

May 29, 2005

Dacia-

Congratulations on graduation! I hope you can use this small gift, it is one of the things that all (1) my students agreed no college student can really live without and (2) your parents wouldn't freak out about. As strange and wonderful as your high school graduation is, it is even stranger to me since I have known you in brief flashes since you and your mom lived in the small apartment in Houston down south of Rice. Sort of like driving through a lightning storm at night where you only see the passing scenery in brief flashes and suddenly you realize you have arrived. Having just had a daughter of my own, I am beginning to better understand how protective your mom was of you back then, and probably still is.

I heard from your mom that you will be going to UT Austin next year, a really excellent university. The summer before college is a really strange one for most people. I remember that I knew life was going to change in a major way, but really had no idea what to expect. So I just didn't think about it that much. Advice is worth exactly what you pay for it, and I know you are probably sick of hearing about college from your parents, teachers, and everyone else you meet. But... Maybe it is egotistical on my part, but I thought it would help to hear from the other side of college. If you don't mind I would like to share some things that I have learned from teaching at a large state university similar to UT for the last seven years. There is no real order or theme for this letter. Rather it is a list of the things that I find the students I teach don't really understand about the weird and wonderful experience called college. Also there are some of the myths that all students believe about college that they picked up from high school, but that just aren't true. Maybe this letter will help make sense of some of the experiences you are bound to have.

## **I**

The first piece of advice is to always remember that your professors are not Gods even though they may act like it sometimes. They got their jobs because they know a lot about one very specialized thing, not because they are wise, or good, or all-knowing. They just people. They have on days and off days just like everyone else and many of them are not even very good teachers. Remember this when you feel like the professor doesn't care about you or when you feel lost and confused. If you feel like you can't understand what the professor is teaching, it isn't you and it isn't that you are dumb. Don't get discouraged and quit, and don't ever get down on yourself. Although not every professor cares about students or about being a good teacher there are some that do. Treasure the ones that have something important to teach you, and try to establish a long term friendship with them.

## **II**

The second thing about college that students don't always appreciate is that it will change who you are. You won't be the same person when you graduate from college that you are now at high school graduation. The people you meet, experiences you have, classes you take, and activities you choose will all change your life in strange and wonderful ways. While this is a scary thought, it is also an empowering one when you realize that to some degree you can choose the experiences you will have. You become what you do. Knowing that what you choose to do changes who you are gives you the power to make wise decisions: ask yourself "Will this help make me the person I want to become?"

## **III**

The third, and maybe most important, piece of advice that I can offer is to always follow your interests and your passions. No-one ever becomes successful at what they do if they don't love it; if you choose not to follow your passions life is much more difficult and boring. I often saw college as work, not as something that I was interested in; this prejudice held me back for a

long time. Many of the students I teach feel this way, and they have a lot of trouble learning for this reason. Learn to love what you do, you will spend a large part of your life doing it. Learning to love your work is the most important thing you can take away from college. If you see college as work, and don't find in your profession some sort of joy, it will be very hard to find success, or happiness, or contentment later in your life. Also understand there is a big difference between loving something and liking it. I love my job, but I don't always like it.

#### **IV**

Fourth, realize that life is long and good things only happen when they are ready to happen. It may take you some time to find something you like to do. It may take some time to find a person you feel you can spend the rest of your life with. Don't worry about it and don't force it. Being impatient about things that will happen in their own time causes bad things to happen.

#### **V**

Fifth, don't worry too much about grades. Have fun and learn. All the students I know who care too much about maintaining a 4.0 GPA are pretty nasty people. Nobody I have ever talked to said that when their grandfather was dying he regretted not having a higher grade point average in college. Grades are not at all important in the long run, but a lot of doors will open for you (scholarships, travel opportunities, jobs) if you have at least a 3.0 GPA. What is much more important than grades is experience in whatever field you choose to study in. Try to find a professor you respect and work for them, even if you have to work for free in the beginning. Great things happen this way.

There are also a few myths that all college students believe that just aren't true...

#### **I**

The first of these myths is that they will train you on the job, and it doesn't really matter how well you learn what is covered in your college

classes. The truth is that most of what is taught in college you will only have a chance to learn once. If you don't learn it you won't ever know it. So don't lightly blow off class or skip homework. You can get through college just by going to class every day.

## **II**

A second myth is that your professors know as much or more about you or your life than you do. This perception seems to arise from people's experiences in elementary and secondary school, as well as from the illusion faculty members like to present as being all-knowing. Faculty only know about your life if you tell them about it. Be honest and up-front in how you deal with your professors. They are not your parents, they are not the police, they are not the "Man". If you need help, ask. If you need a favor, ask. If you don't understand something, ask. If you don't tell them about who you are, they won't be able to help you.

## **III**

The final myth that many of my students suffer from is that graduating from college is the end of a journey. It isn't, despite what your high school teachers led you to believe. It is simply another step. The things that make Dacia Dacia will still be there, her hopes and loves and fears. The things that make us human are always close at hand. Don't focus so blindly on graduation that you forget that life continues afterwards.

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Reading over what I have written it seems sort of like just plain old advice. Not the ringing phrases and deep wisdom I had hoped for when I sat down to write you. It really all comes down to one thing: have faith in yourself. I know you well enough to know it is well deserved.