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The Last Page: To This Slacker, Lessons Learned

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FOR THIS SLACKER, LESSONS LEARNED

I was a lousy student at Colby. A slacker. I watched TV reruns on an enormous sofa and waited for the Roberts dining hall to open for lunch. I took courses from the most entertaining professors I could find; I dropped courses led by professors who talked tough about reserve readings and class participation. I met and passed my Colby years with people who, 25-plus years later, are still my best friends.

And I somehow passed enough English and history courses, begged for enough extensions on overdue papers, and, in one eventful night, wrote enough poetry between midnight and 9 a.m. to earn a Colby degree. I didn't know I had made it until I was not pulled out of line at commencement.

I do still have very real nightmares about running into professors on the Colby campus (for some reason it's usually Patrick Brancaccio appearing from around a corner to demand an overdue paper). But I was happy to be at Colby, if not academically engaged by Colby. At the end of my five years—including 18 credits and three gyms my last semester—I was grateful to have made it through.

And following 25-plus years of occasional reflection on this topic, below I offer a couple of the lessons I did learn, with kudos to some of the professors and administrators who taught them to me.

Lesson 1: Colby was committed to me. I gave the College plenty of academic reasons to get rid of me, but Colby remained steadfast in its commitment. I always got the sense from the deans (e.g., Earl Smith and Jim Gillespie) that the College was trying to find a way—any way, really—for me to succeed. Colby would not give up on me despite the fact that I appeared to have given up on myself.

Colby's commitment has influenced the type of manager, husband, father, and friend I am today. I try to be loyal when loyalty is due—but without strings, conditions, or caveats. This trait has been most useful in raising kids, where loyalty and support is so much the better strategy than continuous “helpful” criticism. The same has been true in the corporate world. When someone is not meeting my expectations, I feel the spirit of “Dean G” rise up in me, arguing for calm guidance, kindness, and humanity. I try to find out why there is a problem; I don't give up on people.

Lesson 2: I was graded but not judged. My professors, when faced with my

academic mediocrity, found things to like in my work, and in me, even when it was quite difficult to do so.

Grading an English exam on a book I had not bothered to read, covering ideas I had not bothered to attend class to discuss, Phyllis Mannocchi once wrote something like: “Next time please find time to read the book—I wouldn't have assigned it if I didn't think it was worth your time. But nevertheless I was highly entertained by your creative argument, although it was unrelated to the question I asked. Come talk to me about this.”

For Ira Sadoff I once submitted a semester's portfolio of my original poetry, half of which had clearly been written in the wee hours prior to the deadline. I did not receive, nor did I deserve, a decent grade, but nevertheless Ira's comments sought to point out and encourage things he liked in my writing.

“While your portfolio doesn't show much progress from beginning to end (in fact, it regresses), in these last poems there are several strong images that need to be more fully developed. I like your Thelonius Monk poem, though it is really just an idea. You need to keep writing.” He could have blown me away with a single sentence, but instead he chose kindness.

In the end, Phyllis and Ira taught me to seek out what is good in people. A little bit further down the road, other people and institutions taught me the hard lessons I had deflected at Colby—the editor-in-chief of the magazine where I first worked comes to mind, as do several mentors from the management consulting world.

I do look for people like me in Colby, but I don't find them. That's understandable. By showcasing the College's stars, this publication does a good job of advancing Colby's distinctive brand in the hyper-competitive arena of higher education.

But to accurately reflect the full Colby brand experience—and even to honor it—this magazine's readers should know that tonight there will be a student on Mayflower

Hill playing poker with friends until the first beams of morning light hit the Sloop Hero. He's making a really smart decision to check and raise, as well as a really dumb decision to blow off studying for a history exam. Things will work out for him, as they have for many of us former slackers, thank you very much.

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