

Title: Thoughts on Being a Successful Student

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In order to have a great university, you need three basic things: a good place; a good faculty; and, of course, good students. Scholarships, of course, are absolutely necessary if Houston is going to attract the good students that it needs and deserves. But more than that – and here the GLO Scholarships are important – GLO recognize the good work that good students do.

Two or three years ago, these scholarship recipients entered the University of Houston full of hope and promise. They were bright, determined, and ready to work hard, or so they seemed at the time, else the University would not have been admitted them.

Now, they will receive this wonderful scholarship; and I am sure they are still full of hope and promise else they will not be selected. These students remain bright, determined, and willing – at least some of the time – to work hard.

Their teachers must be doing something right. At least they are not doing everything wrong.

In my time today, I want to talk about what it takes for a student to do well in college. I know that I am not talking to a group of college students: as I look over this crowd, at least that much is clear.

But what I have to say might also apply to doing well in other aspects of life, say, in accounting, lawyering or banking, even in raising a family. But I know about success in college, not managing money: so I'll talk about that.

Obviously, one key to being a success in college is having a good teacher. Outside the university, we talk about having a mentor, and that is what every student needs, what every person needs.

I often tell students that in college, they can do without many things: they can do without a lot of money, without a car, without the love of their life – but they cannot do without two things: a few good friends and a few good teachers.

Now I am a teacher, so you might expect me to think highly of teachers; but I suspect each of you is like me, you can remember a teachers who made all the difference in your life.

The most outstanding teacher I have ever known was a long-time friend and colleague in The Honors College named Ross Lence. Professor Lence died two years ago, and we miss him terribly.

Ross Lence was so admired by his students that they gathered together \$375,000 to establish the Ross Lence Distinguished Teaching Professorship. When he died, his students and friends donated right at a \$100,000 to establish the Ross

Lence Scholarship Endowment. Recently, The Honors College received a gift of \$175,000 to establish the Ross Lence Master Teacher Residency Program.

Now Ross Lence knew that education begins with provocation. He knew that to wake a student up, you have to provoke him, perhaps even irritate, even upset him.

Because Ross was a master of provocation, every one of his students has some story to tell. One student received his first paper back from Professor Lence, only to read this comment: "Young man, if we are going to communicate, we are going to have to settle on a common language. I prefer English."

Another got her first paper back only to read, "Young lady, it is clear that you can write: now you need something to say."

In this response we see two dimensions of education: 1) first, skills; 2) content. Students of course need at the university to develop basic skills, such as the ability to read complex material; the ability to think critically; the ability to write and communicate well; the ability to count and compute.

But what good is the skill to communicate if you don't have anything to say? In one's college education, then, the successful student must do more than acquire basic skills. The successful student must learn some stuff!

Another student told me about getting his first paper back from Professor Lence, only to be asked to come in for an office visit. When the student arrived at the appointed time, he was scared within an inch of his life. He knocked and, with considerable trepidation, he entered. "Young man," Ross said, "before we go any

further, tell me one thing: are you retarded? If so, I can't help you – but it would explain this paper.”

The young student was struck dumb, speechless. What was he to say?

Ross persisted, “Well? Are you?”

The young man mumbled, “I don't think so, sir.”

And Ross roared, “You don't think so!”

After a pause, Ross said, “Young man, that is a very good answer. A man who doesn't know whether or not he is retarded might be capable of getting a good education. Let's take a look at this paper.”

After telling me that story, the student told me what many other of Ross's students have said: “Dr. Lence changed my life.”

Every one of us, then, needs a teacher, a mentor; and if we are lucky, that teacher will literally change our life. And in time, if we are really lucky, as we have mentored, each of us may be able to mentor someone else.

As we think about what it takes to do well at the University of Houston I remind you of something else that you surely know better than anyone else, and that is this: there is nothing inevitable about one's achieving at a high level; there is nothing inevitable about one's being a success. Accordingly, it was not written in the stars or encoded in the genes of our scholarship recipients that they would do well in at the university. And what is true for them is also true for us.

This reminds me of a story. It is said that four students journeyed to the garden in search of truth. These students were like our scholarship recipients:

bright, determined, and willing to work hard, at least some of the time. The outcome of their search was uncertain, but little could they imagine just how uncertain, just how precarious, it was. And let me tell you why.

Of these four students who journeyed to the garden in search of truth, one died. One became a heretic. One went mad. One became a great teacher.

Now I would hope that the odds of doing well at the University of Houston are higher than one in four, but the story is enough to remind us not to take academic accomplishments – or any human accomplishment, for that matter – lightly. Our students, indeed, none of us, achieve simply as a matter of course: things could always turn out other than they do.

Our students have been awarded scholarships because they have achieved a particular kind of excellence, and that is the excellence of academic achievement. Of course, academic excellence is not the only excellence – the only quality – that one needs in life, but it is the kind of excellence that falls especially within the purview of a university.

But for the living of a happy and a meaningful life, one needs other kinds of excellence than that of academic achievement. As we all know, one can make straight A's in school and flunk life.

We all know that being a decent human being – and being content and happy in life – are more important and more difficult than making an A in Differential Calculus or in an upper-level Accounting course. It is far easier to be a

good lawyer, or a good accountant, than it is to be a good husband, a good person. We all know that.

In life, then, one needs a variety of excellences, which is to say that we need something other than book learning.

If one needs any proof of this statement, one need only to spend a good deal of time with faculty members at the University of Houston – or, for that matter, with the faculty of any other university. By definition, university professors possess academic excellence; but if you spend much time with them, you will quickly realize that some of them can be absolute morons in other ways. And if not moronic, they are at least no wiser in the living of their lives than the average Tom, Dick, Susan, or Mary off the street. Of course, any college professors present today are excepted, including myself!

For the living of one's life, one needs those excellences associated with being a good friend; one needs to be able to keep promises, to speak truthfully, to sympathize with other people.

One needs those excellences associated with being a good husband, a good wife, and a constructive parent, whether or not one is married or has children. One thus needs compassion and understanding, patience and courage, moderation and common sense, a generous spirit and the capacity to laugh.

One also needs those excellences associated with being a good citizen, which include the capacity to engage in civil conversation. By civil conversation, I mean the ability to disagree in good spirit.

In a free and democratic society discussion and disagreement, even dissent, are encouraged, even necessary. Yet we know how difficult it is to talk – and disagree – about thorny political issues with a calm and generous and understanding spirit.

For the living of one's life in a free and democratic society, then, one needs to possess more than *knowledge about* the government. One needs the capacity to rise above one's own individualistic interests and to consider the interests of one's neighbors – indeed, one needs the capacity to consider, and to act in behalf of the common good, which includes, of course,

We hope, then, that all of our scholarship recipients are practiced in these other kinds of excellence that make for a satisfying and meaningful life. We hope that they have admirable qualities of character as well as admirable qualities of mind.

Now to be sure, we know that, for the most part, our scholarship recipients have benefited not only from hard work but also from good fortune. And what is true of our students is no less true about the accomplishments of every one of us, regardless of whether we are accountants, or lawyers, or money managers. We can usually credit two things for whatever measure of success that we have in life: hard work and good fortune.

Each of our scholarship recipients – indeed, each of us – has been gifted with capacities and talents and opportunities that were not altogether of our own doing. We ought, then, to be less self-congratulatory than we are plain grateful.

I sometimes think that simple *gratitude* is the key to living a satisfying and generous life. In the absence of grateful, we are more likely to be resentful, envious, jealous, and downright unhappy.

Now we all work hard, all least most of say we do. I have 25 or 30 people working in The Honors College, and I have yet to have one of them tell me, “Dean Estess, you know something, I’m lazy. I try to do as little as possible around here.”

No, every one of the people in The Honors College tell me that they are working hard, and I am sure that they are.

But we know that we need more than hard work. We need good fortune. We need some good luck.

But honor is not due those who are merely lucky. If someone, for instance, wins 50 million dollars in the Texas State Lottery, we don’t honor that person. We may envy the winner of the lottery, but envy is not honor.

Honor is due even less those who act as though they deserve to be honored when all they have been is lucky. Honor – we sometime say – is never due those who were born on third base and act as though they had just hit a triple.

Rather, honor is due those who work and act over a long period of time – sometimes years – so as to enhance the possibility that good fortune will come their way. That’s what people mean when they say that we make our own luck.

The great dancer Martha Graham once asked, “How many leaps did Nijinsky take before he made the one that startled the world?”

The answer, of course, is simple: Nijinsky, that great master of the ballet, day after day, year after year, took hundreds and thousands, and hundreds of thousands of leaps, before he took the leap that startled the world.

And because his leaps startled the world, he still is honored in the world of ballet. And what is true in the arts is also true in athletics and in engineering and in doctoring and in building a business.

A portion of honor, I suppose, is due those who aim at success and miss; so it is not inappropriate for us to respect the one who works hard but still makes a C.

But we reserve the fullest measure of honor for those who aim at acquiring knowledge and who actually hit the mark.

Our scholarship students have hit the mark. Not every time or in every way. Not in every act or in every word. Excellence, after all, is not perfection: indeed, perfection falls far short of excellence if, for no other reason, than that perfection is far less interesting than excellence.

And that is what we all need in all our jobs: not perfection, but excellence. Striving to be perfect can make a person miserable and drive other people insane.

Now, let me say one last thing about academic success. In order to succeed at the university, all persons – whether students or faculty – need to be aiming at two things: first, we ought to aim at learning *what* we don’t know;

second, we ought to aim at learning *that* we don't know. And what is true in the university is no less true for every person in every profession.

It is obvious that learning *what* you don't know is important. At the university, some students learn chemistry and biology; others learn accounting and principles of management; others computer science and engineering; other music and literature.

But it is as equally as important that students learn *that* they don't know. It is important to know and to remember that one's learning is inevitably partial, incomplete, even provisional. Much of one's knowledge will even be obsolete in a short period of time.

All of us know some, but not too much; and if things are working right, we *know* that we don't know too much. To tell the truth, thinking you know it all is worse than knowing nothing at all, which is why there is nothing worse than a person who thinks he knows it all.

I sometimes think that learning *what* you don't know is 50% of the reason why you go to a university in the first place. Learning *that* you don't know is the other 50%. In this regard, I am reminded of that great Greek philosopher and teacher named Socrates. Socrates wanted his students to acquire what he called "learned ignorance."

That's an interesting idea, isn't it: learned ignorance. It is an oxymoron, which is the putting together of seemingly contradictory or incongruous ideas.

Suppose you were to go home tonight and your wife asks you, “What did you learn anything interesting today?”

And you reply: “Today, I learned something really important, something that’s going to make a tremendous difference in my life.”

Your wife asks, “What’s that?”

And you say, “I learned some ignorance.”

Now it is possible that your wife will say, “I thought you already knew all the ignorance you needed to know.” Then you would have to explain what you have in mind.

By learning *what* we don’t know we gain confidence and competence and the capacity to do things in the world, including the ability to perform well in our various jobs. By learning *what* we don’t know we are equipped to be good accountants, or good engineers, or good chemists, or good readers.

But by learning *that* we don’t know we acquire modesty and humility, self-reserve and greater willingness to listen to others and to what they have to say. A person who doesn’t know *that* he doesn’t know doesn’t listen: such a person tends to be a terrible friend and a horrible husband.

If history teaches anything, it teaches that there is no more dangerous person in the world than a person who, if given sufficient power, doesn’t know that he doesn’t know. Thinking that he sees everything, such a person can be destructively blind.

So, in closing, may I tell you that, in my view, a truly successful student – and a truly successful banker or fund manager – regardless of his or her level of achievement, needs a deep awareness of how far he or she has to go. A truly successful student – and a truly successful doctor or teacher – is a person who possesses a certain disposition, which is to inquire and think, and to seek to know more and understand better – and by doing so ever to enlarge his capacity to know, and enjoy and love the things and persons on this sturdy earth.

As a good and well-educated man named Norman Maclean once wrote, *While the oxygen lasts, there are always new things to know and . . [new things} to love . . .*
. Indeed, by knowing them, we come to love them.