

College: What's in it for Students?

Noam Shpancer

Noam Shpancer received his bachelor's degree from the University of Houston and doctorate in clinical psychology from Purdue University. He is currently an associate professor of psychology at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio. His research centers on various dimensions of the home-daycare link, including parent-caregiver relations, people's childcare attitudes and perceptions, and children's adaptation across contexts. His scholarship and commentary have appeared in various journals, including American Psychologist, Early Childhood Research Quarterly, and Early Education and Development. Dr. Shpancer teaches a wide variety of courses, including Introductory Psychology, Life Span Development, Psychology of Personality, Abnormal Psychology, Human Sexuality, and Health Psychology. He is also a licensed, practicing clinical psychologist, specializing in the assessment and treatment of anxiety disorders.

The Perils of "Preparation"

What are the most important things students learn in college to prepare them for life, and how are those things acquired? This question is deceptively easy to answer, which means it is hard. First, the notion of "preparing for life" is problematic. As John Lennon said, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." Many of the defining experiences in our graduates' lives will actually happen while they are "preparing for life"—in college. Moreover, in an important sense, "life" does not require that much preparation. Most of the 70% or so of non-college graduates in the United States do quite well in "life," thank you. On a different level, can anyone really ever be prepared for life? Life and the forces that shape and dominate it are large and mysterious. Life at full force can easily subvert, negate, bedevil, and overwhelm any "preparation." So, the preparation mantra should be tempered with humility.

Second, it is not easy to determine whether any of the improved skills college graduates may demonstrate were actually acquired *in* college, *because* of college, or from professors in college *classes*. Students, after all, spend most of their time outside the classroom and often outside of campus, at work, or with their peers. When they're finally in the classroom, many students spend much time in various modes of disengagement. Moreover, many of the things college students learn involve skills—and ways of learning them—other than those emphasized, anticipated, or measured by faculty. The college environment and experience interact in multiple, subtle, and largely unaccounted for ways with students' individual temperaments, expectations, and circumstances to produce a learning equation that is not easy to figure out. Students who hold full time jobs may be forced by their need to juggle work and college

to develop unique organizational, time management, and study skills. They learn those skills while in college, but not in class. College has a role in shaping that kind of learning, but it's not the type of role that curriculum designers brag about or that faculty members think about when they think about learning in college.

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Learning in College: What the @#%\$! Do We Know?

Much of college instruction is organized, implicitly or explicitly, around the notions that students will follow the rewards, and that they will become proficient in what they practice most. These notions are neither heartless nor useless. But what are students rewarded for on campus? And what do they practice most? Faculty may like to think that students are rewarded with good grades for learning the material, and that they practice both important skills (like calculating the mean and standard deviation of a distribution) and meta-skills (such as critical thinking). But from a student's perspective, good grades may be awarded to those

who learn to tune in to different professors' quirks and anticipate their tastes. From a student's perspective, what is practiced more may be skills like learning how to get by on little sleep, and meta-skills like cramming and rote memorization.

The gap between what the college faculty means to teach and what the students learn can be seen clearly with regard to the issue of reading. Students are forced to read hard in college, so as to increase their knowledge base and instill a love of reading. But research has suggested that many students drastically reduce their reading after college, in part as a reaction to the negative associations reading has acquired there. In addition, much of what's being learned and internalized will always depend on the individual student. College is a large buffet. Different students pile different things onto their plates, and they consume different amounts of those things, at different speeds, in different orders, to different effects. A student with well-defined goals of becoming a nurse will tend more attentively to the specific skills of the profession presented in various classes than an Undecided major, who may lack a clear sense of which part of the class, area of information, and particular skills are more or less important to her. A good college should accommodate, and prove useful to, both of these students.

In light of all this, I argue that in preparing students for the real world, we should first remain humble—and inquisitive—about the idea of preparation itself. We need to remind ourselves that our “preparation” is but one of many possible, legitimate paths into real life success. As such, it carries inherent limitations along with its obvious advantages. In addition, we should insist on developing a more systematic, evidence-

based understanding of the cause and effect relationships that actually exist between what goes on in college and the graduates' subsequent jobs, careers, and life paths. We know from research, for example, that college grades are not very useful in predicting later life success; yet we—and our students—continue to insist on making a big deal of grades and GPAs. In a “best practices” universe, we would focus in college on what actually makes a difference in later life, rather than on myths, tradition, or wishful thinking.

While thinking “globally” about the scholarship of teaching or about school-wide assessment procedures, teachers could also act “locally” by including an assessment component in their classroom routine. Every month, you may circulate a short questionnaire asking your students to rate, anonymously, the different aspects of their class experience (the readings, the exams, the lecture, the group work, the audiovisuals, and so on). You may ask them to relate briefly a few “highlights” and “low blows” regarding their experience in the class. This way, you will reduce some of the guesswork involved in trying to ascertain how your class is going. You will also introduce a feedback mechanism through which problems may be addressed and corrected in a timely fashion. This will, in turn, increase not only your teaching confidence and effectiveness, but also the quality of the student's overall college experience. People feel and do better in a responsive environment.

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Learning in College: Big Skills, Little Skills

In the best of all worlds, an undergraduate education, especially at the technical college, should balance its emphasis on job-specific skills with an equal focus on instilling robust, fundamental meta-skills that are useful across many contexts and across time: thinking and writing skills, social skills, cultural literacy skills, civic responsibility skills, and computer skills. Many students, after all, will end up working outside their major, or outside their initially acquired training. They will also end up living in a world vastly different from the one they glimpsed from their classroom windows in college. The job descriptions they will have in ten years may not even exist today. I started college in a world without the internet, without Google, without cell phones and iPods. Heck, I studied FORTRAN! With technological progress only accelerating, it's a safe bet that our students will find much of the specific skills they learned in college useless in ten years. Moreover, even if their specific skills are necessary to get them in the door of a profession—to get them a job—these skills may not be sufficient if the students are to keep the job, grow in the job, manage life outside the job, and change jobs when they are forced or wish to.

This is not a revolutionary idea. In fact, all colleges are always and inherently involved in teaching several important meta-skills. Take, for example, the notion of endurance. If you think about it, one of the real, if often unacknowledged, functions of college is to serve as an endurance test. The average college diploma does not reliably signify much in the way of a specific skill set. But employers still prefer a college grad. Even if given a choice between two individuals with equal skills, employers will usually

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prefer to hire, or promote, the one with the college diploma over the one without. True, the diploma is a proxy for things other than endurance, such as intelligence; but you don't need to test intelligence over the course of several years. A one-hour IQ test would yield a most reliable result. Why the years of college, then? Some say that this is the time needed to cover the material. But most colleges are structured so that even brilliant students finish in the same amount of time as their slacker peers. No, the main function of college is to test endurance. To complete college, you need to develop adequate measures of commitment, discipline, organizational and social skills, and emotional stability. Someone with such

qualities is likely to be a good worker, capable of not only learning and adapting but also of tolerating the drudgery, competing demands, long hours, stress, and social politics that characterize the American workplace.

Higher education institutes should strive to find a balance between specific skills and general meta-skills. Knowing how to do something may get you in the door. But knowing how to learn new things will decrease the chances that you'll be thrown out shortly after. As part of this effort, we should first become aware of—and then explain to our students—the often hidden meaning of the things we teach and the ways we teach them. When we keep our students around for years, they (and we) should know why. I make a point of telling my students that they are all smart enough to graduate, but that smarts are a dime a dozen in America, and so the real test in college is of their endurance, which is a quality that more reliably separates success from failure. When I ask my students to do a class presentation, I inform them that I am interested not only in what they've learned about some obscure topic, for which they may have no future use, but also in how they learn to speak effectively in front of people, a meta-skill on which much of their future advancement may very well depend.

Meta-skills are not difficult to identify, for yourself and for the students. Core meta-skills can easily be presented in the form of “class mantras,” to be repeated in different contexts throughout the course. Repetition need not imply rote memorization. Creative repetition is essential to learning. Every teacher should be able to create a summary of the essential teachings of a course in digestible form, to be emphasized

repeatedly. If the whole moral architecture of the Judeo-Christian tradition can be summarized in ten short commandments, then certainly the take-home message of your course could be summarized in a few tag lines. For example, in my Psychological Assessment class, one of my mantras concerns the importance of “converging evidence” in making sound diagnostic judgments. I make a conscious effort to repeat, explain, and apply the concept in different settings until the students can anticipate and use it correctly on their own. Why do we get a second opinion, and more testing, regarding a medical problem? We need *converging evidence*. Why is a sports team crowned as champions only after winning multiple matches with different teams? There is now *converging evidence* as to its superiority. Why not marry after the first date, even if it was splendid? That’s right, you’ve got it.

Learning in College: How Was It For You?

So, we may agree that a good college should offer a balanced diet of specific skills and general meta-skills. However, a focus on skills still misses an important function of college: to provide an experience. As a

clinical psychologist, I’m often dismayed that psychologists are depicted and used in the media primarily as advice givers. True therapeutic work, insiders know, has very little to do with advice giving. Advice is a dime a dozen. Your friends and parents, the various experts and consultants everywhere, and the Googles and Yahoos of the world are filled with advice, much of it sound. What people seek in therapy, however, is something else entirely: they seek an experience; a healing experience. And for good reason: we are moved, defined, shaped, and changed most not by advice but by experience. Several things about the therapeutic encounter conspire to facilitate a potentially positive, healing experience: the promise of confidentiality; the safety of clearly defined boundaries; the practitioner’s warmth, attentiveness, and non-judgmental stance; the social license to explore intimate, personal terrain in therapy, and so on.

I think the same is true for college. We are often preoccupied with the question of “what have they learned?” And that question is important. But the crucial question for me has to do with the quality and essence of the college experience we provide. “What was their college experience like?” The importance of college in this sense is akin to that of letting children experience nature, for example. When children explore the backyard and see ant colonies, spider webs, brooks, roots, they become aware of the existence of vast, mysterious natural living systems; they gain an appreciation of the larger place we humans inhabit; they can learn to place themselves within this context, and also gain a sense of its power, beauty, and fragility, and hence develop a kinship and loyalty regarding it. A student in college can have a similar experience

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regarding the life of the mind and the world of knowledge and ideas. The child who plays in the backyard does not have to become a naturalist. This is not how the benefits of being in nature are measured. The person in college does not have to become a theorist, or a scientist, a writer or a teacher to benefit from the exposure. What they get is an appreciation of the mystery, challenge, and beauty of ideas; of trying to understand and explain; of cultivating a life of the mind. Our graduates will

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internalize their experience of this world and its creatures as a context, a reference point for measuring, evaluating and valuing things in the “outside” world, and within themselves. The strength and sensibilities drawn from such an experience—like those drawn from childhood days exploring the forest or backyard—may end up being more important than the material covered in the classroom, the skills, or the advice.

The Good College: Are You Experienced?

How do we facilitate a good college experience for our students? Several things about the college environment commonly conspire to allow a potentially positive

experience for students. College campuses are often (and should be always) beautiful environments—green, well-maintained parks filled with beautiful young people. Moreover, despite being perennially easy (and often deserving) targets for various “political correctness” jokes, colleges are still islands of relative tolerance, safety, diversity, aliveness, and nurturing. Students in the least get a sense that such things as tolerance, serious conversation, intellectual pursuit, and deep knowledge exist, that they are possible and available. A knowledge of the mere presence and accessibility of rich resources—not just their constant utilization—informs one’s sense of well being, comfort, and quality of life. Notice, for example, how big city dwellers routinely cite the nearby museum or opera house as benefits of their city existence even if they haven’t visited the museum or opera in years.

One of the most important things we can give students is an experience of belonging, of being a part of the place, the pursuits, the resources, and the ideals that constitute the concept of university. It helps, of course, that the time students spend with us is often a time of youth, when more things are fresh, new, and surprising; when memories are deeply etched with a defining, lasting vividness; when a sense of invulnerability and possibility still spring effortlessly forth. In an important regard, youth shapes college, rather than the other way around. Memories of college, for most of our students, are memories of youth, and as such inherently vivid, special, and cherished in ways that later (and earlier) memories cannot be. Memories of youth, despite popular beliefs, are often more powerful than memories of childhood in shaping our identity. We see ourselves forever as we were in our twenties, not as we were at age four.

A good college environment should provide multiple “affordances” to students. Affordances are the various interactive and exploratory opportunities that objects and environments offer to individuals. A pen, for example, “affords” you to hold it, write with it, throw it, or chew on it. A table affords climbing, hiding under it, or running around it. The college environment, as well as your classroom environment, should as much as possible provide students with multiple affordances. If you’re discussing child birth in your developmental class, students should ideally be able to read about the process, interview a woman who’s been through the labor and birth process, watch a video of a birth, and visit the neonatal unit of a local hospital. An emphasis on affordances should compliment the existing emphasis on diversity on college campuses. By way of analogy, diversity refers to having crayons of different colors. The concept of multiple affordances refers to having crayons alongside brushes, clay, cameras, and computers.

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Good teachers, of course, also enhance the students’ college experience. But what makes a good teacher? The business of teaching advice seems to be as popular, and as dubious, as the business of parenting advice. You get conflicted suggestions from warring experts: be tough and demanding; be caring and nurturing. Be organized; be spontaneous. Watch and manage carefully; lay off a bit and provide space for growth. Trends wash over and then wash out; surefire recipes fail to deliver measurable change and everybody ultimately learns as they go and concoct their own idiosyncratic path. I think the best overall advice about teaching (and parenting) is this: First, you have to give a damn. Second, find your voice and speak in it. There are multiple ways of moving toward any desired end. By being yourself you’re modeling something important to your students (and children). Third, one size does not fit all. So, get to know your class. Get a sense of what it responds to and go from there. In general, a good classroom offers a balanced diet that includes three “food groups” expressed as types of engagement: students should engage with the material, with the instructor, and with their peers. If your class is lacking one of the three, add it on.

A teacher’s influence on students’ college experience is not, of course, limited to the classroom. As a thought experiment, think about what model underlies your relationships with students. Many teachers see their relations with students as akin to parent-child relations, and there’s certainly an aspect of that involved. But your students are not children; they’re adults. Some may view the student-teacher relationship as a commercial one. There’s definitely a consumer-service provider aspect to the relationship, but I would argue that the students are also our partners, both in class, during the learning process and, later, in appreciating and embodying the rewards of the examined life. That’s one reason I recommend abolishing your office

hours. You don't have office hours for your partners. Instead, declare an open door policy for students. You will see them when they show up. I have done so throughout my teaching career and am here to report that such an arrangement does not lead to chaos. To the contrary, as developmental research has shown, a child who knows that his mother is always responsive and accessible becomes less, not more, clingy. Students show up when they need to, are less anxious when they do, and are appreciative of the flexibility.

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The college experience is unique, and its uniqueness should be retained even as we strive to make college relevant for "real life." This is a delicate balancing act. Clearly, we should make our teachings applicable to the real world, and use real world examples to make the material appealing and clarify its significance. A good college should not ignore, dismiss, or deny the outside world. But it should be clearly distinguished from it. Boot camp is not war. It prepares the soldiers for war, but no one should get hurt in boot camp. And no one should confuse the two. The same should be true for college and life. The students should feel challenged but protected, and the teachers' alliances

should lie clearly with the students' success. I often tell my students that if they have all A's on their grade report, then they are probably studying too much, and should perhaps ease up and take time to engage the college experience, not merely the material. When done right, college is not merely about skills, as marketable as they may be; it is not merely about acquiring meta-skills, although those are, of course, invaluable. When done right, college should become a forming experience in which students are able to glimpse themselves, and the world, in a new light. If you had a choice between learning all the facts about the physiological, chemical, and psychological processes that constitute the notion of falling in love, and experiencing falling in love yourself, which would you choose? Which would be the greater lesson? Which would prepare you better for life? In a good college, you shouldn't have to choose. You should be able to do both.

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