

Opinion

# College Advice I Wish I'd Taken

Susan Shapiro

ON CAMPUS    OCT. 17, 2017

I taught my first class at Columbia University's M.F.A. program this month, and even though I've been teaching college writing since 1993, I initially felt a little intimidated by the school's regal campus. That, and regretful.

I enjoyed going to college at the University of Michigan, an hour from home, but my secret humiliation is: I was the type of mediocre student I now disdain. As a freshman, I cared about my friends, my boyfriend and my poetry. Or, I cared about what my boyfriend thought of my friends, what my friends thought of him, and what they thought of my poetry *about him*. Here's what I wish I'd known and done differently:

**A'S ARE COOL AND COME WITH PERKS** As a student, I saw myself as anti-establishment, and I hated tests; I barely maintained a B average. I thought only nerds spent weekends in the library studying. Recently I learned

that my niece Dara, a sophomore at New York University with a 3.7 G.P.A. (and a boyfriend), was offered a week of travel in Buenos Aires as part of her honors seminar. I was retroactively envious to learn that a 3.5 G.P.A. or higher at many schools qualifies you for free trips, scholarships, grants, awards, private parties and top internships. At 20, I was too busy freaking out when said boyfriend disappeared (after sleeping with one of said friends). Students certainly don't need to strive obsessively for perfection, but I should have prioritized grades, not guys.

**SHOW UP AND SPEAK UP** If a class was boring or it snowed, I'd skip. My rationale was that nobody in the 300-person lecture hall would notice and I could get notes later. Attendance barely counted. When I went, I'd sit quietly in back. Yet as a teacher, I see that the students who come weekly, sit in front, and ask and answer questions get higher grades and frankly, preferential treatment. After 15 weeks, I barely know the absentees or anyone Snapchatting the term away on their iPhones. It's not just that these students flush \$300 down the toilet every time they miss my class; participating can actually lead to payoffs. I reward those who try harder with recommendations, references, professional contacts and encouragement.

**CLASS CONNECTIONS CAN LAUNCH YOUR CAREER** As an undergrad, I rarely visited my professors during office hours. I didn't want to annoy teachers with what I considered triviality. Besides, I thought I knew everything already. In graduate school, on the other hand, I went to the readings of a professor I admired. Eventually, I'd go to his office just to vent. Once, after I complained about a dead-end job, he recommended me for a position at The New Yorker, jump-starting my career.

But it's not just your professors who will help your life trajectory. Several classmates of mine from graduate school wound up working as editors at other publications, and they have since hired me for freelance work. Years later, I've helped students and colleagues where I teach, at the New School and New York University, land jobs, get published and meet with editors and agents.

**PROFESSORS ARE PEOPLE, TOO** As a teacher, I've kept all the letters, cards and poems of gratitude I've been sent. It's nice to be appreciated, and it makes a lasting impression. After one of my intro sessions, a freshman from Idaho blurted out: "Awesome class! It's like you stuck my fingers in a light socket." I laughed and invited her to speed walk with me around the local park

— an activity I take part in nightly as a sort of active office hours — and we workshopped ideas that led to her first book. And when a student confided she was dying to take another class with me but had lost her financial aid, I let her audit. In retrospect, I should have been more open with the instructors I admired.

**FIND YOUR PROFESSORS ON SOCIAL MEDIA** I answer all emails, and while I may not accept all friend requests, I respond to students who follow me on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. More important, social media is where I post about panels, job openings and freelance work. Checking out students' social media feeds also allows me to see new sides of their personalities. Naked beer pong photos may not impress, but witty posts and original ideas do. Several students have developed book projects from their blogs and Instagram pages, and I promote their work, charities and events on my own social media feeds. You never know if the college president or your professor might retweet or repost your work.

**YOU CAN SOCIALIZE BETTER SOBER** Drinking and smoking eased my social anxiety and seemed like fun. Until I couldn't stop. Getting clean — smoke-toke-alcohol-free — led to a huge upswing in my life. Instead of partying, I'd do movie nights, dancing, yoga, aerobics classes and readings with friends and dates. I was surprised to see that my work greatly improved, as did my relationships. I know many students who get into big trouble when they are under the influence, and I still worry about what I missed, wasting so much time wasted.

**YOU'RE NOT STUCK** Don't be afraid to ask for emotional support. It was a graduate school professor who recommended my first therapist to me: She was a fantastic listener who charged on a sliding scale. Therapy can be cheap, fun and easily available — not to mention lifesaving.

And if it turns out you're in the wrong school, don't worry. A third of college students transfer before graduating. If you're unhappy or not thriving at your school, take the long view. I couldn't have made it in Manhattan as an undergraduate, but four years later, graduate school at New York University offered me a chance to live in my dream city. It took me only three decades of work to make it to the Ivy League — to teach one class, at least.

Susan Shapiro (@Susanshapironet), a writing professor at the New School, is the

author of “Five Men Who Broke My Heart,” and the forthcoming “The Byline Bible.”

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