"doing." Take, for example, the following questions that nearly everyone repeatedly asks:

- "What are you going to do with that major?"
- "How is this class going to help me when I get a job?"
- "When am I ever going to use this knowledge in the real world?"

While this kind of thinking might seem natural and legitimate, these are actually loaded questions. People who engage in conversations about such questions usually insist that any major, class, or assignment be directly related to something that can be immediately applied to a job. Therefore, answers to these questions must argue against the steady and careful academic development and personal growth that determine who you become, give you the character and abilities employers want most, and serve as the foundation of your career. These are also the wrong questions to ask because they will give you an incredibly narrow focus on the entry-level job you will get after graduation, which is likely the be the least interesting and exciting of your career.[8]

Although the idea of "doing" does matter, if you let a focus on job skills dominate your conversations and actions, you will be unnecessarily confused about and frustrated with college. So much of what you do in college, such as doing research and taking general education classes, is designed to help you become a more intelligent, capable, understanding, aware, and competent person—regardless of your major.

The purpose of this book is to introduce you to a more helpful way of thinking and talking about college and learning that will enable you to take full advantage of your education. I invite you to carefully reconsider what we so often think of as common sense ideas about the purpose and outcomes of college and embrace a new kind of conversation that focuses on who you are becoming and your long-term personal and professional success.

CHAPTER 2

Becoming a Learner

Thinking that every major, class, or assignment should connect to a specific job or professional skill distracts us from recognizing the primary purpose of education: to become a learner. As a result, we often overlook our most important and valuable learning experiences and fail to take full advantage of the opportunities a college education offers. Too often we get so caught up answering questions about what we will do with our majors and what value a particular class or assignment holds for our professional careers that we forget that the most important outcome of learning is who we become as a result of our education.

Brian McCoy is the CEO of a successful building supply company. In a commencement speech at Texas State University, he explained that asking "What do I need to do to be successful?" is misguided. Instead, he argued, we should ask, "Who do we need to become to be successful?"[9] He's right.

From the perspective of becoming, everything you do in college matters. Everything counts—both inside the classroom and out.

And it's not only *what* you do that counts; it's also *how* you do it.

Who you become as a result of your education is the culmination of your everyday actions and efforts. Over time, as you participate in a variety of activities and take an assortment of courses, you change and grow. You become a different person. It is the steadiness of your work ethic, your daily diligence in doing what is expected of you, the manner in which you handle yourself

in social situations, how you deal with setbacks and challenges, the extent to which you think carefully and critically, and your ability to learn new and challenging ideas that will determine who you become.

However, there is no guarantee that you'll become a learner just by getting a college degree. That depends on you. You can go through college and graduate and actually not improve or even become worse in terms of your character, intelligence, and personal capacity.[10] Just getting by, working the system, cramming, cheating, procrastinating, avoiding responsibility, making excuses, and doing the least amount of work possible will over time result in your becoming lazy, unethical, unable to clearly reason through difficult problems, and unprepared to be excellent at whatever you do. A person who has developed those characteristics certainly isn't in high demand anywhere.

On the other hand, consistently striving for excellence, working to your potential, steadily completing your assignments, working hard, meeting challenges, being prepared, asking for help, and overcoming mistakes and failures will result in your becoming the kind of person who has the ability to excel in any environment.

When you focus on who you are becoming, you will recognize that college is a time of preparation. How you take advantage of your time and opportunities determines the kind of person you become.

You don't suddenly become a learner when you don a cap and gown at graduation. Too many students mistakenly think that everyone is equal at graduation because each has a diploma. Although it is true that you will have the same diploma as others, you will not be the same person as your fellow graduates. Each of you will have different skills, abilities, and especially potential.

It's not just *that* you completed a degree; it is *how* you earned your degree and the cumulative effects of your education that matter.

Why Becoming Matters

When your conversations and attitudes revolve around whether or not your major or classes are building enough professional skills, you overlook three important realities of the world you'll enter after graduation: (1) Your degree doesn't guarantee you a good job. (2) You are going to forget much of what you learn. (3) Many of the job skills you learn in college will become obsolete.

Reality 1: Your Degree Doesn't Guarantee You a Good Job

After his first two years of college, my dad took a leave of absence to return home and marry my mom. While my mom finished her degree, my dad got a job loading railroad cars at a shipping warehouse. When the loading supervisor and warehouse manager found out that my dad had attended two years of college, they transferred him to the office and gave him a job as a clerk. No questions were asked about what classes he'd taken or what skills he had. He had been to college, and that was good enough.

For a long time, people who went to college did so assuming that if they worked hard, did well, and graduated, they would get a good job.[11] For previous generations that was true. Those conditions, however, don't exist for you. Regardless of your major, there is no guarantee that you will find a high-paying job immediately after graduation doing exactly what you'd hoped to do in your chosen profession.

I've seen many bright, capable graduates struggle for a while before finding the kind of employment they wanted. I've watched very accomplished students, many with professional experience in their fields, take unpaid part-time positions or internships or accept low-paying jobs in order to get additional experience and to prove themselves to future employers. Even those who get the kinds of corporate jobs that many students seem to covet still have to work very

hard to prove that they can learn and thrive in the workplace. As I've watched this process in others and reflected on my own experience, this fact is repeatedly affirmed: Upon graduation your biggest asset is your potential and your ability to learn, not your expertise.

As the opportunity for higher education grows both in the United States and globally, more people will graduate with college degrees than ever before. At the same time some predict that within only a few years approximately two-thirds of the jobs in the United States will require at least an associate's degree.[12] This suggests that both now and in the future a college degree may make you less unique. Yet, at the same time it will be even more essential in securing employment. In many cases your degree will serve as a credential that will enable you to be *considered* for employment. The kind of learner you have become will be what distinguishes you from everyone else.

Reality 2: You Are Going to Forget Much of What You Learn

I don't remember much of the detail from the approximately 50 classes I took as an undergraduate. I can only tell you about a number of broad ideas and general perspectives. Research shows that over time many people forget significant amounts of the information and ideas they've learned, particularly when that learning isn't immediately connected to something personally meaningful.[13] Of course we don't need research to tell us that months or years after a class we won't remember most of the details we were required to learn. This lack of long-term recall, however, doesn't mean our learning was pointless.

So what is the point of taking so many classes?

Remember, society doesn't hold a college degree in high esteem because you have memorized facts about economics, studied the processes of photosynthesis, or remembered the quadratic equation. Rather, the standing that comes with a college degree lies in the

assumption that you have developed an appreciation for the influence of economics on contemporary concerns and recognize the value of scientific knowledge in shaping society.

Companies aren't going to hire you because you took courses in philosophy and English and learned to write research papers. They do, however, seek job candidates who have developed an ability to understand, critique, and make arguments that are logically sound. They want employees who know how to identify important questions, collect and analyze information, and develop informed conclusions.

Thus the reason for taking so many classes is not only to broaden your knowledge—the stated goal of the university—but also to develop you into a person who can reason, think deeply and creatively, and be a lifelong learner.

What will you retain from your classes?

You will retain the most important thing—who you have become as a result of your studies. For example, I don't remember many details about technical writing that I learned as a senior. However, I do remember what it was like to develop a proposal for a project, gather the resources and research necessary to complete it, create a draft, get feedback for improvement from my professor and classmates, revise my manuscript, and finally submit it for evaluation. I remember how hard I worked, how much effort it took, how I felt after receiving feedback, and how hard it was to deal with the obstacles of completing a large assignment. I remember the sense of accomplishment I felt when I was finished, knowing that I had the capacity to do something as complex and difficult as that project. This learning created a foundation for successfully taking on larger projects after I graduated.

I do, therefore, remember some important things that I learned in my technical writing class, but those things were not necessarily the terms and concepts that could be put on a final exam. They were the

things that gave me a foundation for thinking like a writer and the confidence to complete a difficult, complex project.

So rather than assuming that specific coursework is the most important aspect of a college education, I suggest that you focus on the learning process itself. For example, you can take multiple history courses and learn how to analyze and evaluate people and events while gaining an appreciation for the importance of history in helping you understand current problems. Or you can slide through those same courses—avoiding careful reading, cramming for exams, doing sloppy work at the last minute, and complaining about how you would rather be doing something else—and gain nothing.

Mastering the process of learning through study, analysis, and experimentation is much more important than the details of what you learn.

Reality 3: Many of the Job Skills You Learn in College Will Become Obsolete

In a speech to business students in 2008 at the University of Colorado at Boulder, Peter Behrendt—a successful engineer, CEO, and venture capitalist—told students not to worry excessively about the technical skills in their chosen fields.[14] As I listened, I thought that advice sounded odd coming from an engineer.

Next this 40-year technology veteran asked the audience to think about the rate at which knowledge develops and technology changes. He asked, "How many times has the amount of space that it takes to electronically store data decreased over the past 40 years?" The students offered various guesses, all of which were far too small. The answer: one billion. It used to take thousands of square feet to store what now fits easily on the tip of your finger.[15]

Thus, the specific professional skills that he'd learned in college about how to store data electronically were obsolete by the time he'd

graduated. Knowing this, he suggested that students learn broadly across a number of disciplines in addition to studying the technical aspects of their field.

Peter Behrendt's advice holds true for each field of study and for every career. The way we do things now will change and will probably change quickly. The dramatic rate of technological change means that whatever technical or industry-specific skills you learn in college probably won't last even a few years, let alone a career. This is why Behrendt encouraged students to not be excessively concerned about technical skills. Instead, he encouraged students to also develop excellent communication skills, learn another language, develop a global perspective, learn how to ask good questions, and develop zero tolerance for unethical behavior.

Once again, I emphasize that this does not mean that you should avoid learning technical or professional skills in college. Those skills are important. They can help you get your first job and will enable you to develop your ability to learn in a particular field. However, you should not be *overly* worried about them to the point where you make job skills the sole focus of college. What you need to do is recognize that their usefulness and value probably won't last very long.

Thinking ahead to the entirety of your future career and life, you will spend most of your time working with technologies that haven't yet been invented. You'll help solve complex problems that don't currently exist. And both your professional work and community engagement will respond to social, cultural, and economic conditions that haven't arisen. If that doesn't sound realistic to you, just ask anyone who started their career 40 years ago, and they can tell you exactly how this has happened to them.

Your ability to learn how to learn will be what takes you through the countless developments and changes that you will deal with in

your work and in society. By recognizing this, you can focus on your development as a learner, which will be more lasting and applicable in all your future endeavors.

Outcomes of Becoming

When you focus on who you are becoming, you will recognize important outcomes of your education that others often overlook. You will see results that are not always directly reflected in grades. These outcomes are distinct from professional job skills because they incorporate broad abilities, personal character traits, and ways of thinking. These qualities are transferable from job to job as well as from career to career. They never become obsolete or outdated, and they can be learned in any discipline or field of study.

And what are these vital qualities? Creativity, the ability to think critically, excellent communication skills, and an exceptional character.

Creativity

Creativity expert Ken Robinson defines creativity as "the process of having original ideas that have value."[16] He explained that research on creativity illustrates that when we are very young, we are extremely creative; as we get older, we lose that creativity.[17] Some, like Ken Robinson, argue that formal education saps the active, exploring, questioning nature of our minds. And they may be right. We are too often told to listen, take notes, and memorize information. Yet when we graduate, begin careers, and get involved in our communities, we are expected to be creative, solve problems, or do something original.[18]

I recognize that some college classes provide little room for originality. Even so, you can take opportunities to be creative both inside and outside the classroom. You can seek out courses, teachers, projects, and activities that will help you develop your creative capacities.

Remember, creativity isn't just confined to art or dance or music. Creativity is possible in every field of study and in all learning environments.[19] Anything that requires you to develop original work or to form your own conclusions can help you develop a creative mind. Sometimes the key to finding opportunities simply lies in asking for permission to do things in a different way.

Critical Thinking

A successful engineer explained to me the importance of critical thinking as an outcome of a college education. He said the world pays you to solve problems. If the only problem you can solve is something extremely simple, you can get paid for it. But the pay won't be much, and you can easily be replaced. If the problem you can solve is to save a life, facilitate collaboration, run a company, develop technology, or something else that is complex or requires expertise, then you become hard to replace and much more valuable.[20]

To be a problem solver, you need to learn how to think critically—a quality that many people consider to be the primary purpose and most important outcome of a college education.[21] Critical thinking is not primarily concerned with knowing the right answers. Instead, critical thinkers master the art of asking good questions in order to solve complex problems.

In business and politics, for example, we often suffer from a lack of critical thinkers. Too many people in these areas come up with solutions based on what they already know or on what will seem "safe" or familiar to their customers, investors, or constituents. Unfortunately, many of the problems we face in our organizations and in our society deal with new and ambiguous conditions that have no clear answers and that cannot be successfully addressed in the same old ways.

In contrast, a critical thinker is able to look at a problem from multiple perspectives, consider contrasting ideas, understand differing

arguments, gather good information, and then develop informed conclusions. You must recognize that every new subject, class, paper, or assignment gives you the opportunity to think carefully, ask good questions, and hone your critical thinking skills. When you do, you prepare yourself to become a problem solver.

Communication Skills

Communicating and working effectively with others is considered by nearly all employers to be the most important ability that college graduates need to develop.[22] This means being able to work well with those who see the world differently than you do, come from different nationalities and cultures, or have differing experiences or expertise. Communication seems pretty easy when you're surrounded by people who are like you and when the problems you're solving are simple. But the true measure of competent communicators is how they manage conflict and difference and their ability to bring people with different ideas and experiences together.

Your success depends upon your ability to build and maintain positive, trusting relationships. College provides you with endless opportunities to interact with all kinds of people under many different circumstances. How you communicate with your teachers, peers, roommates, family, and friends helps you develop your communication skills. In every group project, study session, club, class, and conversation with a professor, you are learning to build relationships and work effectively with others. Some of this learning will come from success and positive outcomes. Some of this learning will come from disagreements, conflict, and failure. Regardless of how it comes, it is valuable experience if you learn from it.

Therefore, how you interact with your teachers, advisors, peers, mentors, and others is extremely important. When you graduate from college, you will have spent several years communicating and

collaborating with others. Having difficult conversations with a professor about a grade, asking for help when you are confused, and working with your classmates on projects offers you the opportunity to develop competence as a communicator.

If you only focus on grades and developing professional skills, you are likely to miss out on this essential learning. And without strong communication skills, your ability to work successfully with others and accomplish your goals diminishes significantly.

So seek to develop relationships with your professors, learn to ask for feedback and help, continually improve your ability to work effectively with groups, and increase your capacity to appreciate differences and manage conflict.

Character

Character is the sum of qualities that influences *how* you accomplish tasks and achieve goals. These qualities can include a good work ethic, dependability, and honesty. When you focus on who you are becoming in college, the things that will matter most will be how you studied, learned, and completed your work. This focus will build depth of character, a depth that will help you be successful in whatever you do.

When you graduate you should be able to do much more than you were capable of doing when you began college. Your personal capacity and work ethic should be significantly expanded, and you should be ready to stretch yourself even further as you tackle the many opportunities and challenges that await you.

Unfortunately, some college students try to do as little as possible and avoid challenging situations. It can be tempting to think it's smart to figure out ways to work less and to find ways to get a good grade with the least amount of effort. This trap is easy to fall into if you assume that the grade—and not who you become—is the only thing

that matters. While it is a good idea to be careful about taking on too much work, your personal capacity will not increase if you avoid stretching yourself. Instead, you should go above and beyond what is expected of you. Don't shy away from doing hard things. Even though hard work can't always be graded, your efforts will always pay off in terms of who you are becoming.

Your character is also influenced by your integrity and your ability to complete tasks on time. Are you honest on all of your tests and assignments, and do you complete them when they are due? Learners understand that they need to do what is expected of them, when it is expected of them, and to do their own work.

Every ethical employer expects you to be able to work hard, meet your obligations, and be honest. In short, your employers will expect you to have depth of character. You will find the same expectations in your personal and community relationships as well. Learners know that such abilities aren't turned on and off like a switch. These abilities are developed and practiced over time and become ways of living in the world. If you develop a lazy and dishonest character in college, you will be that way in your work situations and in your personal life. But if you become a person of high character, others will trust you, enabling you to be successful even in the middle of challenging circumstances.

From Student to Learner

When you understand that the primary purpose of college is to become a learner, you see learning in a new light. Now it's no longer only about what happens in the classroom. Instead, learning becomes something that you're doing all the time. It never stops.

Your learning objectives also change. You move away from an exclusive focus on grades and begin to focus on how your education is transforming you into someone better. You begin to measure your

success by how you see and engage the world differently and how your understanding and perspectives expand.

This approach highlights a significant problem with the way many people engage education—passively sitting back and waiting to be taught. Perhaps this point is best illustrated by this question often asked by students who are frustrated with an assignment or uninterested in taking a class: "What exactly do I have to do to get an A?" This question usually implies that they want to do the least amount of work—and therefore learning—in order to get the desired grade.

From the perspective of becoming, being a passive student actually works against you and your desires for success. To get out of this passive stance, I suggest dropping the label of "student" and adopting the label of "learner." Although simply replacing the word doesn't guarantee a change in behavior, speaking differently about how to engage learning—and understanding that difference—can change the way you think about and pursue your education.

To get the most out of your education, you must stop seeing yourself as a student with all the passive and amateur connotations that word can imply. Instead, you must see yourself as a learner who is active, courageous, hardworking, and energized. The following table summarizes the differences between the attitudes and behaviors of students and learners.

STUDENT	LEARNER
Waits to be directed	Seeks out opportunities
Learns for the test	Learns for understanding
Is externally motivated	Is internally motivated
Avoids challenging situations	Seeks challenging situations
Sees learning as an obligation	Sees learning as an opportunity
Learns to do	Learns to learn

Let me elaborate on this distinction with an example. As an undergraduate teaching assistant for a communication theory course, I met both students and learners. Every semester each student was required to write six short papers and take two written exams. The professor told the class members that he'd left the topics of the papers open so they could write about the theories they were most interested in and the ones they understood best. The overall guidelines for the papers were these: be creative, be organized, and think critically.

Most of the students were not used to this type of freedom and responsibility. Some seemed to enjoy it, but others really disliked it. Many who disliked it became frustrated with the open-ended challenge to be creative and to write about what they found interesting. The learners, however, thrived; the freedom to think critically and be creative energized them. Their abilities improved with each succeeding paper, and they earned high grades in the class. Those who remained frustrated with the assignments didn't excel. They blamed their struggles on the professor's teaching style, on not having multiple-choice exams, or on not having assigned paper topics.

In all the classes I have taught since that time, the same pattern has played out. Those who have adopted the mindset of a learner thrive, even through challenges and setbacks. Those who act as passive students coast along, never fully realizing the possibilities for growth and development as a learner.

Now, I understand that being a learner isn't easy and doesn't always come naturally in an education system that often conditions us to be passive. I believe every person who has attended college has played the roles of both student and learner. My own successes and failures were largely determined by the role I adopted. Yet my experience has taught me that we can decide to become learners who actively pursue knowledge and understanding. And that decision—simply

choosing to act as a learner—can enable you to grow and improve in all of your learning opportunities.

Making this choice, however, doesn't mean we are always either one or the other. These labels represent sets of behaviors that we work toward developing and enacting. And we are most often some mixture of a student and learner at any given point in our lives depending on how we approach the challenges and opportunities in front of us. That is why it's never too late in your education to embrace the learner's mindset. Whenever you begin the process of becoming a learner, you will do things differently, see your education differently, and find new motivations.

Therefore, striving to be a learner gives you great power. You gain tremendous control over how you learn and who you become. When you break the mold of a passive student and become a learner, you can become more and more successful—no matter how good or bad your educational opportunities and circumstances, no matter how competent your professors, no matter your intellectual abilities. You increase and expand your successes because you do not wait for someone else to make your education better. You take responsibility for who you are becoming.