

How to Succeed in University and Life

by Jim Davis

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Why have I written this paper?

Having attended university for 7 years, and subsequently taught in post-secondary institutions for 38 years, it is difficult to watch students fail a class when they could be passing the course along with their peers. In every class I have taught, there have been from 2 to 6 who fail, because they never do anything to earn a grade in the class. They don't attend the class; they don't do the assignments; they don't write the exams. In short they don't even appear to try. My question is: why did they enroll in the course. If their circumstances changed after they enrolled, they should have dropped the course because taking an F grade is almost the worst thing you can do in university. I know because I took 40 credits worth of F. Every F grade counts against your cumulative GPA, and universities have a minimum cumulative GPA required in order to graduate. The F grades I took at one university almost prevented me from graduating at another.

This occurs mostly because of ignorance or a mistaken belief that the most important aspect of university is being able to pay for it. If a student has student loans, and they drop classes below the minimum number of credits required for them to maintain the loan, that loan becomes immediately due and payable. So they take the F to avoid problems with their student loans. It is truly necessary to be able to pay for one's education. However, let's take a look at the consequences of getting an F grade.

First: taking an F seriously reduces your cumulative GPA. If your cumulative GPA is below the specified minimum, you cannot graduate.

Second: universities have rules about how many F credits you are permitted to have before you are required to withdraw from the university.

Third: programs in universities also have rules about how many Fs or Ds a student is permitted and still be allowed to graduate. These rules are spelled out in the university catalog.

Fourth: if you really need that class then you will have to repeat the class to change the F grade into an acceptable grade. This increases the cost of attending university by one extra class fee and delays graduation. Getting more than one F simply compounds the problem and delays one's graduation.

For these reasons, in university an F grade in any class is to be avoided at all costs! Trust me on this. I learned it the hard way when I sat down with a university official to review my application to graduate. She noted that I had transferred in 5 classes from another institution and they had been evaluated as being worth 40 credits. All the grades for these classes were Fs. She calculated the numbers and said: "Congratulations you can actually graduate." I was shocked, because I only had 2 classes, 6 credits out of 64, which were not As, at that institution. That was when I really understood the effect of

cumulative GPA. I had even read the catalog, but I clearly had not understood the implications of what it meant.

Even those who get acceptable grades sometimes sabotage themselves by failing to perform some of the activities which will earn them more marks and a better grade in the course. Students often think they have a good reason not to do an assignment, but more often than not, it is a failure to understand and adequately consider, the long term consequences of doing so. People, in general, far too often focus on short term considerations and overlook the long term consequences. Many excellent students have taken classes I have taught and done very well in the class. They seem to have already worked out what I am trying to communicate in this paper. So this material is intended for those who have not yet worked it out. Hopefully this material will make explicit, for those students, this understanding, and give those students, who have not yet worked it out for themselves, the opportunity to remedy their behaviour!

I have always believed that in addition to teaching the subject matter, an instructor should also teach two more things. Then at least the student not only has a choice, but also has the know-how to earn good grades. These two things are:

1. How to succeed in a class

The first item is recognized by instructors and the university as absolutely essential. That is why every student **must** receive a course outline for each class they take. It is the contract between a student and the instructor as to how to succeed in that class. If this is not done, it becomes prima facie evidence for a successful grievance by any student! It is essential that each student seek out and read the course outline.

2. What the failure paths are for a class

The second item is not often discussed. It is left to the student to figure it out. It is the main explanation as to why some students do so much better than others. Successful student, those who get good grades, have usually learned this from their interaction with teachers during the 12 years of schooling of their primary and secondary education. At all costs you want to avoid the failure paths but sometimes those paths are not well understood.

How to Succeed in University and Life

Two Parts to Success:

There is an saying in english: “You cannot see the forest for the trees.” This implies that there are at least two parts to anything we perceive. Put another way: to achieve success in any endeavour. We must understand and then act upon these two things:

1. The forest is what we want—the big picture
2. The trees are the actions that will get us what we want—the details

Both of these are necessary! If either is lacking no one can be successful in attaining what they want. So let’s look at each one in more detail.

The Big Picture or Why Do You Want It?

In Rogers and Hammerstein’s musical South Pacific there is one scene where a mother, known as Bloody Mary, sings a song to the young man who is courting her daughter. It speaks to the fact that if we want something out of life, we have to have a dream. Humans aspire to dreams. It appears to be part of our makeup as human beings. Here are the lyrics to the chorus of the song. Conceptually it hangs together very well. If you would like to hear it sung, [here](#) is the youtube link.

Happy Talk–Chorus

Happy talk, keep talkin' happy talk,
Talk about things you'd like to do.
You got to have a dream,
If you don't have a dream,
How you gonna have a dream come true?

This is not the only reference to this idea in famous movies. In the Sound of Music, Mother Superior sings a song to Maria about the same idea. The song is titled Climb Every Mountain and you can listen to it [here](#). Dreams are powerful, and we need all the power we can get, to help us through the challenges of attaining our dreams. That is the message of this song.

Climb Every Mountain

Climb every mountain, search high and low
Follow every byway, every path you know
Climb every mountain, ford every stream
Follow every rainbow, till you find your dream
A dream that will need, all the love you can give
Everyday of your life, for as long as you live
Climb every mountain, ford every stream

Follow every rainbow, till you find your dream
A dream that will need, all the love you can give
Everyday of your life, for as long as you live
Climb every mountain, ford every stream
Follow every rainbow, till you find your... dream.

Notice this song is more specific about what we have to do to 'find our dream'. We need to seek for it, investigate all the possibilities, in short devote considerable energy in order to identify it before we can attain it.,

We often see a similar message in various forms in our culture. Here is a poem that speaks to the same idea, but in a different way.

The Will to Win by Berton Braley

If you want a thing bad enough
To go out and fight for it,
Work day and night for it,
Give up your time and your peace and your sleep for it

If only desire of it
Makes you quite mad enough
Never to tire of it,
Makes you hold all other things tawdry and cheap for it

If life seems all empty and useless without it
And all that you scheme and you dream is about it,
If gladly you'll sweat for it,
Fret for it, Plan for it,
Lose all your terror of God or man for it,

If you'll simply go after that thing that you want.
With all your capacity,
Strength and sagacity,
Faith, hope and confidence, stern pertinacity,

If neither cold, poverty, famished and gaunt,
Nor sickness nor pain
Of body or brain
Can turn you away from the thing that you want,

If dogged and grim you besiege and beset it,
You'll get it!¹

¹ Berton Braley. "The Will To Win." Family Friend Poems, <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/the-will-to-win-by-berton-braley>

I first encountered this poem in a book I read when I was 19. It made such an impression that I have never forgotten it. It speaks to the price we must pay for our dreams. A dream is as much a necessity as living, and each of us needs to figure out what we want out of life. Figuring this out is a large part of what makes life worth living! We all pay the same price in the end: we give our lives for it. But to attain it we must first identify it, then flesh it out more fully; and finally we must turn our dreams into goals!

Finding Your Goal

For some this comes easy, others have to work at it. High school and university guidance counsellors tell me when it comes to knowing what young people want to study there are two kinds of students:

Golden - they already know the field they want to work in.

Silver - they don't know which field, and the first thing they must do is find out.

I was in the second category. I didn't get my first clue as to what I wanted to do for my career until I was in my third year of university. I was asked to teach a particular concept in one of my classes. After class my instructor complemented me on doing a fine job, and suggested I would make a good teacher. So I eventually pursued an opportunity to teach at university. The fact that public speaking held no terror for me, made the decision relatively easy.

Like me, my youngest daughter was also Silver. She made several false starts and it took her two years in university to figure it out, but she did it. My oldest son and oldest daughter were in the first category. My son was interested in computing and became a software developer. My oldest daughter was very interested in music, (they all were interested in music) and is now a Music Therapist at a major hospital in the United States.

I am not going to address the challenge of identifying a field of interest further in this paper. If you are in the second category and need assistance, need ideas to figure it out, or help in doing so, I recommend you utilize the resources around you, university counsellors, advisors, friends or family. It is necessary for everyone to figure this out!

Whatever you select, it must fill one requirement. It **must** be something you are deeply interested in. It cannot be too easy or you will be unable to fulfill the requirements implied in Climb every Mountain and The Will to Win. A deep and abiding curiosity about your field is absolutely essential!

It doesn't really matter to anyone else what we give our life to. If it captures our interest, it is suitable for us. Of course it should be something worthwhile, and it should be something socially acceptable. We should build something rather than just tear down

what someone else has built. If nothing else, we should make it easier for others to follow where we have trod.

Why Goals and Not Just Dreams?

The difference between dreams and goals is that goals answer the 6 questions: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How. Goals are concrete, specific, and have timelines attached. Goals are the means by which we make our dreams substantive.

Peter Drucker once stated: *Planning is invaluable, plans are useless*. To put that another way: If at first we don't succeed, try try again. I know you have heard that platitude before. While dreams inspire us, goals enable us to drive ourselves to achieve our dreams. Planning helps us figure out the mechanics, even if we have to scrap our first set of plans and create a new set. Again, if first you don't succeed, try, try again.

If you need help understanding more of the specifics of goals and goal setting that really works, I recommend a book titled: *Wishcraft — How to Get What You Really Want* by Barbara Sher. It is one of the best books published about goals, how to set them and how to achieve them.

Incidentally the easiest way to plan well is to identify our objective and then work backwards from our objective to our current situation. This is because hindsight is more reliable than foresight, so it is easier to identify and overcome obstacles when we plan backwards.

To Summarize

1. Start with a Dream.
2. Make it as meaningful as you can, something you greatly desire to have/gain/ accomplish.
3. Turn it into a goal by making it yours, giving it specificity, creating target dates, know why you want it, plan how you are going to attain it.
4. Work on it regularly to achieve that goal. This is done by using the material that immediately follows.

The Details

In order to attain our goals we must take actions to move us toward our goal preferably on a daily basis. This part of the paper will look at what those actions should be and why. Our actions are the mechanics of how we accomplish our goals/make our dreams come true. They are necessary (see below) to the attainment of our goals. This means that without actions, we will not attain our goals. Actions create the **focus** that powers the accomplishment of our goals.

William James, a famous psychologist from the early twentieth century often quoted the following:

Sow a thought, reap an action,
Sow an action, reap a habit,
Sow a habit, reap a character,
Sow a character, reap a destiny.

He was trying to tell us that what we think about, determines who and what we become. It isn't luck. It isn't random. It is our thoughts which we empower when we act upon them. Learn to control our thoughts, control our actions, create powerful habits and we create our character and so learn to control out destiny. In the book *Think and Grow Rich*, the author speaks about a great secret in the first chapter of the book. However instead of simply stating it he asks the reader to figure out what it is. Somewhat ironically the secret is that *Thoughts are Things*, thoughts are real!

First some general principles about these details.

One of the most famous recipies for success in history comes from the Ten Commandments. The story goes that Moses met God on the top of a mountain and God gave him ten commandments for Israel live by. Some people think that God was trying to 'control his people'.

I think it more likely that the commandments, if lived, would help 'His people' to become more like Him. In other words, I believe the primary benefit of living the commandments are the outcomes that are achieved by the individuals in their own lives! This is one of the hallmarks of attention to the details.

Some of you might think that the commandments are dated or irrelevant to you. That is not the point here. Regardless of what you believe, the laws of every advanced society on this planet are based on these laws. Non-christian nations have surprisingly similar principles. This makes them very relevant even if we are not christian! Please notice that there are five positively phrased commandments, the 'thou shalt do' commandments, and

five negatively phrased commandments, the 'thou shalt not' commandments. They indicate a pattern.

The point of bringing this up is that some of **the details** of our actions are going to be positively expressed: things you must do, and some of them are going to be negatively expressed: things you must not do. We need both kinds of details in our lives and we need to follow them daily. I also need you to understand a couple of terms which will be used throughout this part of the paper. The are:

Necessary—something we cannot do without. If it is necessary, it **must** be present! Absence of that item/peactice/skill will prevent us from achieving our objective.

Sufficient—those things which, taken together, allow us to achieve what we are after. If we identify all the necessary items and determine that these items are sufficient to attain our objective we will attain it. If even one thing is missing we will not achieve our goal.

If we can identify the do's and don'ts which are both necessary and sufficient, and then work daily to attain them, we will achieve our goals.

What Correlates to Success in University?

The highest correlations are known from studies conducted. They are:

- **Attendance**—going to most of the classes. Here most would mean 95%, meaning you can afford to miss 1 class a term in any given course. If you are not in class you have zero chance of recalling what was discussed in thaat class. Can you learn it on your own? Certainly, but why do things the hard way. It takes more time and effort to do it on your own. Also, instructors invariably give hints, not only about what students need to know, but also on the relative importance of the topics. I often express this as follows: If you take any course textbook, I can set an exam from it that my peers would fail, and they could do the same to me. So how do you know what to concentrate on? Attend class!
- **Staying awake**: both literally and figuratively! Get enough sleep at night that you are not sleeping in class. Then engage with the material. Discover how it is relevant to you. I will say more on this as we continue.

To get good grades, both of these conditions are Necessary, but neither is Sufficient by itself, nor in combination with the other.

Two things which do not correlate highly to university success are: **Intelligence**, and **hard work**. These may be helpful perhaps even necessary, but they are not sufficient.

The question is: can we identify those things which are both Necessary and Sufficient to getting good grades and obtaining a university degree? The answer is **YES!** To understand it, we need to look at several concepts which are laid out next. There are five things you need to understand.

1. **The Theory of Constraints (TOC).** Review the attached TOC Summary. This is required to understand the next item.
2. **Current Reality Cloud** of the University Experience. Attending university is a complex business! Go through the cloud and become familiar with it. While what I have provided you is hardly complete, ask yourself, does what is there accurately represent the university experience? This material should fit with your intuition about attending university.
3. **Project Management**—an activity which has a definite beginning and end, and consists of many tasks which are organized sequentially and/or in parallel.
The core problem of projects is uncertainty. We never know when something is going to occur to delay our project. This is what makes how time is used in projects so critical!

The scarce resource of project management is: *Time* - once passed it is gone forever! Read the article on the Characteristics of Projects. Almost all projects suffer from three problems. They are:

- Going over time.
 - Going over budget.
 - Compromizing the quality of the project.
4. **The University Environment** is similar to that of projects, but more restricted: There are no time overruns - the only instance of this is I grades and neither faculty nor administration like I grades.

There are no budget overruns - they are not permitted by government.

There can be quality deficiencies. While I have seen instructors do this in a course, it is very rare. Most quality compromises are created by students. You will learn how this happens and how to avoid it.

5. **Time Management:** I include the basics of this to help you to understand how to manage your time. This material is the essence of Time Management!

What are the Actions that Help us Succeed in University?

- 1. Maintain Focus on the Class** — One of the main ways university helps people get an education is that it provides structure—classes—that ensure the student works on each subject on a regular basis. You should be studying each week at least as frequently as the number of credits the course carries. Five credits, study every day. Three credits, three times a week. Attendance and study creates and maintains focus. Without focus it is difficult if not impossible to achieve our goals. Distance education is when we try to do the same thing without the structure of classes. For most people this has been a disaster, for decades! The rate of failure in correspondence courses is well over 50%! It takes a lot of discipline to make distance education work.
- 2. Attend Classes** — This also maintains focus. Absences occur each time a student believes there is something more important than attending class. For students who do not understand time management, more than 80% of the time they choose to miss class, it is a bad mistake! Also, if you miss a class you miss out on course content. Now you must make that up on your own time, and it almost always takes longer to learn the material on your own. This simply creates more time pressure and Time is the scarce resource in university!
- 3. Using Deadlines instead of Priorities** — Using deadlines is an attempt to cope with the pressure to perform, but working to deadlines is what creates much of that pressure in the first place! Instead of using deadlines use priorities. Using priorities is a proactive process—we are trying to prevent problems. Using a deadline is a reactive process—never as effective as being proactive. Work as quickly as possible, on the item with the highest priority that can be worked on. We accomplish more in less time this way, than in any other way. The busier a person is, the more important this becomes! This also means you must have a system for setting priorities and tracking your progress — this is the essence of time management. (see below)
- 4. Complete every Activity Worth Marks in the Class** — Students talk themselves out of marks all too frequently. Some will say “It’s only 5%.” Five percent is enough to raise your grade by 2 letter grades in the C and B grade ranges. Complete all the work which will earn you marks in the course.
- 5. Don’t get Distracted** — occurs when student is not clear on their goal - A student’s goal must be: To get an Degree! Certainly we can do other things, but education must be the top priority, even above work! You may think if I don’t work I cannot afford school. This is true, but work is a means to an end. Education, is the end, work is the means. If you prioritize work above school then school will always be the lower priority and your grades will suffer. You may also take longer to finish your education thus delaying your graduation and the start of the rest of your life.
- 6. Don’t Procrastination** — There are several reasons why this may occur, but fundamental to most of the reasons is a poor understanding of the Task Curve. We need safety to protect us from uncertainty, but where is it most effective?

Remember, Murphy can strike at any time, so we need to start our task ASAP, and complete that task ASAP. Review the Task Curve. Make sure you understand it! When you regularly start your work in the second half of the curve, Murphy will eventually get you! Notice I didn't say if!

7. **Don't Cheat** – This is one of the classic problems in school. As you will see shortly, the main issue in going to school is your use of time. When faced with the decision on how to spend ones time it is easy to get sucked into looking for shortcuts. Cheating is a classic shortcut in education and it attacks the central premise of universities–learning. Cheating suggests a student can get the mark without doing the work. Some can and do, but they overlook the fact that the first person they are cheating is themselves. Even if no one else ever knows, the individual always knows. Carried to an extreme this practice would devalue all degrees obtained from **universities and thus destroy the value of advanced education for everyone.**

The first four actions in the list are positive. The last three are negative. These seven actions, are necessary, and taken together, sufficient to earn a good grade in any class.