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The (academic) road less travelled: From dropout to recovery

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Abstract

In our educational pursuits, many of us have fond memories of teachers and professors who supported us, believed in us, and were very instrumental in our ultimate success. Some of us also have memories of certain *other* educators who were, to be charitable, not very kind at all. I have the indelible recollection of an entire high school that ran its day-to-day affairs like a prison, and the educators there (if you can call them "educators") were much more prison guards than actual teachers. I eventually dropped out of high school. I was burned out and demoralized in irrelevant classes to the point where I just didn't care anymore. This opinion piece is not only about my own academic redemption, but it also gives hope to other people who might have had negative educational experiences. To them, I say, you are not alone, you can recover, and your own success will be a perpetual stab in the eye (figuratively) to those who wanted to see you fail.

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When I think back on all the crap I learned in high school, it's a wonder I can think at all (Simon, 1973).

Introduction

I am a college graduate and a law school graduate. I was a practicing accountant for close to ten years. Currently, I have been a college professor for twenty-five years, teaching taxation, business law, and accounting. However, prior to my being blessed to have academic and professional success and the resulting accolades therefrom, I was also a completely demoralized, hopeless high school dropout. Thus, I have to slightly disagree with the above quote as I learned absolutely nothing in high school – *nothing beneficial*, that is. Instead, high school merely shoved a bunch of irrelevant, worthless classes down my throat with a culture of *learn this... or else!*

So, how did I go from the depths of high school failure to the summit of professional success? The story of my journey is in the coming pages. Was it an easy journey? Absolutely not, but it wasn't impossible, either. While this article is about my academic redemption, more importantly, it is also a story that will provide some hope for students starting their own journey through higher education after bad experiences in high school and perhaps battling their own self-doubt.

Major reasons for dropping out of high school

Needless to say, there are many reasons why people drop out of high school. The reasons can be academic, job-related, or personal. The academic reasons can be missing too many classes or getting too many bad grades to make continued attendance a viable option (Bouchrika, 2023). Sometimes students have to choose between holding down a job or going to class (Bouchrika, 2023). Personal reasons can include "becoming pregnant, getting married, and having to take care of or support a family member. Students whose families struggle financially are more likely to drop out of school" (Bouchrika, 2023, p. 5).

In my case, admittedly, I dropped out of high school precisely because I skipped too many classes and failed too many classes. The daily routine in my doomed senior year was simply this:

Show up to class (occasionally).

Not care.

Fail one exam.

Fail another exam, and still another exam.

Fail final exam.

Fail course.

Rinse and repeat.

I like to joke that I was a straight-F student in engineering school. The problem was it wasn't exactly a joke. As I will discuss below, I was so demoralized and burned out that I blew off every class in my senior year of high school and consequently failed everything under the sun.

My experience with high school failure

The kind of school I went to

Believe it or not, before the train wreck that was my time in high school, I was actually a pretty good student in elementary and middle school. I had been on the honor roll a few times and also won a few academic awards. With that kind of track record, I figured that I should be able to at least hold my own once I got to high school.

The high school that I went to was very competitive, and one needed to pass a specialized exam to get in. It was a specialized high school and, reputedly, one of the best in New York. What I didn't realize was this school had a well-known national reputation for its STEM programs (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). At that time, this school had majors in civil engineering, architecture, industrial design, chemical engineering, electrical engineering, and upper-level math, and was just starting a major in computer science (that's what I remember). Well, I quickly discovered that I had very little aptitude for, and even less interest in, just about all of the classes in the major I was eventually saddled with. And this was just the beginning of the horrors to come. Suffice it to say, this school's STEM programs inspired me so much that I went on to college to become an accountant.

Angry, overbearing, bullying teachers

In the movie "The Breakfast Club" (Hughes, 1985), Principal Richard Vernon was, for me, far and away the villain of the piece. He was evil, heartless, hostile, impatient, and overbearing – everything a good teacher should never be. I reference the movie's Principal Vernon here because the majority of the teachers I had in those days had those same qualities. Most of them were unapproachable and stern, and they never came off as empathetic people you could go to for any help or guidance. The pedagogical culture was more like a prison than an actual school. For me, the (alleged) prestige of going to a supposedly top-tier high school quickly wore off.

I wonder now if Principal Vernon might have been based on at least one, if not more, of my high school teachers. The late Paul Gleason, who played Principal Vernon, perfectly captured the anger, bitterness, and vitriol of so many of my high school teachers. If he were still with us, I would personally congratulate him on his tour-de-force portrayal. The culture at my high school was one of lingering anger from the top down. I had teachers there who called me a loser, said my work product was 'crap' (Gilmore & Smith, 2014) and were firm in their conviction that I would never amount to anything. For me, the typical school day was equal parts anger, verbal abuse, and mental cruelty, along with a seemingly 1950s mentality of *learn this or else!* It

was as if those teachers enjoyed themselves barking orders at students who they knew couldn't defend themselves. Adding more insult to injury, the teachers there would yell at me if I gave a wrong answer, if I said I didn't know the answer (Worrell et al., 2023) or if I didn't do a demonstration correctly. I was nothing but a verbal pin cushion for these people, who really weren't teachers, as they were really prison guard-type enforcers of the school's petty yet draconian rules.

To this day, I just can't understand how academicians expect students to succeed under conditions like that – or would want to. I am also convinced that my old school has the (academic) blood of a lot of disillusioned, demoralized students whose desire for learning was browbeaten out of them on its hands. I can tell anyone that it is easy for a student to become demoralized when all teachers seemingly do is focus on what students can't do instead of focusing on a student's potential for future success. That's what learning is supposed to be about; isn't it nurturing a student's potential for success? Nothing can ever justify that kind of negative reinforcement. My old high school was truly a place where hope went to die, and to quote the classic Steely Dan song, "and I'm never going back to my old school" (Steely Dan, 1973).

The day-to-day isolation and hopelessness

For me, there is probably no worse feeling a student can have than sitting in classes every single day, knowing that nothing good will ever come of it. That happened to me. I would get up every day at 6 am and commute ninety minutes to sit in class after class to learn absolutely nothing that would help me in real life. As I recall, classes started at about 8:30, and by 9:46, I had already lost the will to live; that's how stultifying, boring and worthless those classes were. And the school insisted that I do two hours of homework every night for these useless classes (which I never did). What for? Again, these classes were nothing but a daily exercise in hopelessness. The single biggest problem I always had was that no one would ever tell me how and why these classes would be useful in real life. And my reward for enduring the day's uselessness was I get to do it all over again tomorrow. The problem was, with this kind of pedagogy, I just couldn't enjoy learning for its own sake. I always had the lingering, inescapable dread that I always had to fight my way through one class, only to have to defend myself in the next one (Geometry 1 and 2, for example). Students just cannot receive the full benefit of a class when they just cannot see the point of it and must always have their mental guard up with almost no relief.

Being accused of cheating on a test

Ordinarily, in the big picture, failing a test might not be the worst thing to ever happen as long as a student takes the necessary corrective measures to do better the next time around. Admittedly, I failed more than a few exams in high school. Sometimes, I was sloppy and not as prepared as I should have been, and I deserved what I got. Other times, I just didn't have a clue, and I knew it. And later, as I was

rocketing towards flunking out, I failed some other exams precisely because I just didn't care. For what it's worth, I was never reduced to cheating on any test; at least my F's were honest.

So, imagine my surprise when I received a letter from one of my teachers making a horrible allegation that I cheated on a test. This teacher was one of the many overbearing, egotistical, blowhard types I had the misfortune of taking more than one class with. With his letter, he included a test that I had taken earlier that week, which I failed (what a shock). His letter claimed that another student (I'll name him "Slater Hepplewhite" to protect the guilty) had test answers wholly identical to mine and that I must have copied his answers.

I was outraged to no end, and I could not wait to meet him in person to rebuke his charges. When I met him in his office, I told him point blank that he was so convinced of my guilt as judge, jury, and executioner that he missed two very important details: first, he was so firmly convinced that I cheated that he obviously never considered the reverse possibility that the other person copied my answers, and second, if I was going to copy from another student, I most assuredly would have copied from a much better student than Slater Hepplewhite. My outrage, logic, and self-defense must have convinced him that I was telling the truth because he backed off after I fought back. He did have the (rare) common decency to tell me that a student that reacted as I did most likely did not cheat. I even passed his class later that semester. Well, that was one of the few victories I had in high school, and I even had lawyering skills way back then and didn't know it.

Failure and more failure

I think it is obvious that students do well in classes when *they want to be in class* (Wood, 2023) This is especially true when students can see the relevance of certain classes to real life, as well as their future career pursuits. "Students only want to take courses that would help them later on in life" (Knight, 2016, p. 2).

Most students only want to take courses that will prepare them for the real world. When high schools offer courses like personal finance, public speaking or independent living, students are more willing to take these classes because they know what they take away from these classes will actually help them later on in life. When the students can apply their knowledge learned in high school classes to their real life, that is a successful outcome (Knight, 2016, p. 3).

I couldn't agree more. Unfortunately for me, I didn't have that freedom of choice in high school. During my sophomore year, I had to pick a major, and I chose graphic communications, which at that time was the forerunner to what we know today as computer science. I was looking forward to taking classes in computer graphics, programming languages, and maybe even spreadsheets. Well, I never got that opportunity.

Why? The unthinkable happened: my choice of major was overruled and rejected. Instead, I was “awarded” the major of civil engineering. There was no conversation nor any right of appeal. *This* was my major, come hell or high water. (Can one imagine college being this inflexible?) I will also add here that because of my school’s hostile delivery of instruction, there was nothing civil about the civil engineering major. What I will never understand is what a high school gains by forcing a student into a major that is so far removed from the student’s preferences, interests, and talents. Common sense would suggest that a student has a much better chance of success in classes the student actually wants to take. One would think that a high school would have a vested interest in student success and do everything within reason to help the student be successful. In my case, as things ultimately played out, Gilmore, the involuntary civil engineering major, just didn’t have a prayer. For me, that kind of academic despotism was both unconscionable and unforgivable.

Going back to my earlier point of my having little to no aptitude in STEM classes, I got saddled with classes in the strength of materials, structural design, surveying, structural shop, patternmaking, chemistry, and physics, to name just a few. So, I sat in class after class, day after day, knowing these classes would never do anything for me in day-to-day, non-engineering life and that nothing good would ever come from the experience. These courses were just pointless, irrespective of any career pursuit I might have taken. Even if I never became an accountant and never went to law school, those classes would never have helped me get a job as a house painter, a cab driver, a janitor, a cosmetologist, a grave digger, a bartender, or anything else. As to my earlier facetious comment about losing the will to live by 9:46 am in some nondescript class, well, if a serial killer had barged into the classroom and driven a railroad spike through my skull, that would have been an act of mercy for me. That’s how disconnected I was. Eventually, I started skipping classes more and more, and truth be told, I had mentally checked out long before I finally stopped showing up for classes.

Again, I ask: *where is the relevance?*

Many students feel that courses they are taking in high school are not relevant to the field of study they would eventually major in at a higher level of education. Should a student who hopes to major in journalism be forced to take classes such as chemistry, physics, and calculus in order to graduate? Should a student who hopes to major in biochemistry be told he must take three years of Spanish and four years of English in order to get his diploma? (Knight, 2016, p. 2).

And because I was forcibly pigeonholed into “my major” and taking the resulting useless classes, ennui and failure were certainly inevitable. So, here’s my litany of “non-success” (yes, failures) as a civil engineering major:

Trigonometry (twice)

Freehand Drawing

Chemistry (twice)

Physics

Structural Design (twice)

Patternmaking (Wood Shop)

Geometry

Students have different minds with different interests, and it’s unfair to ‘universalize’ the courses that every student at a school has to take. If a student does well in and has a passion for English courses but struggles in math and science courses, that student should have the freedom to take more literature so he or she can thrive and learn about a subject that he or she loves. Too many students are failing classes that they should never had to take in the first place (Knight, 2016, p. 3)

To that, I say bravo and amen! I will also add this: as a tax professor, those civil engineering classes have never helped me teach my own students how to claim a charitable contribution deduction (IRC § 170) on their income tax returns or a marital deduction (IRC § 2513) on their gift tax returns. The defense rests.

The point where my failure was complete

Sometimes, when people go through a prolonged bad stretch, they tend to feel that they have gone as low as they could possibly go. And it is at that point that the elevator of fate reveals an even lower floor. That’s what happened to me. After failing exams, failing classes, and repeating some classes, I finally reached rock bottom and the point of no return.

This happened in my senior year, November 1981, to be exact. I had taken an examination in a structural design class, just one of the many classes that I had no hope of passing in that doomed senior year. When I received the graded exam, my score was a three (yes, as in one, two, three!). When I saw that score, I didn’t feel anything. I wasn’t mad, I wasn’t embarrassed, and I wasn’t morose. I just felt nothingness. I stuck the exam in my pocket, and that was the exact moment when I no longer had any hope of graduating in June. And I also knew if I was going to graduate, I would have to come back and repeat the entire senior year. Well, that was not going to happen; I had taken every indignity that I was going to take from that place. Obviously, I had no idea of what I would do next, but I was not about to extend my high school horror into a fifth year. High school had seen the last of me. As Mr. Frank Sinatra so sagaciously put it, “scuse me while I disappear” (Sinatra, 1966).

The road to redemption

Getting a G.E.D. (General Equivalency Diploma)

My parents were honor students all throughout school, and my mom was the salutatorian of her graduating class. They

both enjoyed school and for a child of theirs not to like school was the ultimate insult to them. So, how does a failed high school dropout like me tell his honor student parents that there is no way on God's green earth that he is going back to school? With great difficulty, I readily admit. But I had to honestly tell them that I wasn't going back. Even if I found another school willing to let me transfer there with my sorry record, I knew I was going to bail out at the first sign of trouble. So, transferring was not an option, either. Like I said, I was done with high school.

So, what happened next? That summer, my mom saw an advertisement for a G.E.D. preparation course at a local community college not far from our house. We all liked the idea, and I went and registered. I even remember the registration fee was \$35. The class met every Monday night from 6 pm to 9 pm from September through November. The room was filled to capacity every night, and everyone in the class, of all ages, was so supportive of each other. Every week, we would go over a specific subject area that would be tested on the New York State High School Equivalency Exam at that time (writing, social studies, science, math, and reading skills).

This program even gave us two simulated exams similar to the real thing to assess our readiness for the exam. The minimum passing grade was 225, and I scored in the high 270s both times. I knew that I was locked, loaded, and ready to crush this test. When I took the exam that December, I walked out of the room knowing I knocked it out of the park. It was such a sweet feeling having regained that level of academic confidence after having so completely lost it just recently. On the actual exam, I did even better than I did on the practice exams: I was blessed to score 291 (I have that scorecard to this day). That officially drove the stake through the heart of the high school vampire (Moxey, 1972) and freed me up for my next opportunity... whatever that was going to be.

Overcoming my trauma and doubt to start college

Now that I was free of the high school albatross, I really didn't know what I wanted to do next. Frankly, I was so traumatized by high school that I didn't initially see college as a viable option. I thought that college was going to be High School Hell, Volume 2. What ultimately changed my mind was that I had several friends in college who told me it was nothing like high school and that the lifestyle was far less regimented and pressurized than high school. I sent away for some college catalogues from various schools, and I liked the major offerings and course descriptions. I even browsed in a couple of college bookstores, and I enjoyed looking through some of the textbooks, even though I had no clue what was in them. I slowly began to realize that maybe this college thing might not be so bad after all.

My parents even told me that they would pay my tuition, and if I didn't like it after the first semester, I could walk away and get a job with no questions asked. So, with a little remaining trepidation, I enrolled at Hunter College and eventually majored in accounting. I must say here that I appreciate my mom and dad not giving up on me during this time.

Even though we did not always agree about my academic prowess at the time, they were never going to disown me, no matter how disappointed they were with my grades at the time. I am sure that there are stories out there of parents and children who have strained or perhaps irreconcilably fractured relationships because of academics. And this disconnect can be compounded by the student's thinking (right or wrong) that the parents only see the student as just a report card instead of a person trying to find their own way (Gale, 2022; Li, 2022; Nolan, 2020; Chng, 2023). Thankfully, many decades later, my mom (still with us as of this writing) and my dad saw me graduate from both college and law school as well as bury the high school demon.

Navigating college on my own terms

Once I made the decision to go to college, I quickly realized that if this was going to work, I was going to do this *on my own terms*. I knew instinctively that if college was going to be high school all over again, where I had no say over my own existence, I would scrap the whole thing and get myself a job pumping gas and go from there. A large part of my trouble in high school was that I somehow had to be all things to all people and live my life on everyone else's terms instead of my own. Once I started college, I saw right away that I could pick my own major, pick the times I wanted to go to class, choose my own career, and run my own race. It was a completely different world for me, and I loved it.

Because of this, I regained the confidence that had been ripped away from me in high school. There's something to be said about being able to make *your* own academic decisions without all of civilization second-guessing your every move. Therefore, I would tell any student in college (and beyond) to run their own race at their own pace. For example, if someone wanted to be a music major and both of that person's parents are already attorneys, that's fine. Remember, mom and dad have already run their academic race. So run your race, and don't let them (or anyone else) run it for you! This is *your* turn, now. Most importantly, I knew that I was going to do this for me and only me. Not for my parents, siblings, or friends. And sure as hell not for my old high school.

Sweet freedom

The great thing about college is the flexibility in scheduling. Once I had the freedom to pick the major I wanted without being overruled, I could even pick the times I wanted to go to class. Most classes have multiple sections, so depending on one's preferences or life situation, one can take classes in the morning, afternoon, evening, weekends, or online. In four and one-half years of college, I had only one 8 am class. Otherwise, my school days mostly started at 10 or 11 am, with a couple of required classes being offered at night. I had no problem with that, and it was far better than vegetating in some irrelevant, worthless class at 8:30 am, as I suffered so incessantly in high school. Anytime I received an assignment in college (and beyond), my only obligations were to do them right and submit them on time. The rest of the time, my life was my own.

So, how did I pick my accounting major? Almost by accident, actually. I originally intended to major in economics, which also required courses in calculus and statistics. Remembering how much I detested geometry and trigonometry in high school, I also understood that calculus and statistics were part of the requirements for the major (and the accounting major as well). Happily, I had done well enough in my college proficiency exams that I didn't need to take any remedial courses (Worrell et al., 2023), making me immediately eligible to take calculus and statistics.

In my third semester, the section of calculus I wanted to take was already closed, and I instead took accounting principles 1 in that same time slot. Turns out, I loved the class, and I officially declared the accounting major the following semester. By the way, unlike high school math, I also enjoyed calculus and statistics in college. I scored a B in calculus and a C in statistics (oh, well).

I can certainly understand the outrage if any college deliberately blocked a student from a preferred accounting major (for example) and then somehow compelled that student to major in something like underwater basket weaving or something just as useless to the student's individual taste. Or worse, imagine a student who is great at math and science and wants to major in engineering but is instead forced into a business administration major. Thus, instead of taking desired courses like aerodynamics, fluid mechanics, geothermal engineering, vector analysis, plane geometry, and the like, the would-be engineering student gets saddled with courses in accounting, finance, economics, management, taxation, etc. I can understand the agony of an engineering student who wants to learn about mechanical stress, torsion, probability theory, and shearing stress but is instead forced to learn about financial statements, financial ratio analysis, or preparing a Schedule M-1 reconciliation on a corporate income tax return. It wouldn't take long for that student to either go scream bloody murder to the administration or, worse, transfer elsewhere and take his tuition money with him.

Understandably, it's one thing to be removed from a college major if a student does not meet its academic requirements, but that's wholly different from being arbitrarily kept away from the major of one's choice. Otherwise, there's no way a *tuition-paying* college student would ever sit still for something so egregious as being blocked from choosing the major that student wants.

The realization that I belonged in college

After my experience in high school, one might think that I might have struggled with the impostor syndrome once I started college. In a nutshell, impostor syndrome refers to a person's internal belief that the person is not worthy of the attained position or status and that the person will eventually be exposed to be the fraud that person really is (Impostor syndrome, n.d.).

Luckily, I never had that problem. My 291 on my high school equivalency exam was good enough to get me into most colleges in New York. Hunter College accepted my application

for admission on that basis. Thus, my getting accepted was not a fluke, and my getting accepted was my opportunity for a fresh start after the high school nightmare and away I went. I also began to understand how certain required classes outside my major were relevant just the same. For example, in economics, one has a better understanding of supply curves, demand curves, and marginal revenue curves with a basic understanding of calculus. While I'm no mathematician, I could at least see the connection between calculus and economics, and this understanding only added to my academic confidence. I knew beyond any doubt that college was for me. In fact, one month into my first semester, I was having lunch in the cafeteria one day, and I suddenly realized: *so, this is college, and I belong here!*

My finest hour in college

As an accounting major, one of the required courses I had to take was the introductory course in federal income tax. As a full-time student, I had never worked anyplace before, "so I was intrigued about what I would learn in an introductory tax class. Turns out I enjoyed the class, and the attorney who taught the class was phenomenal and just plain brilliant. He broke the concepts down so they made perfect sense to a novice like me" (Gilmore, 2022, p. 49).

Schedule-wise, I had taken all the other required accounting classes, and I was taking tax in my final semester. So, there was a little bit of pressure as this was the class that stood between me and graduation (I wasn't at all worried about the other fluff classes I took that semester; *tax was the big one*). So, for obvious reasons, I could not fail and lose out on graduating from college that semester. It would have been like going all the way to the Super Bowl just to lose (just ask the Cincinnati Bengals and Philadelphia Eagles the last two seasons).

Thus, I studied my tail off for that class like I never had before. I got a B+ on the midterm, so that took a little pressure off. The final exam was on a Tuesday night, so I'd have to sweat out the entire week, plus the weekend before the grades were posted. Was that wait ever excruciating! Finally, on the following Monday, I rushed to campus at about one in the afternoon, and the tax grades were posted. Come hell or high water, I had to see how I did; graduation was riding on this final throw of the dice. In those days, the department offices used to post computer printouts of the final grades, and you looked up your Social Security number to see your grade. And there it was: *God blessed me with an A!* My graduation was secured! By the Grace of God, I was actually a college graduate! The comeback was complete! As I had a great time in college overall, that moment was my finest hour as an undergraduate (Gilmore, 2022). And that started me on the road to the teaching career I enjoy today.

What helps retention in higher education?

As I mentioned earlier, students do well when they *want* to be in school. Thus, institutions of higher learning understand that and therefore have various initiatives in place to get students – and keep them. These initiatives can

help students negotiate the journey from academic failure to academic success.

Showing college students that they belong in college

College gave me a fresh start after high school. When I attended my first orientation, one of my advisors told me in no uncertain terms to check any high school baggage at the door. The advisor also told me that my score on the high school equivalency exam, along with my college proficiency exam scores, left no doubt in anyone's mind that I was ready for college and up to the challenge. That meant a lot to me, and once I started, I never looked back; Hunter College (my first alma mater) believed in me, and I believed in myself.

Your admission is not an accident

Sometimes, it might take a student a while to get used to the idea that he or she is really in college, and the student might inadvertently believe that the admissions committee somehow made a mistake in letting him or her in. That is not the case at all. An admissions committee is a group of people who meticulously read through a person's college application at least twice before making the ultimate decision to accept the student (Milliman, 2022). The admissions committee is thus charged with the responsibility of bringing in the best possible freshman class for the college/university. Ordinarily, two different groups will look at your application and will decide if you happen to be a good fit for the university and, therefore, membership in that year's incoming class (Milliman, 2022).

In my case, the admissions committee at Hunter College saw my high score on my high school equivalency exam. The committee saw that I was someone who had recovered from the worst academic failure, which was completely failing out of school. And based on that recovery, the committee reasonably believed that I could successfully complete college and graduate, which I did. My high G.E.D. score was really the only thing I had going for me when I applied for college. But sometimes, it only takes one spark to start the chain reaction from college acceptance to admission to graduation. Once I got in, I never thought it was an accident, and I never pulled off any fraud to get in. Actually, because there were so many people looking at my application, I couldn't scam that many people simultaneously into thinking that I was better than I actually was. I'm neither that smart nor that devious.

Again, my admissions committee thought enough of me to accept my application, and I happily vindicated their confidence by graduating. My getting admitted to college was not a fluke, and your getting admitted was no fluke either. Accept the committee's gift of their confidence in you and go validate that confidence. If I can do it, with my track record, then you sure can! Go get 'em!

Asking what students expect to get out of the class

When students register for a class, they usually expect to get something out of the class. That expectation could be general knowledge, how the class is connected to their major, how the class has a direct impact on their lives, or anything else. To a certain extent, a student wants to know the real-life relevance of a given class. Thus it is certainly reasonable for an instructor to ask what a student wants to get out of the class, and the resulting conversation can help a student become more engaged in the class. In other words, the student will want to go to class and feel less compulsion to do so.

Showing real-world examples connected to the subject and how they relate to the student

As I mentioned earlier, practically all my high school classes had nothing to do with my life outside of school, and nobody cared enough to try to tell me why they mattered. I submit, students have a legitimate educational right to know how certain classes will impact their lives. So, why not show them? When I teach contract law, for example, I break it down so that my students can see that a contract is not always a multi-billion-dollar corporate transaction that they can't relate to. I break the concept down to something students *can* relate to. A contract is, by definition, a legally enforceable agreement (Black's Law Dictionary, 2016) for which the law gives a remedy.

I tell them, for example, when they go into the local Dunkin' Donuts and purchase a large French Vanilla coffee and pay \$3, they have completed a contract. Just like that! They pay the \$3 and walk out with the item just purchased. And to further show that a contract is not at all removed from everyday life, I also tell the class that when they buy coffee, they do not swear on a Bible and take an oath that they are creating a contract for the sale of goods pursuant to Article Two of the Uniform Commercial Code. They just did it. I also tell them that they create legal contracts all the time: registering for classes, paying tuition, renting an apartment, buying a car, painting a fence, buying groceries, babysitting a friend's cat, and so on.

Similarly, in financial accounting, I show my students, irrespective of major, how to keep track of their money. They can keep track of where the money comes from, where it goes, and how to record every transaction. This is certainly relevant in showing students how to balance their checkbook or how to stay on top of their finances if they own their own businesses or eventually become accountants.

Finally, in income tax, I show my students the basics of income tax preparation and the legal rules that apply to them. They truly want to know how to keep as much of their money away from the tax authorities as legally possible. I show them what deductions they can properly take to reduce their taxable income and eventual tax liability (prescription medications, co-payments, braces, psychiatric visits, charitable contributions, and state/local taxes, among others). I also show my students whom they can claim as their dependents (parents, children, siblings, etc.), which

results in tax credits that also reduce their tax liability. Last but not least, I tell my students that they can at least do their own taxes and they won't have to pay H & R Block anymore, and that is another way for them to save money. Thus, my students can definitely appreciate how the subject matter applies particularly to them.

Discovering classroom humor

How having fun can lead to academic success

The best times that I had in school were in college, graduate school, and law school. Why? Because the environment was conducive to learning and academic success. Thanks to the many great professors I came to know – and became friends with, the classroom aura was almost always easygoing, light-hearted, and low-stress. Yes, I understood the obligation to do the work on a timely basis and give my best efforts, but the experience was so much fun that I actually thrived. This was light years removed from the authoritarian and dystopian culture of my old high school. It's no wonder that after my high school disaster, I found success in higher education. It was so liberating to learn at my own pace and have fun in the process. "Looking back at my time in college, graduate school, and especially law school, I know that the classes that were the most fun, and where I had the most laughs, were many of the same classes where I also did the best" (Gilmore & Smith, 2014, p. 294).

This is proof positive that learning is not a chore, and a student does not always have to choose between learning and fun. I would not have been successful in college and law school otherwise. By the way, I am not the only one who sees a direct connection between having fun and academic success:

In response to the open-ended questions at the end of the survey, students identified 'humor' and making the material 'fun' as specific characteristics they sought in an 'entertaining' teacher. For instance, a Colorado student said: 'Teachers that are funny, friendly, make sarcastic comments, etc... are more real and it makes class more interesting which facilitates learning.' Several others said things like: 'the best way to keep students' attention is to try to make class fun or entertaining.' 'Be a dynamic lecturer' was another comment echoed by several students. 'If a teacher is entertaining, knows the material and enjoys teaching, then learning is so much easier' nicely summarizes what many students value in a good teacher (Levy, 2006, p. 82).

And at the other end of the spectrum, students can also perceive how a teacher's complete lack of humanity and affability can make learning a living hell:

Although the importance of teacher friendliness may be obvious, many students made it clear how detrimental to learning it can be when their teachers are not friendly. Several students warned that teachers should not be 'intimidating,' 'hostile,' or 'unfriendly and aloof. Another student said: 'A stiff, cold, unapproachable personality makes someone an ineffective teacher.' Yet another said: 'Poor social skills inhibit learning in an interactive classroom.' Finally, a part-time UNLV student said that when the [professor] is unapproachable and barely human, the class is truly brutal (Levy, 2006, p. 86).

This is proof positive that learning and fun are not mutually exclusive or necessarily an either-or proposition. Having fun and not being isolated by the learning process can make the single biggest difference between passing and failing:

It makes sense to me why I didn't feel comfortable saying my piece in the classroom for so many years. I was afraid to say the wrong thing and feel stupid. In a domination style learning environment, students' creativity and, ultimately, their potential is limited. In a holistic setting, students teach and learn interactively with the teacher. As they are teaching and learning, equality is created between them (Robinson & Kakela, 2006, p. 206).

Law schools are rooting for student success, too!

Let me start by getting the obvious out of the way: successful retention, graduation, bar passage, and success in professional life for law students are good for law school business. Why? It keeps the business open. Anyone who has ever seen the movie "The paper chase" (Bridges, 1973a) knows Contracts Professor Charles W. Kingsfield as the stereotypical Socratic professor. Kingsfield professes that his only goal is to teach the uninitiated how to think like a lawyer: "You teach yourselves the law, but I train your minds. You come in here with a skull full of mush; you leave thinking like a lawyer" (Bridges, 1973b). Being told that your brains are full of mush is not the most welcoming or confidence-inspiring thing one wants to hear on the first day of law school.

This brings us to the Socratic Method of law school teaching. This is a teaching methodology at the law school level that suggests that a student learns the law much more effectively by answering a series of rapid-fire questions asked by the professor on the spot, as opposed to being given the answer during the professor's lecture (Gilmore, 2013). That said, the biggest criticism about the Socratic method is that it puts students in the professor's crosshairs, where they can be cold-called at any given time, and the student can only answer so many questions before the professor pulls the rug out from under the student and proceeds to disassemble the student's points, one by one (Gilmore, 2013).

That said, I believe the law school teaching model has somewhat moved away from the Kingsfield model of forcing students to answer questions under unceasing pressure. In my own experience, professors have allowed me to volunteer or assign me to lead the class discussion on upcoming cases. Although I was confident in my ability once I was in law school, I do admit this kind of methodology removed the sense of foreboding that my professors were looking to take me apart as soon as I opened my mouth.

Some of you reading this might ask, 'Well, wait a minute Professor G. If this article is the story of your academic redemption, what does law school have to do with this?' Well, law school was the next part of my academic journey, in which I was blessed to be successful. By the time I started law school, I already had undergraduate and graduate degrees in my pocket. Therefore, I had already recovered the confidence that was so completely dismantled in high school, had success in higher education, and I was ready for my next adventure.

Going back to my earlier point that law schools want and need successful graduates in order to continue as viable going concerns, I wasn't just being facetious. One way law schools help students to become successful students and professionals is by showing that they care about their students, not just as students, but as people. "All told, faculty who let their students know that they care about them will, in turn, earn enhanced respect from students" (Jaffe, 2023, p. 13).

In addition to caring about students as people, law schools are increasingly cognizant about students having mental health issues that could adversely affect their academic progress (Jaffe, 2023). Thus, in recent years, law schools have had mechanisms in place to help students with any issues affecting their mental health. In addition to on-campus counsellors, law schools have lawyer assistance programs that help students with different issues, mental health, depression, substance abuse, and the like (Jaffe, 2023). During my time in high school, I am happy to report that despite the daily browbeating, I was blessed not to have suffered from depression or any substance abuse issues. Just getting my self-confidence pulverized every day was bad enough.

How my learning experiences inform my teaching style today

Showing my students that I'm just like them (only slightly older)

My opening day icebreaker every semester is that I tell my students that when I was much younger, much skinnier, and when I had hair, I sat exactly where they sat (not literally, of course), trying to make sense out of the subject matter for the first time. I tell my students that the only difference between me and them is that I'm a forty years older version of them, and believe it or not, I'm just like them. That normally puts them at ease, and they know I'm someone who's been there and am willing to help them be successful. My students truly appreciate that.

Learning and good storytelling

Part of the fun in learning and retaining concepts is in the professor being a good storyteller while teaching the day's topic. It's been my experience on both sides of the lectern that students retain the subject matter longer and do better when the professor can tie a wild, zany story back to the day's topic.

In my tax classes, I tell a story about finding money in the street and how it triggers a taxable event if the finder then claims it as his own. I then point them to the specific section of the tax law that defines gross income (IRC § 61), and I point them to the actual tax case that proves found money is subject to tax (*Cesarini v. United States*, 1969).

In my business law classes, I show first that there must be an offer and acceptance working in tandem to create a contract (Miller, 2017). I then show that once an offer is rejected, it can never be resurrected to create a contract. Assume, for example, I ask a young lady out on a date, and she responds that she would rather stick her face in acid before going out on a date with me. That is an unmistakable rejection (Miller, 2017). Three seconds later, she says that she was only kidding and would love to go on a date with me. (Suspend your disbelief about the legality of a date; I'm only showing the necessary contractual components of offer and acceptance.) Since a contract requires both an offer and an acceptance together in tandem, once she rejected my original offer, the offer is automatically terminated and is no longer on the table, and therefore there is nothing for her to accept.

Here's a more concrete example. My friend George offers to sell me his baseball card collection for \$750, and I say thanks but no thanks. Later on, I change my mind and tell George that I would love to buy his baseball card collection. Unfortunately, I would be out of luck because the offer is now terminated, and I cannot accept an offer that is no longer there.

Here's another story I use to keep my students awake and laughing. I'm a senior in high school, and I want to play college football at the University of Miami. All the big-name Division One schools are intensely recruiting me to play for them: Georgia, Alabama, Clemson, Notre Dame, UCLA, Stanford, Michigan, and Ohio State. I reject them all because I'm holding out for the University of Miami. I'm overjoyed when I receive a recruitment offer from the University of Miami, and I sign off on the letter of intent to play for the University of Miami. However, I didn't read the letter too carefully, and instead of playing for the University of Miami Hurricanes in Florida, I committed to play for the Miami University Red Hawks, located in Oxford, Ohio (yes, there is such a University)! Oh, no! Because this is a unilateral mistake (Miller, 2017) on my part, I am legally obligated to play in Ohio for at least my freshman year before I can try to transfer elsewhere. Because of my haste, I am now stuck with a contract due to my own rushed, negligent reading. As Charlie Brown would say, "RATS!"

I've had the experience in college and law school of taking wonderful professors who had great storytelling skills that helped me make day-to-day practical sense of the subject matter. This certainly helped me succeed and made college and law school so worthwhile for me. And this was light years removed from my high school experience of being force-fed pointless classes.

The college lifestyle is far less regimented than high school.

I am doubtless overstating the obvious when I say that college is a completely different experience than high school. One of the biggest differences is that college is far less regimented and draconian than high school. Of course, in college, one attends classes, submits assignments, takes exams, writes papers, and meets deadlines. However, because college scheduling is much more flexible than high school, a student can easily get the work done on time and still have plenty of time to enjoy other things in life.

Because in college you are typically only taking between three and five classes at a time, you will likely have much more free time than you did in high school. Most students in high school go to class from 8 am to 3 pm and then have sports practice or other activities after school and on top of that have homework... In college, you typically only have each class two to three times a week. You will have homework, but professors usually do not assign busywork, and instead, it will be larger projects such as essays. Time management is a key part of college and if you manage your time properly you will have plenty of time to spend with your friends and pursue other activities (Korn, 2021, p. 4).

Another key difference that separates the flexibility of college from the regimentation of high school is that a student won't have someone breathing down his neck every second about any given assignment. One of the many things I hated about high school was I always had some teacher nagging me about some assignment, usually twenty minutes after I got it.

With that kind of petty administrative housekeeping, I eventually decided that I'll hand something in just to hand it in. Why should I break my neck to do an assignment that I didn't care about in a worthless class that I wasn't going to pass anyway? That does nothing for positive reinforcement and student motivation.

Whereas in college (and beyond), you, as the student, can make the call on what you are going to do and when you will do it. You also understand that you have to work within certain parameters, and that's okay. Ultimately, that is your decision and responsibility. Welcome to freedom!

In college, you have the ability to make your own decisions on many things. For example, no one is going to ask you why you are leaving your dorm or apartment to get food in the middle of the night. Or you can head out Saturday morning to explore new places without needing

an explanation as to why you aren't working on that big homework project! This freedom of being able to do whatever you want whenever you want truly makes college and the transition into adulthood so much fun (Korn, 2021, p. 2).

Another key difference between high school and higher education is the relationship between the student and educator. During my high school incarceration, in a typical eight-period class day, at least seven of my teachers were martinets and held themselves out as strict, no-nonsense drill instructors. When the learning environment is nothing but militaristic, I believe that does the student much more harm than good and eventually crushes the desire for learning. (Sparks, 2018) My time in high school reminds me of a classic *Night Gallery* episode called "The Academy," (Serling, 1971), where the learning environment in an unusually strict military school was nothing but discipline and endless drills. While this would be normal in military school, the episode's punch line was that in *this* school, the students are forever matriculated and never graduate. (Skelton & Benson, 1999).

In college (and law school), the majority of professors are genuine people who want their students to succeed. A professor is not a student's presumed enemy. Professors want to help their students do well and don't want to put the screws to anyone. I had professors who were not only great people but enjoyed teaching and were passionate about it. Passion is something one cannot fake. Thanks to them, not only did I become successful, but they enjoyed my success as much as I did.

Professors truly care about what they are teaching and want to help you. For the most part, college professors are excellent at what they are teaching and have been researching the subject for many years. Professors are experts at their subject and most of them have written textbooks or numerous research papers on the topic. And because they are so passionate about the subject, this usually will show when they teach their lectures, which in most cases are engaging and entertaining to hold your attention (Korn, 2021, p. 5).

A student can be happy to know that a professor has a back story just like theirs

Sometimes when a student is going through a bad academic time, the last person the student might want to speak with is the student's own professor. Why is this? Sometimes the student might have the perception that the professor is someone from another planet, far removed from whatever problems the student might be having. To put it another way, the student believes that the professor can't relate, doesn't care, or even both. I *know* the trepidation because most of my high school teachers were unfriendly and unapproachable. So, I certainly couldn't talk to them because they just couldn't care less and surely did not want to hear anything I had to say.

That said, I must point out that professors have office hours, where students can come in for academic advice, career advice, life advice, or just get a sympathetic ear. When I

occasionally mention that I'm a high school dropout, my students are both amazed and stunned. Initially, students see their professors as professional subject matter experts in the classroom. And in my case, when I tell my students that I flunked out of high school but recovered, I think that psychological barrier between me and my students disappears. At that point, they realize that I'm a (slightly) older version of them. And it really helps their classroom experience with me because if they have academic insecurities, they know that I, as their professor, have a backstory similar to theirs. And they know that *I can relate*. And my door is always open.

Having difficult conversations with compassion, not confrontation

Because I've personally experienced academic trauma and failure, I think I have a better understanding of how to converse with students who might be struggling. For example, when I sit down with a student who failed my exam, I do not place any judgment. I show the student where he went wrong and how he can improve the next time around. That is far different from a pedagogical mindset that says, "You blew the exam; you're an idiot; you're never going to get this; you don't belong in college; change your major; get a refund of your tuition," and so on. If a student's confidence has taken a hit because he's struggling with a class or didn't do well on an exam, that student might be alienated from wanting to improve if he senses the professor is apathetic at best or confrontational at worst.

So, in my very small way over the years, I've helped some students overcome a tough start to finish well and succeed in my classes. Because I've seen those students recover and go on to success, there is no doubt in my mind that students do better when they know their professor is in their corner, as my professors were for me. Finally, that success is manifested when they graduate! Over the years, I've seen my former students become Certified Public Accountants, Enrolled Agents who can practice before the Internal Revenue Service, Business Owners, and Professional Chefs, and two of them have become Attorneys. They did the heavy lifting, and I was happy to play a small role in their development. I am certainly proud of them.

Conclusion

If there is any piece of advice I can give to any academic administrator that would be any good, it would be this: one cannot run a school/classroom like a prison, treat students like inmates, shove irrelevant classes down their throats, and then be surprised that students do not want to learn or succeed under such dehumanizing conditions. That *modus operandi* is counterproductive at best or demoralizing to students at worst. It will never do any good for a student's confidence for that student to go to class after class every day expecting nothing but vitriol from the very people entrusted to facilitate their learning, knowledge, and intellectual curiosity.

I was fortunate enough to escape from that spirit-crushing environment and recover to succeed in higher education. But how many similarly situated people are out there who weren't as blessed as I was and perhaps lost an opportunity to succeed in higher education? I submit, any institution that inflicts mental cruelty and tries to call it academic instruction is committing academic malpractice and should be held legally liable for both malpractice and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

Knowing this, institutions of higher learning have resources in place to help students feel welcome, to help students find their way, sometimes to lend a sympathetic ear, and even help with mental health (and other) issues. It also helps to have professors and administrators who are committed to student success. As discussed above, it also helps students to have professors like me who can more intimately understand a student's struggle and resulting insecurity and doubt.

Because I was able to get a clean break from high school and a fresh start thereafter, I never had to speculate on "what might have been" had I been able to pursue the major I really wanted in high school. I have no doubt that the Grace of God definitely returned "beauty for my ashes" in the form of a successful academic and career trajectory (*Holy Bible*, 2015, *Isaiah* 61:3). That said, I must point out that my commentary here is not intended to be a blanket demonization of all high schools. Many people look at their high school experience with fondness. And I do not suggest that the college experience is as universally rewarding for others as it was for me. Each of us is a product of our own experiences.

It has been well over forty years since my escape from high school, and I haven't gone back since. Although I have absolutely no plans to go back to visit, I do hope that, over time, my old school has at least tried to make some lasting changes for the better. My story gives even more meaning to the old advertising slogan, *been there, done that*. Thus, the support systems mentioned above go a long way to helping students succeed far better than the "old school" explanation of "sit down and shut up" (Liberals response to dissent, 2015). In short, intentional classroom vitriol does nothing to help student success and retention. Nurturing and support are what help students succeed. I am living proof.

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