

A primer for parents of college-bound students

By Thomas E. Cronin Special to *The Times*

As a parent who also is a college president, I know many college-bound offspring plainly think they've heard enough advice by now. So parents, please don't share this column – at least directly – with your daughters or sons.

But perhaps, in your own discreet way, you will have one last exchange with them about the following suggestions for incoming students.

- As a college student you will enjoy greater freedom than you have ever enjoyed. But with freedom comes responsibility – both for you and others. Respect your fellow students and others, and read carefully your college's policies on honesty, harassment and misconduct. It is a privilege, not a right, to be a member of any college or university community, and the privilege has to be earned regularly by mature, responsible behavior.
- Diversify your friendships. Reach out and meet and befriend those whose backgrounds and interests are different from your own. Having a mix of friends and groups you are involved with gives you choices about how you spend your time and what you want to be doing.
- "Be hold in what you stand for and careful in what you fall for." David Shi, president of Furman University in South Carolina, passed on this concern to his college-bound son, and it is good advice. "You will discover ... that intelligent young people do not always behave in intelligent ways. Indeed, the most common mistake that first-year college students make is to become intoxicated by their new freedom. Caught up in the festive distractions and temptations of college life, they quickly get behind in their schoolwork, and before they know it, they are in a deep hole." Shi adds, "Be smart – and think twice before you make decisions or do things."
- "Never underestimate the need for beauty and beautiful things in one's life" is one of my wife's favorite suggestions to young people. Find time to explore and appreciate poetry, music, dance, pottery, painting and the performing arts. No one is really whole or fully developed without artistic feelings and opportunities.
- Friendships are enormously important. You will learn as much from the people you surround yourself with as you will learn from most of the courses you will take. So seek out adventurous minds and befriend them. Pick your friends and mentors judiciously. Make sure to preserve private time and preserve, also, the right to say no. Friendships should never depend on going along on binge drinking sprees or regularly partying late into the night
- "Your world is full of technological inventions," according to one of my mentors. "But you will never encounter a techno-

logical achievement more wonderfully intricate than your own body. Treat it well. Respect it and seek out help when you experience stress. Develop habits that promote physical and emotional wellness and discipline yourself to avoid activities that are destructive of those ends." Young males are especially prone to avoiding health and counseling centers, and they need extra encouragement to take advantage of these resources.

- Get adopted by a handful of mentors and faculty advisors. Every student encounters some pain, some homesickness or some momentary setbacks. It comes with all transitions. Don't be unsettled or give up. Persistence is incredibly important to success. All of us stop learning when we become less willing to risk failure.
- The key result of learning is not exactly what you know but how well you can continue to learn about new things and how well you put your learning to use solving problems, inventing things and making good things happen. Young people are especially in search of their own identity and searching for the larger purpose or meaning in life. Students shouldn't depend on others for supplying meanings for them.
- Beware of perfectionism and have the courage to be patient in the face of paradoxes, puzzles and complexity. Former Stanford President Don Kennedy would urge students not to fall victim to the social paralysis that results when we let visions of the "best" drive out the "very good." "Every program, every idea, every reform can be engineered a little more or made a little better by further massage. You have been encouraged to hold high standards, and this is good," he said. But he also advised that sometimes more modest improvements or good reforms need adoption rather than dogmatically insisting on sweeping, comprehensive reform. "Remember, a lot of disappointed people have been waiting forever on the street corner for the bus marked 'Perfection.'"
- Know why you are going to college. Make it your own dream and no one else's. Then make a plan that focuses on ideas, ideals and the life of the mind. It has to be about learning, learning how to learn, learning how to become a leader, a professional, an artist, a scientist or whatever.

College-bound students owe it to themselves and their families to sit down and write themselves a long letter about why it is they are going to college. They should outline goals and aspirations, and describe personal priorities and cherished values. Ultimately only you can be in charge of your own life, soul and education!

New students are always urged to get involved in campus organizations, sports, community service and countless other opportunities. And this is good advice up to a point. Yet, one only has 168 hours in every week. You can't do everything. It's easy to be overwhelmed by it all. Set smart expectations, and consider the wise advice of Wendell Berry: "We can make ourselves whole only by accepting our partiality, by living within our limits, by being human – not by trying to be gods."

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