

On Being a Student

by Donald E. Simanek

An ex-president of this institution, when it was a college with an enrollment of several thousand, was asked how many students the school had. He quipped "Oh, perhaps a dozen." He was making a joke, which is as old as the hills. The president of a large corporation used it when he was asked by a reporter (during a strike) how many workers there were in his plant. One of my junior-high teachers used to remind us that to be a *student* meant more than merely being a *pupil*.

Times change. The definition of "student" once was "one who studies academic subjects". Today it can mean merely "one who attends a school, college or university". This modern definition doesn't even suggest that the person does more than "attend". College and university professors still use the first definition, and schools have ways (such as requirements, exams and grades) to attempt to ensure that those who attend will also study and learn.

What distinguishes a student? What makes the student stand out from the rest of the class? The **four As**: attitude, academic skills, awareness, and accomplishment, certainly are a large part of it, and a student who has them will be very likely to earn As:

- **Attitude** is primarily a genuine desire to learn, and the willingness to do hard intellectual work to achieve understanding. It is also shown by how well you apply yourself even to subjects in which you have little interest, and how much you can achieve even when a professor's style isn't to your liking.

- **Academic skills** include ability to read with comprehension, intelligent use of resources (including library resources), logical and mathematical skills, efficient study habits, and the ability to communicate clearly and fluently in speaking and writing.
- **Awareness** of what's going on in the world around you, and the habit of intelligently relating it to your academic courses. For example, when taking a course in political science, you should relate what you are learning in class to what's happening on the national and world political scene. When taking a science course, you should relate scientific principles to phenomena you observe in everyday life, and go out of your way to find applications and examples of science in the real world.
- **Accomplishment** is demonstrated by successful application of understanding. The evidence of that is:
 1. Correct and confident application of what you've learned to new problems and challenges,
 2. Clear and effective communication of your understanding through speaking and writing, and
 3. Possession of a base of information, skills and understanding sufficient to allow you to continue your education outside of the classroom, throughout your life.
 - 4.

All of these add up to a fifth A: **ability**, a word frequently used above.

The goal of education is to achieve the ability to apply one's knowledge in new, creative, and correct ways.
Abilities are not entirely innate; some are achievable through dedicated and focused effort.

Other symptoms and qualities of a good student include:

5. **Self-discipline.** The successful student has learned to budget time, and use it efficiently, and will do the things that need to be done, when they must be done, whether or not one feels like it at the time.
6. **Initiative.** In short: doing things without being told. The student doesn't wait for assignments to read ahead in the textbook, or to seek out and study related books to gain understanding. The good student does more problems or exercises than assigned, and does them even when none are assigned. The good student working in the laboratory does not merely follow instructions (though that is an important skill) but looks for opportunities to discover new things, try new things, or find better methods. When an opportunity arises to do a project outside of class, the good student jumps at the chance and doesn't even ask whether it will earn extra credit.
7. **Breadth of interests.** College provides a great opportunity to broaden your interests and explore new things. You may never again have available to you such a convenient and comprehensive library, such diverse and inexpensive cultural events and academic activities. Much education can occur outside of class, if you seek it. But if you confine yourself to the things you've always done, avoiding anything new and unfamiliar, you will have squandered a valuable opportunity.
8. **An open mind** is a mind receptive to examination of new ideas and facts. Having an open mind does *not* mean that one jumps on the bandwagon of

every new fad. A better characterization of an open mind is one, which is willing to dispassionately and rationally analyze new ideas, weighing them objectively against established knowledge and the facts at hand.

9. **A critical habit of mind.** Education is more than the acquisition of information. It includes the ability to acquire new information, to critically evaluate that information, and to correctly and effectively use it. With so many information sources at our disposal in this computer age we are awash in information, and in danger of information overload. But much of that information is fraudulent, worthless, incomplete, or just plain wrong. It has always been so. We are assaulted through every medium by folks trying to sell us a myriad of items (with impressive claims of its value), to persuade us to accept some political or social idea, to convert us to some religion or philosophy, or to convince us of the value of some medical panacea. Most of this is humbug. One of the values of a good education is the ability to see through false and unfounded claims and outright deceptions. By this criterion, education has largely been a failure, for many people who have college degrees are still suckers for the snake-oil and perpetual-motion-machine peddlers.
10. **Perceptiveness.** The more you learn, the more perceptive you become. You can, as necessary, "read between the lines." you can fill in missing details. You aren't dependent on being shown; you can puzzle problems out for yourself. You perceive quickly what a writer or speaker means, without misinterpreting. You learn to seek the intended

meaning of what you read or hear rather than trying to impose your own preconceived meaning. You can see through complexity to the heart of a matter. You are able to distinguish the important from the trivial in a serious discussion.

11. **Objectivity.** Most of us begin our education with an "egocentric" view, expecting lessons to have some relevance to our needs or desires. We even impose such interpretations on what we learn, and avoid learning some items because they don't seem important at the time. Education can broaden that view, encouraging us to set our egos aside and objectively evaluate facts and interpretations.
12. **Humility.** However much one knows, one must realize there's a lot more to be learned, and that some of what one 'knows' may turn out to be wrong. For this reason intellectual arrogance is unbecoming an educated person. Many of the classic errors of history were made by people over-confidently going beyond what they knew and understood.

Work to be educated, not merely trained.