

A letter came from a new college student:

September, 1995

How are you doing? It's been a while since I have gotten to speak to you, but I can still remember what you told me the last time we were together. I'm trying to stay on track and not lose sight of my priorities here, but I'm hitting a few bumps. My athletics are going very well [the student was on the swim team at his college] and I'm getting in shape, but I'm having a really hard time getting myself to study and I think I'm finally starting to suffer from homesickness. I was wondering if you might have any suggestions. I'm glad that I now have this way to get in touch with everyone. Thanks a lot. I would really appreciate your advice and your response.

Sincerely,

[—]

---

This was my reply:

Dear [—],

The best and first thing I can suggest is to spend a little time thinking about why you are where you are. If you do not have a good answer for that, you will have more of the struggle you describe. The students who excel are those who have a personal stake in what they are doing.

Among the good answers that some students find are:

1. "I am here to get an education. For probably the last time in my life, I have a chance to study and learn undistracted by the question of what am I going to eat and where am I going to live, and how will I be able to pay for it. I have access to intelligent people, my professors, whose life work is to help people like me learn about the world in which we live. They are going to work hard to lay before me ideas and concepts that I may not have seen before, or that I may not have seen all the implications of before. My part is to do what they ask me to do--to read, to do homework as practice, to listen and take notes, to discuss and argue, to debate and challenge, to learn to write and to speak my thoughts in a coherent manner and to learn to accept criticism of my ideas in a productive manner--a manner that leads to my being better able to express myself. I CANNOT do these things if I spend my time and energy playing around and ignoring my academic work. I cannot, therefore, become what I am capable of becoming if I spend my time goofing off. Nobody expects me to do nothing but go to class and study, but my principal occupation should be to go to class and study. People who are successful in life normally spend at least 40 hours a week working at their jobs. This is my job for now, so I will spend at least 40 hours a week going to class and studying. Some people have to work two jobs, because their resources are such that they have to do so in order to maintain their lifestyle. In my case, swimming is my second job. It is not my principal job--that is studying and going to class--but swimming is number 2. I will give it the attention and devotion it requires, because swimming is my outlet, my means of self expression, and perhaps my passage to better things."
2. "I am here to build a foundation for my life. For perhaps the last time in my life, I have the chance to prepare for life, undistracted by the question of what am I going to eat and where am I going to live, and how will I be able to pay for it. There are people all around me who have already lived a lot of their lives, and who have experience and knowledge that I need. I am going to take advantage of them. I am going to demand their attention and I am going to be unsatisfied if they do not work hard at helping me. But I CANNOT expect this of them unless I first demand something of myself. I have to work at least as hard as they do. I realize that I have an opportunity that some people in this world only dream of. I have the chance to attend a fine university, to study with excellent teachers, and thereby prepare myself for the best life has to offer. I cannot afford to waste a day or even an hour on things that are not lasting and significant and long term. Knowledge is permanent. Wisdom opens other doors of opportunity. I want knowledge and wisdom, because I want to do something useful and significant in my life."

3. "I am here to prepare to serve. I know that there are people who need help and I want to be a helper. There is so much I can do, but I CANNOT do those things if I do not prepare now. For perhaps the last time in my life, I have the chance to prepare for a life of service, undistracted by the question of what am I going to eat and where am I going to live, and how will I be able to pay for it. People all around me have already made the transition from preparing to serve to serving. I want to find them. I want to learn from them. I want to spend my time doing things that matter. The work I do in class is preparing me, and I have heard people say that they never realized the effect that this or that course of study would have on them. I want then to treat every class, every lab, as a special opportunity, to learn something new, to understand something better, because I do not know what I need to know, and the more I know, the more prepared I will be for what life throws at me."

There are others, but maybe this will give you a starting place to get your own answer. Please, do not make the mistake of wasting time and opportunity. You have a chance. Don't throw it away.

With concern,

Bill