

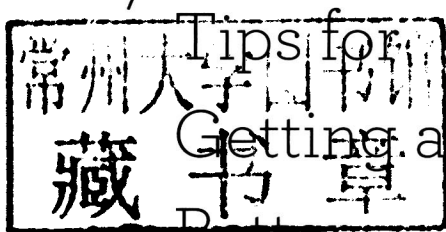
The Thinking Student's Guide to College



Chicago

The Thinking Student's Guide to College

75



Education

Andrew Roberts

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The Thinking Student's Guide to College

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How to Study
Arthur W. Kornhauser

*Succeeding as an International Student
in the United States and Canada*
Charles Lipson

Doing Honest Work in College
Charles Lipson

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Introduction

What do you want out of college? If it is just a diploma and a good time, this is not the book for you. Nor will I provide much advice on getting along with your roommate or balancing your studies and your social life. Even if what you want is straight As, you should probably look elsewhere. There are already dozens of books that will help you in these areas.

If, on the other hand, you think that college should be a place where professors challenge you to do the best you are capable of, provide you with personalized feedback on your work, and show you new ways of understanding the world, then you are in the right place. This book will show you how to get such an education.

You might assume that such advice is not necessary, that all colleges are designed to lead you by the hand and draw out the best that is in you (the word “educate” comes from the Latin *e* + *ducere*, or “draw out”). After all, that is their reason for being. As a card-carrying member of the academic guild, I won’t tell you that this is wrong. They might take away my card. What I will say is that colleges and universities do many things, only some of which are geared to giving undergraduates the best possible education.

Universities, for example, must please their alumni and donors for whom a first-class football team may be more important than a better learning experience. They also take it as their mission to train the next generation of professors—that means graduate students, not you. Most are committed to creating new knowledge, an activity known as research, which is not necessarily a boon to teaching. Universities even have to make sure that we faculty are happy and won’t run off to the business world where salaries are better. As the University of California’s Clark Kerr memorably put it, the job of the college president is to provide “parking for the faculty, sex for the students, and athletics for the alumni.”

Some of these activities (I haven't listed all of them here) may contribute to your education or simply make it possible at a (somewhat) reasonable price.¹ Others, however, may get in your way. Universities gather too many smart people in one place to completely prevent you from getting a great undergraduate education. Unfortunately, most universities also have a path of least resistance where less ambitious and uninformed students float by, getting far less out of college than they could.

This book is not addressed to less ambitious students. It is addressed to the uninformed who want more, but do not know how to get it. It is for those students who want to be challenged, who want to produce original and consequential work, who want to be exposed to new ways of thinking, who want in short to leave college a different and better person than they entered it.

I was inspired to write this book by students who, after four years of higher learning, realized that they should have been doing something different. That in place of rote learning and impersonal interactions, they should have taken classes from engaged professors who challenged them to think creatively and produce meaningful work.

I have met many such students. Often they come to me during their senior year seeking a letter of recommendation and I can barely recall them from the giant lecture class they took with me. I ask them if they might not ask another professor who knows them better, but they claim that I am the one they feel closest to. Sometimes I ask them about the accomplishment in their college career they are proudest of and they have trouble recalling one.

These students are inevitably smart and hardworking, and I am continually amazed that they have completed college without finding a subject they genuinely cared about, writing a paper they truly believed in, or meeting a professor who gave them more than the time of day. This book is an attempt to avert these lost opportunities and give more students the chance to get the best possible education they can. Its aim is to turn sighs of "I wish I had known" and "I wish I had done things differently" into shouts of "I wouldn't have done it any other way."

1. In fact, universities set their prices below costs in order to attract more students than they can admit and increase their cachet by being choosy among them. See Gordon C. Winston, "The Economic Structure of Higher Education: Subsidies, Consumer Inputs, and Hierarchy," Williams College Project on the Economics of Higher Education, DP-4, 1996.

The book does this in a specific way. It does not teach study skills, how to get As, or how to navigate the social scene. For those interested in getting a better education, such advice is hardly necessary, and as I mentioned above dozens of books already cover these topics. I am also not going to take you on a tour of actual colleges. There are plenty of books that do that already and emphasize trivial or nonexistent differences while ignoring enormous similarities.

What this book does is give you an insider's look at how universities deliver an education. Its view is from the ground floor, from what I believe is the fundamental interaction in a university education: the relationship between students and professors. While this might seem like the element of university life that is easiest to navigate, it is in fact the place where you will face some of the highest barriers to getting the best education you can.

Consider the following contrast. Joe Ordinary goes to the top-ranked school that he gets into, chooses its two most popular majors, and takes their highest-rated courses, most of them large lecture classes. He also graduates without meeting any of his professors, without producing any work that he is proud to call his own, without having explored any fields he didn't know beforehand, and with a mountain of student loans.

Jane Extraordinary, by contrast, chooses a less selective (and cheaper) school but opts for a smaller, offbeat major where she gets a lot of individualized attention, makes friends with several of her professors, and ends up coauthoring a paper with one of them. Because she leaves school without much debt, she spends her first year after graduation doing charitable work in a foreign country and returns home to attend a PhD program (OK, this last part is wishful thinking on my part).

While I would not shed tears over the fate of Joe, I would argue that he has not gotten as much out of college as he could have. And I think he may agree with me. He has surely become credentialed and will succeed in a job market that rates those credentials highly. But he has also spent over \$200,000 for an education that he probably could have gotten for a fraction of the cost. He has not taken advantage of even a fraction of the resources that a university has to offer. Jane did this and has gotten a better education not to mention more value for her tuition dollar.

A recent survey confirms that these differences are large and widespread. It asked students at over a thousand colleges and universities how much their university challenged them academically and gave them an enrich-

ing educational experience among other things.² The results were striking. At every college, there was a lot of variation. Some students felt they were constantly being challenged to do better and had lots of interaction with professors and an enriching education experience, while others felt just the opposite. What varied was not the universities—the same pattern showed up everywhere, from Harvard to Podunk U—but the students. Some students managed to suck the juice out of their college, while others were left with the rind. The aim of this book is to show you how to find the juice.

Just to make clear what I am aiming for, I view a great education as maximizing the amount of personal interaction between committed students and great professors. In an anecdote I will return to, my ideal is a smart and caring professor on one end of a log and a student (or handful of students) on the other. It envisions students solving complex problems under the guidance of an experienced mentor and receiving constant feedback on their efforts. It exposes students to as many new ideas and styles of thinking as possible. It tries to identify and sharpen students' natural talents, while not neglecting their weaknesses.

As you might guess, few American universities offer exactly such an education. At least three obstacles stand in the way. The first is cost: it would be prohibitively expensive to give all students the personal attention they want from truly qualified faculty members. The second is research: universities today are structured around producing knowledge rather than teaching students for reasons I explain in chapter 1. The third is incentives: professors have few incentives to devote themselves to giving students the best possible education and many incentives to teach undergraduates in a perfunctory way.³

While these obstacles make it harder to have a great learning experience, they do not make it impossible. You simply need to learn how to do it. The trick is to know how universities work. All universities have what I will call, for lack of a better term, loopholes, which give you access to the sort of personalized education I have just described. They are hidden in such institutions as mandatory office hours, drop-add periods, research assistantships,

2. See the National Survey of Student Engagement, *Promoting Engagement for All Students: The Imperative to Look Within: 2008 Results*, Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, www.nsse.iub.edu. It is discussed at more length in chapter 2.

3. A fourth obstacle is that many students, hopefully not those reading this book, do not wish to be challenged and work hard; they view college as a time to relax and socialize.

honors programs, and senior theses. Universities make ends meet because most students do not take advantage of these loopholes. What I will show you is how to exploit the system as it is currently set up so that you do get personalized attention from committed professors.

In the process, I will also try to demystify the workings of universities. Most students spend four years at college without understanding what makes the place tick. Few have any idea what professors do in the hours when they are not teaching and what sort of relationship they have with teaching. They have a vague idea that something called research goes on at the university, but don't know what it means or how it affects them for good or ill. My hope is that by explaining how universities work, I will make it easier for students to get the most out of them.

Some of the questions I will explore are the following. What makes some universities different from others and all of them similar to each other? What motivates professors, and why are some better teachers than others? How do you identify the best professors and get them to devote attention to you? What should you look for in choosing a college, courses, and a major? And how can you improve your education outside the classroom?

The book itself is structured around a list of tips for getting a better education. I have done this to make reading easier. Indeed, readers may skip around among the tips as they please with little loss of comprehension. None of the tips are hard and fast and a few contradict each other, at least in part. (There is more than one way to skin a cat.) I had originally called them rules, but that word is too strong. I will not hesitate to qualify the tips in the text that follows them, but I will often state them a little more bluntly than is necessary to get my point across. While many students deduce the tips I set out by themselves, many do not or lose too much time before they do.

What are my qualifications for offering this guidance? I am not an expert on education (I am in fact a political scientist), though I have tried to immerse myself in the latest research on pedagogy (or the science of learning). I have spent a good deal of time working in higher education and thinking about where students stumble and where they succeed. My main qualification I think is that I made a good number of mistakes in my college career. I regret not taking advantage of more opportunities at college, and this book is partially a biography of my errors as well as those of students I have taught. I hope readers of this book will learn and profit from my mistakes.

THE PURPOSES OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION

What should you get out of college? In this text box, the first of many scattered throughout the book, I'd like to describe one scholar's attempt to articulate the aims of a university education. Derek Bok, whose arguments I paraphrase below, is a former president of Harvard and has written widely about higher education. He believes that students should aim for eight things during their university stay. Unfortunately, he thinks that universities fall short in these areas; therefore it is incumbent upon you to find ways to achieve these goals.*

1. *Learning to communicate.* This means learning both how to write and how to communicate orally. These are skills that virtually all employers want, but ones where American students frequently come up short. To gain these skills you need to seek out courses that force you to write and speak and at the same time deliver constant feedback on your progress (see Tip 14).

2. *Learning to think.* This means learning how to think critically (see Tip 50). The goal is to be able to attack complicated problems without certain solutions, an activity that characterizes just about every job students will ultimately find themselves doing. Acquiring this skill requires you to seek out courses where professors challenge you to work your way through exactly such problems. It also requires sequentially building on your knowledge so that each course extends your abilities.

3. *Building character.* Though universities no longer try to inculcate moral values as they once did, you should seek out classes that will help you to deal with the ethical dilemmas that you will face in your life. These classes won't tell you what to do, but they will show you how to reason through these problems to identify the core issues at play and introduce you to a variety of ethical theories that can guide your decisions. Participating in community service activities also serves this end.

4. *Preparing for citizenship.* American democracy is plagued by citizens who care little about politics and know even less. College is one place where you can increase your interest in and knowledge of politics. You can do this both in coursework—Bok recommends classes in Ameri-

*The book where they appear is entitled *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).