

# Prepared to Graduate

Evelyn Beck

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In February, many of the 125 people killed by a suicide bomber in Hilla, Iraq, were police recruits waiting in line for physicals. Five months earlier, forty-seven recruits died in a similar attack. And the horrors continue. Deciding to join the police force in Iraq takes great courage. It takes grit and resolve. That these young men risk the wrath of insurgents to join the country's struggling law enforcement reminds me of how powerful is the impulse that propels people around the world toward a hopeful future in spite of the dangers. A better job—and the better life it helps create—is not just the American dream, but the dream of people everywhere who seek meaningful work that pays a livable wage.

This is the dream that brings students to my college, and their ability to find a good job upon graduation signals success, duly noted by our placement office. What's harder to measure is how students' college experiences have affected them in more intangible ways: how it has opened their minds to multiple viewpoints, how it has given them the confidence to continue and the courage to speak out, and how it has helped them take pleasure in learning.

From my perspective in the classroom, it is these immeasurable qualities that mean most. I understand the quest for hard data to represent progress, but when I think of efforts in the public school system such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act, I remember the principal who bemoaned during a phone interview the invalidity of a test that pits one year's class against the next year's and the uselessness of a system that doesn't note anything remarkable in the steady progress of a single underachiever. Numbers cannot capture either the miracle of a student's epiphany after reading a novel or the disappointment we all experience when a student who excels on campus falters when she moves beyond our nurture and support.

I'm not suggesting that statistics don't matter. But they are only one barometer among many, not the only way to register progress. I do pay attention to them, and I do read with interest surveys from employers about what skills college graduates have and especially what skills they lack. But while I want to address those deficiencies to better prepare our students for the world of work, I also want recognition for how a college education can transform individual students in ways no numbers could possibly quantify.

## What Our Students Gain

*Confidence:* Many students come to us with a track record of failure. Helping them to experience success can and does make an enormous difference. They start to think that despite having been told they're stupid, maybe they're not; maybe they're even—dare they think it—smart! Success breeds success. “Self-esteem” has become one

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of those overused and recently discarded buzz words, but I see every semester how confidence in their abilities causes students to walk with their heads high rather than looking at the ground, and how it engenders greater ambition. Two-year colleges do a great job of offering the extra assistance that helps students succeed. I've seen that this semester with Gerald, an eighth-grade dropout with slurred speech returning to school after twenty-four years; his mantra was *I'm worthless*, as in comments like “I'm old, overweight, and not much to look at” and “You'll be able to spot me; I'll be the big stupid-looking blond guy” and especially “I'm not a writer. I'm too old for school.” While he hasn't completely discarded that self-deprecating edge, it has softened as he's come to feel a sense of accomplishment and belonging. He's

gone from sounding like an annoying broken record to being funny in his way, such as when he agreed to my request to wear a red shirt to an honor society event: “It can't be as hard to find a red shirt as it was for me to find a suit the time I needed one. That took me all night; I had to dig up three graves before I found one the right size.” He has told me that the reason he became involved on campus was to interact with a classier group of people than the “dope heads” who had previously comprised his social circle. He wanted to learn how to carry himself better. Once, when we discussed interracial marriage in a small group, his initial reaction was disgust. But then he emailed me later that maybe he needed to think about the issue further. And the real test came recently when he decided to attend a regional convention with a school group and was warned ahead of time that he'd be rooming with a fellow student who was gay. He thought it over and decided that was not a problem—a sign of how far he had come and how much the college experience had laid the foundation for this transformation.

*Pleasure in learning:* With her blond shag haircut, gold hoop earrings, pleated miniskirt and white boots, Mrs. Hamacher was the coolest teacher at Henry D. Perry Junior High School in 1970. I remember vividly the day she played the Beatles song “Come Together” and asked us to analyze its lyrics. Trying to make sense of lines like, “He wear no shoeshine he got toe-jam football” linked the classroom to the radio I spent so much time listening to. This was something no other teacher had done, at least not so memorably. That kind of spark is one of the intangibles that the best teachers

deliver to students. It can't be measured but ignites a passion for learning that lays the groundwork for a lifetime of personal growth. School, I remember a professor once saying, should do more than train you to make a living; it should prepare you to make a life. That is what I tell my students each semester, and it's the best way to express how I approach teaching.

As my memories of Mrs. Hamacher remind me, learning should be fun, and college students need to experience silliness (for a purpose) just as much as youngsters. Think about what you most remember from school; it was certainly a project or activity that illuminated a subject in a novel and imaginative way. My son came home from middle school one day much more talkative than usual, eager to share how his science teacher had assigned each student to be an animal in the food chain; they then had to move around the room trying not to be "swallowed" by the animal above them in the chain as they simultaneously tried to "gobble up" the prey unlucky enough to occupy a place beneath them. Such activities that help students to experience their way toward new awareness happen daily around me; the challenge of conjuring up ingenious ways to help students learn is what makes teaching so

fun, of course. Students in my freshman and sophomore literature classes overcome their shyness to act out poems and plays and dress up as authors or characters. Or when I ask them to put a character on trial, they eagerly ask lawyerly questions and "object" at the opposing counsel's flagrant disregard for the justice system's rules. When I direct them to follow clues in a campus scavenger hunt that imitates the intricacies of Jorge Luis Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths" or to play a round of *Scruples* as a prelude to a discussion of the nature of evil in *Faust*, each activity energizes our discussions and helps students rediscover the sense of enchantment that we all know as young children but somehow lose along the way, especially if all of learning is dry and rote or if learning is equated with work and punishment.

I love to visit classrooms of great teachers; I regularly seek out stories of the fun that goes on in college classrooms. I especially enjoyed a recent National Public Radio series on popular college courses, which told about how University of North Carolina Professor Richard Superfine asks students to pretend to be a train to demonstrate the physics theory of magnetic levitation, how Oregon State University Professor Gary Burgett teaches entomology with the help of *The Far Side* cartoons, and how a Harvard law professor finds in Frank Sinatra songs a connection to Supreme Court rulings. Community colleges, with their outreach to students who have never enjoyed school, have a greater opportunity than most to help many students experience their first real classroom delight.

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*A sense of community:* Positive reinforcement, peer pressure, solidarity—whatever you call it—students entering a community of learners find sustenance from their fellow students. Over the years, I have met so many young women who were brutalized by their husbands or boyfriends, who have been forbidden to leave their homes at some point or who found themselves stalked on campus. Sadly, some of these students collapse under the weight of fear and anxiety. But others, buoyed by the support of

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new college friends, manage to break free. A community can arise anywhere, but some of the students returning to school are also returning from a kind of exile of isolation, so study partners and lunch buddies serve an important function and offer yet another example of those intangible benefits of a community college education.

#### **What Our Students Lack**

*Work ethic:* In a 2002 report by the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement called “A Report to Stakeholders on the Condition and Effectiveness of Postsecondary Education,” which surveyed employers about the preparedness of high school and community college graduates,

high school graduates scored lowest in their work ethic and their willingness to take responsibility. This question was not asked in this survey about community college graduates, but it’s something that my college hears from area employers frequently about our own graduates. And we are not alone. According to a 2004 survey of 118 area businesses by East Tennessee State University, employers identified as their more urgent and widespread need workers with a strong work ethic and who are dependable and committed. These results were echoed in an earlier study on “Workforce Preparation for the 21st Century” by the Center for Public Policy Studies at California State University, Stanislaus, which found that poor work habits most concerned area employers.

We know that our students lack a strong work ethic, and we are obviously not doing a good job at instilling such a trait in them by the time they graduate. The problem is that such values are learned over the course of a lifetime, and while we can whittle away at some of the bad behavior, the task of remaking a student’s value system is daunting. That’s not to say it’s impossible, and we can do better. We *must* do better.

What we do best is to address this issue in discussions, forcing students to question their inherent beliefs. Once they recognize we determine our own values—that we can in fact believe differently from our families and our peers—that is an important first step in behavioral modification.

But that’s only stage one, and from what I’ve learned talking to other instructors, we aren’t so strong on the follow-up. To instill new values, we need action. If we

want graduates with excellent work ethics, we must demand better behavior from our students in the classroom. Easier said than done; I am the poster child for this deficiency. For example, while I do ultimately drop students for excessive absences and tardiness, I also tolerate for much too long this bad behavior and more, from cell phones ringing during class to chit-chat and mild rule flouting such as bringing drinks into the classroom. Though it goes against my retiring nature, I admire General Colin Powell, who always arrives last (and on time) at a meeting and then locks the door behind him; latecomers are not permitted. Oh sure, you say, that's the military. True enough. If I were to lock the classroom door behind me, students would march en masse to the president's office and my college would reprimand me. We have a very "learner-centered" environment that too often translates into a "customer is always right" mentality. If a student protests at being dropped from a class for excessive absences, a complaint to the right person will often get the student reinstated. If a student doesn't like a grade, it's quite possible that a challenge will be successful.

What messages are we sending? If students are not held accountable for their behavior, how can we expect to instill that elusive work ethic in them? Colleges, particularly community colleges, must not become so accommodating that nearly any behavior is tolerated. I remember a student protesting a D she received in an American Literature course a year later because she was transferring and had just discovered that the grade did not transfer. While I did not change the grade, I easily could have, and if the student had raised more of a ruckus, I may have felt pressure to do so. I do not feel that I work in an atmosphere of tough standards and high expectations; this creates an environment in which we fail to push students to work harder and that ultimately damages the reputation of two-year colleges. As illustration, consider this message from a local university professor sent in response to a high school teacher's inquiry about the two-year colleges in South Carolina (and forwarded to me); the professor wrote that the programs at these colleges "aren't the greatest," that in truth "the two-year school curricula are *desperately* inadequate." Providing an opportunity to every student is the miraculous mission of community colleges, and that's exactly why my job provides daily doses of inspiration. But opportunity is one thing; as the saying goes, there's little long-term benefit if you just give a hungry person a fish without giving him the skills to feed himself. The lack of respect paid two-year colleges is in part our own fault.

*Basic skills:* Second only to work ethic in most employer surveys is concern that workers lack basic skills. Unfortunately, an associate degree is no guarantee that an individual is proficient in reading, writing and math. I would also add to that a

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different sort of basic skill that some students lack: the ability to follow directions. It's tempting to pass the buck and blame K-12 teachers for failing to adequately prepare our students. But we must all work together to tackle the problem. Most community colleges have extensive developmental programs that help students learn how to study and that allow them to start where they are and progress toward true college-level coursework. Those with very weak skills in multiple areas face a tough climb, and some drop out in frustration, but I've witnessed lots of success stories, including that of Janet, whose parents were illiterate and who spent her youth feeling like an outsider. But at my college, she blossomed, graduating with top honors, being named our number one student, and transferring last year to pharmacy school. "I always thought I was dumb," she told me once, tears welling up in her eyes.

### **What We Must Do Better**

Community colleges do so much with so little. Faculty labor under heavy teaching loads for salaries much lower than their counterparts in four-year institutions. We don't command the respect we deserve. And yet we keep at it, for we recognize what a difference we make in so many lives. Every semester someone tells me that college has transformed his or her life. Sometimes the word I hear is *saved*. And I imagine my college as a mighty ship that pulls the flailing student from the vast ocean. Saving lives—that's heady stuff. And yet the general public doesn't hear these stories enough. It's imperative that we tell them.

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