

Ask the Professor: Freshman year

Ask The Professor: What Freshmen Need to Know.

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What Freshmen Need to Know

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Seventeen

Homerun Professors

by Jason R. Edwards

In my many years of test-taking and test-giving, despite the actions of the Supreme Court, I have witnessed an awful lot of prayer in school. While certainly a supporter of panicked humbled cries for divine intervention, prayers before tests always make me wonder if students are as interested in celestial intervention at a far more important time: registration. By the time you're taking some joker's test, the truly important die has already been cast.

I believe it was Wendell Berry who once said something like this: "When a teacher walks into the room, part of your fate walks into the room." Wendell Berry is smarter than I am and a far better writer, so I really should just repeat his words once more and call it quits. Instead, I'm going to note the thought again and then unpack that concept a bit more for you so this essay isn't so short.

"When your professor walks into the room, part of your

fate walks into the room.”

Nothing outside of you will determine the value and the power of the education you receive more than the professors you get. For good and ill, they will choose the books you read, the assignments you do, and the topics you cover. All college educations are not equal because all college professors are not equal. This is not a conspiracy, just a fact: professors are human beings, and human beings (even ones who are professionals) vary widely in their abilities to do their job.

In the game of teaching, all college professors have made it to the big leagues so they do have some ability. But some are homerun hitters while others hit doubles. Still others hit singles and many strike-out all the time but are on the team because they can pitch (meaning they can bring in big grant money from the government).

You will not get all homerun hitters (which, to extend the metaphor too far, is all right because in the past decade or two these profs have apparently all been hopped up on steroids) but you want to maximize the number you do get. To do this, you need to know what you are looking for.

The first job of the professor is to convey effectively the knowledge appropriate to a particular course. This seems obvious and not too difficult, but there are two major problems you will encounter.

The first challenge is that the job of many professors is actually to research and publish, not to teach. Their interests and job reward structures center on their investigations and publications; hence, their teaching load is actually inhibiting them from

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doing their jobs. As you can imagine, their consequent performances in the classroom typically suffer. This situation is far more common at big universities than small colleges, so watch for it accordingly.

The second problem is equally endemic to small and large institutions. Far too many professors pathetically pursue the popularity they were denied in high school and/or want to wax poetic on whatever catches their fancy rather than giving you the information you actually need and insisting that you learn it. These professors are frequently quite entertaining and almost always easy, but they are wasting your time and someone's money.

To get an education—not just a degree—you need professors who will at least hit singles: teach you what they are supposed to in a coherent manner and actually force you to learn it.

An education made up of a constant string of well-hit singles actually can make for a Hall of Fame career. But strive to get even more. After all, both Nap Lajoie and Babe Ruth are enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame, but there is a reason you have heard of one but not the other: and it's the long ball.

A homerun prof not only gets you the basics, he changes the way you perceive the world. This is where the fate that Berry mentions comes into play. A series of singles lets you accomplish whatever you wanted to accomplish, but consider that at eighteen years of age you might not have everything figured out in terms of goals, ideals, and beliefs.

A homerun prof attempts (and frequently succeeds) at

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getting his students to look at things in ways they have never considered before and inspires them to continue to explore the ideas presented in class. This type of professor alters your destiny. Not bothering to find these professors limits your destiny.

You only get one shot at this life. Maximize your options rather than blindly following your current cow path. Put yourself in contact with as many life-altering powerful hitters as you can.

Schedule accordingly.

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