

## Introduction

When I was a sophomore in college, one of my professors challenged the way I looked at the world. He guided his literature course by a simple saying: *The hardest thing for you to know is the thing you think you already know.*<sup>1</sup> From that course I learned the value of re-examining what seems obvious or appears to be common sense in order to change the way I understand the circumstances around me or to help me remember why I think and behave the way I do. This is the task I am asking you to take on as you read this book.

Education and learning are so familiar to us that it's easy to think we understand what they are. We believe we know how the education system works and why we are learning. However, many so-called commonsense ways of perceiving and pursuing a college education are actually guided by misconceptions and misunderstandings that limit learning and keep us from reaching our potential. Given the amount of time and money that you will invest to earn a degree, it's important to carefully reconsider the purpose of higher education and to question commonsense understandings of how to complete college successfully.

This book is not meant to offer a definitive explanation of the history and purposes of higher education. Nor is it meant

to offer quick fixes for the many challenges you will face or to provide how-to instructions for classroom learning and study skills.

Rather, my purpose is to offer a broad philosophy of learning that will enable you to make more sense out of everything you do in college. I am confident that when you focus on becoming a learner, you will improve your college experience. I hope these ideas will serve as a starting point for a new kind of conversation about higher education, a conversation that you will need to continue throughout your college experience and beyond.

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July 2012

## Chapter 1

# When Learning Job Skills Is Not Enough

During my senior year of college, one of my professors told me about a meeting he'd had with a news agency director. During that meeting my professor asked the director how many journalism majors he typically hired. The director's reported response completely changed the way I thought about college and learning. He said, "I don't often hire journalism majors. Many times I hire philosophy, political science, or English majors. I can teach anybody how to write a good news story. I'm looking for people who can think critically and analytically, people who are problem solvers."<sup>2</sup>

This story bothered me for two reasons. First, I couldn't understand how people could get jobs doing something outside of their college majors. I'd assumed that students always got jobs related to their majors. Second, and more importantly, I wondered if I was like the person who'd gotten the job because he was a critical and analytical thinker or if I was like the one who'd learned the necessary job skills but still didn't measure up. I hoped I was the critical thinker, but to be honest I wasn't sure. And that troubled me.

A few months later, I heard a similar story during a teaching seminar. The presenter told of a friend who'd been touted for years as one of the best recruiters in the computer science

industry. Everyone he recruited turned out to be an excellent computer scientist. He was, however, reluctant to share the secret of his success because he said that nobody ever followed his advice: “Hire honors history majors instead of C+ computer science majors.”

For me, these stories raised an important question: If job skills are not the most important outcome of a college education, then what is the purpose of earning a degree? After months of thinking about these stories and reflecting on my own experiences in college, I finally figured out my answer: *The primary purpose of college isn't learning a specific set of professional skills; the primary purpose of college is to become a learner.* In other words the kind of person you become is much more important than what you learn how to do.

What the news agency director and the computer science recruiter understand is that job skills—by themselves—are not enough. They are merely one aspect of the array of knowledge required to be successful in any given profession. What the news director, the recruiter, and other forward-thinking employers are most interested in is who the graduate has *become*, not just the specific set of professional skills he or she has mastered. These employers want people who are critical thinkers and problem solvers.

To think critically and solve problems, you must develop creativity, intelligence, and your personal capacity—qualities that become part of “who you are.” These abilities never become outdated or obsolete. Once a part of your character, they are not easily forgotten. And the need for learners with these character traits is not restricted to any single course, major, or profession.

I am not suggesting you ignore the need for acquiring job skills and gaining professional experience while you attend col-

lege. These are important, and the need for them is increasing.<sup>3</sup> Even so, employers will evaluate you primarily on who you have become as a result of your college education and on your capacity to continue learning and growing. Even in professionally oriented degrees, who you are still matters more than what you can do because it speaks to your long-term potential for success.

I am suggesting that you be more concerned about who you are becoming as a learner rather than about the specific job skills you may be acquiring. Focusing *solely* on professional skills is very shortsighted and actually works against your own best interests. In contrast, concentrating on who you are becoming allows you to recognize the need for developing professional skills without overlooking the most important and primary product of your education—you.

This perspective also allows you to recognize that the purpose of your education is much more than simply securing employment. You are not in college to become an employee. You are in college to become a more capable and contributing citizen.<sup>4</sup> Who you become in college will not only have a significant impact on your career but also on your family, your community, and every organization and group in which you participate.

## **An Invitation to a New Kind of Conversation**

The way you talk about education and learning matters.<sup>5</sup> The words and stories you use to describe and make sense of college will either orient you toward taking advantage of your opportunities or they will work against you by obscuring the most important goals of higher education. How you talk about your college education influences what you deem useful

or useless, important or unimportant. Your conversations will determine the kind of effort and attention you devote to your studies.

Unfortunately, most conversations about college and learning seem to revolve around acquiring job skills and focus on the idea of “doing.” Take for example the following questions that students, parents, and even government leaders repeatedly ask:

- “What are you going to do with that major?”
- “How is this class going to help me when I get a job?”
- “When am I ever going to use this knowledge in the real world?”

While these questions seem natural and legitimate, they are actually loaded. People who engage in conversations about such questions usually insist that any degree, class, or assignment be directly related to something that can be immediately applied to a job. The answers to these questions usually argue against the steady and careful academic development and personal growth that determine who you become. These are the wrong questions to ask because they will give your time at college an incredibly narrow focus.

While the idea of “doing” does matter, if you let a focus on job skills dominate your conversations and actions, you will be unnecessarily confused and will be frustrated with college. So much of what you do in college, such as doing research and taking general education classes, is designed to help you become a more intelligent, capable, understanding, aware, and competent person—regardless of your major.

The purpose of this book is to introduce you to a more helpful conversation about college and learning that will en-

able you to take full advantage of your education. I invite you to carefully reconsider conventional common sense about the purpose of college and how to be successful and begin a new kind of conversation that focuses on becoming a learner.