

The Skills Students Need to Succeed in College—Part 1

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An Excerpt from Homeschooling in High School for Higher Education by David P. Byers Ph.D.

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Have you ever played the board game, LIFETM? At the beginning of the game, you have to decide if you are going to go the CAREER route or the COLLEGE route. There is no room for hedging and saying, “I’ll go to college for a little while and drop-out and go to work” or “I’ll work and go to school part-time” or “I’ll try college for a while and switch schools later or drop out if it doesn’t work out”. These options aren’t available to you. You have to make a firm choice right away!

If you play by the actual rules (and not “house” rules like we sometimes do), your choice of college or career in turn limits some of the other options available to you. If you go the college route, you can pick from any of the career cards. If you go the work route, your choices of careers are limited to those that don’t require a college degree. However, if you choose the work route, you may get a chance later in the game to go to night school to change your career and gamble on the chance to improve your salary.

If you’ve ever played the game with children, it’s interesting to watch them make the decision to go to college or to enter the work world. Having worked with school-age children for a number of years, I’ve played LIFETM quite a few times. It’s always interesting to me to hear the children voice their rationale about why they chose career or college. Sometimes they indicate that college is the way to go if you want more job choices later. However, when they realize that the college route requires acquiring debt upfront, they are sometimes swayed over to the “make money early” (career mode) type of thinking. Sometimes children indicate that they’ve chosen the work route because they are tired of school or because they don’t think college is for them due to a perceived lack of skills.

In some ways, playing LIFETM reminds me of the decisions my children will have to make in a few years—career or college. I wonder which option they will choose and what their rationale will be. I’m hoping they will choose college, but if not, I hope it’s not because they feel they lack the skills necessary to succeed in higher education.

As many of you undoubtedly have, we often field questions from non-homeschooling friends, families, and strangers about whether or not we are giving our children the skills they need to succeed. Have you heard questions

such as, “Are you planning to homeschool all the way through high school? What about preparing your children for college? Can you do that at home?” Let’s face it, at one time or another we are forced to ask ourselves these same questions to help us plan our programs and to alleviate any doubt in our minds that make us wonder if we are teaching our children the skills they need for college (or career).

To be honest, if we hope that our children will go on to college and successfully complete a degree, we shouldn’t wait until high school to consider their college-readiness. Instead, we should be asking ourselves throughout the homeschooling years, “What types of skills do students need to succeed in college and how can we prepare our children accordingly?” As a fellow homeschooler and a college professor, I want to share some thoughts that may help you answer these questions.

Having taught college for several years, I’ve worked with a variety of students. My students have ranged from individuals fresh out of high school, to young people who have tried one college or another with varying degrees of success, to adult professionals in their 20s, 30s, 40s, or 50s who never completed their degrees.

In each group, I’ve seen a variety of learning skills. While a few students have excellent skills, the majority of them, even the “older” ones, have either undeveloped or very poor skills. The students with undeveloped and poor skills often struggle with college because they are forced to fight two battles simultaneously: 1) Learning the skills necessary to succeed in college, and; 2) Learning the assigned material. Once they get a handle on college-level learning skills, learning the assigned material is often much easier.

So, what are these college-level learning skills? For convenience sake, let’s break higher-level (college) learning skills into three, broad categories—obtaining, thinking, and doing.

In the “obtaining” category, students can *obtain* knowledge through a variety of learning experiences such as: reading assigned material, attending class and paying attention, listening to live or taped lectures and presentations, and watching instructional sessions presented live or on tape. Students can also obtain knowledge by using resources such as the library or Internet to locate and use learning materials related to the subject they are studying. In summary, students must be able to sit still, read, listen, and pay attention in order to *obtain* knowledge!

In effect, obtaining knowledge can be a rather passive activity much like watching television. Often one of the first problems my students have is thinking that just by attending class and listening to the instructor, they will automatically obtain knowledge. They come to class expecting to be entertained and believe that what the instructor

does or says will *make* them learn! It's almost as if they expect the wise "old" professor to open the tops of their heads and pour the knowledge in.

Actually, the instructor plays only a small part in the *learning process*. What the *student* does plays a far greater role in learning than anything the professor does, which brings us to the other two categories: "thinking" and "doing".

In the "thinking" category, students must be able to remember and reflect on what they've learned. College students are often told to utilize "critical thinking" skills. Critical thinking means so much more than trying to remember new information like you would to pass a spelling test or a history date quiz. Critical thinking means putting new knowledge into a useful context by relating it to existing knowledge. The key concept is that students *think* about what they are learning in a way that it becomes meaningful and hopefully useful to some degree.

For instance, the first time you read the Robert Frost poem, "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening", you may not think more than "That's a nice poem" or "I don't get it". When you take a college poetry class and read the same poem, you may learn about imagery, metaphors, and expressing ideas through poetry versus prose. If you already know something about poetry, reading Frost's poem may enable you to compare and contrast it to other poems and other styles of poetry that you've read. You can compare and contrast Frost's style in this poem to his other poems or to the style of other poets. If you've read a biography of Frost, you might now better understand more about the poet himself. You might also now understand the last lines of "miles to go before I sleep" in a personal context based on an understanding of what Frost meant and what you think it means to you and your life.

Many times college students fail to go beyond surface learning because they fail to think. They may read Frost's poem and correctly answer the required test questions, but they haven't really learned anything because they don't *critically think* about it. Sometimes failing to critically think is a lack of maturity, but more often than not, it's a lack of experience with critical thinking skills.

Being able to read well and critically think about what was read are important skills for the college student. Critical reading skills are sometimes referred to as "reading for comprehension", which goes way beyond just being able to remember what you've read. Critical reading skills mean being able to think about the written words as the author intended, as well as understanding how you perceived them. It also means being able to *internalize* the material so that it is useful when you need to put it to work, which brings us to the last category of "doing".

Doing is the key to learning because students can show both what knowledge they've *obtained* and what or how they've *thought* about it. In most college classes, students *do* by writing papers. The ability to write well is an important skill for a college student to have.

There are other important skills associated to *doing* that college students must have. Sometimes students complete individual or group projects, put on demonstrations, conduct experiments, participate in class discussions, or engage in some other sort of learning behavior to show their professors that not only have they learned something and thought critically about it, but that they can actually *do* something with their new-found knowledge. To successfully demonstrate their knowledge in the ways I've just mentioned, students must be able to think logically and in an organized manner, to be creative, to speak well, to get along with others in a group setting, and to convey their thoughts and meanings to others verbally and visually.

These are just some of the skills that college professors want their students to have. Next time, I'll expand on this list and give you some tips on how you can help your children develop the skills they need to succeed in college.

Remember, *obtaining* knowledge is easy. We learn every day. However, taking what you've learned, thinking about it, and then doing something with it is really the key to success in life—whether you choose college or career. Happy learning!

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