

Are you willing to ask? That's the title of my "inspiring" speech today. **Are YOU willing to ask? What it takes to get the most from your college education.**

Now, I got the idea for the title from a college student (really a Ph.D. student) who recently spent a week "shadowing" me at Hiram College. This young man **believes** he is interested in becoming a college president. And after following me around for five days from early morning to late at night, somebody **asked** him what he thought about me. "Well," he said, "**Tom is certainly willing to ask.**"

And, I took that as a real compliment—although in today’s world, the number one job requirement for a college president is to be able to **ask for money**—again and again and again. Most college presidents spend **70 percent** of their time **fundraising**—(and I have to take that part of my job seriously.)

But to me, being **willing to ask** means **putting yourself out there**—not just **putting your hand out**.

And now that I’m out here on this stage...and really out here on a limb—I want to take this opportunity to talk to you about **getting the most from your college education**. I know who you are—the top students from every high school in the Cleveland area. You didn’t get to this luncheon without a lot of hard work and dedication.

You're smart, you're motivated and you're going places. **But, are you willing to ask?**

Looking back, I can see now that I started asking questions a long time ago. I still remember the Spring of 1963. I was a junior at East Liverpool High School, and I had just read **Rachel Carson's** bombshell ***Silent Spring***, the book that first alerted many of us baby boomers to the serious environmental issues facing our world.

Well, that year, Ohio's new Governor—**James A. Rhodes**—came to speak at our high school, his first visit as governor. Our teachers were all excited, and as a student leader, I was instructed to be ready to ask a question during the assembly.

Of course, Governor Rhodes pontificated on his “jobs and progress” theme, but finally asked for questions.

When the Governor called on me, I was ready—“What are **you** going to do to stop pollution in the Ohio River and the Ohio River Valley?”

Looking back—now 49 years later—I can see how he got elected **four times**. Rhodes did his trademark belly laugh and responded, “**Next question?**”

Today, after serving as Hiram’s president for eight years—I wish more of our students asked questions like that. Or asked **any** questions...

Unfortunately, I see too many kids who don't want to put themselves out there. In fact, a big problem for resident life directors in colleges is that there are lots of students who never leave their dorm rooms (and video games), never look up from their iPhones and never take advantage of the fun and the opportunities available on every campus.

And it's not just the students. At Hiram, our RDs and RAs (who are paid to live and work in our dorms) get extensive training in how to interact with students—really just talk—in our attempt to help them encourage our first year students to find a niche on campus. We have so many clubs and activities for students, but some kids never get involved in anything.

Research shows that unless students are “engaged” they may not come back for their second year. Believe me, college administrators take those statistics seriously...

You have worked and sacrificed (and so have your parents!) to get to the college of your choice. But when it comes to navigating the day to day, don't learn your lessons the hard way...College is hard enough. By asking questions, you can enhance every college experience you encounter.

So, here are **my three top tips** to get the most out of your college education.

First, ask other students questions:

So...if you are sitting in your dorm room all alone wondering things like where can you get the best pizza? Is anyone going to the convocation? Where do students sit at the game? Just go down the hall and ask somebody. It's been my observation that people really do love to be asked for their opinions. It's a great way to make friends and get acquainted.

~~Then~~ start by asking savvy and successful upperclassmen what classes you should take. Don't just ask for course titles, get the nitty gritty secrets. Which professor is best? What time should I take it? Should I take the version for majors or a general overview?

And speaking of “what to take,” I suggest you try to take at least one class from your major early in your freshman year. Something like Marketing 101 if you are marketing major or Intro to Biology if you are a science major. That way you can find out early if you want to switch majors. I also would propose that you take a class in the major you are **secretly** thinking about...you never know how things will turn out.

Almost every university requires you to take a number of liberal arts courses—and of course, liberal arts colleges like Hiram build our four-year course of study around them. Ask upperclassmen what classes they loved and why. Ask a senior which class he or she still thinks about.

Please don't waste this opportunity to expand your horizons and stretch your mind. It's my observation that very smart kids—like all of you out there—sometimes are so focused on their majors—like medicine, math or engineering—that they literally resent taking any other courses, such as music, art or philosophy. I really believe a liberal arts education is still the best preparation for success in the learned professions—law, medicine, teaching, as well as business, finance and high-tech innovation.

What you are taught and the way you learn it (in a liberal arts way) helps you look at the subject from many different dimensions. Good learning habits can be transferred from one subject to another. You incorporate the material into your thinking, so you will remember it and use it later on.

Since most people (like me) will change careers 7 to 10 times in a lifetime, a liberal arts education helps one become well rounded, able to see the big picture and really opens up so many choices. Don't forget that college is just the start of your intellectual journey.

Now, my second tip to getting the most out of your college education--**Ask your professors or academic advisor...**

I think you would be surprised at how often I hear our professors complaining that kids today don't want to interact with their professors. Remember that these professors—who devoted 12 to 15 years of studying in order to get a Ph.D. and teach in a college—want to share their knowledge...so talk to your professors, go to office hours, and even try raising your hand in class.

(Be aware that I do hear lots of complaining about students sending demanding e-mails to professors...at 3 in the morning.)

Ask your professor to explain it again. Don't fall into the trap of thinking "If I don't understand it, **then it's his fault or her fault.**" Be a part of a community of scholars. Our society needs people who intellectually alive and willing to take risks.

So, find a favorite professor. Make him or her your mentor by asking questions. You do not want to graduate without making some strong connections with faculty members. Research shows that professor-student interaction—especially during the first year—can have a positive impact on whether students persist in college. Try to take small classes taught by full-time faculty.

And then for heaven's sake talk to your academic advisor. Please try to establish a relationship with him or her. If it isn't working, find another advisor...

At Hiram, our first-year students move in early for Institute Days, where they gather in Colloquium groups led by their **academic advisor**—a full-time faculty member. These groups discuss the summer reading assignment, socialize and get connected to the College. Then our first-years take a Colloquia taught by this same advisor. These are full-credit classes designed around a variety of topics that meet two or three times a week throughout the fall. (In the spring, every student selects a Freshman Seminar which continues the reading/writing skill development and support services.)

By the time their freshmen year is over, our Hiram students really know their advisors and they benefit immensely for the next three years...many small liberal arts schools like Hiram have similar programs.

Your advisor should be helping you—but you need to be your own best advocate to have enriching, fulfilling and fun experiences in the classroom.

Be willing to ask your advisor or professors

questions like these:

Can I take a more challenging and more interesting class to meet this degree requirement?

Can I use a class from my study abroad program this summer to meet my diversity requirement?

Can I take a class in my field that requires intensive writing to fulfill my writing requirement?

The worst your advisor can do is say no. But if they say yes, be ready with the right form to help them “sign-off” that day.

I know that each of you has not only made your parents proud, but your teachers and counselors are beaming with pride as well. This won't stop in college—professors love to brag about their star students.

So be willing to ask a professor..."Can you help me set up coffee with a recent alum or upperclassman from this program? I'd like to meet someone who made the most of their college experience and is now achieving success at work or in graduate school."

And my third—and last point—**be willing to ask yourself** the hard questions when you get to college.

Ask yourself... Shouldn't I be getting up and going to class? I know I am talking to the hardest working high school students in Northeast Ohio, but next year your mother won't be there to make sure you get there...

Think about this. I had one kid tell me that it's **not** drinking... it's **not** marijuana... **Skipping class is the most addictive activity in college.** Don't get started.

Secondly, **ask yourself**... am I involved in college life? Have I joined at least one club or activity?—Be honest with yourself. “I am borrowing lots of money, my parents are spending lots of money, I worked hard to get this scholarship—I chose this college for all its great opportunities—and I am sitting alone in my dorm room playing video games?” Come on, people, we need you to get involved. Give of your time and talent. To whom much is given, much is asked.

Ask yourself, do I ever take the time to think about things? Speed and multi-tasking dominate your lives. Take time to reflect and ponder. Take time to listen actively and carefully. An education in the liberal arts prepares you for society and solitude. It shows you how to enjoy learning –not just memorizing facts you think will show up on an exam.

To me, this is so important, yet a point we forget or dismiss too quickly. The true purpose of education is to **“make minds, not careers.”** Learning goes on for a lifetime—and, ultimately, that’s what makes you happy.

As Judith Shapiro, former president of Barnard College, put it, “You want the inside of your head to be an interesting place to spend the rest of your life.”

It has been a true pleasure to be here today and to congratulate all of you—and your parents and family members on this very special honor.

...Finally, I have one last question for all of you.

Are you sure you wouldn't you like to come to Hiram College next year? (Hey, I said I was willing to ask.)