Harvard-Bound? Chin Up

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Published: March 2, 2006

I've got great news! You're young and you're smart and next year you're beginning college. Unfortunately, I've also got bad news. The only school you got into is Harvard, where, as Peter Beinart of The New Republic notes, students often graduate "without the kind of core knowledge that you'd expect from a good high school student," and required courses can be "a hodgepodge of arbitrary, esoteric classes that cohere into nothing at all."

But don't despair. I've consulted with a bevy of sages, and I've come up with a list. If you do everything on this list, you'll get a great education, no matter what college you attend:

Read Reinhold Niebuhr. Religion is a crucial driving force of this century, and Niebuhr is the wisest guide. As Alan Wolfe of Boston College notes, if everyone read Niebuhr, "The devout would learn that public piety corrupts private faith and that faith must play a prophetic role in society. The atheists would learn that some people who believe in God are really, really smart. All of them would learn that good and evil really do exist — and
that it is never as easy as it seems to know which is which. And none of them, so long as they absorbed what they were reading, could believe that the best way to divide opinion is between liberals on the one hand and conservatives on the other."

Read Plato's "Gorgias." As Robert George of Princeton observes, "The explicit point of the dialogue is to demonstrate the superiority of philosophy (the quest for wisdom and truth) to rhetoric (the art of persuasion in the cause of victory). At a deeper level, it teaches that the worldly honors that one may win by being a good speaker ... can all too easily erode one's devotion to truth — a devotion that is critical to our integrity as persons. So rhetorical skills are dangerous, potentially soul-imperiling, gifts." Explains everything you need to know about politics and punditry.

Take a course on ancient Greece. For 2,500 years, educators knew that the core of their mission was to bring students into contact with heroes like Pericles, Socrates and Leonidas. "No habit is so important to acquire," Aristotle wrote, as the ability "to delight in fine characters and noble actions." Alfred North Whitehead agreed, saying, "Moral education is impossible without the habitual vision of greatness."

That core educational principle was abandoned about a generation ago, during a spasm of radical egalitarianism. And once that principle was lost, the entire coherence of higher education was lost with it. So now you've got to find your own ways to learn about history's heroes, the figures who will serve as models to emulate and who will provide you with standards to use to measure your own conduct. Remember, as the British educator Richard Livingstone once wrote, "One is apt to think of moral failure as due to weakness of character: more often it is due to an inadequate ideal."
Learn a foreign language. The biographer Ron Chernow observes, "My impression is that many students have turned into cunning little careerists, jockeying for advancement." To counteract this, he suggests taking "wildly impractical" courses like art history and Elizabethan drama. "They should especially try to master a foreign language as a way to annex another culture and discover unseen sides to themselves. As we have evolved into a matchless global power, we have simply become provincial on an ever larger stage."

Spend a year abroad. Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland believes that all major universities should require a year abroad: "All evidence suggests this, more than any other, is a transforming experience for students that lasts a lifetime."

Take a course in neuroscience. In the next 50 years, half the explanations you hear for human behavior are going to involve brain structure and function. You've got to know which are serious and which are cockamamie.

Take statistics. Sorry, but you'll find later in life that it's handy to know what a standard deviation is.

Forget about your career for once in your life. This was the core message from everyone I contacted. Raised to be workaholics, students today have developed a "carapace, an enveloping shell that hinders them from seeing the full, rich variety of intellectual and practical opportunities offered by the world," observes Charles Hill of Yale. You've got to burst out of that narrow careerist mentality. Of course, it will be hard when you're surrounded by so many narrow careerist professors building their little subdisciplinary empires.

But you can do it. I have faith.