

A Lecture on Education

By Douglas C. Pearson, Colonel, USAF-Ret.

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Over the years I have watched students struggle to make it to graduation, some successful and some not. I have carefully listened to the many arguments they have given as to why they are having trouble succeeding in school. Some of the challenges were merely excuses, but many of them were relevant and shared by a number of students. I wanted my students to know I support them in the challenges they face, so I decided to spend a day discussing with each class the seven obstacles I have identified in getting an education and how they must overcome them to get the education they deserve. Here is what I told them:

Class, you must realize that your education has to be your responsibility. As I look at each one of you I want you to understand that you are the best person, with the most vested interests, to ensure that your personal development is maximized. But your educational success is not always an easy path. I want to cover seven potential problem areas you may face and help you understand some of these difficulties; some of them might surprise you.

You will experience ineffective teachers. No educational system is perfect, neither in high school or college. Although not a frequent experience, as a student you will encounter an ineffective teacher or professor. You will likely have to make an extra effort in a class like this by taking more notes, doing more reading outside the class or researching more information on your own. The responsibility of getting your education still rests with you. In my experience, I had teachers whom I could hardly understand, and they spent the entire lecture facing the board writing equations. But I had to find a way to learn the material and move on.

You will encounter boring classes. Not every class you take is going to be interesting, nor will the material be presented in a way that will keep your interest. There may also be classes that have interesting topics but the content is presented in a way that makes the class boring. Being in a boring class is not an excuse to perform poorly. It is still necessary

to do what is required and put the effort into the task at hand. Again, the focus must be on getting the work done even though the circumstances are not optimal.

You will have classes that seem irrelevant. In taking core classes, or courses outside your interest area that are required for graduation, there will be material that may seem irrelevant. These courses often contain useful information that might not connect with your interests. Although the educational process may seem to be a 'square filling' exercise, what seems to be irrelevant really has a character-building motive behind it. Focus on developing a work ethic and doing something well even when the activity does not interest you.

You will have 'issues' in your life. This is a huge problem area for many of you. I could ask each of you to stand up and tell me about an issue in your life that is troubling you and every one of you would have something to say. I, of course, will not put you in that uncomfortable position, but you all understand my point.

A student immediately responded, "Col. Pearson, I have so much to do when I get home. I have a child I need to take care of, a house to clean and food to prepare. I don't have time to study and much of the school work does not seem important."

I understand that some of you are dealing with problems even adults would have difficulty dealing with. It is also a fact that the magnitude of some problems makes education seem secondary in your life. Some of you with failing grades just have too much happening in your life and education does not seem important in comparison. But you have to persevere. Do not let the bad things that happen in your life derail you from getting an education. Keep the mission in focus and remember that the responsibility of getting an education rests on your shoulders.

You may not have someone in your life who is proud of you. For some of you, there may be no support at home and no one else who cares. Your success is easier when there is someone you can turn to who tells you, 'I am proud of what you have accomplished.' Teachers do that, and for most of you who are so fortunate, your parents do that. But, some of you may not have that kind of care, and some may lose it in tragic ways. That is a reality that some must face. What has to

happen for you in high school is that you must examine your behavior and develop an internal pride in what you do—an inner drive that brings personal satisfaction. This can sustain an individual in the toughest of times. Developing that inner drive gets down to nothing more than old fashioned 'work ethic.'

You will have some kind of learning challenge. Each one of you has some level of a learning challenge, but your learning process must continue, even when there are obstacles to comprehension or understanding. Some of you may have trouble with math, some English, some science, some reading comprehension. Whatever weakness you have, that is the area where the extra effort must be applied. Recognize your shortfall and work harder in that area. My weakness was in reading and reading comprehension. I knew I did not read fast and many times I had to read the material over and over again. I often had to study much longer than others to absorb the material for tests. But you have to 'make it happen'—it just takes work, sometimes lots of work.

You will encounter others who believe being 'smart' and studying are not the 'in things to do.' Do not let peer pressure and the attitudes of others get in the way of your education. It is your life and your future that you are developing. As a high school student, this is the first time in your educational career that you are developing a resume for your future. Whatever you do, it is your high school education that will determine your success. It is not just the academic achievements, but the patterns of behavior in getting the task done that are so important.

I thought about this lecture and realized there are truths that apply to many of us in life. Once you accept what you may think is a burden of responsibility, you will embrace it and it will become a joy of responsibility. Your joy comes from the internal drive you develop, where rewards for achieving something through hard work come from within. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Col. Douglas C. Pearson, USAF-Ret., is a senior aerospace science instructor who has managed and taught the Air Force Junior ROTC program at Sandy Creek High School for seven years.