



MOVE BEYOND THE FAMILIAR, MAKE THE MOST OUT OF LIFE, AND TRY SOMETHING NEW

At a recent high school commencement ceremony, Yale University President Richard C. Levin offered valuable advice to college-bound students on how to benefit the most from the experiences ahead. His message was not only directly relevant to the graduating seniors, but virtually everyone else – even those who graduated decades ago. His message was about lifelong learning and growth.

Levin urged the students to stretch themselves with subject choices and sample widely. He encouraged them to take some courses in fields that are entirely outside the range of their past experiences. One will not only emerge as a more broadly educated person, he said, but will also stand a better chance of discovering an unsuspected passion which could help shape the future course of life and view of the world.

He said by studying philosophy, for example, one learns to reason more vigorously and discern more readily what constitutes a logically consistent argument and what does not. Philosophy wrestles directly with the deepest questions of how one should live. Professors of literature, music, and art history teach students how to read, listen, and see more closely. Whether the students major in these subjects or not, their appreciation of what is true and beautiful may be forever enriched.

Years before, when Levin taught economics at Yale, he always began by telling students the course would change their lives. Why? Because economics opens oneself to an entirely new and different way of understanding how the world works. Economics does not prescribe how society must organize or distribute the fruits of human labor. It provides a new way to think about these perpetually important questions.

Similarly, each of the other social sciences – psychology, political science, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics – will provide a different perspective on human experience in society. Levin’s suggestion that students stretch themselves is not limited to the classroom; it applies to extracurricular activities and even to the friends they choose. A dazzling array of extracurricular opportunities will ignite new interests and one of them may turn into an enduring passion.

And, if the friends chosen in college come exclusively from the same kind of background as the students’, half the value of a college education will have been forfeited. The students were encouraged to seek out friends with different histories and interests – to learn the most from the people least like themselves.

Levin’s astute advice may result in a paradigm shift for both students and parents. It may cause one to look at things differently when a desired outcome does not come about.

“Today, because the world is so highly interconnected and interdependent, you will have the added responsibility of acting as global citizens,” said Levin. “Your generation, more than any other that has gone before, will need deep knowledge of an intimate engagement with cultures and societies very different from your own.

“You should seriously consider taking advantage of one of the many programs your college will offer to work or study abroad. Such an experience will stretch you in just the way I am recommending more generally: It will force you to see yourself from a different perspective, and to see others free from preconceptions,” he adds.

In closing, try at least one activity that is brand new. See the world from a different point of view. Move beyond the familiar and make the most of life.

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