Academics

By Jeffrey Hamilton

By now you may already be sick and tired of being told that college is the “best four years of your life.” The first problem is, it’s probably true: college is the best four years of your life. And there’s another problem: many students won’t believe it until it’s too late; just about the time you graduate. And then you’re going to wish you had listened to all those people, and even more, you’re going to wish that you had embraced all the opportunities that your four years at Baylor had offered you, and finally you’re going to wish you could go back and start over. But you can’t. And unless you are intentional about getting the most out of your undergraduate years, you may miss out on a lot of opportunities. Based on a great deal of experience with many, many students, I’m going to suggest that the things that you might miss out on aren’t social, or athletic, or even, hopefully, spiritual. They’re academic. Really. So let’s talk about that.

Of course, now you’re probably asking, how could I miss out on academics? I’m in college. What’s this guy talking about? Well, I’m not simply talking about your classes. You’re going to go to those. You have to. But your classes are only one aspect of the academic experience. If that was all there was to it, you might as well be online somewhere. You could be a Phoenix instead of a Bear. But that would be a big mistake and a bigger loss. Academics are one of those things where the sum is greater than the parts. You will need 124 hours to graduate, but the 35 or 40 classes you take to get there should not be seen as discrete units, hermetically sealed off from one another. They need to work together. And what’s more, they need to be fortified, expanded, and reshaped by experiences outside the classroom so they all build toward a single goal: we want you to be an educated person rather than simply a person with an education.

So how do you make this happen? A lot of it is hard work, and some of it is luck. But as Branch Rickey once famously observed, “Luck is the residue of design.” In other words, you need to have a plan. Not every student will have the same plan or follow the same path to complete that plan, but there are some common threads that need to be part of every educational plan and journey. You need to be able to articulate your ideas, and these ideas need to be shaped by critical analysis of data. The data may come from broad general sources, or it may be highly specialized and narrow, but either way, you will need to process that data from a broad and integrated intellectual perspective. Part of that perspective needs to come from your understanding of our Christian heritage and the obligations this imposes on us.

Under the suggested activities this week you will find a fairly generic chart that outlines the process of becoming educated at Baylor. Reading down the columns vertically introduces a series of skills and values that you will need to acquire to be successful academically at Baylor and in life. Reading across the columns horizontally is essentially a timeline, suggesting how these skills and values can be developed incrementally as you move through your college experience. But that last word, “experience,” needs to be emphasized. The last column on the far right of the chart is designated by the term “Experiential,” and
this refers to the integration of in-class academics with the less formal aspects of academics and education that need to be going on side by side from right now, today, until the day you graduate. The point is this:

• Reading Shakespeare is great. Reading Shakespeare and then seeing a performance adds a new dimension to our understanding.
• Learning calculus or advanced statistics is great. Tutoring a local elementary or high school student in math will teach you things that weren’t in your textbook.
• Reading Scripture is an essential part of a Christian education. Living Scripture on a mission trip transforms your understanding of self and society.
• Reading the required chapters in a given text is essential to understanding the basics in a course. Seeking out library resources, supplemental reading, and additional Internet sources beyond the requirements for a course will open your mind to the larger conversation that introduces you to authors/scholars whose ideas go far beyond the introductory course you are taking for credit. You might just find your future career through such applications of your academic courses to the meta-conversations on any topic in any field!
• Understanding the results of research as explained in your economics or engineering texts is essential. Applying what you have learned yourself as an undergraduate researcher inquiring into complex and unresolved problems can enrich your classroom experience, give you new competence and confidence, and empower you to be a respected voice at the table of some important discipline or societal concern.
• Learning a classical or modern language is valuable in and of itself and a highly marketable skill set. Taking that language skill with you to study abroad and interact with citizens of other nations is exciting and for many students can be a life-changing experience.

Another “experiential” aspect of learning is to begin to form communities of friends who also want to connect the dots from their classroom experiences to the world at large. This means that, even when you are not specifically working on a team project or studying for an exam, the materials and insights you are engaged in for credit hours can turn you into an effective actor and critical thinker in relation to current events, public health concerns, economics, politics, environmental issues—everything! You can become a writer, thinker, and problem-solver using the intellectual skills you are being introduced to in your classes as you overlay them on those areas of life you are passionate about. Talk with fellow students about the ways they are maximizing their intellectual lives and linking them to Baylor, Waco, and far beyond. And talk to your professors, not only in class but also outside of class. They continue to make a journey like the one you’re embarking on and have lots of practical advice to offer from their own experience. All this is to say, the more you integrate “experiential academics” with traditional classroom academics, the clearer your design will become and the more “luck” will come your way.

Your time at Baylor can be “the best years of your life” because you can find yourself, your future, and your way of making a contribution that fits your interests, skills, and calling. Additionally, you can build the foundation for a lifetime of learning and develop the habits
of mind and heart that will enable you to make important contributions to your own community and to society.

Jeffrey Hamilton is Professor and Chair of the History Department in the College of Arts & Sciences