Becoming a Learner
Realizing the Opportunity of Education
Second Edition

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CHAPTER 3

Distracting Conversations

In order to take full advantage of the opportunity of a college education, we must recognize the kinds of conversations that distract us from focusing on becoming a broadly educated, capable learner. Conversations that sidetrack us from this purpose are founded in some of our most commonsense assumptions about the objectives of a college education. We can hear these conversations in classrooms, homes, the media, and from government leaders. Yet when evaluated carefully, these assumptions largely ignore the importance of who we are becoming as a result of our learning and the role of a broad-based education in personal and professional success. Please carefully consider these conversations and think about how much they influence your own assumptions and attitudes about college and learning.

"I’m going to college so I can get a good job."

There’s no question that earning a college degree significantly increases your potential to find a better job than you could get without one. Research clearly shows that over a lifetime, college graduates have access to better-paying jobs and on average make significantly more money than those without a degree. There are notable exceptions, but for every exception there are thousands of examples that support this research.
Although we know that college graduates generally find higher paying jobs and have a lower rate of unemployment, it's important to remember what I explained before: Do not mistake a college education for job training. When college is viewed simply as professional training and obtaining immediately applicable job skills, much of the required general education coursework, assignments, and research becomes frustrating and doesn't make sense. This in turn generates incorrect assumptions that cause you to overlook some of your most important learning experiences.

Again, the primary purpose of higher education in the United States has never been to simply develop workers and teach them job skills but rather to help them mature into capable and contributing members of society who can govern themselves and contribute to the common good through entrepreneurship, gainful employment, and community engagement. In other words, the primary purpose of education is to develop capable, contributing citizens.25

This is not to say that colleges and universities shouldn't be interested in the successful employment of graduates. They are interested. That is why a college education is designed as it is. The reason college graduates obtain higher-paying jobs and have lower unemployment is not merely because students learn skills specific to certain jobs. Most vocational skills programs can do that in a matter of months. Rather, as a means of developing the capacities of citizens, college develops the kinds of people who will be able to be successful in whatever field of employment they choose. This broad focus is not as concerned with what graduates know how to do as with how they think and participate in the world. That is why a general education curriculum exists. That is why writing is stressed across disciplines. That is why universities require broad learning across all fields of study in addition to deep learning in a specific major.

In contrast, job training's significantly narrower focus primarily develops skill sets in shorter periods of time that are largely external to you—job skills that are mainly developed through practice and routine. Knowledge specifically related to professional skills is tied to particular industries and technologies that continually evolve, often making some of today's skills obsolete for tomorrow's world.

Still, vocational training programs provide many excellent opportunities for post-secondary training in important fields. Such programs are very good avenues for building a career. And not everyone has to go to college to get a good job or earn a good wage, though everyone needs some education or training after high school. My point, rather, is that for those who choose to attend college, it is essential to understand that the purpose of a college education is significantly different than that of job training.

Turning away from a primary focus on job training won't hinder your ability to develop professional knowledge and successfully compete for employment after college graduation. If you decide to embrace college's approach to developing broadly educated, capable citizens, do you have any reason to assume that you wouldn't be a successful job candidate? Becoming a learner and obtaining professional skills are not mutually exclusive choices. You don't choose one or the other. You simply need to let your preparation to become a contributing citizen give meaning and purpose to your learning so you can take full advantage of your education.

"I have to go to college if I want to have a good life."

As a college student you are undoubtedly concerned about the impact of your education on your future social and economic well-being. It is true that if you don't complete a degree, you will not have the same access to many of the higher-paying jobs available to college graduates. Therefore, you may have fewer opportunities for
socio-economic progress. Certainly with less income over a lifetime, this may be the case.

The problem with this conversation is that it can turn education into an obligation instead of an opportunity. In other words, you have to go to college to reach your goals. Regardless of whether or not you feel that you have to go to college, there are significant problems with approaching your education as an obligation.

College is not a time to take for granted. The opportunities presented to you in college will open up paths in life that you could not have had otherwise. Your years in college will come and go. Whether you view this relatively short season of your life as an obligation or as an opportunity will have a significant influence on what you choose to do and who you become.

Talking about college and learning as an obligation can lead you to view your opportunity for education with indifference, causing you to feel frustrated by the amount of time and effort required for something that doesn’t seem to have much intrinsic, personal value. As a result, your college education becomes an obstacle—something to get through and get over with. In short, you begin to lose ownership over your learning, and everything about your education that contributes to your personal development is seen as a burden.

Indifference can make doing the least amount of work at minimal quality and with little effort seem like a good idea. Thus, viewing education as an obligation can create habits and attitudes that can cause you to become less of a learner at the end of college than you were when you started.

On the other hand, talking about college and learning as an opportunity—regardless of the level of obligation you may feel—opens you to a level of learning that significantly influences who you become. You approach your education with a gratitude that recognizes the value and possibilities of learning. This perspective generates the energy you need to do the best work possible in order to maximize your personal development.

When you stop viewing college as an obstacle, you are ready to learn. And that learning then becomes a journey in which you have ownership. In this journey it’s the process that matters most, and the ultimate and most important outcome is you. Therefore, you will work to overcome obstacles, seek challenges, and make up for the shortcomings of your circumstances.

“*I’m paying for this, so it better be good.*”

The quality of your education is extremely important. Given the ever-increasing cost of tuition, the extremely high prices of textbooks, and the overall expense of a college education, you have every right to expect that college be a valuable and worthwhile experience. You want to get as much as you can for the significant amount of money and time you are investing.

However, it is important that you recognize exactly what you are purchasing. Yes, in college you will pay tuition and fees, and you will purchase textbooks and supplies. But what you are actually paying for is *access* and *opportunity*: you are not purchasing an education. It’s similar to purchasing a membership to a gym. You are not a consumer of fitness and strength. You purchase access to the gym equipment and to people who can help you reach those goals if you do your part.

Likewise, you’re not a consumer of higher education. Many people speak about making sure that you get a good “return on investment” when you go to college. But what does that mean? Most often it’s talked about in terms of money spent. Your investment, however, isn’t really money; at least paying for college won’t get you anything because you are only paying for access and opportunity. Just like paying for a gym membership and buying the appropriate workout clothes won’t make you stronger or healthier. Your real investment is time, energy,
effort, and hard work. That's what gives you a return on your financial investment, and that return is largely dependent on you. Therefore, I encourage you to think of yourself as an apprentice—someone who's learning to learn under the guidance of others.

Approaching college and learning as something you're purchasing will significantly decrease your ability to become a learner. Those who view college from a consumer standpoint see teaching as a delivery method that doesn't necessarily require personal commitment and responsibility on the part of the learner. They expect teachers to be entertainers and believe that learning is always supposed to be fun. In addition, consumers tend to be impatient; they want to be satisfied quickly. And they place the responsibility for quality on others.

Approaching college and learning as an apprenticeship, on the other hand, enables you to recognize that becoming is a steady process that takes time. When you see yourself as an apprentice, you will recognize your lack of knowledge and ability and, as a result, take the responsibility to sacrifice, study hard, and develop new capacities. You'll recognize that you need mentors and understand that learning includes developing relationships that require your personal commitment.

Too many students don't have the mindset of an apprentice. Instead, they sit back and expect to be taught. And some college professors may even reinforce this view. Still, you make college a valuable experience when you realize that the quality of your education depends on recognizing and taking responsibility for your steady development as a learner. You are not in college to buy something; you are there to become something.

“I just need to get that piece of paper.”

The diploma you receive when you graduate from college is important. It's a valuable credential that enables you to be considered for various kinds of employment or graduate-level study and training. Because of this, people often say things like, “I just need to get that piece of paper” when they talk about persisting to graduation. Or sometimes when they are frustrated or disillusioned with college they will say, “I can't believe I have to do all this work for a piece of paper.”

Talking like this might seem to make sense because the diploma is the tangible evidence that you receive to certify that you completed your degree. But talking this way also makes it seem as if your diploma has some value in and of itself that is independent of you.

It is a piece of paper. And it's an important piece of paper. But it is simply not true that everyone who has a diploma is somehow the same, with similar skills, abilities, knowledge, understanding, character, and work ethic. A diploma only certifies that you have met the minimum requirements for earning a bachelor's degree. It says nothing about the kind of learner you are, what your potential is, and what your abilities are.

Thinking that you just need “a piece of paper” will keep you from focusing on your personal development and your ability to learn. Instead, I suggest you focus on what a diploma is actually supposed to tell someone: That you have become a broadly educated person. Your diploma signals to others that you know how to learn and are capable of thinking carefully about the complexities of the world and solving difficult problems.

If you just focus on getting that piece of paper, you'll likely end up striving for minimum requirements, doing the least amount of work possible, and missing the opportunity to become an educated person. In a job interview, it's not your diploma that does the talking.
It's you. You're being evaluated as an educated person: how you think, communicate, and work. When you're on the job or working in your community, your diploma doesn't do anything. You do. It's your work and your education that informs what you do.

Therefore, the excitement and energy at your graduation will not be because you have "a piece paper" that tells the world you graduated from college. The enthusiasm of those who will be cheering for you as you walk across the stage to get your diploma will be because your education has hopefully made you a more capable, competent, and educated person than when you started. Who you are will influence what you can do, not the diploma.

"In the real world..."

We often talk about what we do outside the university or what we are going to do after graduation as what we will do "in the real world." You have probably used that phrase yourself. The problem is that when we assume there is a "real world," we are also assuming there is a fake world.

Certainly your future work, hobbies, and other activities will not look like a university campus or college classroom. Unless you become a professor, life after graduation will place you in circumstances that are very different than what you experience in college. However, the assumption that whatever awaits you out there is the "real world" can lead to a perception that what you do in college doesn't matter. If college isn't the real world, then why should you care about what you do or how you do it?

It's important to be excited about the prospect of graduation and moving on to different kinds of work and activities that may be more appealing to you. Looking forward to those opportunities and experiences will help keep you motivated during difficult and challenging times.

However, referring to life outside of college as the real world ignores the reality that you need to become a learner and a person of character as a result of your education. And you need to work on becoming that person now. I know many professors who understand how important it is to develop these qualities. So, for instance, they will not accept late assignments because a future employer certainly wouldn't accept late work. When students protest this policy, they often say, "Well, in the real world, my work wouldn't be late. I'd turn it in on time."

Graduation will not suddenly turn you into a responsible person who knows how to organize time, juggle competing priorities, and prepare quality work in time to meet deadlines. In addition, if you avoid your professors and classmates, never addressing disagreements or seeking to develop any kind of working relationship with them, you can't expect that "in the real world" you'll be able to directly address conflicts with your boss or be able to work well with colleagues, neighbors, or even family members. You must learn how to internalize these qualities now. This is the kind of preparation that will determine your character and who you will become.

Therefore, you must recognize that college is the real world. It won't be your world forever, but for a few years it's as real as anything you will ever experience.

In fact, if there is anything fake about college life, it's that it is a much safer place to make mistakes. Here, the consequences for mistakes are minor; you can learn from them and move on. For example, it's safer to learn how to deal with conflict and differences with professors and peers here than it is to learn those skills when you are in your first job with a boss and coworkers. Learning to seek feedback in order to improve the quality of your work and to increase your learning can
be done with minimal risk compared to developing this ability on your first big project after college.

You can use every day in college to build your character and augment your capacity to learn independently. What you do and how you do it matters—it is real, and it has real consequences for who you become.

“When I’m done with school...”

For obvious reasons it’s easy to see graduation as an end and a moment when your education is complete. I certainly thought of it that way when I was an undergraduate. Before I ever stepped foot on campus as a freshman, I had my education planned out: I would complete bachelor’s and master’s degrees. I was sure that when I reached that point every company would want to hire me because of my cutting-edge knowledge and skills. The problem wasn’t my excitement and confidence; the problem was with how I saw myself when I finished college—complete. I somehow thought that when I graduated I would have everything I needed to be independently successful in my career. I was naïve.

Upon graduating, it isn’t your knowledge or skills that make you valuable. In fact, you will very likely be the least qualified and experienced person when you start your first job. It’s a lesson that every college graduate quickly learns. Therefore, your greatest value lies in your potential, your character, and knowing how to learn.

Yes, graduation is an ending point, but it is only the end of formal, classroom education. Graduation is also a new start. In fact, the graduation ceremony is called “commencement,” which means a beginning. When you graduate you begin a new season of life where knowing how to learn becomes your greatest asset and the primary means by which you will achieve success. In most cases the depth and intensity of your learning will increase significantly after graduation.

Seeing yourself as complete or independently successful upon graduation makes learning seem like something you need to do in order to get to your intended goal rather than the vehicle that will carry you through all of life’s endeavors. It’s good to dream about finishing college and to imagine your success. But rather than dreaming about what you will know when you are finished with college, picture who you will become as the result of your quest for learning.

So the question is this: Will you become a capable learner by the time you graduate? Or will you still have to figure that out in personal, professional, and community circumstances where people will expect you to already be one?

Faulty Perspectives

Can you see how the conversations described above distract you, limiting your ability to understand the full possibilities of a college education? Embracing these faulty perspectives in your everyday conversations will prevent you from becoming a learner and reaching your potential. It will hinder your ability to take full advantage of the opportunities for personal growth and development that college affords. If you find yourself talking this way, change your conversation to focus more fully on your learning and who you are becoming. If you see others making decisions based on these faulty assumptions, kindly help them see the half-truths in their perspective that limit their learning.

In the next chapter I suggest a set of principles that will help you develop the abilities and character of a learner.
CHAPTER 5

An Invitation

This book is about change. And that change is based on understanding a simple but often overlooked idea: The primary purpose of college isn’t learning a specific set of professional skills; the primary purpose of college is to become a learner.

There’s perhaps no better way to improve your college experience than to understand that it’s not just the accumulation of classes and grades and the earning of a degree that matter when you finish college. What matters most is the overall effect those experiences and achievements have on the kind of person you’ve become.

Admittedly, higher education has many problems that can affect your ability or opportunity to become a learner; most of these are out of your control. For example, large class sizes and sprawling campuses often make learning feel impersonal. Rising tuition and textbook costs increase your financial burdens. Many classes seem to encourage memorization more than inspire you to engage in meaningful learning. And sometimes professors are better scholars than they are teachers.

However, my purpose isn’t to suggest that you have to have a perfect learning environment or be a perfect learner in every situation. Rather, you need to consistently strive to become a learner in all of your classes and activities. As you work to become a
learner, you'll be able to focus on those things that you can influence and control, those things that will enable you to create for yourself an excellent education despite any shortcomings in your circumstances.

In other words, you don't have to have a perfect learning experience or be a perfect learner in college to reach your potential. It's who you become as a result of that process—no matter how imperfect your efforts or that process may be—that matters most. And since you will never have perfect circumstances in your community, profession, and relationships, becoming a learner in a less-than-ideal college situation can prepare you for solving problems and succeeding in this less-than-ideal world.

Putting These Ideas into Action

Every person experiences education differently. Our experiences, interests, preparation, abilities, and opportunities vary so much that it's impossible to tell anyone exactly how to pursue a college education in every detail. As I stated in the beginning, my intent isn't to offer a step-by-step, how-to guide for college success. Rather, my hope is that by helping you to focus on who you are becoming as a result of your education, you will more clearly see the crucial learning that you might otherwise overlook.

However, it's not good enough to simply read this book and think, "Well, that learning philosophy was interesting." You need to do something with these ideas.

Your challenge and opportunity is to carefully consider the idea that the primary outcome of a college education is the person you become. You must figure out how this knowledge can improve your education and how you can adapt it to your own needs, circumstances, goals, and field of study. To take full advantage of the opportunity of your education, you need to thoughtfully examine your assumptions about college and learning, identify the ways some of your assumptions hinder your ability to become a learner, and recognize the areas in which you've already been successful.

I invite you to carefully consider the ideas I have presented and begin to create your own philosophy of learning, outlining the specific ways you will strive to become a learner. Doing so will help you make sense of higher education's many opportunities and challenges. The following questions can help you begin this process:

- Outside of professional job skills, what learning abilities do I want to develop during college? How will I go about learning them?
- In what ways will I take better advantage of general education classes, especially if I am not necessarily interested in the topic?
- What is my plan to develop productive, professional relationships with my professors?
- What will I do when I find myself in a learning environment that I find difficult or challenging?
- How will I evaluate my success in ways other than with my grades?
- What is my plan to improve my work ethic and integrity during college?
- How will I deal with failures, setbacks, and obstacles?

And as you move from class to class and semester to semester, please consider the following questions to help you focus on and identify your individual progress as a learner:

- What are my learning goals for this class or semester? What will I do to achieve these goals?
• How does what I am learning in this class connect to what I am learning in other classes?

• How are my abilities to think critically, write effectively, solve problems, and communicate with others improving with this class or semester?

• What abilities and attributes am I developing in this class that will contribute to my future goals and help me be successful?

• What is something that I have struggled with in this specific class or semester? How did I overcome or deal with that challenge? What could I have done differently? How can I use that experience to improve?

• What is something really hard that I have done in this specific class or semester? How was I able to be successful? How can I replicate that in future classes and semesters?

Now, as you finish this book, please realize that this is not the end. It's the beginning of a new conversation. When you close this book, I hope you will take up this discussion with your peers, parents, and professors. Add your own stories and the stories of others. Find narratives that will help you remember and apply these ideas. Share what you've learned and teach others. Ask for feedback. Develop ideas and plans that will help you implement these principles in ways that best suit you. Then open the book again in challenging moments or before a new semester and review it to remind yourself again about the purpose and goals of higher education and how it can most benefit you. I am confident that you can use the ideas you've learned here as a lens through which you can continually make sense of and assess your opportunities, challenges, and successes.

Always remember: The primary purpose of college is to become a learner.