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Advice the Core Cannon Cannot Give

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ADVICE THE CORE CANNOT GIVE

Seminar members, knowing that sometimes even the brightest freshmen don't listen, offer a few words of personal advice.

Every faculty member looks out over that freshman class and wishes them the best; but each one has that half-buried yearning: "If I could tell these kids — excuse me, young men and women — just one thing and if they would listen to me, their lives would be richer forevermore. This includes the members of our seminar. So, we're making one more try.

Since we are men and women, priests and laypersons, with and without our immediate families, we address these letters to a son or daughter, a niece or nephew, to a general freshman, or in my case, since my nephew David is now 45, to some future grandnephew who might be named after my late brother Dave.

What unifies these suggestions is the realization that the core can't take care of everything and, for a real education, the student must strike out on his or her own. **RASj**

Margaret Davis: Knock on that door.

To a freshman:

You are entering a wonderful time of your life, and I urge you to find a mentor to help you through the delights and challenges of the next four years. The faculty of your college are professionals experienced in their fields of study, but they are also caring individuals committed to helping you make the best of your college experience and your life afterwards.

I encourage you to find someone among the faculty whom you respect, trust, and like, and get to know that person on a personal level. Faculty relish relationships with students outside the classroom and are open to genuine and lasting friendships.

I love to go to weddings and parties for graduated students and delight in receiving letters, visits, and Christmas cards with pictures of children and dogs. Maybe your freshman advisor, a teacher in your major, or a priest with whom you work and worship is one whom you will find to be a lasting mentor and friend.

Just knock on that door and invite yourself in for a conversation. The door might open to begin a friendship that you both will cherish forever.

Margaret Davis teaches English at Spring Hill College.

Gregory Carlson, S.J.: Write for fun.

Dear Sonja,

You're off to college. Good for you!

What college started for and in me keeps growing, and those first four years remain special. Conversations Magazine has asked me to describe 'core experiences' not in the classroom. I write to recommend three to you.

1. Keep a book open to a great painting. Change often. Enjoy Picasso, Renoir, Pollock. You know that I haven't used book stores. I find lovely painting books and enjoy living with them.
2. Find a teacher with whom you can relate and then bother her. I met Fr. Len Waters when I was twenty; I am still growing from our relationship. He is long gone, but our conversations opened many doors! He listened, challenged, recommended books, read my writing, and criticized it fiercely. My thinking proudly bears his stamp.
3. Write for fun. I have written many assignments, but college also taught me to play with ideas. That practice helps me to write this letter! Write poems, essays, short stories. Writing makes me hungry for ideas and images.

This practice later morphed into my "worrying" homilies into shape.
Uncle Greg

Gregory Carlson, S.J., teaches English at Creighton University.

The joys hopes, griefs and anxieties of the people of this age

Leslie Liedel: Live on campus, but go away.

Dear Kian,

First, although you won't be old enough for college for a few years, choosing the right college is important, and we both know that there are so many options. There is not necessarily one right school for you and your needs. That being said, I demand that you live on campus. I don't care if you go to the college down the road from our house, you must live there.

I have watched generations of commuter students sitting in their vehicles, eating lunch, reading assignments, and writing papers on laptops. While I applaud these young people for pursuing higher education, I wish they were more connected with the university. The roommate you have during your first semester may become your best friend or your worst enemy... or neither. But living on campus will force you to meet all kinds of people, will encourage you how to make good decisions, and will assist you in learning how to negotiate differences. And while you may lose several hours of sleep, you will gain so much from the experience.

Second, study abroad. Again, there is a study abroad program in virtually any place you can imagine. You cannot make a wrong choice with regard to this issue. If you want to go to Italy to study art history, good for you. Maybe you want to go to Cameroon and work with marginalized people? Or possibly you want to spend time in China to work on your Cantonese? Once college is over your responsibilities will increase significantly. It is highly unlikely that you will ever again have a fifteen-week period to spend in another country, interacting with the folks who call that country home and receiving college credit while learning about a particular culture. Now is the time to take advantage of this truly win-win situation.

Love, Your Mother

Leslie Liedel teaches history at Wheeling Jesuit University.

John O'Callaghan, S.J.: Listen

To a Believing College Student:

It's been a while since I went to college, but one thing I did then is even much more crucial in today's U.S.A.: an honest-to-God "Retreat."

I don't mean the kind of retreat where everyone gets together and talks a lot – though I think that has a place too. I mean a retreat where you can leave behind all the constant talk, of whatever kind (banter or texting or bar-conversations; even serious talk about serious things) and listen. To yourself; to wise words from a spiritual author or counselor; to what God may say in the depth of your heart.

Experiencing this kind of retreat in my college years made all the difference for my life. It put me in touch with myself in a way nothing else had done. It deepened my faith in a God who knows me better than I know myself, who guides me and leads me (though I sometimes realize that only in retrospect), and will see me safely home. It will never be listed as a Core Requirement, but nothing was more important for my college education.

If you go to a Catholic or another faith-based school, this kind of retreat will probably be available – or can be set up if you round up some interested others. If you're not at a place where God is a permitted subject, look for a Newman Center under whatever title: they'll probably understand what you're looking for. You won't be sorry.

John O'Callaghan, S.J., teaches medical ethics at Loyola University.

Raymond A. Schroth, S.J.: Swim and read.

Dear David,

As you leave for college here are two things usually not required for graduation — but are required, I suggest, for life.

First, learn to swim very well. Not just because it's a family tradition, but because some day you'll be standing on a bridge in Paris and some desperate person will leap into the Seine to end it all. You'll dive in and save her. Another day while running on the beach, you'll see an angry wave snatch two children and yank them out to sea. You'll plunge in and drag them back.

Then, above all, read a Big Fat Book. Let a classic lure you into another world, not the fantasy escapes of Tolkien or Harry Potter, but worlds of pain, prisons, murder, love and war. Usually teachers don't assign big books, either because they haven't read them themselves or fear students will drop the class when they see the reading list. Try David Copperfield, Les Misérables, Anna Karenina, and The Brothers Karamazov. You might lose some sleep and miss some parties, but you'll have an education.

Love, Uncle RAY

Raymond A. Schroth, S.J., teaches at Saint Peter's College.

I love to go to weddings and parties for graduated students and delight in receiving letters, visits, and Christmas cards with pictures of children and dogs.

Mark Scalese, S.J.: Immerse yourself in serving others

Congratulations! You made it to college, and more importantly, you have decided to study at a JESUIT college. No doubt, during orientation you have already heard that your school wants to help you develop into "men and women for others." I suspect that by the time you graduate you will be able to repeat that slogan in your sleep.

In my experience, one sure-fire way to open your minds and hearts to "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted," is to go on a service or immersion trip sponsored by your school. That

quote is from one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, known by the opening words of its first sentence in Latin, "Gaudium et Spes." Since 1965, Jesuit schools all over the world have taken those words very seriously. The campus ministry program of your school probably sponsors several service/immersion trips each year, usually during winter and spring breaks and after graduation. At my own institution, students encounter the poor in other countries such as Jamaica, Belize, and Ecuador, and closer to home, in locations such as Appalachia, New Orleans, the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, and even Washington, DC. More and more Jesuit schools also offer special service-learning courses that integrate classroom learning with real-life experiences in nearby inner-cities or even other countries. All the students I've known who have gone on such trips have been profoundly changed by the people they encountered. I bet you would be too.

Mark Scalese, S.J., teaches film/video production and studies at Fairfield University.

Mary K. Proksch: Your life is your legacy.

Dear First Year Student,

You are entering one of the most exciting times of your life as you make the transition from high school to college life. Your whole life is ahead of you, and the last thing that you are probably thinking about at this time is your legacy. After all, isn't legacy something that people think about in their 50s, 60s, 70s, or beyond?

In reality, when you really think about it, your life is your legacy. Legacy isn't something to start thinking about and planning, for as you are ending your career; your legacy is the totality of your life. Legacy is the result of the choices that each of us makes every single day of our life, so choose wisely. Life is lived once and there is no going back to reverse the past.

On a lighter note, enjoy your years here. This is a wonderful gift of time to discover who you are on your journey of greater understanding of self and others. Embrace your liberal arts courses as they will be life-changing and broaden your worldview, your *Weltanschauung*. Choose a life work that fills you with passion.

Mary K. Proksch teaches nursing at Regis University.

Harry Dammer: Contemplate and concentrate.

To My Daughter Katie:

Too soon you will be on your way to college. You will be told many things about how to approach your college years. I would like to weigh in too! I have just one thing to tell you....your most important job for the next four years is to determine what you would LOVE to do with your life. This is imperative because you may never again have the time and resources to help you make such a determination. Do not make a decision based on money or what others say you should do. To help make this determination do three things: First, pay attention to your liberal arts courses. The study of philosophy, theology, biology, and math will normally benefit down the road. Second, attend cultural events that you would normally not attend. It will stretch your world view. Third, spend some time alone. Turn off all electronic things that the world has said you cannot live without and spend time with yourself. Contemplation and concentration are lifelong skills too!

The results will be that you will find what motivates you, what makes you tick, and then you can pursue it. What you love you will be good at. Then someone will pay you, we hope well; but if not then, it matters little. You will be happy, as you have made me. Enjoy your four years, but not too much!

Love, DAD

Harry Dammer teaches criminal justice at the University of Scranton.

Aparna Venkatesan: Be present in your life.

Dear Leaders of the Future,

In our modern age, we are constantly bombarded with information. Cell phones, blogs, faxes, emails — we are often at the mercy of the scattered thoughts of others and ourselves. But is information knowledge, or even understanding? We are over-stimulated within and without. How do we develop patience and depth of perception in an era that thrives on the instant-ness of things? How can you develop thoughtful opinions on the people and topics you will study and encounter?

Thoughtful answers require a mindful self, a self-centeredness that has nothing to do with selfishness. Mindfulness requires in turn the opportunity for introspection. In a typical day, we may have to schedule this time for reflection. Try to slow down and be present in your education and in your life, for patient experiencing provides different insights than the instant opinions you may feel pressured to express.

Rilke once wrote "resolve to be always beginning, to be a beginner." Take advantage of the unique spiritual education you will receive here to cultivate this fresh mind, and a receptive heart. It will make you a good observer and a good listener, excellent qualities for any path that you choose (scientist, artist, writer, parent, President) and for any human being.

Aparna Venkatesan teaches physics and astronomy at the University of San Francisco.