

THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE AHEAD

1. In the months that remain before you enter college, you are going to be flooded with advice. You have been receiving tons of advice all your life, and as seasoned advisees you are quite capable of listening or not listening, as the occasion requires. I give you credit for quite a lot of sophistication in such matters.
2. Also, you yourselves may have already tasted the joy of advising your younger brothers, sisters, or friends, so you comprehend the pleasure that advice gives to the adviser. Perhaps that pleasure derives from the fact that each of us likes to play the wise man now and then. Or perhaps it is that none of us finds the path through life particularly easy or free of heartache and we can't help believing that we may spare others what we could not spare ourselves.
3. Growth toward intellectual, social, and emotional maturity does not occur at a steady pace. There are bursts of growth, and the bursts occur at moments of role change—when the youngster leaves his mother's apron strings to go to school, when he begins dating, when he enters college, when he takes his first full-time job, and so on. You are at the threshold of one of those bursts of growth.
4. The primary formal emphasis of the college and university is on intellectual development, and most of your preparation for that experience has been in the intellectual dimension. One might imagine, then, that this burst of growth will be chiefly intellectual. But you know better than that. You will spend the next year, perhaps the next several years, growing up in many different dimensions. Some of it will be rewarding and some of it painful; and I hope that you savor the rewards, because no one can spare you the pain.
5. Young people who go to college away from home experience one particularly effective stimulus to personal growth: they find that there is no longer anyone to stand between them and the consequences of their own foolishness. It's a very bracing experience. Of course, that doesn't mean that they stop doing foolish things. Indeed, they may even go for a splurge of foolishness when they get beyond the reach of parents. There is a certain amount of sheer pleasure in doing things of which one's parents disapprove.

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6. In college, you will encounter many tests of your stability and personal maturity, and I'm not going to tell you how to meet those tests. I'll just remind you—and I wish I could engrave it in your memory—that the greatest psychotherapeutic medicine we know anything about is sleep. If you are anything like the college freshmen who have gone before you, your first semester will be a festival of sleeplessness. As long as you can get away with it happily and successfully, it's all right with me. But when your prevailing mood becomes one of anxiety or fear or hostility or misery—take the medicine! Sleep!
7. At the same time that you are learning the lessons of managing your own life and your own emotions, you will be learning the even more difficult lesson of relating to others—especially difficult when the others are busy trying to learn that lesson too. You'll have to learn that, as Budd Schulberg said in one of his books, "You can't eat your friends and have them too." Our best young people today lead rather intensely competitive lives, and often develop a resulting insecurity that drives them to use every human contact as a means of self-aggrandizement or an occasion for cutting their friends down to size. Thanks to these unconscious reactions they cut themselves off from the emotional reassurance that friendship can bring.
8. One lesson that I hope you will learn in your relations with others is to be conscious of the impact you have on other people. Some people go through their lives virtually unaware of the impact they have on others. The distinctive thing about our dealing with other human beings is that we not only react to our environment, in some measure we create our environment. The person who craves a quarrel creates circumstances in which a quarrel is inevitable. The person who finds that people are frequently hostile to him may be creating the conditions that produce hostility. People who meet friendliness wherever they go are probably doing much to produce that friendliness. Thus in some measure we really do create our own climate. The power of that truth to change our lives is seldom grasped.
9. I might say a word on the subject of conformism. No matter what kind of group you fall in with in college you will be under considerable pressure to conform to the ways of that group. . . . I'm not going to tell you what kind of group to belong to. I'm not even sure that it matters. And I see no harm in a certain amount of conformity to whatever group you do belong to. College groups, like all human groups, would fly apart without certain shared values and attitudes and customs.

10. But I do urge that whatever group you belong to, whatever outward fads of dress or haircut or slang you accept, you keep somewhere within yourself a core of autonomy, an inviolable core of individuality that isn't misled by any of your contemporaries, friends or foes. And the emphasis is not upon foes, because your enemies rarely succeed in misleading you. It is your friends who constitute the danger.
11. In your first year you will find many of your classmates divesting themselves with almost hysterical speed of precollege attitudes, roots, and identities. And having cut their moorings, they then have a desperate need to create a new identity, to be accepted by their new society, to create a new world to which they can belong. Thus cliques form, fads sweep through the group, and the young person feels that he must do the kind of things and be the kind of person that will bring him full membership in the new group.
12. Go along with all of that to the extent you absolutely must—you cannot avoid it completely—but keep one small independent corner of your mind that calls nonsense by its right name, that holds to the things you know to be true, and that laughs at pretentiousness even when it is exciting and fashionable.
13. Most of you are going to colleges and universities that are highly selective. For the first time in your lives you will find that just about everyone in your environment is approximately as bright as you are. Most of you are not only bright; you have a rather substantial investment of self-esteem in the fact that you are bright. Whatever failures you may have sustained in other areas of your life, you have gotten a pretty steady income of praise and admiration for your intellectual performance. It is not going to be easy to find yourself in an environment where you cannot readily win just about every intellectual competition.
14. I must say that I worry about the intensity of competition in our good colleges and universities today. I do not believe that college should become a battleground and every day an occasion for triumph or bitter defeat. I hope you will keep in mind that you don't have to win them all. You are going to have a good many setbacks, and some of them will seem fatal and final but they will not be. The tasks and trials of college test only a few of the qualities that make for a successful or significant life. Life is a long, bumpy road, and the prizes go to those with tenacity, durability, resilience, and the capacity to pick themselves up after they take a fall. You know now that you have ability. Have some faith in your long-term capacity to use that ability constructively. Don't let that faith be shaken by momentary setbacks.

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15. One of the most vexing questions you will face is how early and how deeply you should specialize. I'm afraid that I reject most of the standard educational pronouncements on the subject. One set of experts says, quite correctly, I believe, that the modern world is built on specialization, that those who reach the peaks of performance are usually specialists, and that you will understand everything better if you know one thing in depth. Another set of experts says, again quite correctly, that in this world of specialists we gravely need people with the breadth to see life whole and to knit the specialties together. It is clear to me that we need both.
16. It is increasingly clear to me as I grow older that individuals differ sharply in their leanings and that some are so powerfully inclined toward being either specialists or generalists that it is foolish to deter them. I would make ample allowance for the bent of the individual. Let's face it, some people are happier and more productive and even more useful as narrow specialists. At the other extreme, some of our most useful people don't specialize at all.
17. But in thinking about this I hope you will bear in mind that you cannot predict with certainty what life holds in store for you in the way of changes and challenges. You can decide what your college major will be, but you cannot predict the circumstances of your life. You don't know what the future may demand of you in the way of skill and understanding. Nor do you know what the future may offer in the way of opportunity for fulfillment and enjoyment.
18. You will prepare yourself far better for that unknown future if you cast a wide net during your undergraduate years. You will never again in all your life have a better opportunity to explore the various fields in which you might exercise your skill and judgment. Life closes in. The path ahead narrows. While you still have some elbow room, seize the opportunity to look around, to test yourself in various fields, to explore the range of your interests and abilities.
19. To some extent what you get from college will depend on what you bring to it in imagination and curiosity. It can be a routine experience for those who approach it in a routine frame of mind. A college education comes to the student packaged in neatly labeled containers called courses that he is supposed to sample systematically. And the student, pressed for time and caught in the routine of studies, works his way through the forest of courses like an industrious beaver chomping his way through the river saplings.

20. But look at it another way. Through the faculty, library, and laboratories of the college you can become familiar with the fruits of human knowledge and experience, human skill and understanding, human hope and failure. Your sojourn on this earth is not of indefinite duration and you have a lot to learn. You are heir to generations of human experience and you can tap that experience. You are caught in what some have called the human predicament. You are capable of distinctively human modes of enjoyment, appreciation, and awareness, and you should explore those modes. The task of education is to enable you to live more fully in the dimensions that are most distinctively human.
21. One of the most distinctively human things about you is your mind. It has the capacity to doubt and to believe, to reach out to the galaxies and to deceive itself about the simplest things, to conceive the highest ethical standard and to plot the most evil deed, to construct a sonnet and to build a financial empire. It is capable of grandeur and it is capable of folly.
22. I sometimes think that there is nothing we underrate more consistently than the human mind. Science has developed a most impressive apparatus—huge laboratories, immensely sophisticated instruments, elaborate procedures—but it is not an apparatus that runs itself, and the creativity is not in the apparatus. The creativity is supplied not by the new instruments but by a very ancient instrument—the human mind. I say ancient because so far as we know the human mind is fundamentally the same instrument that it was 5,000 years ago, or even 30,000 years ago.
23. We don't trust that marvelous instrument and of course we have good reason not to trust it because it is capable of error, self-deception, illogic, sloppiness, confusion, and silliness. So we invent machines to make judgments for us, or we devise systems and let the systems make the judgments. But the mind that invents the machines and systems is much greater than what it invents.
24. The solution is not to depreciate the value of the mind as an instrument for making judgments but to develop the potentialities of that instrument. All of the dangerous fallibilities of the mind may be diminished by education.
25. From your standpoint, one of the most interesting things about that marvelous, dangerous instrument is that each of you possesses one. It can serve you well or badly. In pursuit of your aim you won't want to make the mistake of developing only those skills that machines can emulate. You will want to develop the mind's capacity to reach out, to create, to aspire, to be aware, to dream, to love, to conceive a moral order.

26. I believe that the individual can achieve happiness and full moral stature only if he has made commitments to something larger than his own "convulsive little ego," to use William James's memorable phrase—religious commitments, commitments to loved ones, to one's fellow man, to some conception of the moral order. But we all recognize that one can be committed to the wrong things, and that one's style of commitment can be foolish and fanatical.
27. That is where education comes in. Education can bring young people to the intellectual and emotional maturity that makes meaningful and lasting moral commitments a possibility.
28. When I think of the word "excellence" I think of the whole extraordinary variety of intellectual, social, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual excellences which man seeks and occasionally achieves. And I don't know of any experience better designed to acquaint one with that whole range of excellences, better designed to acquaint one with the best that man has said and has done and has been than a good liberal education.
29. Liberally educated people will not be among those who abuse or oversimplify the word "excellence." They will have caught glimpses of the many kinds of excellence to which man has aspired, or failed to aspire. They will have sensed man's littleness as well as his occasional greatness, his capacity to endure as well as his capacity to aspire, his infidelity as well as his faith and his faithfulness. Understanding these things, they can distinguish between the enduring excellences and the glittering prizes of the moment.
30. I suppose I should wish you success, but that's really too easy. I would like to wish you something that is harder to come by. So I am going to wish you meaning to your life. And meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something you build into your life. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of mankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something. The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together into that unique pattern that will be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you! If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure is of less account.

