STUDENTS, you must boot up your minds for the 21st century. You already know how quickly everything around you changes—seemingly on a daily basis. This fast and furious evolution means that you have to become an excellent learner to keep up with a future where change is an everyday occurrence. In short, it means that you will have to be a student for the rest of your life. Imagine yourself in a job or a career. As each new thing comes along, you have to learn it right away. Whether it is on the job or in the classroom, it is the same thing: learn, learn, learn.

You are in for a lifetime of change and learning—welcome to the Information Age. How will you manage it? If you become an excellent thing: learn, learn, learn.

The harder you study, the more you will want to study because you are ready for the new challenges that lie ahead. If you get better at what you do—learning—the more you will want to learn. You will feel that being a student every day means more than you ever imagined. It is a fantastic feeling. Being a “serious” student does not mean you lose the fun in your life or become a different person. Serious means dynamic. You take control each day so that you can do everything you need and want to do. It means becoming an independent and good student who improves day by day.

The plain fact is that what you do every day as a student—listening with attention to your teachers in class, following directions, completing assignments, meeting deadlines, and studying with concentration—has far-reaching effects. What you do now as a student mirrors what you will do as an adult in the workplace: going off to work each day, getting there on time, doing a job according to someone’s directions, meeting deadlines and the demands of others, and trying to succeed by using your head. These are skills that employers prize.

School teaches you to become a person who gets things done. All of those assignments, tests, projects, lab reports, and papers teach you how to be self-motivated and active. If you have initiative and energy, employers will hire you. Later, your boss will notice these abilities, allowing you to move up the ladder. Productive people always are in high demand.

Serious students are going places. They are moving ahead. They are better organized, and they succeed in everything—from extracurriculars to classes. What about you? What would your friends say if they were asked if you will be successful? From semester to semester, from year to year, successful students are in control of themselves: focused and balanced. They see an exciting future for themselves. They plan ahead. They set and reach goals—like climbing a mountain.

If you are a student who is serious about succeeding, you need to look at the entire mountain. You should be thinking about reaching the peak and enjoying the view from the top (it is your future), but some climbers only watch the path that is right in front of them or the rock that they are crawling over at that moment.

Do you think school is something to get through and leave behind? Do you find school dull? Maybe you are waiting for the excitement to begin, but it never seems to arrive. You live in the moment. Do you think of school in terms of compartments? You move from one course to the next, one semester to the next, one year to the next. Each is separate, and one compartment seems just like the next. You are bored. You do not really exert yourself. You work just hard enough to get okay grades. Basically, you are satisfied with getting by. Setting goals is not something you think about.

Then again, perhaps you are the type who earns pretty good grades but, basically, you work for grades, not to learn, not really. You have no real sense of how all your classes fit together to form a whole. There is no big picture for you, either.

What I term “college smart” is what all students should be striving for. College is the high point of your education, so whether you already are in college, or on your way, you need to become college smart—at the top of your educational game. When you are college smart, you know that grades are not your only goal. They certainly are important, but you always are thinking of the larger purpose: studying and learning to build your future.

Gaining knowledge, developing learning skills, and achieving your course goals all mean that you are looking beyond classes, semesters, and grades. Even if your life goals are a bit hazy, you always are thinking ahead. For instance, you might say to yourself: “I like math. I wonder if I would like engineering or business?” or “I like language and literature. I wonder if I would make a good lawyer, journalist, or press secretary for someone in government?”

Every course you take develops (exercises) your mind in a different way. All courses come together to form a whole. Taking one class seriously but blowing off others narrows your mind and closes doors to your future. Broad knowledge gives you different types of opportunities in the workplace and makes you more valuable.

Of real value is the ability to communicate—to write, read, speak, and listen. When you were in high school, how did you rank yourself on each of these four types of communication? Were you a pretty good reader, but not so good at writing assignments, especially long ones? Did you groan a lot? Did you like talking to your friends, but not talking in class? Did you find it hard concentrating on what your teacher was saying?

Evaluate your ability at communication. Besides school assignments,
All of these other qualities you bring to the table. Just about every job out there demands that your communication skills be competent. So, too, does every college course.

Naturally, you will be asked to do more writing in your literature, history, and social science courses than in your natural and physical science classes. However, in all of the courses you will be expected to utilize basic communication skills with proficiency. Whether you are composing lab reports or research papers, they must be at college level in terms of grammar, spelling, sentence and paragraph structure, overall organization, and coherence.

Obviously, you have to read in all of your courses in varying amounts but, no matter what the subject, your reading has to be focused. You are going to have to read constantly with concentration in the workplace.

When you use your communications skills informally, you can be casual or relaxed. You may read through a magazine or newspaper quickly; you may write a short e-mail to someone in your family; you chat casually when you are out for dinner with a friend or walking on campus with a classmate.

Different communication skills are needed in formal situations. Just look at what you do in college. How can you possibly know what is going on in a class without listening carefully and taking accurate notes? How can you understand what you are supposed to learn without reading with concentration, highlighting select passages, and organizing good notes? How can you write an articulate and intelligent paper on what you have read—such as literature or some event in economics—without knowing and applying all of the basic rules of writing, from accurate spelling and grammar to coherent sentences and paragraphs as well as a persuasive essay structure?

When you ask questions in class or when you speak with your professors privately (both of which you should do regularly), are you going to stumble around verbally and use a bunch of uhs and you-knows with lots of dead air space? Can you find words and assemble them intelligently, or do you stammer and grope for them?

When you finally reach the workplace, you will have a supervisor, manager, and boss. These are the people who make sure you have the knowledge to do your job. Your supervisor tells you how to use your knowledge to help the organization, then assigns you work, and finally, evaluates your performance. That performance evaluation moves up the line and crosses the desks of your department manager, his or her boss, and so on.

That evaluation measures how well you have done your job; how much initiative you have brought to it; how much you have advanced and improved yourself (striving to do better and learn more); how you have advanced the interests of your employer by being a creative and imaginative problem-solver; how well you collaborate with colleagues; and how much you can be trusted to do your work—your dedication and dependability level.

Does that sound like a combination of all the courses and teachers you ever have had? Doesn’t this list describe what you are supposed to do in the classroom? Classrooms are like workplaces. You have: a job to do that requires work on your part; assignments to finish; responsibilities to take care of; to be accountable to someone in charge; and deadlines to meet. The quality of your work determines whether or not you move up the ladder.

As you think about these important goals, think about this: you obviously are not going to love every college course, professor, assignment, and test. No one can love everything in life, but respecting most everything is the mature thing to do. It is the college thing to do. So, put plenty of space between yourself and students who still take the adolescent view, constantly complaining that “I hate this,” or “I hate that,” or “This course is stupid. Why do I have to take it?” or “I’ll never use this stuff. It’s dumb.”

College is the time to learn respect for what goes on around you—and be sure to carry that attitude with you throughout your life.

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