

What Professors Expect From You (I.e., Why You Are at College)

Often, students who struggle in college do so because they are unclear about what their college professors expect. This confusion might come from attending college for the wrong reasons, or it might originate in different experiences in high school. The secret is to know what professors expect in terms of basic mental habits and skills, and how those expectations often differ from earlier educational experiences. Let us explore why you are *not* at college initially, move toward why you actually *are* here, then move into what expectations result from that.

First, **you are not here to get a diploma.** This first misconception is quite common: “I just want to get my degree and get out,” the student proclaims. If a sheet of paper is all you want, you can buy a degree online from non-accredited institutions for as little as \$200—much cheaper than the tens of thousands of dollars a college charges you. In fact, if all you want is that diploma, I have several decorous versions with a blank spot for student names sitting in my attaché case, and I’ll happily sign one and give you one for free, and you can leave class right now.

“Wait a minute,” you protest. “That’s not a *real* diploma. Nobody will accept that as good quality.” True, those employers and institutes you worry about will not accept it because (like you) they want something more than the piece of paper. The document isn’t really what students or society at large wants; what we want is something much more abstract—certain skills and mental attributes.

Contrast the college education for a moment with another bit of background many employers favor: military experience. Why do many businesses, say Intel for example, give special preference for hiring their engineers from the ranks of young ex-soldiers? The management could care less about the specific tasks the soldier did previously during the service; they have no need for workers who can throw grenades, drive tanks, parachute with night-goggles, or patrol the midnight dunes outside Iraq. So why seek them out? The preference arises from the way military culture inculcates certain traits valuable to Intel—in this case, the ability to follow orders and directions exactly, familiarity with a strict chain-of-command, extensive experience with handling hazardous and expensive large-scale machinery, a philosophical outlook that favors personal responsibility rather than passing the buck, and attention to the minutia of safety and security. These are all excellent traits for someone working in a dangerous chemical fabrication lab in a company adverse to lawsuits. The managers don’t care *per se* about the piece of paper saying the soldier was honorably discharged, or about the *résumé* listing the tours of service. That’s secondary to what they really want on a more intangible level: a certain type of person.

In the same way, a college diploma is only a certificate indicating a graduate (probably) possesses certain desirable traits or skills. These traits are somewhat different from what military experience provides, but still valuable in a real way.

The acquisition of those traits and skills is your real goal—not the diploma *per se*, so don't get hung up on the certificate. Instead, you need to ask yourself, what are these traits or skills the professors want us to develop? We'll come back to that after a moment—but first we need to clear up a second source of confusion.

The second common confusion? **You are not at college to get a better job or to get rich.** “Dr. Wheeler!” you might shriek, “What do you mean? All those career counselors told me I would have a better chance of getting a good job if I had a college degree!” They did not lie; indeed, college graduates over the course of their lives tend to earn more money than non-college graduates in most (but not all) cases. Some professions such as law or medicine specifically have a college degree as prerequisites, but they are exceptions. Many of the most successful and richest individuals skipped college or dropped out of it—Bill Gates comes to mind.

Although better-paying jobs are generally a pleasant side effect, a fringe benefit of the college degree, we as professors do not target your specific future career goals as our primary objectives when we design our classes. If students treat college as a vocational school, and expect to focus on technical details of their profession, they end up frustrated and confused when the class does not swing that way. What does this philosophy class have to do with my major in pre-medicine? Why do I have to take a foreign language requirement? Why do I as an artist need a class and a lab in the hard sciences? Such questions are usually the result of a student who thinks teleologically in terms of career, confusing the side effect of a good job with the actual goals of a liberal arts education. Indeed, many of your classes will *not* be (and I would argue *should not be*) aimed at any specific career. Just as Intel doesn't need people who can drive tanks and throw grenades, but instead seeks people with military backgrounds for more abstract skills applicable at that company, most employers don't need employees to be able to read *Koiné* Greek and use APA documentation style in psychological studies. Instead, they find invaluable those more abstract skills gained while pursuing the liberal arts degree.

Often, it doesn't even matter what the specific degree is, the individual will still be attractive for other reasons, as evidenced by the Latin classicist who is hired to work for the IRS, the former English major who is accepted into medical school, the history major who becomes a middle-rank business manager. This sort of incongruity surprises many people, but is actually quite common. In point of historical fact, fewer than a third of college graduates actually end up employed in a field directly equivalent to their major, though they often tend to be happily employed in something indirectly related to it.

In fact, if you look at the charters of most public and private liberal arts colleges and universities, they do not mention the employment prospects of their students at all, but rather state they seek to enrich the students' lives, raise the culture of their state, create more thoughtful citizens and voters, encourage more intellectual rigor and honest curiosity in the public, and so on. In spite of what many eighteen-year-old freshmen and their parents think, this college experience is definitely not about

acquiring any specific job—that’s what vocational and technical schools teach, and they teach it pretty well if all you want is excellent employment.

So what is college about, then? Why all this hoopla about a college degree rather than certificates from vocational and technical schools? The prestige of the college degree comes from the fact that college education inculcates certain types of rare thinking, certain habits of mind, that many people never have adequate time and opportunity to develop because their lives are consumed with other important, very real obligations—their jobs, their families, their communal responsibilities. Because our lives are so limited, and our time so short, most elementary and secondary education by its very nature must focus on memorization of basic and vital skills of this sort—learning multiplication tables, learning basic spelling, learning key fundamental facts garnered from science, and so on. Stuffing facts into children’s brains is the most time-efficient way to go about education initially, but it can actually mis-prepare students for college, where professors want you not only to go on learning factual information, but move beyond it through critical thinking and analysis.

Don’t get us wrong; we don’t think that high school time is wasted. In fact, we assume that by the time you come to college you have certain valuable basic skills under your belt, and that you have already developed the ability to memorize. We assume you have a basic overview of the workings of U.S. government and law. We assume you can do basic math already (and probably basic algebra). We assume you are familiar with the basic scientific method (though you will probably need more practice with it). We assume you have a thumbnail sketch of what happened historically in each decade of American history and each century of European history, and that you have had enough foreign language background that you can pronounce its sounds more or less accurately and access a basic traveler’s vocabulary before you move on to more conversational-level skills at the college level. We assume you can spell English words, or at least look them up in a dictionary when you don’t know them, and we assume you can punctuate sentences correctly—i.e., that you are on a first-name basis with commas and semi-colons rather than a more distant “Sir”- or “Ma’am.”-type of relationship with them. We assume you can build a paper with a clear thesis and simple transitions between ideas, an introduction, and a conclusion. Without even covering (or sometimes even mentioning) such material in our classes, we as teachers will assume you can do all these as a basic minimum before we even look at your papers. If you cannot do these, we may recommend you enter a remedial course before moving up to college-level work.

The trick is that we will expect you to move *beyond* that level in our college classes. That is extraordinarily frustrating for students who want more of what they had in high school, or who want college classes to go back in time and cover the high-school level material they somehow missed. Trust me, without a flux capacitor and 1.21 gigawatts of electricity, that sort of time-travel will not occur.

Professors want you to have those skills already because we (i.e., both the professors and the majority of the class) are ready to start applying, tweaking, and playing with knowledge on a higher level of complexity beyond simple memorization. We are ready for critical reading (for more information here, see http://cnweb.cn.edu/kwheeler/reading_basic.html). College professors want students who can go beyond memorization toward explanation and analysis. We want students who can read critically and see how the various facts fit together, to see the overarching ways ideas fit into other ideas.

Let me give you an example contrasting two different types of learning. Like many high school students, the first pupil, Ginny, has the task of learning about the digestive system in a biology class. The teacher gives her a checklist of the twelve parts of the digestive system and a color chart of each one is available in the textbook. The student dutifully learns the twelve parts. She learns to label each one on an anatomical chart. She learns the definition of each one. On her high school examination, maybe the teacher asks her to match the part to its corresponding anatomical image. Maybe the teacher gives a test in which the student must match the name to the definition. In any case, Ginny's job is mostly memorization.

Now let us suppose a second pupil, Roger, has the task of learning about the digestive system in a college anatomy class. He follows the same technique Ginny did, memorizing each of the twelve parts, learning to define each one and label it on an anatomical chart. He comes prepared to write out each definition or match it on a multiple-choice examination, and he is prepared to label it on a chart. To his horror, the examination presents Roger with a hypothetical scenario in which a patient comes in suffering from a digestive disorder, lists the symptoms, and then asks the student to specify which parts of the digestive system are involved in the disorder. Or maybe the examination asks Roger to trace the path of ingested rice throughout the entire digestive system and explain at which point a specific vitamin would be absorbed into the blood stream. Or maybe the examination presents Roger with an speculative alien autopsy, then offers suggestive data about what each digestive organ does chemically in the imaginary alien, and asks Roger to write an essay explaining which alien organs correspond in function to the ones in the human body. Regardless of which question appears, Roger feels outraged. How could the teacher do something so unfair to him! He didn't memorize digestive disorders! He wasn't told he would have to know about vitamins absorption! The professor never presented imaginary alien anatomy in lecture before!

Unfortunately for Roger, his habit of memorization without context has hindered his performance. Such examinations are quite typical at the college-level because the teacher wants to make sure that you are doing more than memorizing the material—the teacher wants to make sure you *understand* how facts fit together. Professors want to see that students can perceive the implications of each lesson. We want to see that the class can think through the bundle of disparate data and make connections, separating the relevant from the irrelevant. For Roger to succeed, he'll have to do more than name each part and point to its location in the body; he'll

have to actually comprehend what the part does, how it does its task, how it fits in the digestive chain in relation to the organs it is attached to. He'll need a holistic picture in his mind, an organic model. It holds true for other subjects as well. In a creative writing class, it's not enough to be able to define and list the parts of the Petrarchan sonnet; you'll have to be able to create your own poem. In a history class, it's not enough to know the major generals and the battles they fought; you'll have to be able to explain what effects they had on the war and analyze what other factors helped create those outcomes—whether those factors are economic or demographic or even psychological. College courses frequently force you to go beyond what is covered in the class lecture or the textbook(s) in the class. Some professors might even assign two different textbooks that provide contradictory interpretations of events and expect you to (a) note the disparity, and (b) reconcile them, or (c) argue in favor of one or the other—all without telling you in advance. This is not meant to be unfair or to assassinate your GPA—this is about moving into a more advanced way of thinking, and to make you aware of meta-thinking (the way you think about thinking)!

The important bit is not just knowing what something is; the important bit is knowing why something is the way it is and how it works and why it matters. It's about being thoughtful and disciplined in your learning so you can think about what you know in a meaningful and original way. It's about constantly asking, *so what? Why does it matter? What are the implications? How can we use it? Improve it? How does it connect with other parts of life or knowledge?*

We expect you to have these abilities or develop them over the course of your college career. It's as much a habit of mind as anything else—a tendency toward routine thoughtfulness and curiosity and intellectual rigor. We want to produce graduates who are comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction and the unexpected, and who can think their way through a maze of random facts to produce original and penetrating insights. We want to produce graduates who can make connections between diverse concepts and separate the meaningful data from mere background noise. We want graduates who habitually ask questions, take nothing for granted, and explore alternatives creatively. We want graduates who balance open-mindedness toward new ideas with sufficiently rigorous thinking to have an intellectual immune system against mental swill that will slop up against the public discourse.

Ultimately, that is what we expect from you in the classroom. I often tell students that, if they memorize perfectly all the vocabulary, all the dates, all the names and concepts, and can recite all my lectures by rote, I'm pretty sure they will pass the class, but I'm not yet sure they will earn higher than a "C." To get that "B" or that "A" they really want, they will have to be able to *apply* that knowledge in ways that are original and creative while still making sense. This can be upsetting to students new to college, especially those who mistakenly think that *how hard they work* determines their grade, rather than *how much they have learned* and *how well they can apply that knowledge*. Even worse, many students judge how hard they have

worked by how long they have spent memorizing material. The important part comes after the memorization: thinking about the connections and relevant questions that material raises. This goal is often what college professors are really after, and ultimately, what you should be after too.