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GUEST ESSAY

The Key to Success in College Is So Simple It's Almost Never Mentioned

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For Emily Zurek Small, college did what it's supposed to do. Growing up in a small town in Northeast Pennsylvania, she had career and intellectual ambitions for which college is the clearest pathway. "I just kind of always wanted to learn," she told me recently. "I wanted to be able to have intelligent conversations with people and know about the world."

She enrolled at a small nearby Catholic college, majored in neuroscience, and in 2016 became the first person in her family to earn a bachelor's degree — and later, a master's. She now works as a school psychologist in Virginia.

I saw Ms. Zurek Small's education up close, in two theology classes I taught during my 11 years as a professor at the college she attended. She was a good student, but what struck me more than her ability was the fact that she cared. Being in class, asking questions, and exploring ideas meant something to her.

One reason she cared was that she was paying her own way and was thus amply aware of her education's cost. "If I was not engaging, I was just throwing money out the window," she said. That engagement helped her realize that "my thoughts and opinions matter."

As universities in much of the country suffer declining enrollment, they need to make the broader case for going to college even as they debate how best to help students learn after Covid disruptions. How should universities implement remote learning? How should they teach writing in the age of artificial intelligence? How difficult should it be to pass organic chemistry?

But there's an equally important question that only students can answer: What will they do to get the most out of college? It's their education, after all.

One of the most important factors in Ms. Zurek Small's success seems almost too obvious to mention — but in fact deserves far more attention and discussion: a simple willingness to learn. In more than 20 years of college teaching, I have seen that students who are open to new knowledge will learn. Students who aren't, won't. But this attitude is not fixed. The paradoxical union of intellectual humility and ambition is something that every student can (with help from teachers, counselors and parents) and should cultivate. It's what makes learning possible.

The willingness to learn is related to the "growth mind-set" — the belief that your abilities are not fixed but can improve. But there is a key difference: This willingness is a belief not primarily about the self, but about the world. It's a belief that every class offers something worthwhile, even if you don't know in advance what that something is.

Unfortunately, big economic and cultural obstacles stand in opposition to that belief.

The first obstacle is careerism. To an overwhelming degree, students today see college as job training, the avenue to a stable career. They are not wrong, given the 70 percent wage premium for 22- to 27-year-old workers with a bachelor's degree over those with only a high school diploma. But this orientation can close students off to learning things that don't obviously help their job prospects. Despite the fact that I taught at a religious college, students in my theology class grumbled about having to satisfy a requirement. Why, they asked, would they need to know theology as an accountant, athletic trainer, or advertising manager?

The human mind, though, is capable of much more than a job will demand of it. Those "useless" classes like philosophy, literature, astronomy or music have much to teach.

I haven't had to solve a calculus problem in 25 years. But learning to do so expanded my brain in ways that can't simply be reduced to a checklist of job skills. Living in the world in this expanded way is a permanent gift.

The other big obstacle to the willingness to learn is the urge to present yourself as always already informed. The philosopher Jonathan Lear calls this attitude knowingness. Lear regards it as a sickness that stands in the way of gaining genuine knowledge. It is "as though there is too much anxiety involved in simply asking a question and waiting for the world to answer," he writes.

Knowingness is everywhere in our culture. From the former president claiming "everybody knows" some conspiracist nonsense to podcasters smugly debunking cultural

myths to your feeling you have to have read, heard, and streamed everything, the posture of already knowing supersedes the need to approach new situations with curiosity.

Every semester during my years teaching theology, a student would tell me on the first day of class that they knew they would get an A, because they'd already had 12 years of Catholic school. But often enough, they'd get a C. Their assumptions about the subject matter kept them from learning the more critical approach to the subject I was trying to teach.

Knowingness is a danger especially for talented students who have been rewarded for always having the right answer. At the University of Pennsylvania, undergraduates complain that student clubs expect prospective members to have extensive knowledge of the club's area of interest. As a first-year student, Adrian Rafizadeh, told the campus newspaper, "If I can't get into the clubs that will help educate me and foster that interest, then how do I even get started?"

Once, in a cafe near an elite liberal-arts college, I overheard a student lament to another, "I can't take a Russian history class; I don't *know* any Russian history!" Of course not. That's why you take the class.

Universities are factories of human knowledge. They're also monuments to individual ignorance. *We* know an incredible amount, but *I* know only a tiny bit. College puts students in classrooms with researchers who are acutely aware of all they don't know. Professors have a reputation for arrogance, but a humble awareness of the limits of knowledge is their first step toward discovering a little more.

To overcome careerism and knowingness and instill in students a desire to learn, schools and parents need to convince students (and perhaps themselves) that college has more to offer than job training. You're a worker for only part of your life; you're a human being, a creature with a powerful brain, throughout it.

In addition, adults need to show K-12 students that it's OK not to know something yet. School isn't a quiz show; the first person to say the right answer doesn't deserve the greatest reward. Rather, school should cultivate students' curiosity and let them feel the thrill of finding something out.

I would bet most teachers already share this outlook, but it's hard to encourage open-ended curiosity when schools are judged by standardized test scores, and it's hard to defeat narrow-minded careerism when the entire economy seemingly mandates it.

The career orientation and the culture of knowingness both take for granted the outcomes of college — jobs, knowledge — and gloss over the means. But the means are everything:

the books, teachers and fellow students who will change your life.

Emily Zurek Small compared graduating to "unlocking a door." She is no longer a student, but, she said, "I am still exploring what's on the other side of that door."

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