



Keys to success

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Introduction

School and life share many common challenges. One of the many advantages of facing these challenges in a school environment is that “failure” generally does not mean that a patient will die, a mortgage will be foreclosed or a business will fail. It is the place to dare; as Robert Kennedy once said “Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly.” School is a place to dare greatly. It is also a place to learn how to open the doors to a successful life. Here are the keys to some of those doors.

Know your goals

As a marathon runner I have gained insight into some important lessons for life. The first is the realization that one of the most challenging parts of a marathon is getting to the starting line. Marathon runners know that they must plan far in advance and schedule their daily runs for months before the big event. Once scheduled, it takes determination and perseverance to go out and do the daily runs.

Another realization is that around the 18 mile mark, we tend to ask ourselves the question, “what the heck am I doing here?” Marathon running, like school, is a challenging endeavor. It is easy to find reasons to stop. The successful marathon runner, and student, makes it through those difficult moments because they are focused on their goal.



We can help ourselves stay focused. For example:

- Picture yourself as successful. Remind yourself that you are not only capable of achieving your goal but that you will be successful.
- Put a picture on your refrigerator that reminds you of the importance and outcome of your goal. It may be a picture of a graduation day to remind you that you are working toward the day when you will graduate; or, if you are going for your degree so that

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you will be able to afford tuition for your child, the picture might remind you of your child's future graduation day. It might be a picture of a car or house that you will be able to afford as a result of your education. It may be a picture of you changing the world.

Evaluate your goal. Some people go through their entire educational experience thinking their only goal is to graduate. Are you really devoting all those years of your life just to get a piece of paper to hang on your wall? Is that piece of paper the only value that school offers? What is your real goal? What are the real opportunities in education; what is the real value?

Know your goals and remind yourself every day of why they are important to you.

Meet the challenge

In a "Kung Fu" episode from its first season on television, Caine tells a young man "You believe wisdom is a flower to be plucked. It is a mountain to be climbed". Many people seem to believe that they have merely to wish for the knowledge or abilities they seek. Indeed, many seem oblivious to the fact that the mountain even exists. Those few who achieve their most important goals do so by climbing the mountain of 2 am studying, by forgoing the lure of the lounge by the stream bed far below and by keeping their eyes focused on the mountaintop ahead. They embark upon their trek with the full understanding that it will be a challenging journey. They are determined to meet the challenge.

Good time management is good stress management

A large obstacle to success is time. Everyone is busy and no one has enough time. But a big difference between successful people and those who are not, is that successful people tend to be good time managers. They recognize that priorities change not only every year, but every day and sometimes from minute to minute. A way to manage your time is to manage your priorities. What does this mean in a practical sense? You might say; from 9 to 5 Monday through Friday, my priority is work. Wednesday night, Friday night and Sunday mornings I spend with my family; Sunday afternoons is for quality time with my spouse. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings and Saturdays are for school.

A typical three-credit graduate course requires about 12 to 15 hours a week. Before you begin the course, take out your calendar and schedule in those hours for each week of the semester. Then, during the semester, stick to your schedule. If, on a given week, you finish everything in less than your allotted time, move ahead and start preparing for next week.

In the beginning of the semester, read the course objectives and look over the schedule of the whole course. Make sure you will have access to the textbook and all reading assignments. Confirm that you have all the hardware and software necessary for the course. It is also important to have a backup plan for those instances when the hardware

or software fails to operate. In distance education (DE), setting up this schedule and then sticking to it, is as important as showing up prepared for on-campus classes.

Time management is also important when looking toward graduation. Make sure you are familiar with the graduate school requirements for graduation and the deadlines for submitting the various forms.

Be aware of the changing world

The world changes every day. And so, to a certain extent, do we. This realization is important for a couple of reasons. First, it lets us know that it is acceptable to reevaluate our goals periodically, or as situations change. As an example, for about 10 years before I started running marathons, I worked on the medical team at the finish line of the New York City Marathon. One year I had a patient who came in with an ankle the size of a soccer ball. I asked him what happened. He said tripped and heard it snap at the two-mile mark. I asked him what he did. He said he had come 3,000 miles to run this race and he wasn't going to stop because of a broken ankle! We can learn a couple of lessons from this man. First, if we have enough determination we can do just about anything. Can you imagine the determination it would take to run 24 miles with a broken ankle? The second lesson is that we need to have the ability to respond to changes in the world. That man's world changed at the two-mile mark. He may not have had the ability to adapt.

In the workplace, this means that goals change – sometimes rapidly. Our managers will not always be in a position to tell us that the goal has changed. We must have the ability to recognize, evaluate and respond to changes in the world. One of the objectives of education is to help us develop this ability.

Another important ability in this area is “tolerance for ambiguity”. This means that we understand and can deal with the reality that just because something was “right” yesterday, does not mean it is “right” today. As managers and professionals, we must constantly hone this ability within ourselves.

Believe in yourself

One day as I was running, two paths converged and I found myself next to another runner. As we talked I asked him how much he runs. He said he runs 10 miles every day. I was very impressed. I asked him how many marathons he had run. He answered by saying, “Oh, I could never run a marathon”. As we talked further, it was obvious that he had simply convinced himself that a marathon was beyond his abilities. He was shocked when I told him that before I had run my first marathon I had run 10 miles only once. I had figured that if I could run 10 miles, I could run a marathon.

Richard Bach once wrote: “Argue for your limitations and, sure enough, they're yours”. Many people argue for their limitations. They convince themselves that they are not capable of accomplishing something even though they never tested their limitations.

As another example, I recently gave a lecture in Europe where I was encouraging the audience to work together to develop a nationwide strategic plan. At the conclusion of the presentation I invited questions. One participant asked a particularly important question. “How”, he asked, “can you expect us to work together when every time we’re in the same room we wind up fighting”. I responded with a short story. “One of my Tae Kwon Do students was a major in the US Army, Special Forces. He had been a Green Beret in Viet Nam and later worked as a mediator and a kind of crisis manager. Some years ago he went to Bosnia to begin the peace process. When he sat all the participants around the table to begin the “strategic plan” for the future of their country, there were people there who, days earlier, had been killing each other’s children. He was able to get them all talking together to begin the process”. So my message was, if they can work together, any group can work together. If you believe you will be unsuccessful, you’ll be right. So instead, believe in your success. Believe in yourself.

Learn all you can

Unlike a grammar school math class, the content of a typical distance education class is only one part of the learning process. In DE, you also have the opportunity to constantly learn and refine a host of skills and abilities. For example: you can learn how to better control the technology you are using; you may develop your ability to work with on-line teams (an ability that is becoming increasingly important for many professionals); or, how to better communicate through technology. The DE experience is also an opportunity to develop yourself in terms of self-control, goal development and attainment, critical thinking skills and problem solving.

Preparing for the comps

The comprehensive exam is taken during your last semester in the program. The exam is a synthesis of everything you have learned during your time at UMBC. In order to do well, you will want to have access to all the material in all your courses. Some practical steps toward achieving this include creating a directory on your computer – let’s call it “school”. Create a subdirectory (e.g. 676) for every course you take. Save all the lecture notes, readings and everything you write for that class (including whatever you post to the discussion board) in that subdirectory. Keep any papers in a folder marked for that class. Keep all your books.

Explore

The Internet is a rapidly growing resource. Schedule time to simply surf the web and explore new areas or topics. Since this is an activity that could be very time consuming, schedule this time in advance and maintain strict limits.

Communicate

The DE experience is optimized by constant communication. If you have questions about a course, ask your teacher right away. Establish dialogues and develop relationships with

your classmates. One of the wonderful aspects of this type of education is the opportunity to share perspectives with people from very different backgrounds and cultures. Make the best of the opportunity by reaching out to your classmates. Communication will optimize the learning experience for everyone.

Don't expect perfection

We are all still learning about this medium. Faculty and technical staffs are constantly exploring a growing myriad of ways to present, facilitate and evaluate on line learning. Students can aid the process by being tolerant of current limitations and by offering their suggestions for improvement. Remember the old saying: "You're either part of the solution or part of the problem". Choose to be part of the solution.

Have fun

DE is an exciting and dynamic new way to learn. Enjoy the process. Don't expect or wait for your teacher to entertain you. Accept the responsibility to make the experience fun for yourself. The more you enjoy it, the more you will learn.

Conclusion

Education, according to a young man I spoke with recently, is an "awesome" experience. It is an experience that influences not only how well we will navigate this world, but also how we see the world. It allows us, no, it encourages us, it stimulates us, to see beyond the farthest horizon, to "see" things that have yet to exist and, perhaps most amazingly, to see old familiar things from entirely new perspectives.

Education is also a journey; and although it is important to have milestones along the way, in many ways the journey is the destination. Enjoy the journey.

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