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The High School Commencement Speech of My Dreams

By Joan McCain
UCF Forum columnist
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The other night I dreamt I gave a high school commencement address. While the graduates would not all be headed to college, in my dream state that is whom I addressed. It went something like this:

Dear Soon-to-be College Freshman:

Here is my advice, brought to you by my two decades of teaching at a university.

Tip #1. COLLEGE IS NOT HIGH SCHOOL.

This is a different league and you need to step up your game. Do not whine, do not expect hand-holding and do not blame your teachers if you have to put in extra effort, time or even actually study. The average college freshman had a high school GPA of 3.9 and spent two to three hours a week studying. It will not be like that in college. Adjust. Suck it up. Learn the value of hard work, and use it to your advantage. And know this absolute truth: Hard work is the great equal opportunity equalizer because anyone can work hard.

Tip #2. IT IS OKAY TO GET A "C."

Yes, a college teacher said that to you. It is okay to get a C (or even a D) if—and this is a big if—you have done the work and tried your best. To get into college, you were convinced grades were the most important thing in the world, and along the way you have come to believe it is a measure of your self-worth. Stop it right now. No one hires someone for a job based on a GPA. Your grades do not define you, and they do not demonstrate your potential in the world—as long as you did everything you could, put the time in the course, and did your best. You will be hired—and judged and promoted in jobs in the real world—by your work ethic, your ability to take responsibility for your actions, and by your passion for what you are doing. So, work hard, care about learning, but when you get a C, do not cry. Do not feel defeated. Learn from it and try things a different way.

Tip #3. YOUR PROFESSOR IS NOT YOUR FRIEND BUT YOU CAN BE FRIENDLY.

When a professor says something that inspires you, gives a great lecture, organizes the class well, when you understand something you never understood before—tell him or her. Go up after class or send an email or go to his or her office, introduce yourself and say it. Some students think that is sucking up. It is not if you mean it. It is building a relationship. This is valuable practice for life, as relationships are all that matter. Get to know your professors. (They also recommend you for jobs and scholarships.)

Tip #4. LEARN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RESPECTING SOMEONE AND LIKING SOMEONE.

You are not going to like every professor you have. Some will be tough, some will be scatterbrained, some will be nerds. Doesn't matter. Respect them. No matter what. They are your teachers, they are in charge of the classes, and you don't have to agree with or like what they do, but you have to respect it. The moment you think you are better than them, smarter than them, can cheat their system, you have lost personal integrity. You also have created a negative energy that will make the semester longer and harder than it has to be.

Tip #5. SCHOOL IS YOUR PRIORITY.

Go to class. Do not let other students influence you to "just get the notes online" or from someone else. Go to every class. This understanding of priorities is a great leap toward the skill set you will need in the professional world. But it will also help your attention span. Because, let's be honest, your attention spans are pretty tiny. How can you adjust? Turn your phone off in the classroom—not just on silent. College classes cost money, and your education is an investment. Do not waste it. There is no argument that the social and personal growth that happens in college is important. But it is not more important than your studies. School comes first, everything else is second. And, yes, that includes Netflix.

All best wishes for your future.

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