B's and C's and an exhausting social calendar.

To every incoming freshman, I offer an open door. Having failed miserably when I entered college life, I am committed to helping as many of you as I can to be as successful as you can. Have a question? Problem? Want advice? Don't know where to turn? Well, I've been there, and I can help — just send me an e-mail or call me at the Herald. I can't promise to solve your problems, but I do promise to listen and to share my own experiences with you, to help you access the resources you need and to help you on your journey.

Good luck, and may the gods of fortitude be with you.

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