

## How to Behave, and Succeed, at University<sup>1</sup>

This essay is not a harangue, although I expect most students will object to some, and some students will object to most, of what I suggest here. Nevertheless, I want you to read it because I genuinely care about my students, and because I believe that most of the students coming to LMU would benefit from taking this advice to heart. Goethe notes, as one translation of [\*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship\*](#) has it: “if we treat [people] not as they are but as they should be, we help them to become what they can become.” This is often paraphrased as, “treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being.” My own experience as both a teacher and a student suggests that he was on the mark with this observation.

If, as you read this, you are inclined to take exception to either the content or my tone, remember that it is written for typical LMU student. Perhaps you are not typical. If you have just enrolled in my class, it is very likely that I don't yet know you. Maybe what I suggest here is second nature to you—your university life is both pointed in the right direction and humming along just fine. Well and good. But in any given class I am confident that there are some students, perhaps the majority, who are trying to sort out their priorities at a time of life when they are still figuring out who they are and who they are becoming, all in an environment complicated by much less structure than they were accustomed to before leaving home. I've seen thousands of students pass through the halls of LMU, and I'm convinced that most of them would have benefited from hearing what follows and taking it to heart.

In the end, of course, this is just a bit of friendly advice; and, like all advice, you can take it or leave it. You will need to decide for yourself how relevant it is to your situation.

### Preliminaries

First things first: get your priorities straight. You are at LMU *to get an education*. Or, perhaps better, to get a good start on a lifelong education. And while education is exciting and engaging, it is generally hard work as well. Other things will no doubt happen in the course of your undergraduate life—some good and some bad—but your primary focus while at university should be your classes, studying, and the cultivation of a rich, deep, and varied intellectual life.

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<sup>1</sup> Historically, “college” and “university” represented two distinct modes of education. Colleges were associated with the humanistic, liberal arts education I emphasize in this essay; universities were focused on training students for successful careers. I will be using “university” broadly to describe the institutions in the United States, most of which began as colleges and which later, in imitation of European universities, adopted the university model. They attempted, at least initially, to preserve the core of a humanistic education while also training their students for successful careers. The best of them succeeded to some degree. However, over time, the humanistic, liberal arts core of the traditional college became marginalized, and then threatened. In this essay, when I write “university,” you should read “a modern undergraduate institution—which may or may not also have graduate programs—that has made some concessions to vocational training, but which retains a strong commitment to the ideals *and the concrete, curricular practices* of a broad, humanistic, liberal arts education.” Sadly, the image of education I praise here is a critically endangered beast, to the degree that some people think it extinct, or mythological. Nevertheless, it remains possible for you to approximate something of the experience of genuine education at an imperfect institution by acting with a degree of purpose and an autodidactic spirit.

Unfortunately, in the contemporary cultural milieu, shaped as it is by forces inimical to real education, you will need to focus very hard on this goal in order to achieve it.

Starting, perhaps, with the obvious: your aim should be to excel in every class, every semester. Most students will read that and assume that the point is “straight A” marks, and in one sense they would not be wrong. However, while excellence is likely going to earn that “A,” it cannot be reduced to it. Your grades are distinct from your education. What you are actually after is the growth and understanding to which those “A” grades supposedly, but do not always, correspond. It is entirely possible to achieve an “A” and still fail to gain the educational benefits you are here for. Likewise, your education might benefit enormously from a particular class in which, for some reason, you end up earning a “B.”

On that point, you should probably get accustomed to the fact that you are unlikely to be a straight-A student. I’ve seen a number of horrified people gasp the words “but I’ve *never* received *anything* less than an A” with a kind of disbelieving horror. Sometimes there are tears. Sometimes the student’s confidence never seems to recover. Do you know what the little voice in my head says when I hear this? “Damn. That’s sad. I guess you’ve never really stretched yourself.” In the real world, away from fawning parents and academic grade inflation, you will find some things that you are not naturally good at. Some things will come easily, other things will require incredible work, and yet other things won’t come to you no matter how hard you work, because some things are just not your thing. After, say, kindergarten, you can’t seriously think that you are going to be ‘A+’ at everything you try—every academic subject, every sport, every skill. The only way that can happen is if you shut yourself up in a tiny shell and never attempt anything that you are not already certain you can accomplish. Good luck with that life plan.

I’m not naive, and I understand there are legitimate, practical reasons to be concerned about grades; but if you are at university for an education rather than a certificate, the grade will be of secondary importance. If you are here for any reason other than “to become educated” in the sense I outline below, you should sit down and think, really think, about what you are doing. As of September 2012, one year at LMU will cost around \$56,000. That is a staggering amount of money to spend, and it is largely up to you whether it is well-spent or not. Take advantage of the opportunities and four years at LMU can be time and money very well spent; but waste those opportunities and you will wish you did something else with that money and time. You should squeeze every last cent of value from your education.

Remember that this document is about how to succeed *at university*. I fully recognize that there is much more to a good life than a successful undergraduate career. You don’t need a college degree to be a good person. You don’t necessarily need a degree to make decent money. And you could certainly get certain sorts of training for far less than it costs to attend LMU. In fact, the things most people seem to focus on while at university can be done elsewhere as well, more easily, and without the expense. If your main goal is to have a good time or to socialize, maybe you should take off a few years and do that while working a regular job, where someone will be paying you for your time rather than while at university where you are paying for an education. Parties thrown by young employees are every bit as crazy as college parties. If your main goal is to engage in service, consider dropping out and joining any one of the incredible organizations

doing service: the Catholic Workers, L'Arche, or a similar group. Again, you won't be paying tuition, so you will be saving a lot of money. Moreover, you will be doing much more service than you will at LMU. If your main goal is to check things off a list and earn money, again, you can accomplish that without paying LMU's tuition; and there are various sorts of trades, internships, jobs, and careers where you can get started making money right away and benefit from several more years of earning income, compounded interest, and so on.

LMU does not exist to facilitate socializing, or social work, or vocational training. A university is not good at these things, which are done better and more cheaply by, respectively, social clubs, service organizations, and vocational schools or apprenticeships. Universities exist to educate students. Of course, there are various ways to pursue this goal. But since you have chosen to enroll at LMU, I assume that you want what we have to offer: *a liberal education in the Jesuit tradition*; and, working under that assumption, I am going to expect and demand certain things of you.

The primary goal of a liberal education is not to help you to get a better job, or earn more money, or accumulate vast amounts of factual knowledge, or train you to do a specific task very well. Traditionally, a liberal education encompassed the sort of learning appropriate to a free man (or, unfortunately less frequently, woman), someone who, liberated from the humble toil of struggling to secure or protect his daily bread, was able to turn his thoughts to 'higher' things. Of course, more or less everyone who reads these comments is "free" in this sense. It is unlikely you are someone's chattel. However, many undergraduates are, or are in danger of becoming, servile in a different sense: prisoners to the hedonic treadmill of consumerism and the workaholicism that it demands; captives of the manipulation and superficiality of social media; inmates of ossified and lifeless ways of living that narrowly circumscribe their possibilities and limit their potential. Such people have no time for or no interest in deep thinking, big questions, or fundamental inquiry. Seen in this light, there are many people in need of 'liberation' today, and so it still makes sense to think of a liberal education as consisting of those modes of inquiry, ways of thinking, and types of understanding that are the privilege of the free person. Here we might differentiate between the "liberal arts," which educate us and help us to make full expression of our humanity, and the "servile arts," which merely train us to be good producers and consumers, good cogs in the machine. Your education at LMU can accomplish either goal; it is up to you to choose which one you think is more important.

A good liberal education frees you from yourself or, put another way, frees you to become yourself. It frees you from yourself in the sense that it helps you to overcome your own prejudice, narrow-mindedness, and parochialism. It frees you to become yourself because, in shedding your unreflective assumptions and prejudices, you are able to freely and consciously adopt new ideas and opinions, while simultaneously preserving the old opinions that successfully pass through the crucible of critical inquiry. A liberal education helps you to become a full human being: someone who thinks for herself; someone who loves the good, the true, and the beautiful, even when she cannot (yet) be good, grasp truth, or appreciate beauty; and someone who is conscious of the world around her, her place in it, and her relation to it.

No university, including LMU, can *give* you a liberal education—small classes and a "cafeteria" style core curriculum do not a liberal education make—a liberal education is, ultimately,

something *you do to yourself*. A good university can invite you to a liberal education, to join a longstanding and ongoing conversation about truth, goodness, beauty, and similar subjects. Dedicated professors and great books—and there are great books—that are already part of that conversation can serve as facilitators. However, the fact is that any successful education will have an element of autodidacticism to it. It is up to you to accept the invitation and to make the most of it.

Unfortunately, LMU is no longer a liberal arts university in a meaningful sense; you can get a liberal arts education here—indeed, a *great* liberal arts education—but it won't happen automatically. You must take advantage of opportunities and resources wisely. This means choosing a course of study that will do more than simply teach you vocational skills, seeking out classes that will round out your cultural literacy, classes that, unfortunately, are no longer required of students and which you may have to take as electives. It means focusing on education rather than grades. It means finding the faculty who actually care about liberal education and actively engaging with them. It means stepping outside your intellectual comfort zone to challenge your assumptions. And, crucially, it means actively working to develop a rich intellectual and cultural life *beyond* the classroom.

All this seems straightforward enough; however, very, very few students actually do this. Indeed, it's exceptionally rare. I suspect this is because most undergraduate students treat university simply as an extension of high school and a precursor to economically advantageous labor. But a university education is not, or should not be, merely a more difficult version of high school; it is something qualitatively different.

If you are not at LMU first and foremost to focus on your education—and here I mean “education” in terms of the liberal education I just described—you should probably do something else for a while. Work, surf, travel, ski—do whatever else happens to be your focus. Get it out of your system and come back when you are ready to buckle down and commit to your studies. I dropped out of my undergraduate studies for some time, and the truth is probably would have learned more and done better if I had stayed out even longer than I did. It's not the end of the world to take time away from school. In fact, I encouraged both my daughters to take a gap year, or gap *years*, before university. While a few of my friends excelled at university straight out of high school, many did not; however, almost every single friend who took time off to figure out what he or she really wanted out of life excelled on returning to university.

In any case, whatever your age, if you have chosen to attend university you should do everything you can to benefit from the experience. Here are some suggestions regarding how to do so. Some of what follows focuses on practical issues, so keep in mind the background goal of liberal education.

## **1. Time Management**

To help ensure you keep your priorities straight, you should construct a schedule at the beginning of each semester, using either a physical calendar or an electronic calendar on your computer. The former is more customizable; but the latter has the advantage of syncing to multiple devices and, crucially, of scheduling alarms that will serve as reminders.

First, block out all the non-negotiable commitments you have during the term, namely: (1) your classes, (2) time dedicated to reading or preparation for each class, and (3) time dedicated to study, writing, or other work associated with each class. One credit hour should require three hours of work each week. Thus, a four-unit class might require twelve hours of work, and if that class meets three hours each week you could be spending about *nine hours* of work outside class time *each week* on that class alone.

So, begin by planning for around 45 hours of academic work each week, and block out that time—both time in class and time dedicated to study—in your schedule. Now, perhaps, you can see why people refer to school as a “full-time job.”

These times should be sacrosanct, inviolable except in rare circumstances. If someone asks you to go to a movie, or to lunch, or some other social activity during one of these times, just tell them you have another commitment and suggest an alternative time outside of your fixed bloc of school hours. The same goes for events associated with “campus life,” extra-curricular service and volunteering, and other non-academic pursuits. Study comes first. *Plan your life around school rather than trying to fit in school around other activities.* You’ll still have time for other interests: you will still meet boys or girls that you like; you will still go on dates (that is, [if anyone dates anymore](#)); you will still be able to pursue non-academic activities and to enjoy life. It’s just a question of priorities; and it seems like an endeavor costing you \$224,000 and four full years of your one, finite, precious life is the activity that should be at the top of your list of priorities, no?

If your preparation and study for a particular class does not actually take nine hours in a given week, consider whether you are really engaging the material in the manner you should. If you read Plato’s *Phaedo* in an hour and consider yourself done, you’ve fundamentally misunderstood what you should be doing. First, you probably have not read well in terms of taking notes, outlining arguments, and developing questions for discussion. For more on this, see the discussion of reading below. Second, I can assure you that you did not really get all you could from the text in one short reading. Your grade—and more importantly *you*—will benefit from additional readings and the deeper insight they will bring. Finally, in the event that you thoroughly engage the material, meticulously prepare for class, conscientiously organize your notes and outlines, and still find that coursework and preparation has not taken the time you have allotted for it that week, consider the radical and counter-cultural idea of doing additional work with the material simply to enrich yourself. Crazy, I know; but bear with me here. For many people, their years at university will be the only time in their lives when they will be reading the great books and thinking about important ideas in close proximity with others who are doing the same thing. After you graduate, you will go to parties, you will go on dates, and you will pursue avocations; however, it is very, very unlikely that you will still be in a situation in which you are regularly reading and discussing great thinkers with other intelligent people every week. College is your best chance to expand your cultural horizons, develop an intellectual life, contemplate the things that make us human, and consider your place in the world. Give yourself the gift of the best education you can possibly get.

Note that I'm not suggesting that you should always stack on more study to the total exclusion of other things that contribute to your well-being. Far from it. First, the academic calendar ebbs and flows; some weeks will require less work than others. Moreover, if you have cultivated the habit of completely engaging your studies and frequently going above and beyond what is required, you should make sure that you take time to have fun, be idle, and reward yourself during days or weeks when classes are less demanding. Experience life. Go to the beach or hike in the mountains. You might even consider rewarding yourself with something illuminating by taking advantage of any one of the myriad literary, cultural, intellectual, and natural attractions at LMU or in the wider LA region. Do not, however, fool yourself into thinking you can ignore your academic work for weeks and then somehow "make it up" in a series of all-night study binges; that strategy will not get you the results you want.

Back to scheduling. If you have other non-negotiable commitments, such as work or family obligations, you should put those in your schedule next. I worked, generally full-time, all the way through both my BA and my MA studies. I was also a very active competitive athlete, I traveled, and I had a social life. So I understand it is difficult to juggle things. However, prioritizing your obligations and understanding which ones—the academic ones—constitute your core, bedrock commitments will make organizing your schedule much easier.

Now your schedule should include fixed times for classes, reading and preparation, studying (writing, problem sets, lab work, creative work, and so forth), as well as other fixed commitments such as work or family time. Next make sure you have time for sufficient sleep. If you do not get enough sleep, sooner or later you will crash and burn. Whatever time is left over is the time you have to fit in clubs, dates, parties, service orgs, intramural sports, and so on, which is a good reason to limit your other commitments (more on this below). If this sort of planning seems odd it is only due to the unbelievable, misguided, upside-down, counter-productive priorities of most students at LMU.

## **2. Planning**

Once classes begin and you have a chance to review your various course syllabi, it's time to do some additional planning that will take into account the predictable ebb and flow of the academic calendar. You should, for example, plan to dedicate additional time to study around midterms and final exams. Think about when papers are due, when lab assignments will take place, when field- or research-trips are scheduled, and any other similarly predictable academic demands on your time. Starting with the due date, work backwards and figure out when you need to start working on the project in question. For example, if you have a paper due, decide when you will need to have a topic, when the research needs to be done, when the rough draft must be complete, and so on. Put these dates in your schedule and, if you are using a digital calendar, tag them with alarms to remind you when they arrive. Even if your professor does not require you to meet intermediate deadlines for these various stages of the project, you should set and meet them yourself. It is not your professor's job to check in with you daily to make sure you are not falling behind. You need to cultivate enough self-discipline to avoid procrastinating and to ensure that you meet medium- to long-term obligations. First, you are very unlikely to earn an "A" mark when you hammer out your paper the day before it is due or cram all night before an exam; and, second, even if you manage to earn a good mark in a last-minute scramble, you have wasted an

educational opportunity by doing so. This sort of planning and use of self-imposed deadlines is obvious once you think about it—and, indeed, you can find this same advice in many books and articles on study habits—nevertheless, it’s astonishing how few students make use of it.

### 3. Preparation

In order to get the most out of your classes—and, therefore, your education—you must prepare. Too often, students think this is reducible to simply studying for exams. However, exams, like grades, have relatively little to do with your education. Your education does not take place the night before the exam is given or the paper is due; and it doesn’t take place solely during class meetings three hours each week. Your education is an ongoing and open-ended process; it takes place every day of your life. Therefore, while at university, you should prepare for each class meeting.

First, you should always do the reading in advance of each class. However, be careful about reading too far ahead because if the reading is not fresh in your mind, if you have not prepared notes, or if your comprehension was less than optimal, you may be ill-equipped to participate in class discussions or to follow the lecture.

You should also, obviously, do any “homework” that has been assigned: problem sets, library work, reading responses, and so on. This is true even if the assignment is ungraded. If a professor tells you that you should complete thirty problems in your math textbook, or that you should watch a Senate debate on C-SPAN, or that you should read the environmental coverage in *The Guardian*, or that you should outline the argument in the *Euthyphro*, you should do so whether or not it is a graded assignment. Your professor did not give that assignment on a whim or as a joke, but because he or she thought it would improve your comprehension, understanding, and overall experience in the class. Do the work, even if it is not going to be graded.

Full preparation—the kind of preparation that will enrich your education, improve your grades, and prepare you for success in other endeavors by developing the habits of discipline and initiative—will occasionally require additional work on your part. In graduate school, I was friends with a fellow who had done his undergraduate degree at Berea College in Kentucky. On his first day as a freshman, he found himself in a history class. As part of the introductory lecture, the professor mentioned the Mason-Dixon Line and said, parenthetically, “of course, you know where the Mason-Dixon Line is” as he glanced at the class. Met with blank stares that might have come straight off a herd of cows, the professor grew frustrated and began to rant, first to himself and then more loudly: “What the *hell*? None of you know where the Mason-Dixon Line is located? You should be *ashamed* of yourselves, every one of you! What the hell is the world coming to?” As his ire cooled he composed himself and returned to his lecture, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Well, Wednesday morning rolls around and my friend arrives in his history class for the second meeting. The professor walks in, puts his books on the podium, calmly turns to the class and, sure enough, asks “so, where is the Mason-Dixon Line?”

The students sat in a stunned silence as the realization of their individual and collective error washed over them. People shifted uncomfortably and nervously in their seats, unable to meet the silent gaze of their professor and hoping someone would save them from the explosion that was

surely brewing behind the podium, each person making excuses as to why he or she did not do what, in retrospect, was the obvious thing to do: spend just a few moments looking for some information that the professor obviously thought significant. The professor was, predictably, apoplectic and cursed a blue streak I won't record here, maligning the stupidity and, worse, the fundamentally unteachable nature of such a collection of passive, indolent, and hopeless children.

It's a great anecdote, and I wish I had been there personally to witness the event, though perhaps not as one of the students. In any case, the lesson is both fundamental and obvious: *your education is your responsibility*. In order to be merely a satisfactory student at university, you should be the sort of person who does a little more than the work that is assigned by your professors, someone who genuinely engages the material, puts effort into the process, and takes pride in her work.

#### **4. How to Read**

At university you are expected to *study, digest, and reflect on the readings at home* so that we can *discuss them in class*. Although most courses will incorporate some lecture, and some courses may be primarily lectures, almost all university-level courses will demand your active participation, which requires that you come to class with a sound preliminary understanding of the reading. Not only will this make the class discussions much more interesting, it will improve your comprehension (and help your participation grade, if there is one). When you participate without proper preparation, the fact that you have not done the reading is often painfully obvious to everyone who has done the reading, including your professor. You should always bring the book or article under discussion to class so that you can refer to the text. This is part of proper preparation for and participation in class.

Reading well requires that we learn, as [Nietzsche says](#), “to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers.” [Reading is not like watching television, or the skimming that passes for reading on the internet](#). You need to develop the habit of reading actively and carefully. My own discipline, philosophy—and, frankly, most anything important or worth reading—demands close and careful attention to the text. Oftentimes, it will take two or more readings in order to achieve even a basic understanding of the main issues. You cannot expect to read philosophical works in the same manner that you read a light novel, textbook, magazine, or newspaper. Great books generally demand something of their readers. If you find that your eyes are merely passing over the text without your brain absorbing or reflecting on any of the ideas, you need to read more slowly.

Remember everything your parents and elementary school teachers told you about writing in your books? Forget it. Underline, mark, and annotate your books—anything that will help you to keep in mind the main issues, follow the steps in an argument, or note interesting correlations. Jotting down notes in the margins is generally more helpful than underlining or highlighting. The physical text in front of you is not sacred, except insofar as it represents a tree sacrificed so you could address philosophical issues. The ideas in the text are the important things. That being

said, only write in books that you own—don't be one of the reprobates that marks up library books.

You must get in the habit of looking up unfamiliar words. Do not assume that the meaning of a single word is unimportant or that you will glean the meaning of the word from the context in which it appears. Although a particular author may use a word in a manner other than, even contrary to, its dictionary definition, a dictionary is the logical place to begin if you are completely unaware of a word's meaning.

In addition to highlighting and writing in the margin, you should take some kind of notes. You need to think about what you are reading as you are reading. First, write down questions—either questions related to difficulties you are having with the text, or questions that might contribute to class discussion. Note, with respect to the first sort of questions, that sometimes the meaning of a difficult passage will become clear from what follows, so keep reading and see if things become clearer. In addition to writing down questions, you should try to briefly summarize what you have read. Depending on the length and difficulty of the reading, you might summarize each paragraph or section with a sentence or two, or each chapter with a paragraph. Such summaries will prove absolutely invaluable in enriching your understanding and in studying for exams. Finally, since you've made a summary or outline, you should take a look at it just before class as part of your preparation.

When you read, your first goal should be to understand what the author in question is saying. To that end, you should read *charitably*. Although you—or your professor—may disagree with them, the authors you are reading have been assigned for a reason. It is very unlikely that you will find something in their work that is obviously stupid or false. If you find yourself thinking, “that's insane” or “that makes no sense at all,” chances are that you have failed to understand the argument. In order to learn from books, you need to understand them; and in order to understand them you must read them well. It is exceedingly arrogant to think that you have everything figured out at 18 or 20 years of age (or, for that matter, at 50 years of age). This is, unfortunately, an easy vice to fall into, particularly for the sort of intelligent person one hopes to find at university. However, you owe it to yourself to leave open the possibility that new information or new argumentation might reveal errors in your current positions, or that alternative positions might be superior to those you currently hold. People who do not read or listen to other perspectives in a charitable way suffer from the vice of close-mindedness. If you are bound and determined to remain close-minded, you should demonstrate your “intelligence” by dropping out of college and saving yourself an enormous amount of time and money. After all, if you already have the answers and are not going to be affected by anything you read or discuss, why pay \$56,000 per year to read and discuss things?

Although the preceding comment suggests we should be charitable readers, we should also be *critical* readers. Things that are true are not true simply because they are held to be so by an authority figure. Of course, it makes sense to weigh a person's expertise when assessing her opinion. Not all arguments or opinions are equal. When you are ill you go to your doctor, not your accountant, and when you want to know about climate change you listen to a climate scientist, not a political pundit. However, it is important to attempt to come to your own reasoned opinion about the merits of any given argument or idea. The authors you read may be wrong.

Your professors may be wrong. Do not be shy about challenging a point that you think demands challenge; just be sure that you have *fully and accurately understood* the point before you challenge it. An argument is not wrong just because it runs contrary to your expectations or beliefs. Additionally, make sure that when you challenge a point you do so with a *good argument* and, at least in a university classroom, that you make your challenge *respectfully*. [The Johnny Strabler approach](#)—Q: “What are you rebelling against?”, A: “Whaddya got?”—is not particularly helpful.

## 5. How to Write

A full account of mechanics and style is neither possible nor appropriate here; but I will allow myself to quickly insist that grammar matters, diction matters, style matters, and logical coherence matters. At the risk of painting with too-broad a brush—since there are very clearly exceptions—if you are at university in the 21<sup>st</sup> century you probably do not write either as well as you should or as well as you think you do. You should take this seriously and make a concerted effort to improve as a writer. It’s not enough to write often, you have to write often while trying to write well.

Rather than address the mechanics of writing, here I aim to talk about the process of writing. First, carefully read the assignment. All the effort in the world won’t make for a good paper if you answer the wrong question or otherwise miss the point of the exercise. Once you have a clear understanding of what is expected of you, schedule self-imposed intermediate deadlines for completing the research, deciding on a thesis, developing an outline, completing a first draft, and so on. Having a plan and a schedule and trying to stick to them will help ensure that you don’t procrastinate.

Not all papers are research papers. Sometimes all you need are the texts you are reading in class. However, some of the papers you will write in college will undoubtedly be research papers. Unfortunately, many students think Google is the only necessary research tool, which seriously limits their resources and often directs them to sources that are fraudulent, non-peer-reviewed, erroneous, out of date, or otherwise misleading. There are good resources on the Internet to be sure, but there is a great deal of rubbish as well. You need to be able to distinguish the gold, not only from the surrounding mud, sand, rock, and detritus, but also from the pyrite. In short, in the vast majority of cases, undergraduate students using the Internet for “research” with the same skills they use to shop on Amazon or look for a restaurant are likely to end up with sub-standard results. Therefore, if you are not intimately familiar with library research, you should find out when the library is having an orientation and sign up. In fact, all students should try to do this the first semester of their freshman year in order to familiarize themselves with the research facilities on campus.

In researching your paper, you should follow all the suggestions about reading enumerated above: read carefully, avoid distractions, take notes or otherwise summarize what you’ve read. Depending on the subject and the paper assignment, this may entail reading a large volume of material or reading a small amount, perhaps only a single text, very, very carefully. I know of classes in which students read a dozen novels in a fifteen-week semester, and others in which the

entire semester is focused on only 60 pages of text, or in which a week or two is spent on a three-page argument.

I've already mentioned that you should expect to read academic books multiple times to get an adequate understanding. This is especially true of the sorts of text you will encounter in a philosophy class. Expect to read, take notes, read again, talk to classmates, think very carefully, read again, and then think some more before you have any chance of really grasping what the text has to say. Don't fall into the trap of skimming texts you should be reading and, in general, avoid Sparknotes, Cliff Notes, Wikipedia, and similar resources as they tend to give you selective and superficial coverage—exactly what you don't want from your education.

At some point, however, you will have to begin writing. While most students fall into the practice of paying insufficient attention to reading, it is possible to focus too much on reading. If you are going to meet the deadline, at some point you are going to have to make a judgment call that further reading is not in the best interests of your paper. Once you've done the bulk of the reading, it's time to decide on a thesis and develop an outline of your argument. The structure of your outline will be determined by the assignment, so you've got one more chance to make sure that you've properly understood what your professor wants.

The outline will lead naturally into the crafting of your first draft. There are many different ways to proceed at this stage, but one possible strategy is to simply add layers of detail to your outline until you've got a rough sketch of the argument as a whole. As the outline gets more and more detailed, the information fills in and the stages of the argument develop. Once the entire argument is there in rough form, it's time to polish that into an acceptable first draft. Your first draft should be a complete, readable, grammatical paper that you can proofread, critique, and show to friends.

This is, unfortunately, where most undergraduates stop; however, for any student not wasting her time (and money), this is really only the halfway point of crafting a good paper. Once you have a draft, put it aside for a day or two—again, having begun the writing process early will pay dividends here. When you return to the paper it will be with a relatively fresh eye, so sit down and give it a good, careful, critical reading. Pay special attention to the overall arc of the argument and the transitions between sections. If anything is unclear, revise the prose to make it clear. Don't ever put yourself in the situation of responding to some future criticism of your writing with the defensive, "you know what I meant." Instead of hoping your reader will know what you meant to say, just clearly say what you mean to say.

Once you've done a first proofreading and revision, it's time to enlist the help of some friends. Don't pick these people because they are the folks you hang out with on Saturday night, or because they are part of your intramural soccer team, or anything of a similar sort; you need good academic friends who will be critical judges of your work and who will offer constructive criticism to improve it. The obvious place to look for such friends is in your classes. If a friend proofreads your paper, it's only polite to offer to proofread her paper in exchange. After you receive your friend's comments, take some time to sit down together and talk through the paper. You may accept some of her suggestions or critiques, and you may reject others; but defending your position against those criticisms you don't accept will help with your next draft.

Revise the paper again in light of your friend's comments. Proofread it again. At this stage you should try reading the paper out loud—not mumbling or *sotto voce*, but at a normal conversational volume. Why? Simply because something close to 99% of current high-school and university students lack any solid grounding in the grammar and usage of the English language. The grammar-checking software that comes with programs like Microsoft Word is a very uneven and inadequate tool, so don't rely on it. However, if you are a native speaker of English your ear should be able to catch grammatical errors you can't identify by name simply because they sound odd when spoken aloud. Don't know what a sentence fragment is? Don't know why subjects and predicates must agree? Don't worry; your ear can catch many common errors if you read out loud. Take care, however, because some grammatical howlers have crept into the vernacular and may sound appropriate even if they are gross errors in usage. Moreover, your ear will not catch all grammatical blunders—for example, the proper uses of commas, colons, and semi-colons. Thus, your best long-term strategy is to familiarize yourself with grammatical structure and the mechanics of writing. Start with something basic like [\*The Elements of Style\*](#) and move on from there. Being reasonably well-read will help here as well, as reading great books will familiarize you with great prose. Or do yourself a big favor and take a few semesters of Latin. Seriously. While I am still developing as a writer, and I still make errors, Latin helped me immeasurably.

At this stage in the process the major elements of your paper should be well-established and you should really be working on the clarity, style, and readability of the paper. Pay special attention to transitions (between ideas, sections, or paragraphs), grammar, and diction. Avoid using what Strunk and White call “twenty-dollar words” simply in an attempt to sound learned or appear cosmopolitan. Ditto for tired clichés and metaphors. Be very skeptical of suggestions from a thesaurus—especially a free, software-based thesaurus—because it will often suggest words are synonyms when in fact they have substantially different connotations or flavors. Mark Twain [observed](#) that “the difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter—’tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning. After that, of course, that exceedingly important brick, the *exact* word...” Choosing the right word, at least, is a basic requirement of writing well; but you should strive to choose the word that expresses *exactly* what you want to say. If saying what you want to say actually requires the “twenty-dollar word,” then by all means use it. I'm not suggesting, as Strunk and White do, that the fancier word is always to be avoided in favor of the simple or common. I'm merely suggesting that you should not choose the longer or less-common term merely because you think it sounds intelligent or sophisticated. Proofread your draft carefully. When you get to the point where you are confident in the argument, grammar, style, and so forth, and find yourself agonizing over individual word choices, you are where you want to be.

## 6. How to Study

The first important point about studying was addressed above: carve out dedicated times in your weekly schedule for studying and stick to them so you don't fall behind. However, you should obviously try to ensure that the time you dedicate to studying is as effective as possible.

You need to make sure you study in an environment conducive to studying. There will no doubt be some personal variability in this choice. Some people study best in the library, some in quiet spot at home, and others in coffee shops. However, don't deceive yourself here. You need to study someplace that will allow you to focus on studying, someplace without temptations or distractions.

In graduate school my Latin reading group would meet a couple of times per week in the local coffee shop to study and work on translations. One winter morning I arrived to find one of my partners already there, sitting at our customary table; however, he had turned his chair away from the table and was now facing the corner, hunched over his book. Confused by his position, which looked like a child who had been given a "time out," I asked, "What's going on?" Without lifting his eyes from the Latin text or turning around he gave an exasperated sigh and muttered, "Girls. Too many pretty girls." So, whatever you need to do to find an environment free of distractions, do it.

To that end, you should swear off multitasking. To study well you need to *monotask*. Start by unplugging—no television, no talk radio, no music with which you will be tempted to sing along, no mobile phone, no Internet. Many of you will assert that you can study perfectly well while watching TV, or while fielding status updates on Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat. [The fact is you cannot](#). You might think that if you remain disciplined and use electronics responsibly, they will aid rather than detract from your education. [Again, you would be wrong](#). Research supports the very common sense notion that when you do two tasks at once you do them both more poorly than you would if you focused exclusively on either one. You simply cannot focus on your work if you have two or three other things competing for your attention. If this seems like a problem, stop now and go back to reread the introductory paragraphs of this document. Given the resources of time and money you are committing to your university education, you should not be engaging the process half-heartedly. If television and Facebook are really that important to you, save yourself the tuition and just go get a job that leaves plenty of time for keeping up with the Kardashians or whomever else you are following.

You will find yourself studying more effectively if you take breaks when necessary. Again, there will be personal variability in this regard. Try giving yourself a 5 or 10-minute break every hour or so; get up, get a drink, stretch the legs, knock out some pull-ups, do some yoga, or whatever. But (a) don't let the 10-minute break turn into 30 minutes or 60 minutes, and (b) when you sit down for the next 50-minute study session, you should focus only on the work in front of you. I sometimes find it useful to change venues during study sessions, especially longer sessions. I'll start at a library and, after several hours, move to a coffee house. After a few hours there, I'll move to another coffee house, and from there to my home office. Of course, not all study sessions are so long. If you only have three or four hours of studying in a given day you might move only once, or not at all. Be sure not to waste time in transit. You will lose your focus if it takes you an hour to accomplish each of those moves; however, on our campus this should not be a problem, as you can move from the library, to your department's "village," to the Lion's Den, to a study room, and back to your dorm with just a few minutes in transit. Obviously, if you find yourself on a roll, don't ruin things by changing venues. Wait until things are going poorly and then try to shake things up a bit with a quick break to move to a new environment.

Try to incorporate as many different “inputs” as possible when studying. That is to say, read, write, and speak as part of your studying. This is one reason it is important to take notes in class: you hear the material, write it down, and later read it back to yourself—engaging the material three different ways. If you explain the material out loud to a study partner you’ve incorporated a fourth way of engaging the material. This sort of “repetition with variation” is one of the best things you can do, and it will go a long way toward helping you to understand the material and fix it in your long-term memory. This, of course, is your goal. Good studying is not about cramming material into short-term memory for an exam without concern for whether or not it is retained over the long haul. Notes, outlines, and summaries are all part of good studying. If you just read the book and leave it at that, you are short-changing yourself.

As you think about varying your study methods, don’t be afraid to incorporate unusual components. When I was in graduate school I was of course reading, writing, and discussing things on a daily basis. However, I was also a very enthusiastic and committed climber, and would spend most weekends (and not a few weekdays) climbing in New Hampshire or Vermont. So, I started building up a set of flash-cards to prepare for my oral comprehensive exams. Now, philosophy is not the sort of thing that lends itself to flash-cards—which are more appropriate for memorizing vocabulary, chemical reactions, or anatomical structures—but I wasn’t studying only with flash-cards. The flash cards were just to supplement all the other work I was doing, and to allow my climbing partners to quiz me on the long drives north to climb. “What are Thomas’s ‘five ways’?” “What are the major steps in Kant’s transcendental deduction?” “What is the definition of *eudaimonia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*?” And so on. Each flash card had bulleted points on the back so my long-suffering, non-philosophical climbing partners could verify my answers on late night or early morning drives to the mountains. Good times; good times.

On that point, don’t discount the power of memorization, which is often disdained these days. You will do yourself an enormous favor if you practice memorizing material—not just scientific formulae or social science statistics, but philosophical arguments, speeches, and poetry as well. It’s a great gift to yourself to memorize some poetry. And by “memorize” I don’t mean “know it well enough to recognize it,” but rather “know it well enough to recite it out loud, from memory, verbatim.” Memorization not only builds intimate familiarity with the material, but also exercises your mind in a way that is becoming increasingly rare in our “let me Google that” culture. However, be aware that memorization alone is insufficient for learning. Oftentimes excellent memorization and good regurgitation are, while necessary for an A, only sufficient for a C. A parrot or a computer can collect and regurgitate information. You, presumably, are a person. Your goal is not only familiarity with data or facts, but also integrating facts into a larger coherent picture, critically engaging information, assessing the value and validity of different arguments, thinking about and cultivating virtue, contemplating the mysterious, and experiencing wonder.

Be careful with study groups. When they work well they can be excellent resources for pooling notes, exchanging papers for proofreading and critique, and verbally explaining key concepts to others, adding the crucial inputs of speaking and listening to the more common reading and writing. However, study groups work poorly more often than they work well. They often degenerate into social get-togethers rather than real study sessions, and very often there will be

one or more slackers who are not pulling their weight. If you are going to use a study group for a specific exam, paper, or class, be sure to identify people who will be serious about the goal of the group, and bow out at the first sign that the group is not focused and really committed to studying.

Read as much as you can given your other commitments. Nothing will enhance your education as much as reading. Your reading should be both deep, investigating your area of interest in greater detail, and wide, engaging things outside your main area of interest so as to expand your horizons.

Finally, though I'm hesitant to mention it here, in the context of trying to get students to take their studies more seriously, remember to live your life and seek out new and varied experiences. Socrates reminds us that the unexamined life is not worth living, and he was certainly right about that. The comments above are designed to aid you in examining and reflecting on your life in the academic context. However, without rejecting or in any way diminishing Socrates' assertion, I'd add that the un-lived life is unworthy of examination; you need to experience the world to have something worth reflecting on.

## **7. How to behave in class**

First and foremost, attend all your class meetings. There is a tremendous temptation to skip classes in college. You are likely living away from home, and so have no authority figure looking over your shoulder to make sure you do your homework and go to class. Many of your professors will not take attendance; assuming you are an adult and are responsible for your own choices, they are willing to give you enough rope to hang yourself. However, trust me, in small classes like those at LMU, your professor notices when you are absent. Don't give in to the temptation to skip classes. It will both harm your comprehension in the course you skip and, eventually, create extra work when you try to catch up.

Since you will be attending your classes, you might as well make the most of your time there. Bring the book under discussion, sit in the front of class, take good notes, ask questions, and participate in discussion. Sitting in front will help you stay attentive and focused, since you will feel like you are in the spotlight of the professor's gaze. Taking notes and bringing the book under discussion will help you to follow lectures and get more out of them. Note, however, that you can go overboard with notes. Different students and different classes will require different approaches. Sometimes it's best to take very detailed notes, as if you are trying to write down everything. Other times it's best to take notes in outline form, as if you are trying to summarize the main themes and key points of the class. Still other times it's best to take few or no notes and simply participate in discussion or follow the lecture without being distracted by writing. You will have to work out what works best for you and what is appropriate for each class.

Note that studies seem to show that [you will be better off taking notes longhand rather than using a computer](#) and, indeed, [even having a computer in class is likely to be detrimental](#) to both you and to those around you. For these reasons, I do not allow students to use electronic or digital devices in my classes. Even the very best students will give in to the temptation to surf the Internet, send emails, check Facebook, or otherwise distract themselves from class. It is

inevitable. However, since some of your professors will let you use computers in class, I suggest that you choose, on your own, to stick with a pencil and paper to avoid getting distracted. If you just can't tear yourself away from the soothing hypnotic glow of your laptop, do yourself a favor and install a program like [Freedom](#) (there are many similar apps), which will disable your wireless connection during class time and help you stay focused. Ideally, folks would just cultivate some self-control; but if people need an aid in doing so, they should use it. As for your cell phone, turn it off while you are in class; you are not that important.

Asking questions—either questions from the reading or questions that come up in the course of the class meeting—will increase the odds that you don't get completely lost. If you ask a question, the professor might be able to clarify things in class, helping you and potentially other students who are struggling with the same issue. If the issue cannot be clarified to your satisfaction during class time, you should visit the professor during his or her office hours. Asking questions and participating in discussion will increase your engagement with the material; and, trust me, whether or not participation is graded, professor's notice who is actively engaged in the class.

In general, you should err on the side of being too fastidious, disciplined, and formal in your class interactions unless and until it becomes clear that you can or should ease up and adopt a more casual attitude. You do not, for example, call your professor by his or her given name unless invited to do so. This is not because your professor is "better" than you, but because the professor-student relationship should have a level of formality to it. Your professor might be friendly; she is not your friend. It doesn't matter if you overhear other people adopt a more casual attitude, stick with "Professor" until invited to do otherwise. In graduate school many students assume they can address their professors informally without first asking permission. That is both rude and presumptuous. I addressed all my professors as "Professor" during graduate school. It took me several years after earning my Ph.D., and a great deal of informal interaction, to address one of my dissertation advisors by his first name. I have another mentor—with whom I am very, very close—who I feel confident I will never address informally.

Likewise, don't treat your professor or class like a DVR system into which you can tune in and tune out at will. Show some respect for your education, your classmates, and your professor. The activity that goes on in a university class isn't a rerun of your favorite sit-com, and you shouldn't act like it is. Don't casually get up to go to the bathroom, don't check your text messages, don't play the class clown, and, in general, don't act like the class is somehow an intrusion on your life that is preventing you from doing something you'd rather do. If you can't behave in this way, then simply go do whatever else you think is more important than your class; but in that case don't complain about failing the class and don't whine about not getting your money's worth out of your college experience.

Dress appropriately. I offer this advisedly, since I tend to be rather casual myself. As far as I'm concerned there is a large range of individual variability and personal style that falls within the "appropriate" range, and I'm not suggesting a jacket and tie for the average class. We are in California, where more casual dress is the norm, something clearly evident in my own sartorial insouciance. Nevertheless, you shouldn't dress inappropriately. Avoid clothing that would be more fitting for either slumber party or a night out clubbing in Hollywood (and that's putting it

delicately). Of course, if you are making a presentation as part of your grade in a class or as part of a research panel, you should take it seriously and dress appropriately.

Other behaviors should be approached with similar restraint: don't bring food or drink to class; don't arrive late; don't pack up before the end of class; don't leave early; don't leave class and return; don't engage in extended, whispered conversations with your classmates; don't read material unrelated to class; and in general treat your class like it is a serious business. Just because others are rude does not mean you should be.

When you communicate with your professors, your email should include an appropriate salutation and closing, and it should use complete, grammatical sentences. Why? Because this is how you will be expected to communicate with others in the professional world, and because this is how you should communicate with others with whom you do not share a familiar relationship. Emailing such people—professional contacts, strangers, etc.—should not be done as if you are texting your friends.

Err on the side of respect, politeness, and class. Trust me, you'll stand out like a prince among thieves in this day and age. I'm giving you this advice for your benefit in other classes, internships, and jobs. In life, even when the expectations are not clearly stated, there are often consequences for half-witted behavior.

Your professor has office hours. Make use of them. In general, you should go to your professor's office hours rather than trying to make an appointment outside those office hours. First, it's simply easier. Second, your professor has many other responsibilities—other classes, other students, grading, class preparation, conferences, publishing expectations, committee work, and home life with his or her family. Although you might be able to arrange a meeting outside posted office hours, it's more complicated to do so. Certainly don't try to arrange a special appointment because your professor's office hours fall during your favorite television show or because of some similarly trivial conflict. Remember, your classes come first and your other activities are scheduled around paying attention to those classes. If, however, there is a genuinely unavoidable conflict—perhaps your professor's office hours are during another one of your classes—don't be shy about asking for an appointment. But never, ever fail to show up for an appointment you have made with your professor outside of office hours. Your professor may well have gone out of her way to accommodate you, arranging for childcare or canceling other appointments. Moreover, other work will have been put off (trust me, your professor has more than enough work to fill the day, and then some). When you do show up—at office hours or for an appointment—it's generally best to arrive prepared to talk about what you want to talk about: bring clear, specific questions. There may be other students trying to see your professor as well, so it's a good idea to make sure you can get your issue taken care of efficiently. If there is no one else waiting and your professor has no other pressing commitments, then you'll have time to chat casually.

Finally, never ask, "will this be on the test?" It doesn't matter if it is on the test or not; if your professor mentions it because he or she thinks it is worth your while to know it. Likewise, never ask your professor, "did I miss anything on Friday?" Seriously? The answer is yes, you missed something. That's what happens when you miss class. Now, if you missed for a good reason, it's

not the end of the world. However, when this happens it is your responsibility to catch up; it is not the professor's job to re-lecture the entire class to you as an independent tutorial. First, do the reading. Next, speak to your classmates and ask them to share notes, as well as observations about what seemed most essential in the lecture or discussion. Then, armed with that preparation, go to see your professor with clear questions about specifics, not the general, and inappropriate, "what did we do Friday?"

## 8. Other Issues Related to University Life

There are many other helpful hints I could offer, but obviously a document like this cannot aim to be comprehensive. If you are interested in some additional thoughts on what to make of your university education, you might take a look at [a short presentation I gave to the incoming class at LMU in 2015](#). Here, however, I'll conclude by offering the following suggestions and insights related to life at university.

Your time as an undergraduate is likely to be some of the most significant of your formative years. Who you are in college influences who you are in your twenties and early thirties; and who you are in your twenties and early thirties has an enormous influence on your prospects in life—educationally, socially, professionally, economically, and existentially. Note that the previous two sentences speak in terms of influence rather than casual determination; there is always the possibility of a second, or third, or fourth chance to get your act together and turn yourself around—something to which my own life is a testament. Nevertheless, whatever life you choose to live, your development during your years at university is likely to be critical in forming your adult self.

With this in mind, make sure you put in the effort to do well whatever you choose to do. Unrealized potential is the most common commodity in the world. Mark Twain observed, [in his autobiography](#), "Thousands of geniuses live and die undiscovered—either by themselves or by others. But for the Civil War, Lincoln and Grant and Sherman and Sheridan would not have been discovered, nor have risen to notice." Those undiscovered geniuses may take comfort in George Eliot's [conviction](#), also no doubt true, that "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs." However, I suspect that excellence is elusive not only because of the vagaries of chance, but also because people don't focus, don't commit, and don't put in the hard work and effort required to realize their potential. I've passionately pursued a number of different endeavors in my life, and I have a fair measure of self-discipline and focus. Once or twice, I've *almost* gotten good at something.

It's up to you to figure out what will constitute a good, meaningful, well-lived life. There are, [as Henry David Thoreau said](#), as many ways to live well as there are "radii from the center of a circle." But, granting the challenges associated with trying to figure out just what kind of life you do want, the earlier you get to work crafting the life you hope to live, the better. It is possible to squander an opportunity and recover later. I myself was a lackluster student as an undergraduate and only got my academic act together when I returned to graduate school later in life. Nevertheless, as an undergraduate you find yourself at a point in life blessed with an

extraordinary number of opportunities and possibilities. If you pass up these opportunities and forgo these possibilities, they may not come around again.

That being said, consider the following points, which don't really fit neatly into any of the topics I've already addressed.

### **(a) Challenge yourself and work hard**

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, in his poem "[The Visionary](#)," that victories over trivial things are, in the end, trivializing:

When we victorious are, it is over small things,  
and though we won, it leaves us feeling small.

Sometimes it is better to be 'defeated'—or, perhaps, in the academic idiom, to fail to achieve an "A"—by a great challenge rather than to be 'victorious' over a trivial one. Because anything that is a real challenge comes with the risk of failure. If success is guaranteed it is, by definition, not challenging.

The secret of... growing lies in this:  
by being totally defeated and disarmed  
by ever greater forces and their cause.

Growing in a variety of ways—but especially as an intellectual—should be a major goal of your university years; and this requires both trying new things and trying difficult things.

Trying new things is essential to expanding your horizons, and university is one of the best places to accomplish this. Unless you are very, very lucky you are unlikely to ever again live within a five-minute walk of intellectual debates, choral concerts, dance recitals, theater performances, poetry readings, and all the other things that are regular events on a university campus. You may be a chemistry major, but you won't know if you also love poetry until you hear, read, and perhaps write some poetry. Use your time at university to become more fully alive and to exercise the full scope of your humanity.

In addition to trying new things, you should challenge yourself by trying more difficult things. Imagine a student who is already conversationally fluent in Spanish. She could enroll in a beginning Spanish course where she can be confident of an "A" that would boost her GPA—which seemed to be a common practice among a number of the students in my Japanese courses at UCLA—or she could enroll in a Spanish literature class in which she will struggle to read great literature in the original Spanish. Which is more likely to help her grow and develop?

That friend of mine who did his undergraduate at Berea struggled a bit during his first semester at university. Deciding to try and set things right, he identified a group of "A" students and struck up some friendships, hoping to figure out what he was doing wrong. So far so good. However, he realized quickly that this particular group of students maintained high GPAs because they declared easy majors and dropped any class that appeared difficult. Thankfully, my friend was mature enough to realize that there was something fundamentally wrong with this

strategy. Rejecting the easy road, he decided to simply take the classes that interested him and let the chips fall where they may. He ended up a double-major in philosophy and classics, and, amazingly, did not open up a single report card during the rest of his time at Berea. He focused on his education instead of his grades. After he graduated, he sat down with his uncle and a bottle of bourbon, and together they opened each report card, laughing and joking about the various grades he had earned. Incidentally, this approach worked perfectly well in terms of his practical career prospects: he went on to graduate school, where I met him, and then to a successful career in academia.

### **(b) Be responsible for your choices and your actions**

This one seems so simple, but on reflection it is one of the most difficult of these various recommendations. It's difficult in part because we have so few examples of people behaving in this way. In our society everyone seems to have an excuse ready when things go poorly, and few people are willing to admit that the problem—or even part of the problem—lay in inadequate preparation, lack of discipline, or insufficient effort.

Students bear the ultimate responsibility for their own education. Of course, faculty are responsible as well: faculty must present the material, assist in its comprehension, model certain virtues, and in general mentor students as they develop. Nevertheless, the prime responsibility for your education lies with you. It is your responsibility to be organized and disciplined, to prepare for class, to engage the material, to seek out opportunities for enrichment, and to ask for help when you need it. It's your responsibility to do the work necessary to succeed, including any remedial work you might need. Unfortunately, more and more students are coming to university unprepared to produce work sufficient to earn an A. In some cases, students are arriving at university unprepared to produce work sufficient to earn a B or even a C. Wherever you fall on this scale of preparedness, you should get ready to step it up. If you were earning A and B marks in high school and find yourself earning C marks at LMU, the solution is not to whine, complain, or make excuses. The solution is to seek assistance (because faculty and staff are here to help you) and redouble your efforts (because faculty and staff cannot do the work for you). The vast majority of LMU students complaining about their grades are not even approaching [the university's suggestion of three hours of work each week for each unit of credit](#), much less exceeding it. How can you complain about your grade when you aren't putting in the required work? This holds whether you earned a C and want a B, or earned an A- and want an A. You are never going to whine your way ahead in life, though the prevalence of this tactic in our society may indicate why it is the first option for many people. Instead, try working harder.

If you make choices that indicate your education is not your first priority, you should be ready to take responsibility for your decisions. It becomes quite irritating to hear, as I have over the years, student X whine about the amount of reading assigned over a weekend, or bemoan a required extracurricular outing that conflicts with a party, or complain indignantly about the final schedule because the exam is on a Friday, especially when I happen to know that student Y is first-generation college student working full-time, or is raising children, or is on chemotherapy, or is helping to care for her dying parent and, in each case, is not using it as an excuse. I hasten to add that I am actually *very willing* to go well out of my way to help students like “student Y,” who are dealing with real challenges or problems, and such students should feel welcome to

discuss these issues with me. However, if you are a “student X,” don’t expect me to think that your family vacation in Hawaii, planning the sorority formal, lip-sync practice, or auditioning for a role on some reality television program qualifies as a “real challenge or problem.” (Note that all these “student X” and “student Y” examples are drawn from actual students I’ve known.)

I am not ignoring or dismissing the reality of unequal circumstances, unforeseeable tragedy, or unwarranted misfortune; but it is astonishing how far good, old-fashioned, roll-up-your-sleeves work will get you. It won’t do everything, because life is not fair; there’s an undeniable element of chance and luck at play. If your economic circumstances require that you work while in school—as mine did—it’s hard not to resent students with financial resources that allow them to focus solely on their studies (even if few choose to do so). Moreover, there are other elements of chance at play: some people happen to be smarter than others; some people find self-discipline easier than others; some students have the good fortune of being better prepared than others; some people have extra-curricular obligations, burdens, or challenges that others do not have to deal with. Nevertheless, each person must play the hand she’s been dealt as best as she can. There is no use, as Seneca notes, dissipating yourself in “pursuit other men’s fortunes, or in complaining [about your] own.” Work hard. Persevere. Believe in yourself, but without deluding yourself. Don’t be afraid to seek help when you need it. Despite the fact that life isn’t fair and people don’t always get what they deserve, you’ll be surprised at how often we reap what we sow.

### **(c) Don’t ‘over commit’**

One of the big pitfalls that trips up otherwise promising students is getting spread too thin, committing to a large number of endeavors that would individually be goods but which together become an anchor that pulls them down. Would you rather do a dozen things poorly or three things very well?

I had a student several years ago who I met during the fall semester of his senior year. He was clearly bright and seemed reasonably hard-working, but he seemed stuck as a B- student in my class no matter what we did. Over lunch one day he apologized for his mediocre performance in class, and indicated that an overcommitted schedule was proving to be a major problem. When he arrived at LMU from high school, he was prepared to buckle down and work hard. All his advisors, all the orientation counselors, and all his professors told him to he would have to work harder than he ever did in high school, and that classes would be more demanding and more difficult. In his first semester he worked hard and was rewarded with straight A marks in all his classes. However, as he settled in to life at LMU during his second semester he realized he could probably get those A marks with a bit less work, and he became involved in a number of clubs, a fraternity, a service organization, and so on. Soon he found himself stretched too thin; his grades slipped from As to Bs and Cs, and even his other interests often felt like obligations that he couldn’t quite meet as he should. In my experience, this is a common story. What feels like overcommitment is very often, as a student once told me, “under-commitment to too many things.”

It’s possible to do too much, even if the things you are trying to do are individually good things. Go back to the beginning of this essay, think about your schedule and how many hours there are

in the week. Neither social life, nor service orgs, nor Greek life, nor student government should be your primary focus. You are at LMU for an education. You will have time for other things as well. But if you really dedicate yourself to your education, you've got room for, at most, a handful of other things. When one of the things you are doing costs \$56,000 per year, it's better to do two or three things well than to do a dozen things poorly. Keep your priorities straight.

To that end, I strongly suggest you do not join a fraternity or sorority. This recommendation is likely to be met with disdain or scorn at LMU—disdain from those freshmen who aspire to join a fraternity or sorority, and scorn from those students who are already members. Nevertheless, since this essay may persuade at least a few among the former, I feel compelled to make the point. Fraternities and sororities generally work at cross-purposes with your educational goals, or at least with the educational goals you ought to have. To explain at length why this is the case would take more space than I'm allocating to this point here; but the argument includes concerns about misplaced priorities, the goals of university experience, hazing, mob mentality, individuality, social identity, sexual assault, substance abuse, and much more. I'm happy to discuss this issue with you if you are interested.

It is true that some excellent students are in fraternities and sororities. Indeed, among the dozen or so truly great students I've known in two decades at LMU, at least two belonged to a sorority, apparently enjoyed it, seized the opportunity to get a great education, and went on to prestigious post-graduate endeavors. Thus, those of you in the Greek system can rest assured that I will treat you as unique individuals in the hope that you will prove yourself to be another anomaly. However, I remain convinced that, for the vast majority of LMU students, Greek organizations actively undermine their ability to get the best possible education.

That's not the same thing as saying that joining a fraternity or sorority will lead directly to worse grades (although it might). Remember, while this document says a great deal about how to succeed in the pragmatic task of maintaining an excellent academic record, your real education cannot be reduced to your grade point average.

#### **(d) Become the person you want to be**

There are relatively few transitions in life that afford you the ability to make a break with your past. Of course, we can never fully escape our history, but there are moments—and moving out of your parents' home to attend university is one of them—of relatively radical rupture. When you arrive at LMU, nobody knows what sort of person you were in high school and people don't have any expectations about who you are and what you have done. The upshot? You don't have to step right into whatever role you played in high school. You don't have to be the “class clown,” “jock,” “party girl/boy,” “nerd,” “loner,” or whatever other persona you occupied during high school. You can start the project of making yourself the person you want to become without the accumulated weight of the person people expect you to be.

The flip side of this is that, if you are quite comfortable with who you are and who you are becoming, you still need to continue the work of self-development here at LMU. Your professors do not know you are an “A” student or a “good” student (they are not the same thing), so you are going to have to prove that you are. Unlike your high school, where your 10th grade teachers

may have told your 11th grade teachers what a fine student you were, your favorite high school teacher (or parent, or priest, or mentor, or whatever) has not communicated to the LMU faculty your exceptional qualities. In fact, even if they had done so it might be viewed with skepticism given grade inflation and the hyperbole of letters of recommendation. If you are the sort of student who thinks of herself as smart, dedicated, hard-working, and creative, you've still got to show others that you are those things.

Wherever you are in the process of self-cultivation, choose wisely and think very carefully about what you want out of life. Read some philosophy and literature to get a sense of what sorts of lives might be meaningful. Then read some history, economics, and psychology to complement those insights. Varied sorts of research suggest that most people are very bad at predicting what will actually make them happy and, as a consequence, many people spend a great deal of time and energy pursuing things that are ultimately not in their best interests. Think about that carefully, and frequently.

You should also think carefully about the people with whom you choose to be friends, as your friends will exert an extraordinary degree of influence on the person you will become. If you are thinking of joining a club, or fraternity, or sorority, consider the people involved. When you are a freshman, it is all too easy focus on how "fun" it is to stumble off the Thursday night party bus with the seniors in whatever organization you are thinking of joining. However, you ought to be asking yourself another sort of question as you laugh at drunken upperclassmen stumbling around at 2:00am the night before an exam or other commitment: not "isn't he fun to hang out with," but rather "is that the person that I want to be in four years?"

It is certainly important to have fun, and that includes revelry, silliness, horseplay, and 'killing time' doing 'useless' things. Well and good. But there's more to life than that. Much more. You've got one life to live: one "wild, precious life," as Mary Oliver puts it. Think carefully about how you intend to spend it.

### **(e) Don't be stupid**

There are a number of predictable pitfalls you should avoid at university, chief among them substance abuse and academic dishonesty.

I am neither naive nor prudish, and I expect that students will experiment, in a wide variety of ways, during their university years. Alcohol is not an unmitigated evil, and the worst part of university drinking culture is that students seem utterly incapable of indulging in a moderate and responsible manner. If student drinking amounted to opening a bottle of wine with dinner rather than shotgunning beer, keg stands, and binge drinking then student drinking would be a non-issue. I'll leave it up to you whether or not you choose to drink; however, if you do choose to drink, I urge you in the strongest possible terms to drink moderately and responsibly. Alcoholism can be a real problem in some cases; and, even if you don't become a full-blown alcoholic, drinking can seriously interfere with your well-being: undermining your education, impacting your grades, putting you in unsafe or vulnerable situations with strangers or acquaintances who may themselves be impaired by alcohol, leading you to make poor choices that alienate friends,

affecting your health through weight gain, and so on. Don't drink to get drunk and never, ever, under any circumstance get behind the wheel of a car if you have been drinking.

Stay away from illegal drugs and from abusing legal drugs, including Adderall and similar substances. Bracketing for the moment the issue of which drugs are more or less harmful, getting caught with any illegal drug is a mistake that can follow you for some time and foreclose opportunities that you may regret losing. It should go without saying that you should stay well clear of any serious drug. Without getting too far into personal history, I've seen people become addicted to serious drugs and can assure you that such a state is something you want to avoid at all costs, including the cost of not experimenting at all with these substances. Drug addiction is not trivial, is not pretty, is not something one brings under control easily, and, as any addict will tell you, is not something from which one ever fully recovers. Abusing prescription drugs can lead to similar outcomes.

The other predictable temptation is academic dishonesty: cheating, plagiarism, and the like. There are strong practical and ethical reasons not to cheat. Unfortunately, academic dishonesty runs rampant in the modern university. Statistics suggest that most students will cheat in some way during their undergraduate careers, so many of your acquaintances will be cheating in one way or another and you may be tempted implicitly or explicitly to cheat yourself. Don't give in to this temptation. First, there will be consequences if you are caught. These consequences vary from professor to professor; however, my own policy is to fail the cheater in the class, not simply on the assignment, and to report the dishonesty to the appropriate Dean or Deans. Imagine failing a class because you were caught cheating on a relatively minor assignment. If it is an egregious case or a repeat offense, I will advocate for the expulsion of the student from the university. Academic dishonesty undermines the integrity of the university community, undermines your fellow students, and undermines your own education.

Well, that's the end of the essay. However, for those who are interested, here are a few other thoughts.

### **(f) Final thoughts**

Here are some final thoughts that either don't fit under the topics above or which I have not had time to integrate into this essay, which remains a work in progress. I apologize for the awkward laundry list of what follows, and for the fact that a number of these final thoughts stray from the topic of "how to behave while at university" and encroach on the "life lessons" that have been too often debased by a host of pop psychologists and self-help hacks. You're better off reading the great thinkers—ancient and contemporary—of the various wisdom traditions, who address how to live well more profoundly than I. Nevertheless, if for nothing else than to serve as a placeholder for ideas I may develop and include above:

1. Don't forget to slow down, be idle, and appreciate the present moment. I realize this essay might sound as if you should be an academic workaholic, but in some measure this is a result of the target audience: it's what most undergraduates need to hear. Nevertheless, it is certainly possible to focus too much on activity, work, and productivity. Indeed, in many ways that sort of misguided hyperactivity is endemic to our

culture. Life is about more than producing results, and if you lose sight of that you will likely end up profoundly unhappy. Read *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (Tolstoy), *The Razor's Edge* (Maugham), and *Walden* (Thoreau) as primers.

2. Although this essay focuses on your intellectual life, don't neglect your physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.
3. Read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Cultivate moral virtues. Simplicity, discipline, courage, temperance, compassion, generosity, and proper pride/humility are good places to begin.
4. Become self-disciplined. You will find it indispensable in achieving your goals, whatever they are.
5. Beyond a modest threshold that you are likely to achieve in any number of ways, money will not make you happy, so avoid making life choices as if it will.
6. Nevertheless, you should do what you can to avoid debt, especially debt that is not justified by the long-term benefit to your well-being. Why? Because debt infringes on your freedom. I spent much of my 20s traveling around the world or climbing. I had no money, and so lived very frugally: living in tents or cars (for years), working sporadically, traveling on a shoestring budget, forgoing certain comforts and most luxuries, and so on. I was able to spend the better part of a decade like this because I had no debt weighing me down. Note that I did not come from money; I started working at 14 and worked full-time throughout most of my undergraduate career. But I avoided debt with the only economic principle you really need: spend less than you make. (That being said, some kinds of debt do make long-term sense, including reasonable debt for a university degree or buying a home.)
7. Cultivate simplicity. Learn to accurately distinguish needs from wants. Take pleasure in the simple things in life.
8. Learn how to sit around a table with others and make conversation like an educated adult. Become genuinely comfortable eating and socializing in circumstances as diverse as a circle in the dirt at a campfire, a dinner party at a friend's house, and a formal banquet or celebration.
9. Be courteous. Discourtesy, posturing, and bluster of all sorts are, as Eric Hoffer noted, the weak person's imitation of strength.
10. Regularly do things that benefit others, and do them because they benefit others. Living selfishly results in an empty life.
11. Don't be a poser. Rather than pretending you are something, or someone, you are not, why not become the person you want to be?
12. Study a foreign language to a respectable level. If you can, become bilingual, or better, polyglot.
13. Travel, but not frivolously. Travel is better on a low-budget, low-carbon, low-resource model that will allow you to experience a different culture without the filter created by a mobile bubble of affluence or familiarity catering to your customary habits. Stop planning your travel around Instagram shots. In fact, get off Instagram. Be a traveler, not a tourist. Better yet, be an immigrant, if only temporarily. Live for a while as an expat. If you are going to study abroad, go for a year rather than a semester, and a semester rather than a summer.

14. Familiarize yourself with the history of your country, culture, family, or religious tradition. Be both proud (where appropriate) and critical (where appropriate) of these traditions.
15. If you want to be good at something, practice regularly. Remember that practice doesn't make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect. You can't just do something; you need to do it purposefully and mindfully, with the intent of getting better.
16. Be sure to arrive on time for situations in which someone is depending on you. This includes classes, work, and similar quotidian commitments. "On time" is a shorthand expression meaning "five minutes early."
17. Take pride in your work.
18. Appreciate and care for nature. Learn the names and habits of local flora and fauna. Learn about local edible plants. Familiarize yourself with the different ecosystems in your bioregion.
19. Spend time outdoors. Get away from cities, towns, roads, and buildings. Leave the car and travel on your own two feet.
20. Spend some time alone, enough so that you no longer associate being alone with being lonely. It's important to remember we are social beings, and that friends and family contribute to our flourishing; but if you only know yourself in society—as you fulfill the social roles of student, son, daughter, friend, employee, and so forth—you're missing something. Take a solo trip or attend a silent retreat. Get comfortable being with yourself.
21. Learn to cook for yourself and your friends.
22. Grow some of your food.
23. Learn to repair things rather than disposing of them.
24. Choose a sport or physical activity to pursue. It will keep you healthy, and it is better, cheaper, and more interesting than joining a gym. Seriously, with the whole wide beautiful world out there, how sad is it to plod along on a treadmill while you stare at some television? Pretty damn sad.
25. Cultivate an appreciation for art and, in addition, try to develop some artistic talents of your own: learn to play an instrument, sing, write poetry, paint, or whatever else suits your spirit.
26. Memorize poetry. To memorize great poetry is to give yourself a gift that lasts a lifetime.

More to come I'm sure.

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