

A Good Education

by DQ

I believe in the value of education; and I've certainly had more than my fair share. Like most kids living in the U.S., I started with the compulsory 12 years of primary and secondary education. That was followed by 15 years of higher education¹ during which time I earned three degrees (B.S., M.S., and Ed.D.) with three different specialties or concentrations (Health/Physiology of Exercise, Wellness Management, and Computing and Information Technology). Besides studying my own disciplines, I also completed extension courses from a half dozen colleges on such widely ranging topics as theology, languages (Spanish and Italian), photography, and "Physiology of the Gastrointestinal Tract" (I kid you not). Of course, during my 36-year career as a college professor, I attended professional conferences and published papers in academic journals. I also prepared for and passed a national certification exam from the American College of Sports Medicine (Health Fitness Director). My reason for detailing this background is not to boast, but rather to demonstrate, I hope, that I've had a good deal of experience with the educational system in the U.S. and therefore have earned a certain right to say a few things about the nature of a good education.

My parents taught me to believe in the value of what they called, "*a good education*." They never defined that term, and yet it was clearly a sacred expression in their lexicon.

In this essay, I intend to describe and explain the term, "*a good education*." My hope is that I can encourage readers to pursue this goal for their own benefit and/or for the benefit of their family. My thoughts on education will be mostly restricted to learning experiences beyond high school, especially those provided by a college or university (i.e., higher education). It is at this level where adult learners can, and should, take the lion's share of responsibility for the quality and quantity of their learning.

I will use the terms "education" and "*a good education*" separately. For the purpose of this essay, I will define education as, *the methodical process of giving*

*and receiving instruction, the outcome of which is judged by sets of standards across different disciplines.*² These standards are made up of the teaching and learning objectives outlined in all the courses offered by an educational institution. As a result, when a student graduates, it is assumed that, during the course of their educational program, they have satisfactorily met all learning outcomes and other requirements of the institution (i.e., achieved passing grades).

However, these *standards do not represent the absolute limit of what a teacher can teach or what a learner can learn*. Thus, *higher education is not necessarily a good education* because, as I will point out shortly, a good education is not limited by the standards established by colleges and universities, nor by the teachers who teach those classes. Rather, a good education is limited only by the extent to which the learner wants to learn. I have no idea if my parents would agree with this distinction, but I have come to believe that it is an important one and worthy of serious consideration.

What I Learned From My Parents

My parents believed in the value of a good education and they were determined that I pursue my own with a singular focus. The main difference between my parents and me was that I actually completed a long and formal education and they didn't. Neither of them finished high school. And yet, they acquired many lessons in the "school of life," which influenced their perspectives on life in general and on education in specific. They worked various jobs throughout their lives, most of which required hard physical labor, like picking and packing cotton, vegetables, and fruit. My dad was a butcher by trade, which traditionally was also a physically demanding job.

What my parents learned in their "school" was something completely different from what I learned in mine, but no less valuable. They understood that jobs requiring hard physical labor are just as honorable as any other, but the demands of physical labor on the body become more and more difficult to sustain over a lifetime. So, they wanted me to work with my mind, not my body; to earn a living using my intellect and save physical effort for recreational pursuits. That was one reason they desired an educational path for their son.

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My parents also understood a bigger picture: Some jobs pay more money and better prepare one for the future. These jobs were considered “good jobs” by my parents, which they believed could be attained by having “a good education.” Thus, my parents possessed a simple, indeed simplistic,

formula for success: *a good education + a good job = a secure future.*

In our country, the types of jobs that pay the highest wages and/or enjoy the best wage-plus-benefits packages are mostly “skilled labor” professions. Examples would include: physicians, attorneys, engineers, architects, scientists, and professors, as well as plumbers, electricians, and many more. Most often, these professions involve advanced education or trade/technical degrees or certifications. And, almost all require some form of continuing education.

Planning for retirement requires resources that are provided by jobs with good wages and benefits. If one is to eventually enjoy retirement, one will have to work at a job for quite a long time to contribute to a retirement plan or investment. Unfortunately, so many young people have no desire to stick with *anything*, let alone a job, for very long. They want to possess good jobs and hope to one day comfortably retire, but have no concept of the time and effort it takes to reach that goal. As the story of *The Tortoise and the Hare*, there is neither an easy nor a short path to success; you must use the skills you have. Whether you work for yourself or somebody else, whether your job requires more or less physical or mental labor, you will need to display discipline, consistency, and *stick-to-itiveness* so that you can one day retire and not have to excessively worry about having sufficient financial resources and benefits (i.e., medical, vision, dental, etc.) in your waning years.

Immersing Yourself in the Process

Seeking a good education has little to do with attending classes. Anybody can do that. In fact, you can pay someone else to do it for you. A good education is about learning and learning requires that you immerse yourself in a comprehensive intellectual process.

If you depend solely upon the teacher to educate you while you merely attend class, you have lost sight of a good education. In fact, that scenario doesn't describe a good education as much as it describes an auto service appointment. When you have car troubles, you take your car to a mechanic, leave it there and come back when it's fixed. A car is a passive lump of metal and bolts that is manipulated by a mechanic until it behaves properly. No engagement, no learning. It's a one-way process. The mechanic may learn something, but you don't (except, maybe, the fact that it costs a lot to have cars repaired). Unfortunately, many people treat their education like they're taking their car in for a tune-up. They figure if they go to their classroom and passively sit at their desk a few hours per week, they are succeeding at getting a good education. But, learning requires full engagement. You need to be an active participant and immerse yourself in the process.

The following are ideas that can help you to get the most from your classroom experience...

- If you value a good education, you will *arrive to class early*, rather than late and sit in a place where you can easily hear and engage the teacher as well as your classmates. Be ready to actively participate whenever possible. Don't be distracted by side conversations or by your smartphone, or even by allowing your mind to wander. Keep your mind in the present and be actively engaged in the topic at hand.
- *Recognize that learning doesn't happen only in school.* Learning happens when you are reading your textbooks outside of class or completing assignments, or when you watch television programs that are related to your studies, or when you choose to read a magazine article because its theme was similar to a class lecture. You should seek out readings, documentaries, and lectures that are outside of the ones you have been assigned. It's a cliché, but true enough: "Each individual has to take personal responsibility for his or her own education."
- You should *ask questions* about everything you don't

understand. Raise your hand and ask the question in class. Alternatively, you can write down questions and then sit with your teachers afterward and ask them. But don't allow a learning opportunity to slip away because you were too embarrassed or too lazy to ask a question. Learning is not a passive encounter.

- You should especially *look for opportunities to apply what you've learned to your own life*. While you are learning, continually ask yourself the question: "What does this mean to me, or to others around me?"
- In some cases, you will need to *embrace chaos*, rather than the status quo. What I mean is, you shouldn't necessarily believe something just because your teacher said it, or because you read it in a book. If it doesn't ring true, perhaps it's because it isn't. Doubt it, question it, test it; make all attempts to strip away the chaff of falsity, and arrive at the kernel of truth. This is what will set you apart as a student and will help you gain the greatest rewards from the learning process.
- Another role of the learner in education is to *develop essential skills* that will not only help you learn in school but will also help you to continually learn and grow in life. Some of these skills are the same ones that you will (hopefully) practice repeatedly during your educational process. These include keyboarding and computer skills, communication—both in writing and verbally—electronic communication and research methods, time management, organizational skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, logic and rational thought, discipline, self-control, and teamwork. A good education will provide you numerous opportunities to hone and master these skills. Don't avoid them, embrace them, and take every occasion to practice them.

Preparing for Your Future

I have seen thousands of students pass through the hallowed halls of higher education. So many of them have no idea why they are there. They have established no roadmap to help them define their goals, no specific objectives, and no strategies for getting the most “bang for their educational buck.”

Before jumping into a college or technical school, it is important to give appropriate attention to your future occupation. The following exercises may help clarify your decision for what major to pursue and what college to attend...

Choose an occupation early. It’s never too early to think about “what you want to be when you grow up.” You should start thinking of possible professions early in high school. You don’t have to make a final decision at that point, just think about and narrow down possibilities of what you see yourself doing in terms of a future occupation. After you select two or three possible outcomes, set out to determine how to get there. Will you need a college degree? If so, what degree? If you need a degree, will an associate’s or bachelor’s degree suffice, or will you need a second or third degree, credential, or technical certification before you can enter the workforce? Will you need a certain amount of experience? If so, what type of experience? Will you need to learn a trade (e.g., automotive care, carpentry, metallurgy, etc.), and where are the best places to learn that trade? These are vital questions and their answers should help you decide on an appropriate college and degree program.

Choose a major early. When you are a junior in high school, or at least 1-½ years before you plan to attend college, you should explore possible majors. Go to your preferred college or university’s website and find the major you are interested in. Look at the classes that are listed as *major courses*. You may have to look at the *college catalog* for a good description of each class and may even have to look up the *course outline* for an even more detailed account of the goals and objectives. After saving or printing out this information, complete the same process for the same or similar degree program at a different college/university. Then, compare the major courses between the two and try to decide which program has classes that are more in line with your passion and expectations as a future student. You may have to repeat this exercise a number of times until you find the major with coursework best suited to your needs.

Finding just the right college and major is critical because all too often students will start a degree program only to find that the major coursework is not what

they expected or is not to their liking. They often end up dropping out or starting over in a new degree program. And yet, they have wasted much valuable time, energy, and money in the process. While all learning is valuable learning, the student who is trying to manage their money and their learning goals cannot afford to make these mistakes.

General Education

Every major requires some courses that are not part of your specific discipline but are necessary to complete a degree program. These are referred to as General Education Requirements. USC, for example, requires ten general education courses in eight categories. Harvard requires eight half-courses, one from each of eight topical areas. Each college or university will establish requirements for general education.

If you are going to become an engineer, you might wonder why you should need to take courses in English Literature, Speech, History, or any other course outside of your specific major. Well, a General Education program is designed to introduce you to the breadth of knowledge you will need to successfully navigate life in the 21st century. These courses are typically selected from across the spectrum of liberal arts and sciences and will allow you to explore social, cultural, scientific, and historical topics while preparing for civic engagement and life in the “real world.” Completing a broad selection of general education courses will help you understand the cultures and values that shape your world and will help you excel in many aspects of life.

For some of the same reasons, I always suggest that students pursue a wide range of *extracurricular activities* during their college life. Your time in college can be rich with growth, idealism, and opportunities for involvement in sports, dance, theatre, arts, clubs, parties, and other activities. These activities promote interpersonal skills, assertiveness, confidence, and teamwork.

Completing general education courses and participating in extracurricular activities will add value and provide a well-rounded experience that will influence your capabilities, both while you are in college and into the future. By pursuing other activities outside the narrow confines of your primary subject matter, you can demonstrate broad interests and develop an array of supplementary knowledge, skills, and abilities that will surely make you more

marketable in the workplace.

Take Your Time

Don't be in a rush to get out of college. For most people, college life will be an irreplaceable experience of a lifetime. Most of us will never have the same opportunity again in our life. If you are on scholarship, have been

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awarded grants, or if someone else is paying your way (or all of the above), then I simply encourage you to immerse yourself in the experience and don't rush through. If you are paying your own way or have committed to loans to attend classes then, yes, I can see some sense of urgency. But, *especially in these cases*, it is important to be sure that you “get your money's worth.” Don't overlook the benefits of leveraging the educational system to its fullest learning potential. Take your time and use the educational process to make you the most qualified candidate in your future profession. Don't just *go to* classes; be sure to *take away* something.

Whatever your situation, don't be in too much of a hurry to finish your degree because life after college is grossly overrated. Work? You have the rest of your adult life to work. It's not going anywhere, so why hurry? Work is not all it's cracked up to be. After all, that's why they call it *work*. Seek and earn a good education and reap the rewards of lifetime learning.

Grades

A good education doesn't ensure your future success in the job market, it does, however, provide you a ticket to get into the game. Each successive degree opens more doors for you to apply to a greater variety of jobs. Whether it's an associate's degree or trade certificate from a community college, or a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree from a 4-year college or university, each degree you earn establishes your “minimum qualifications” in the job market. Every job position you apply for will most likely require some sort of minimum qualifications or, at the very least, “desirable criteria” for you to successfully apply. You need to meet those requirements in order to apply for the job, but

since everyone has met the same minimum standard, it cancels itself out. For example, if a bachelor's degree in a certain field is the minimum qualification, and if you have completed one, then you have arrived to play the game. But, since other applicants have also attained this minimum requirement, you will need more to successfully move yourself to the top of the pool of applicants; you must bring something more to the table to *win* the game. Usually, that will mean attaining one or more degrees above the minimum qualification, possessing job or life experiences that are integrally related to the position, and/or supplying personal recommendations that demonstrate your qualities and qualifications for the position. Unfortunately, grades rarely figure into the job selection process.

“ *Work is not all it's cracked up to be. After all, that's why they call it work.* ”

Admittedly, grades are a necessary adjunct to traversing an educational path. They serve as one of the indicators used by colleges to admit students, they are also considered when students attempt to qualify for grants and scholarships and are used to pass students from one class or grade

level to the next. But, grades do not measure your true success as a student. That is, they don't serve as a true indicator of what you have learned. Achieving satisfactory grades primarily allows you to jump through the hoops of the system, but don't serve a crucial purpose in helping you to become the best candidate for a job position, nor do they necessarily mean that you have achieved a good education.

Grades are based ultimately on standards set by instructors in each discipline. These professors serve as subject matter experts (SMEs) and, together with other SMEs, they draft the learning objectives for each course (i.e., knowledge, skills, and abilities that are supposed to predict success in your chosen educational program). Grades are supposed to measure *something* but, in my opinion, it is never clear what that something is, nor is it clear how you can validly measure it. In any case, your teachers provide assignments and tests and your grade is based on how they interpret your work in light of the standards.

One of the problems I see with this practice is that too many students achieve or climb only to an arbitrary level, but not any higher. How will you judge your own

quality of learning? Will you compare yourself with fellow students? That is probably not a good measuring stick. Are you willing to allow your teachers to set the standard? That is probably a better benchmark, but what if that standard is still too low?

Let's say a teacher assigns a report that requires a minimum of 3-5 word-processed pages, double-spaced with 3-5 references. How many students do you think will turn in a paper longer than 5-pages and with more than 5 references? In my experience of assigning thousands of similar essays, perhaps 1% of the students will exceed the limit. Obviously, you shouldn't turn in a 100-page essay when you are assigned a 5-page one, but my point is that *every standard creates built-in limits to learning*. Therefore, you must be aware that the limits imposed by your instructor are not intended to curb your learning experience. Unfortunately, the requirements established by teachers for assignments, like the outcomes or standards expected by an institution, cause most students to aspire to mediocrity. Most students will put in just enough effort to meet, but not exceed the standards. A student should not allow *any* standard to limit or stifle their curiosity, their creativity, or their goals for learning. A good education is yours to own and therefore should be limited only by your desire to learn and, even then, with extreme care and foresight.

I was never an exceptional student; mediocre in aptitude would be my guess. It required an inordinate amount of effort on my part to produce any semblance of good grades. I eventually realized that, what I lacked in natural academic ability, I could make up for with good old fashioned, roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-dirty, hard work. In that sense, I was a poster child for the cliché: "you can do anything you set your mind to." The further I continued in my educational journey, the more motivated I became and my grades improved as well. Ultimately, learning, not grades should be your focus.

However, when all is said and done, nobody who is selecting you for a job is going to learn anything critical about your desirability for that job by looking at your transcripts to see that you received a "C" instead of an "A" in Anatomy. I've sat on dozens of job interview committees and I can think of only one time that we looked at a job applicant's grades during the hiring process. I can't even remember why we did it, but it didn't end up being important then, and I can't see why it would be important now. People get chosen for jobs, ultimately, on the basis of their life and professional experiences and because of their tangible

skills and abilities, not because of their grades. Grades serve some purpose but don't overestimate their value in making you a good student and in attaining a good education.

Advanced Degrees

If you have the time, money, and purpose to pursue a second or third degree, you will have a chance to immerse yourself even deeper into your chosen field. You will not only achieve a greater depth and breadth of knowledge but will also find that more and more students are passionate about learning at that level. The students who did not have a clear roadmap for navigating their educational process will eventually finish their associate's or bachelor's degree and move on, or drop out, as the case may be. What remains are the students who really have a passion for their future. As the ranks thin out at the master's and doctoral levels, the competition is stiffer, but the engagement in learning is at a much higher level. The professors also realize that the students are of a higher caliber and they respond by setting higher standards. This sounds scary, but it is to the benefit of the students because the work and the engagement process of learning become more challenging and more profitable.

Returning (i.e., Older) Students

Perhaps you had other responsibilities at the time when others your age were attending college. Is it too late for you to seek higher education? I don't mind employing this overused expression, "*It's never too late to go back to school!*" I became a much better student when I pursued my master's degree because I did so while I was currently employed in the field. Even though I had been out of college for 4 years, I found that my motivations had changed and I wanted to pursue my master's degree for wholly different reasons. I enjoyed that program immensely because it was directly relevant to what I was doing every single day. I put forth more effort and purposely pushed past the minimum requirements set by my teachers. The same was true of my doctoral studies. I was in my early 40's when I started that program. Once again, everything was so relevant to my passions and my profession. As I stated previously, my parents depended on their life and job experiences to frame their values about education. It turned out the same for me: my life and job experiences helped shape my values about education and amplified my motivations to learn.

In the same way, if you were raising a family, were enlisted in the military, were “testing the job market,” or were simply engaged in a “wrong turn” in life; if you missed the opportunity to get a good education the first time around, you will likely make a great candidate when you return to the educational arena. All life experiences can serve to provide clarity of vision, passion, discipline, and a sense of direction that will aid you in reclaiming your educational goals and set you on the road to a new adventure and, perhaps, even a new profession.

You may be 20-years out of date and out of practice, but you may also have some major advantages over younger students. Older returning students tend to have more focus than those who may be living away from home and away from parental oversight for the first time. These *returners* will likely have a better background and perspective on life in general and a greater cultural knowledge, all of which typically takes time and life experiences to develop. Older students often know what they want, have learned from their mistakes, and know more about the cost of success.

Finally, if you’ve been working for a few years, your employer may help you with your education, either by providing financial reimbursements, or with flexible scheduling, or both.

Conclusion

These days, the unskilled labor market is shrinking in the U.S. because of a decline in manufacturing and offshoring of jobs. At the same time, our country is increasingly dependent on technology, which is driving jobs that require hi-tech expertise. More and more jobs are relying on a highly-skilled workforce. For the general populace, it is no longer a decision between seeking higher education or not, but rather, it is simply a decision of what type of higher education you will choose. This consideration should be foremost in your mind, both for yourself and for your children.

Because the job market is shrinking while also becoming more competitive, today’s students cannot allow their learning experience to be marginalized. You cannot allow your excellence in learning to be based solely on the standards established by your teachers or the institutions, but instead, you will need to claim your right to learn without limits. Inform your teachers that you intend to learn as much as possible in the time allotted and that you request their support.

Ask them for permission to exceed their minimum standards for assignments. You may be surprised by their response.

In the end, you shouldn't aspire to merely compete in the job market; you should strive to excel in it. When you apply for a job position alongside 100 other applicants, you want your application to be considered one of the very best. Ultimately, the successful candidate is chosen, not because of their degree or their grades, but because of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that they have *learned* during their educational, occupational and life experiences. A good education opens many doors of opportunity to a wide array of good jobs and provides options not available to those without. Become that kind of student who dreams big dreams and achieves them. Prepare yourself to walk through the doors of a good education into the vivid light beyond.

About the Author

DQ, aka Don Quixote, aka David Diaz, is the publisher and owner of Things I Believe Project. An educator and author, DQ has a lifelong love of learning. His pen name comes from his love of chasing windmills (i.e., truth and other ideals) and his penchant for tongue-in-cheek humor: "Don Quixote was developing his arguments in such an orderly and lucid way that for the time being none of those listening could believe he was a madman."

Footnotes