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Looking Back

The advice I didn't get

BY SIMSON GARFINKEL

People told me that I could do anything I wanted with my life when I graduated from MIT. How I wish that somebody had instead given me a list of the things that I should do. After all, I could have ignored the advice, had it been offered. But it seemed instead that my friends, family, and professors had all taken an oath to let me make my own mistakes. I proceeded to make plenty.

In the years since, I've had both good times and bad times. And I have many regrets. Just as a jet accelerates once it reaches cruising altitude, time accelerates once you leave college. The cycles of student life—registering for classes, completing problem sets, taking exams—forces you to notice every passing moment. But once you enter the world of business, you'll get so caught up with other people's deadlines that you'll stop hearing the ticking of your own clock. Months will pass like weeks. Before you know it, some opportunities really will have passed you by.

These days, I find myself thinking a lot about missed opportunities. Married with three children and living in the suburbs, I wake up every morning and transform myself into a second-year graduate student, diligently working on my doctorate. It's as if I've stepped into the world of *The Butterfly Effect* and been given a chance to do everything differently. But second chances only go so far.

If I really could step back to my days of college in the 1980s, I surely would have done things differently. Here's a list, hoping that you won't make the same mistakes.

Grades

I didn't care too much about grades when I was an undergraduate. Grades, I thought, really don't matter in the scheme of things. And the grades that did matter, I thought, were only the ones in my major, and those were straight As.

I was wrong.

No employer ever cared about my grades after I left MIT. So you might think that those nights I stayed up working, all of those countless final project rewrites, was all wasted effort. But it wasn't. All of that work taught me habits and time management techniques that have been incredibly useful. Getting those As taught me how to achieve my peak intellectual performance. I wish I had worked harder for As outside of my major during my undergraduate years.

What's more, to my great surprise, it turns out that my undergraduate Bs and the two Cs occasionally come back and bite me, like the time I applied to law school and didn't get in because my 4.7 undergraduate average "was a bit low." Grades matter, it turns out, when you are being compared with thousands of other applicants. To a first approximation, an A from a second-rate college counts more than a B from MIT. This may be unfair, but it's one of the techniques that large organizations use to weed through a pool of applicants. That's why it's important to keep up your average, even in your senior year.

Major

Your choice of major matters a whole lot less than you think it does. I have a friend who majored in management at Sloan and went on to get a law

degree from University of Miami; another friend majored in Aero-Astro and got a job in the computer industry. Yes, your choice of major can be limiting if you don't try to develop expertise in other areas. But if you try to get a well-rounded education, you shouldn't have any problems.

On the other hand, one of the mistakes that I made was to get an education that was a little too well-rounded. I tried to take a course in every department; I ended up with an education that was very broad but not very deep. It turns out that this was good training for becoming a science journalist, but it also left me with a kind of intellectual shallowness that took me many years to overcome.

I'm not alone; recently I met an MIT junior who is pursuing both a double-major and a double-minor. As a result of her academic load—she's taking eight courses—she's not performing as well academically as she might otherwise. As I learned the hard way, if she tries to go to graduate school, she will most likely discover that quality trumps quantity. Despite many statements about the importance of interdepartmental studies, our society is one that values depth of study, rather than breadth.

In my four years at MIT, I triple majored in Chemistry, Political Science, and the Science, Technology and Society program. None of the departments ever treated me like I was one of their own students: the political science staff said I was a good political scientist, for a chemist. The chemistry types said it was a good thing that I was majoring in political science, because my chemistry grades were none too good (that's where my Cs were). The same sort of comments are made when interdepartmental types try to get jobs, or get tenure.

If I could go back, I would study more of the arts and humanities. I would take a course in music theory. I would take a course in American history, and perhaps another in great works of litera-

ture. There's a great body of knowledge that MIT students think is largely irrelevant; but if you don't learn it now, you may never have the chance. It would have been better for me to go deep in the humanities, an area that our society thinks is important, than to try to learn a little bit about dozens of different engineering disciplines.

At the same time, now that MIT has wisely outlawed triple majors, I wouldn't pursue a double-major and a

double-minor. It's better to do a few things really well.

Continuing Education

One of the best things I did after graduating MIT was to sign up for the course in Financial Accounting at Harvard Extension School. Taught by Leonard Kopelman, I learned how to read financial statements, learned about cash flows and depreciation, and gener-

ally filled a huge hole in my understanding. Yes, I could have signed up for 15.501 (Financial Accounting) when I was an undergraduate. Yet, I probably would not have gotten as much out of it; many of the concepts in 15.501 would have seemed irrelevant before I had some real-world experience.

On the other hand, I think that it was a mistake to wait until I was thirty-five before taking the course. I spent a year getting a Master's degree after I graduated from MIT, but after that I didn't set foot in a classroom as a student for nearly fifteen years. This, it turns out, was a tremendous mistake.

No matter where you end up, you should investigate the opportunities for continuing education. There is simply so much to learn in this world, and keeping yourself in a classroom environment keeps your mind sharp in a way that nothing else can. What's more, programs like the Harvard Extension make it possible to earn a Masters' degree by taking just one class a semester. Sure, it will take you eight years. But in the scheme of things, eight years isn't really all that long. You'll still be under thirty. And what else would you be doing during those evenings, watching TV?

Apply, Apply, Apply

I applied to get into MIT, and I applied for my Master's program, but after that I rarely applied for things. I got my jobs through connections and personal referrals; I thought that was the way the world worked.

While there is nothing wrong with referrals, there are many, many more opportunities in this world that are only open to people who apply. There are great jobs that I never had because I didn't apply for them. There are grants for which I could have qualified—but I didn't apply because I didn't need the money. I didn't realize that with the money also came prestige and opportunities. There are prizes and awards for professional accomplishment. The com-



mittees that hand out those awards never considered my resume, because I never put it in front of them.

Yes, there are some prestigious awards for which people do not apply—you won't find an application form at www.nobel.se—but it's surprising how many other awards, fellowships, and the like only go to those who ask. Take the Pulitzer prizes, for instance, which tend to go to the newspapers and magazines that have small armies preparing their applications. Many businesses get their first big break by applying for and receiving a Small Businesses Innovation Research grant. There are many people who have landed the most interesting jobs that you can imagine—like my friend who is a columnist for Universal Press Syndicate—because they applied. Find organizations and companies that are interested in stuff you like doing, and apply, apply, apply.

Invest For Your Future

Undergraduate education is all about investing in your future. But once you graduate, you should begin investing for your future, as well.

After I graduated from MIT, I started on a dual career as a freelance journalist and a computer consultant. I made a lot of money and spent nearly all of it. And I'm not alone. A friend of mine graduated from Stanford three years ago and took a job on Wall Street; she made \$140,000 last year, and spent nearly \$80,000 on restaurants, clothing, and travel. Today she has a killer wardrobe, but hasn't saved squat.

Be especially careful about collecting physical objects. Possessions don't just cost you money: they also cost you freedom. If you have an apartment full of books, you're less likely to move because of the cost and hassle of doing so. You'll have many opportunities for stability later in life, but the more things you purchase in your twenties, the harder you will find it to take advantage of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities

that require rapid mobility.

I'm not saying that you should live like a monk, but there is this weird tendency among people in their twenties to spend all of the money that they earn—no matter how much money that happens to be. People buy themselves new computers, new stereo systems, fifty-inch plasma televisions, and multiple cars. They take lavish trips. They take their friends out to restaurants—sometimes ten at a time.

It's hard to save money in your checking account. So don't try. Instead, open up a brokerage account with a company like Vanguard or Schwab and set up an automatic investment plan, so that a few hundred (or a few thousand) dollars will get invested every month. Don't gamble with this money: put it in a boring mutual fund, like an index account that tracks the S&P 500. Open up a Roth IRA account and contribute the maximum allowed by law every year.

I took this advice when I was thirty-two. If I had done it when I was twenty-two I would have gone out to fewer restaurants, would have stayed with friends instead of fancy hotels, and probably wouldn't have upgraded myself to Business Class so often. On the other hand, I'd have more than \$250,000 saved away right now.

Don't make Enemies

It's easy to meet people in college—the structure of academia assures that there is always a constant supply of new faces cycling through. But once you get out, you'll discover that there are new rules in play. Once you enter a profession, you'll see the same people again and again at conferences, trade shows, and parties. Go into politics and you'll see the same people cycling through different jobs at the State House or in Washington. For all of the vastness of our planet and its population, I am continually surprised at how small our peer groups actually are.

Once you're out for a few years,

you'll discover that it's generally easier to fire people than to hire them. It's easier to terminate a friendship than find a new friend. It's easier to quit a job than it is to get hired. It takes a lot of energy to create new relationships, and word of how you treat people gets around fast. So be careful in what you do.

This is not to say that you can't start over and re-invent yourself. But starting over sometimes really means starting over. Move to a different town but stay in the same profession, and you'll keep running into people who knew you from your previous life. This is one of the results of our national and increasingly global economies.

* * *

I've had a lot of fun since graduating from MIT in 1987, and I've made a lot of contributions. But looking back, I wish I had done fewer things and done them better. I wish that I'd taken more time to become an expert, rather than rushing through so many opportunities. Fortunately, I've also learned that those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities seem to come around every two or three years.

Simson L. Garfinkel (slg@ex.com) received a Master's degree in Journalism from Columbia University in 1988. Today, he is a columnist at Technology Review Magazine and a graduate student in the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory. He lives with his wife and three children in Belmont, MA.