

## College students need skills

Too many college under-graduates are lost, angry and confused. Nearly 50 percent will not graduate after five years of your four-year program.

Even if they do graduate, they are likely to have trouble finding a job and even more trouble in landing employment that they see a path toward a happy future. Worst of all, they may end up at home, mooching off of and complaining about their parents.

**At the root of the problem is their failure to see college education as a great feast of stuff to learn.** The skills they learn are the vitamins and nutrients. The rest ends up well, you know where.

The definitions, concepts, facts, quotes, models and theories transmitted through lectures, readings and other activities are not ends in themselves, but rather the process material through which undergrads learn how to explore and exercise many different skills.

They are like food. From that food, they develop muscles and healthy tissue and have fun in the process.

But the process is not the purpose. One does not live to eat; one eats to live.

The same goes for a college education. The stuff students process enables them to pass their courses but the goal is to help them build their minds and hearts so that they can lead satisfied lives.

### **Here are my eight rules for getting the most from a college education:**

1. Say once a day "It's the skills, stupid." Keep asking, "What skills do I want to exercise after college that I could not before college?"
2. Make a list of the skills to develop and then choose courses and programs that will help develop those skills. Do not think the choice of a major or program solves the problem. Undergraduate professional school programs like management or communications require a lot of general education and sometimes require that students learn little of which they can apply. Conversely, becoming a fine arts major because the student enjoys it will prevent him or her from taking some applied statistics or technical writing courses.
3. Know the range of skills and consciously choose which to learn at what level of expertise.

### **Here is my list of skills that students need to develop:**

- Obtaining and assessing information
- Reading
- Writing
- Communicating
- Calculating
- Using computers
- Problem solving
- Making decisions
- Feeling
- Enjoying
- Learning
- And as H.L. Mencken said distinguishing appearance from reality

4. Understand why the student personally has trouble focusing on skills. The high school education blinded them to the centrality of skills as the student turned into a test taking and paper writing machine. He or she will probably try to repeat this pattern in college unless they focus on skills.
5. Don't look to college faculty to guide the student to the skills. Look at the faculty as the cooks for your educational feast. They want the student "to study the study of" so they can become their junior colleagues.

For example, the history professor teaching about the American Revolution may expose students to different historical interpretations of the American Revolution. That is useful, but when the professor forces students to make interpretations of the interpretations of those interpretations, they are entering the realm of "the study of the study of."

There is too much of that throughout the college curriculum, leaving students with less time than they need to develop critical skills. Most professors really want students to develop skills, but they are not the skills one will need unless one wants to become a professional scholar.

6. Computer skills are a good thing. It is hoped students need no convincing. Take advantage even if professors ignore or disdain computer training.
7. **Take as many credits as possible that require field work and programs away from campus.** Students can earn academic credits in a setting where it is more difficult for the faculty to force them into "the study of the study of." Students can transform the concepts, theories and models they have studied into skills as they are brought face to face with reality.
8. Look for opportunities outside of class in work and extracurricular activities and especially in the summer to develop the skills that are important.

These experiences help make better course selections they next semester and will demonstrate to the students what skills they need to develop. They will also alert students to what skills they like and what skills they find irritating.

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(Note: While I disagree with some of what he has to say, Professor Coplin's points about which skills are most important and how to approach a college education are relevant to all students. EH)