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Don Pearson

Ann Pearson

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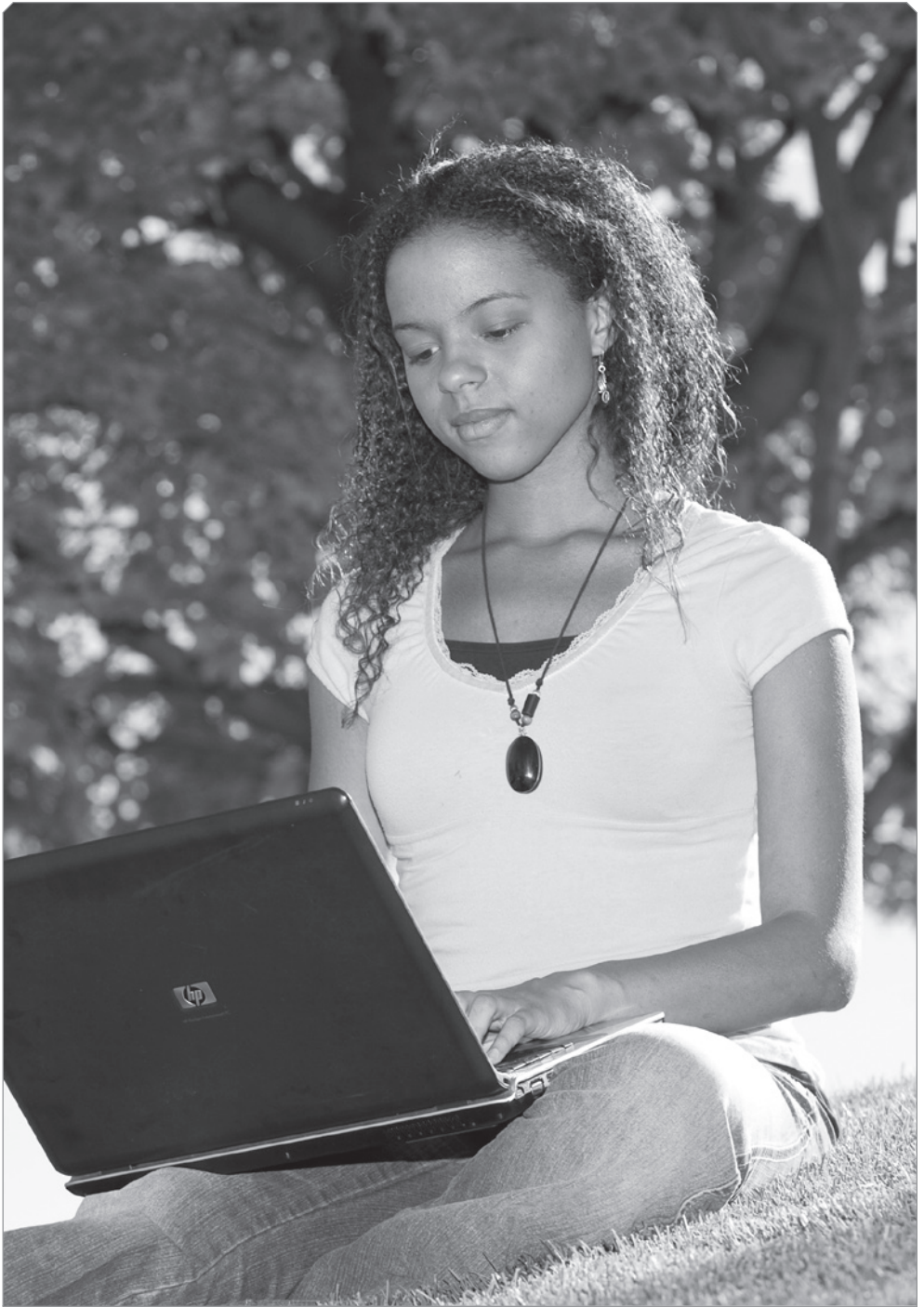


Photo by Jaren Wilkey, Brigham Young University

Having a child in college can be as much of a learning experience for the parent as it is for the student. Parents can best support their children through college as they listen to, encourage, and advise them during these important years.

Guiding College Students to Success

DON AND ANN PEARSON

Don and Ann Pearson (donandannpearson@gmail.com) are the parents of six children and recently returned from the Canada Toronto East Mission.

When our children entered college, they were very independent and had confidence in their own abilities, but they welcomed—or at least tolerated—our advice and were pleased that we were interested in them and their college studies. They were surprised that the parents of most of their roommates and friends seemed to be uninvolved in the educational process at college—apart from finances and social updates. Here are some ideas that worked for us as parents in giving guidance to and showing support of our college students.

1. *Be a good listener.* At this stage of your children's lives, there is no one else in the entire world that is more interested in what and how they are doing. Listen to their review of classes, teachers, roommates, ward events, callings, parties, and extracurricular activities, and then let your children know how much you care about them. While parents want to be good listeners and actively involved, they should not impose their choices on their children or annoy them with overly frequent contact. They should strive to find the right balance of giving support and helping children develop independence, realizing that needs vary from child to child. In trying to help, parents should

avoid choosing their children's majors, careers, or spouses. It is important to express our parental love and interest while recognizing that our children are at college and are responsible for their own choices.

2. *Keep in touch.* This amazing age of instant communication has given us valuable opportunities to provide appreciation, support and guidance to our adult children in timely, meaningful ways. How does a parent help from a distance? Think about your own strengths. For example, Ann enjoys proof-reading papers, and with e-mail our children can have her instant attention on a paper due that week. The first few weeks of a semester are an important time to be involved in making the semester a success. We call to discuss each class, the subject matter, and the teacher. We enjoy learning about the class material and listening to our children's views of the strengths and weaknesses of the professors and course material. We encourage our children to be aware of different classes they might like and to attend a class and experience the subject matter and teaching style. The first few weeks are critical because this is when changes can still be made. Four weeks into the semester is generally too late to advise a student who is not enjoying a class. All you can say then is, "Do your best. Tough it out. You can't drop this class now."

Sometimes, particularly when students are living off campus, parents can be particularly helpful with issues concerning recipes, meals, shopping, and health. Parents should always be sensitive to health considerations. Sometimes parents will need to say, "I don't care what it costs in time or money, get over to the health center. You need to see a doctor."

3. *Encourage the use of the university catalog and class schedule.* Surprisingly few students access the online university catalog. It contains the traffic signs for driving through college. Ignoring the catalog may require u-turns and unnecessary detours along the road to graduation.

We suggest that parents also keep their own copy or use the online catalog. The catalog sets forth the requirements for graduation. It describes colleges and departments, and has course descriptions, course requirements, and postgraduation options for every major. When students are thinking about what classes to take, parents can be meaningful guides if they understand the university catalog. The catalog also contains the university's mission statement, including the academic skills of successful students. For example, BYU's educational aims for students, as set forth in the catalog, are thinking soundly, communicating effectively, and reasoning proficiently in quantita-

tive terms.¹ The university catalog will enable parents to be effective advisers to their college children.

The class schedule contains the traffic signs for that semester. It tells a parent and a student what the classes are offered each semester, who teaches them, and when they are available. The class schedule and the university catalog are the documents that any informed adviser needs.

4. *Remind them to balance their schedule.* Especially in the first semester or two, parents can review their child's class schedule to see that it is balanced. Balance includes class times, course subject, and time demands (number of credit hours).

Help a first-year college student ask, "When are my very best study times? Where is my very best study location?" The level of performance in college is a result of quality study. Often the best time to study is in the morning and the best location is in the library at a private desk. A dorm room where people talk and listen to the radio, watch television, or play computer games may not be the best study location. For some students, an hour is barely enough time to begin studying. For others, two hours is the maximum time they can sit and maintain concentration. As they schedule their classes, it helps to allow time for study at appropriate times during the day.

Sometimes students will proudly say that they have been able to schedule all of their classes between 8:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. They should not be deceived into thinking that this is a good schedule. Five consecutive hours in class can be grueling rather than interesting. Consecutive classes do not allow time for last-minute studying. When the five hours are finished, the student is ready for a break, not more study.

An occasional evening class may be a good idea in balancing time and schedule; evening classes are time effective and often less demanding overall. We would probably not encourage more than one evening class in a semester unless work or registration restrictions require it because evening activities may conflict with class and possibly encourage a student to skip class altogether. Ideally, students should balance a class's subject matter and time slot when considering their schedule.

Variety in a semester's work is appealing and generally more palatable to students; the approach and study demands of math, language, humanities, sciences, and religion classes are very different and add variety to a schedule. Especially in the first college years, some classes should be selected because the student truly believes he or she will enjoy them. Hopefully, a student

will enjoy every class, but some classes will be fun, while others will be enjoyed because of the exhilaration that results from working very hard and accomplishing tasks at a personally satisfactory level. Having both fun and challenging classes each semester will create a well-balanced, challenging, and enjoyable educational experience.

Particularly in their first semester, students should be encouraged not to over-schedule. Even if they are bright, are hardworkers, or were exceptional students in high school, students will probably fare better with twelve credit hours during the first semester than with fourteen or fifteen (for scholarship students, however, a higher minimum credit-hour level may be required). Students can structure their schedule so that they can achieve their best performance.

College grades often become more important than we would like them to be; we go to college to learn, and unfortunately grades can get in the way of learning. Despite this, grades are important for future scholarship consideration, employment upon graduation, graduate work, and, to a certain extent, grades can act as a personal measurement of an individual's college success. But grades are not everything; relationships, knowledge, and skills are sometimes more important than grades when applying for jobs and graduate programs.

In the first semester, and throughout one's college experience, parents should encourage their children to participate in a wide variety of campus and ward activities to broaden their university experience. We found that having our children live on campus without a car during the freshman year helped eliminate some of the distractions that can interrupt a good balance in activities.

No student can have a balanced schedule without paying attention to exercise (every student has the option of registering for a physical education class), nutrition, and sleep. These are very important to a successful college experience. Encourage your children to make good decisions to be healthy, thus keeping their minds alert while at school.

5. *Help students select a major.* Most students change their major during their college years; many do so more than once. Don changed his major from chemistry to political science when he returned from his mission and recommenced his studies at BYU. A primary objective of the first year or two of college is to explore areas for a major. Encourage first-semester students to take at least one class in the department that they think might be their college

major but also to take at least one or two classes in other areas of interest. These areas might be widely different in academic content, such as computer science and English, or zoology and economics. However, this does not mean that a student should register as a general education or an open major. A student should designate his first choice when he registers; then he can change it the next semester if he changes his mind. When a student has designated a major, the department considers the student theirs. This means the student will get the attention and benefit of having declared a major. If the student changes majors, the new department will take over; previously being in another department will not restrict student benefits.

Sometimes students will think that if they haven't decided on a major, they should complete the general education (GE) classes to get them out of the way. Students need to realize that the key decision of their first years in college is to select a major field, not to complete the GE requirements. Students can take some GE classes, but should be careful not to overdose by taking *only* GE classes. Possibly, one or more of those GE classes will provide the exposure a student needs to select a major, but students should use GE classes as a way to help select a major, not simply to fill GE requirements.

While selecting a major is important, students should select a major that they enjoy. Going back and choosing another major, even after several years of college, is better than going forward in a less enjoyable field and career. That may mean exploring many avenues of interest, even taking courses that do not fulfill major or GE requirements. Seemingly unnecessary classes can provide a broader educational experience. These classes will be of particular value in helping students decide what their primary interests in college will be. By taking a broad range of classes, students will gain skills in many areas. Especially in competitive job markets and limited-enrollment graduate programs, students who have unusual knowledge or skills may have an advantage over the other similar applicants.

After our son Tom returned from his mission, he changed his mind about what his major should be three different times in a matter of months. It was fun for us to talk about each potential major area with him. The university catalog was of immense help. It described not only the required coursework for each major, but also the professional opportunities for students who graduate in different disciplines. *U.S. News and World Report* and *Newsweek* magazines periodically have articles regarding hot employment fields and opportunities for employment and compensation in various categories. A

discussion of choosing a major should include not only what the student likes about the subject and why, but also a consideration of where the career path will lead. Some humanities or social science majors may want to consider graduate school or a double major to provide more employment opportunities. None of our children selected accounting, computer science, education, engineering, or nursing as a major or as a second major—which are areas that provide good employment opportunities immediately upon graduation. Consequently, our children had to continue their education past an associate's or bachelor's degree.

After Tom had selected computer science as a major, he almost immediately changed to microbiology and registered for several midlevel microbiology classes during the next semester. He enjoyed them and did well, but when we talked about it during the summer he stated that he really enjoyed the classroom and the lectures, but not much of the laboratory work. Many students might say the reverse. At the same time Tom was also a teaching assistant for the introductory anatomy class in the Zoology Department, which reaffirmed his preference for teaching and textbooks over laboratory work. He was also taking some history classes that he loved. He was planning to minor in history, but he realized that majoring in history would not produce many immediate employment opportunities upon graduation. We discussed many questions: What do you like most about microbiology? What do you like least? Who are the great teachers for you in the Microbiology Department? Can you pursue graduate work in microbiology without an intense focus on laboratory work and research? Are there employment opportunities if you exclude laboratory work? What do you like most about history? What do you like least about history? Who are the great teachers for you in the History Department? What can you do with a history major? Which subject matter do you enjoy the most? In which are do you perform the best? Tom thought and talked about the differences and the options.

Students should talk about what they like and dislike about different majors and employment opportunities and why. With Tom, we tried very hard not to push for an outcome, only to ask good questions. Frankly, we only want our children to make the best decision for *them*, and we can't choose what they will do for their life's work. Tom decided to change his major to history, minor in microbiology, apply to take the GMAT, attend a graduate business school, and take additional courses in accounting, statistics, and economics in the next two semesters to meet coursework requirements

for business school. He carefully scheduled time to prepare for the GMAT before taking it, which made a huge difference in his test results. His history and life science background along with those basic business courses served him well in his MBA program and in job opportunities.

6. *Encourage them to choose a variety of classes.* In the first two semesters, in addition to taking classes in a wide range of interests that may become a major area, we encouraged our children to take a class for fun. Steven had a wonderful experience his last year of high school working with his friend's father. This father was a senior fellow with the American Bible Society and was working on translating the Bible into languages with few users (for example, Eskimo and certain native American dialects). Some areas of translation focus on the difficulty between exact translations and cultural feelings or background meanings, and this is the area Steven experienced. From this work, Steven's interest in language translation motivated him to sign up as a first-semester freshman for an upper-division linguistics class covering problems in translation.

We encouraged him, but closely monitored his situation during the first few classes. Could he perform at an acceptable level? Did he have sufficient linguistics background and language skills to compete in that class with upper-division students? Steven had four years of Latin and four years of Spanish, and he was conversational in Spanish from having lived and attended school in Chile for a summer, but most students in this class had better foreign language skills, especially in spoken languages. The class turned out to be very exciting and rewarding for him, and he performed well. He decided on linguistics as one of his double majors.

7. *Select teachers, not just courses.* In the first years of college students have an almost unlimited choice of teachers and of classes. In approaching graduation, students' class schedules require primarily the completion of specific courses to finish GE or major requirements. Under those circumstances teacher selection may be impossible, especially if only one professor teaches a needed class. But teachers have a huge impact on class learning and memories.

We told our children that they should choose some of their classes based on a professor's reputation at the university. If the professor is outstanding, students will enjoy and learn in the class, regardless of the subject. So how does one determine the great professors and great thinkers on any college campus? One way is to look at the list of professors of the year. Another, perhaps better,

way is to ask friends and other students what classes and teachers they have enjoyed most. We kept track of responses in a separate notebook and in the course catalog. Another helpful way to determine a professor's reputation is to visit <http://www.ratemyprofessors.com>. This site provides students' opinions on how difficult the class is and how helpful and exciting the professor is.

The focus should be on learning about professors who teach classes that a student plans on taking. Every student will have experience with GE teachers, and students in the same major take classes from professors in the same department that new students may not yet know. If a student is planning to take Biology 100 next semester, he or she can ask other students taking that class now about the professor and about the class in general. Students may attend a class period to observe a teacher to determine if they really like the teacher's style. After attending a class, making a decision will be easier.

Our son Eric had a good friend who strongly recommended a professor in the History Department. Eric took the class on American Indian history and felt it was the most exciting and most interesting class he had ever taken. He loved the professor. But this system doesn't always work perfectly. Eric so enjoyed this professor that he signed up for his American colonial history class in the fall. We encouraged Karen, who was entering BYU, to take this great history professor's class with her brother, a senior history major. The class was okay according to Karen, but never quite what Eric had found. Karen later wished she had not taken that class.

Once students have selected a professor, they may want to visit periodically with the professor to enhance their school experience. Many professors love working with students. Help your sons and daughters have the courage to meet with a professor when they have questions or expectations where a few minutes of the teacher's time would be justified.

8. *Encourage them to go out of their way to make friends.* Getting to know roommates, classmates, ward members, and other students at the university will produce rewarding lifelong friendships. Encourage your son or daughter to participate in the wide variety of campus activities with other students, including intramural sports, campus service organizations, department-sponsored clubs or groups, theater, the arts, and so forth. The variety of opportunities offered is remarkable. Your son or daughter should consider that the friendships they form will often last long after their college days. Having these friends will enrich their own lives. Invite the friends of your

son or daughter to your home when they are in your area, and encourage your child to invite friends to your home anytime. Help them to feel welcome there. If you have the opportunity to visit campus, invite your children's friends to lunch with you and your son or daughter.

9. *Be straight with finances.* The cost of a university education is significant. Many students must work. Paying living costs and tuition can be a constant drain on time and energy. Students deserve to know explicitly what financial help they can expect from home. Maybe you plan to help with a mission, but cannot also provide financial assistance for education. Whatever the case is, tell them. Then they can complete part-time and summer work and financial-aid applications, as required. As much as possible, help them to be cautious with debt; carrying major debt out of school becomes overwhelming.

Often students are not well informed about scholarships. Working hard in school to get good grades may result in scholarships that can eliminate or reduce the need for debt. Many institutions offer merit-based scholarships. A scholarship may secure more time for study and activities than will part-time employment. Many times funds are also available for mentored research or focused study in a given area of interest. Doing research is good preparation for attending graduate programs, and may lead to better scholarships in graduate school.

10. *Help them plan for missions.* Attending religion classes or institute will place a student with a group of other similarly focused peers, which may keep strong their enthusiasm for the gospel. For young men, selecting a major may follow a mission. Most upper-division courses will not be taken until after a mission. Coursework before a mission can be general and somewhat exploratory in terms of academic programs.

Of course, with young women, the timing is different if they choose to serve missions. In our family, Laura graduated before her mission, and Karen and Marianne each returned from a mission and completed a final year of school before graduating. We found it especially difficult to help Laura apply for graduate school (even at BYU) while she was still in the mission field. We had a difficult time requesting references and completing applications and essays while Laura was in the mission field. Daughters who go on missions and plan on graduate school after can plan to take the graduate record exam (GRE) or other required tests before their mission.

11. *Give praise and validation.* As much as college students want independence, they also want their parents' help, encouragement, and praise. It is

so easy to say, “We love you and appreciate and admire your hard work,” or “Congratulations on a great semester!”

Commencement provides a time for parents and family to congratulate and honor a son or daughter who is graduating. But we shouldn’t wait four or more years to let them know how much we appreciate their efforts as they move along the university highway toward graduation. Their university experience is life changing, and we should be grateful for the opportunities and blessings that it will provide them throughout their lives.

Finally, we are grateful that shared university experiences have brought us and our children closer to each other. **RE**

Notes

1. 2008–2009 BYU Catalog, The Aims of a BYU Education, Undergraduate Skills.