

Work is personal for the person doing the work

and 30 other insights to change
how you think, work, and live

KEVIN McMULLIN

Dedicated to every school counselor who shows up for their student body, to students who are just starting their own lifelong learning, and to that person who inspires you.

Introduction



In October of 2009, I began writing a daily [blog](#). Originally intended to spread more of the college admissions advice we share at [Collegewise](#), the college admissions counseling company I founded, the subjects soon broadened to other topics—parenting, writing, small business, personal success, etc. Each post shared something I hoped might resonate with at least one person reading it. As the number of readers and daily posts added up, so did my own learning.

Ten years and 3,653 daily posts in a row later, I retired the Collegewise blog. For my final month of posts, I shared 31 lessons I'd learned and blogged about in some form during the previous ten years. Some were new discoveries I'd made during that time. Others were once-nascent ideas that became clearer and richer when blogged. But every one of them changed how I think, write, work, and live. Those final entries and their accompanying lessons are bundled together here in this PDF.

The daily habit of noticing and sharing at least one idea I hoped my readers would find interesting turned out to be the most personally and professionally enriching project I've ever undertaken. I hope these lessons resonate with you like they did with me.

Thank you for reading and for sharing.

Cheers,

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1. My final month of daily blogging starts today

It was almost a year ago that [I announced](#) this tenth year of daily blogging would be my last. October 12, 2019 will be my final post. And with just 31 days until then, I've been thinking a lot about the best way to say goodbye to my readers and to my little blog. Many of my friends and family have asked me what I have in mind for the final post, but that's a lot of gravity and pressure to put on one entry, even the final one in a ten-year daily streak. So while there's a fine line between honoring something for an audience who shows up willingly and overestimating your own importance in their lives, if you'll indulge me, here's what I've got in mind for the next 31 days.

For each of my remaining posts, I'd like to share one thing I've learned and benefited from while engaging in this daily practice, none of which I knew of or fully appreciated before I started. Here's day #1 of 31:

Lesson 1:

It's easier to make things for an audience you have than it is to find an audience for things that you've made.

The beauty of the internet and social media is that you can reach an audience with the push of a button. But all too often, people, organizations, and companies find something to announce and then shout into the online universe to find an interested audience. Kickstarter is a great example of this. Sure, there are success stories of products, projects, and films that got their start and their funding with a Kickstarter announcement. But there are a lot more examples of people who announced their big idea on Kickstarter and then hoped an audience would show up. That's like that person on the street corner acrobatically spinning the arrow to generate interest in the rental property to their left. Sure, you may get the occasional passerby who happens to want exactly what you're promoting. But would it not have

been better if you already had a group of people who were voluntarily giving you their attention and waiting for you to bring that product to them?

In October 2011, my business partner Arun and I released our first version of the Collegewise Guide to the Common Application. We thought it was a great idea and we were excited to share it with students, parents, and counselors. And while the guide is free today, we initially charged \$12.99 per download.

And our advertising strategy to promote it? Simple. I went to my blog readers and said, "Here it is."

No paid advertising. No spamming strangers who didn't want to hear from us. No smarmy tactics or anything else that just wasn't us. I'd already been blogging daily for four years. I had an audience at the time of over 10,000 people who were already showing up willingly to read what I had to share. We didn't have to find people who might be interested. The audience was already there. And if the guide were good enough, they'd tell other people about it for us. That's exactly what happened.

The best way to start building an audience? Whatever your project is that you're envisioning or even already working on, start by identifying, as specifically as you can, who it's for. What need are you trying to fill? How will it help them? And most importantly, what can you share, teach, or otherwise give them today to start earning their attention and trust?

If you start today giving people recurring reasons to show up, when your project is ready to share, your audience will be there waiting.

And appropriately, for the final time on this blog, I'm happy to announce that our 2019/20 Collegewise guide to the Common Application is available today. You can download it for free [here](#).

2. Good. Enough.

Editor's note: This post began with some specific advice for students, parents, and counselors about how to use a free resource we'd just published, the 2019-20 version of our annual Collegewise Guide to the Common Application. I've deleted those portions for the PDF readers. But if you're interested, the post in its entirety is [here](#), and the guide itself is [here](#), free to anyone who wants it.

Lesson 2:

Good enough is "Good. Enough."

We were really proud of version 1.0 of our Common App guide when we released it in 2011. But it wasn't perfect. It looked like an amateur designed it (which was accurate—I was the designer). There were sections where we could have gone into more detail. The images could have been clearer. We probably could have shortened the overall length with additional editing. But we'd already spent dozens and dozens of hours creating the guide from scratch, then refining and revising. It already did everything we needed it to do. And to hold onto it even longer in the quest for perfection would have doomed us to an inevitable loop of changes that had long since left improvements behind. Once it was good enough, we released it. It was: Good. Enough.

"Good enough" can mean a haphazard, lazy excuse to release something unworthy of your time and effort. But used effectively, it can also help you push through the unsubstantiated fear that people won't like what you've made unless

you make it perfect. "Perfect" is a mirage. You can chase it but you won't grasp it. It lets you off the hook of finishing. It starts as a laudable goal but eventually morphs into an excuse disguised as drive.

It doesn't matter how good, great, or perfect something is if nobody gets to see, use, or benefit from it. Good enough won't let you off the hook like perfect will. Embracing good enough helps you get the project out the door.

Our original guide wasn't perfect, and neither were any of the subsequent ones. But each gets better than the last. We're happy with good enough. And thankfully, plenty of others seem to be too.

If you want to produce better work (or college applications), try freeing yourself from the quest for perfect. Then work like crazy until you hit "Good. Enough."

3. What are you noticing?

In 2007, I took a leap and checked an item off of my life's bucket list: I entered a stand-up comedy competition.

To be clear, there was no audition. All you had to do to enter the contest was 1) have a working pulse and 2) write your name on a sign-up sheet. But I went for it. My friends all showed up to support me at the big show. And over the next four weeks, I actually managed to progress several rounds before the far more talented comedians went on to the finals.

I loved being on stage and making people laugh. But here's what I didn't love: spending all day every day asking, "Could *that* be funny?"

Stand-up comics are always looking for material. Is that funny? Could it be funny? How could I turn this thing I just thought or saw or experienced into something funny? That's the job. It's what a good comedian does. But I didn't enjoy examining everything in my life through the lens of what was or might be funny. I found it exhausting. And it took away from my ability to notice and appreciate things that were more important to me.

Daily blogging inspired a similar behavior with a very different result.

Since beginning this blog ten years ago, at least once a day, I have to notice something that might be helpful or interesting enough to write about it. I can't even begin to calculate how many hours I've spent over the last ten years noticing and consequently sharing information that intrigues me. Some days what I share is a lot more important or profound than other days. But the daily practice is one that's made me a better observer, thinker, communicator, student, parent, and colleague. It's why daily blogging is as selfish an act as it may also be a generous one. I get plenty out of this practice, too.

Lesson 3:

What you choose to notice every day influences your behavior.

We all have near limitless information streaming our way every day. But our brains have limited resources. We can't take in everything around us and parcel out attention equally. We get to choose what we notice. And those choices have very real consequences. They can make us feel happier, more informed, more relaxed, more fortunate, etc., or they can make us resentful, over-invested in things that don't matter, anxious, less fortunate, etc.

Not everyone has the luxury to ignore what might be difficult in their lives, especially if they're experiencing real hardship. But we all get to make choices throughout the day about what's worth paying attention to. And those choices have side effects. If you want to change the side effects, change what you're choosing to notice.

It's worth checking in regularly and asking yourself: (1) What am I choosing to notice every day, and (2) is that practice making my life better, or worse?

4. Reversing the sleep deprivation trend

A [new study](#) from the Journal of Community Health shows that the number of adults sleeping less than six hours each night has risen from 30% in 2010 to 35% in 2018. UC Berkeley neuroscience professor [Matthew Walker](#), a sleep expert, tweeted in response to the study, "This is unsustainable chronic sleep deprivation for maintaining human health." And the physical and mental side effects for teens similarly sleep deprived are even worse.

Lesson 4:

Lack of sleep is a dangerous practice that makes you miserable today and also shortens your life tomorrow.

This is something I did not understand ten years ago. I'd always carried some pride as someone who could sleep 5-6 hours a night and seemingly function just fine. I'd reserve focused effort to get a good night's sleep for occasions that merited it, like a big presentation or event the following day.

But since I've started writing this blog and consequently had to find interesting things to write about for parents and teens, I've consistently come across articles, studies, and, most notably, [this book](#) that have completely changed my perspective.

Regular good sleep is imperative to good physical and mental health. It deserves to be prioritized and protected. This is not an opinion. It's science. And it's one of those areas where our society is trending in the wrong direction. It's time to reverse the trend, especially with teens.

If you want to have more energy, perform better at school or work, reach your potential, be happier, healthier and live a longer life, make a full night's sleep (which Walker defines as at least 8 hours) a regular priority.

5. Nobody gets there alone

Through college and my 25 years since becoming an official adult with a full-time job, almost everyone I've met or known who achieved significant, sustained success simultaneously helped a lot of other people along the way.

Whether it was pitching in to help with a project, acting as a mentor, deflecting credit, or even just offering occasional advice, if there's a long line of people who can say about you, "You really helped me in a way that made a difference," you'll almost certainly have achieved a level of success you can be proud of.

I don't necessarily mean that you should cast aside personal or professional ambition in the name of helping others. But you can be simultaneously wildly ambitious and unrelentingly helpful. In fact, those instincts harmonize together.

Lesson 5:

Nobody gets there alone.

Whatever your goals or definition of success, your chances of getting where you want to go will almost certainly involve others at times, maybe even frequently. The teacher who gives you extra help. The teammate who pushes you in practice. The colleague who steps in to help when you're in the work weeds. We all need other people to occasionally be the wind at our backs.

And the more regularly you've helped others get to where they want to go, the more people you'll have standing by at the ready when you need someone to help you along your own way.

Here's a [past post](#) with more on this topic.

6. Learning by doing is underrated

I've always considered myself a good writer. I was raised by an English teacher who gave me good genes and good examples. I majored in English in college. I've used my writing to open doors, to get access to opportunities, and to rally the groups I was part of or leading. Ten years ago, if you'd asked me to name something I felt I was good at, writing would have been at or near the top of the list.

But when I go back and read any of my oldest blog posts, many of them make me wince. Too many words. Too long to get to the point. Too many sentences that should have been more tightly edited. I don't even recognize the writer who penned many of those entries a few thousand posts ago.

Since starting this blog, I've never taken a writing (or blogging) class. I've never reached out to a successful blogger and asked for writing advice. I've never taken steps to learn how to get better at this. I just wrote. Every single day, at least one entry a day, for ten years.

I'm not implying that my little blog entries are channeling anything Hemingway-esque. Every day, I read authors and bloggers whose writing is much better than mine. And I suspect the posts I'm writing today would make me cringe ten years from now if I kept this practice up.

But while I've got plenty of room left to get better, nothing has ever made the demonstrable writing difference like simply writing every day has. Done regularly over time, incremental improvements begin to add up.

Lesson 6:

Learning by doing is underrated.

One of the many advantages of the technologically infused world we live in is that the obstacles on the path to actually doing something have been lessened or outright removed.

If you want to write for an audience, you don't need a book proposal or an agent or a publisher. Blogs, shareable PDFs, email newsletters—they are all there waiting. You can start writing without going through a gatekeeper.

If you want to be a leader, you don't need to get elected to a leadership position. Find a cause or goal that other people care about, stand up, and offer to lead them towards the place you all want to go.

If you want to learn how to play guitar or paint with watercolors or restore a vintage Chevy truck, the internet has all the lessons you need to get started almost immediately.

If you want to make films, don't start by strategizing how to get a job as a production assistant in the entertainment industry someday. Just grab a camera (even your phone will do) and start making films. Do those films entertain your friends and family? Does anybody want to share them with others? If you put them on YouTube, do viewers show up, view, and share them? If the answer is "no," make different films. Shoot from different angles. Write different scripts or provide different direction or try a new approach until something resonates with an audience. The curve might feel steep. But the learning and the subsequent strides will be significant.

Whatever it is that interests you, there are fewer barriers than ever before to getting started. And one of the best ways to learn something is to actually do the thing you want to learn.

7. Work is personal for the person doing the work

For counselors and admissions professionals attending the NACAC conference in Louisville next week, I'll be presenting a session, "Engaging and Delighting your Staff," on Thursday and would love to say hello in person.

Since founding Collegewise over 20 years ago, the single thing I'm most proud of is the people who call our company their professional home. They're smart, interesting, and exceptionally talented. They find so many ways to add value here beyond just doing their jobs (which they do very well). They're constantly reaching out to help colleagues, initiating new projects, taking responsibility and deflecting credit. Each day, they leave work a little better than they found it.

I've had people from schools and companies observe our remarkable Collegewise colleagues and ask me: "How do you motivate them?" The real answer is that we don't motivate them. We hire people who were already motivated before they arrived here.

But we have consciously made an important choice—we view and treat each employee as an individual person. Not a number. Not an asset. Not a resource to be deployed in a way that best helps us. But a unique individual with talents that, when paired with the right opportunity, can help them discover their potential.

We don't get it right all the time. We make mistakes. But I think our remarkable assembling of people here is proof that we're doing something right for them and for us. And in this session, I'd like to share a little bit about how we do that.

My session takes place right after the opening speaker on Thursday. I hope I'll see you there.

Lesson 7:

Work is personal for the person doing the work.

"It's not personal—it's just business."

I don't buy it. If there's a human being involved, it's personal.

If someone is laid off due to budget cuts, it's the person, not a business, who has to go look for another job. If you abruptly cancel a project a team has been working on for months, it's those people, not the business, who feel the

casual disregard of all the work that will never come to fruition. If you treat an employee like one replaceable part in a much larger business machine, expect that they'll treat the job as a replaceable function to be tossed aside as soon as a better offer comes long.

Of course it's personal. It's always personal for the person doing the work. Instead of running away from that truth, why not run towards it? Treat people like the individual human beings they are, with unique strengths, talents, goals, and challenges. Help them learn and grow. Show them that their opinions matter. Demonstrate your care for them as a person, not as someone just filling a role.

When you make work more personal, you get the best from the person doing the work. And that's good for both the person and the business.

8. Focus is a secret weapon

Cal Newport is a professor at Georgetown who earned his PhD in electrical engineering and computer science at MIT. He's also the author of [six books](#) about how to be successful in high school, college, and a career. And in his recent blog post, he explains that while it's common for computer programmers to write code that allows computers to perform multiple functions (he calls these "threads") simultaneously, the human brain operates much differently.

From the "[Our Brains Are Not Multi-Threaded:](#)"

"Something I've noticed is that many modern knowledge workers approach their work like a multi-threaded computer program. They've agreed to many, many different projects, investigations, queries and small tasks,

and attempt, each day, to keep advancing them all in parallel by turning their attention rapidly from one to another — replying to an email here, dashing off a quick message there, and so on — like a CPU dividing its cycles between different pieces of code...This is all to say that the closer I look at the evidence regarding how our brains function, the more I'm convinced that we're designed to be single-threaded, working on things one at a time, waiting to reach a natural stopping point before moving on to what's next."

Lesson 8:

The best way to produce great work consistently is to eliminate distractions and focus intensely on the job at hand.

"Multi-tasking" has long enjoyed a positive connotation, as if someone who chooses to do multiple things at once is somehow smarter, harder working, more effective, etc.

But the truth is that you produce much better work—and more of it—when you focus intensely on the job at hand and do so without distractions. Newport's own work and many other research studies have shown that our brains simply aren't wired to handle multiple inputs at once. Yes, we have the ability to multi-task if we want to. Sometimes we have to do it (if my wife and I didn't multi-task in the morning we would never get ourselves and our two young kids out the door on time). But when you're studying, writing, researching, or doing any other work that requires real thinking, asking your brain to do more than one thing is like asking your body to juggle while you jog.

To get the real benefits, you can't just turn your focus on—you've also got to turn your distractions off. Your phone, email, all the literal bells and whistles are like sirens luring your focus away from the work and towards distraction. If you don't shut them down (even just temporarily so you can get 30-60 minutes of uninterrupted work time), they'll inevitably interrupt you just when you're getting into your flow.

If you're looking to produce better work (or get better grades) in less time, intense focus is a secret weapon. And it's available to anyone willing to use it.

Here's a [past post](#) sharing Newport's simple formula for producing high-quality work, [another post](#) from Newport on how to apply your focus to studying, and a [final one](#) from Eric Barker with four tips from research to help you stop checking your phone.

9. Identify the controllable portion

My daily blogging streak began under personally and professionally trying circumstances.

In October 2009, Collegewise (and many of our families) had been hit hard by the recession. In less than ten months, we'd gone from being a thriving business to one struggling to keep our doors open. I knew that if we made it to the other side, the prospects of us reclaiming our footing and our customer base were certain—we'd always had a long line of delighted customers who were happy to refer us. But every day of that year felt like a personal fight to drag my sleepless self out of bed in the morning to face the day. I was running out of ideas, time, and money. And I was losing my confidence that we could weather the economic storm.

I still vividly remember sitting at my desk on October 12 of that year and making what became a ten-year decision: I would start blogging every day.

Not in the hope that it would solve our problems, and not as part of a complex marketing strategy that could somehow contribute to our business bottom line. It simply felt like something productive to do when I was running low on productive practices. Looking back, the decision was impetuous—it took me less than two minutes to make it. But I knew that no matter what happened, at the absolute minimum, I could end each day knowing that I'd made some kind of contribution I could feel good about, a small win every day at a time when the wins seemed few and far between.

Lesson 9:

During stressful times, focus on what you can control.

Much of the stress we feel is caused by circumstances we can't control. Finances, health, family dynamics, work—when we're confronted with difficult challenges without easy solutions, we lose our sense of agency over our own lives. And it's precisely during those times when we need to recognize which parts of our situation are actually in our control, no matter how small, and then relentlessly focus there.

When we were in the throes of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, there was very little I could control. Other than making sure we kept taking care of our customers and continued to speak at any high school or community organization who invited me, I could only control how to spend the rest of my time. I'm not sure I realized it at the time, but in the face of an enormous problem, blogging was a way to grasp a tiny portion that was still in my control.

One of the reasons that the college admissions process has become so stressful for so many families is that they choose to focus on the outcomes that aren't in their control. You can't control that another student got picked for the

lead in the school play. You can't control that your SAT score didn't go up as much as you'd hoped, or that you didn't get an "A" in AP English, or that Swarthmore denied your admission.

You can absolutely control your effort and attention in pursuit of those outcomes. And you should maximize that control to align with the goals you've set for yourself. But you can't control the outcomes themselves. And the more time you spend trying to worry or will your way into desirable endings that you don't ultimately get to decide, the more stress you're going to feel.

I've written frequently about this concept of focusing on what you can control during your journey to college—you can find a few past posts [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). If the college admissions process is feeling a lot more anxiety-inducing than it is enjoyable for your family, I encourage you to read them. I've found that one of the very best ways to bring some relief during a stressful time in your life is to find the controllable portion and then take control of it.

10. Unpredictable benefits

I'm still close friends with the first person I met at college. I met Craig the first day of our freshman year at UC Irvine when we moved into a dorm together. And yesterday, he forwarded me a social media post from our alma mater welcoming the class of 2023 to campus. Craig's subject line to me: "30 years ago, this was us."

Lesson 10:

Much of what you'll find most valuable in college can't be measured or predicted ahead of time.

I can't say that I didn't know that before I started blogging; I'd been telling families the same thing for years. But it's become even more clear to me as one of the biggest benefits of my college experience has continued and even grown since I graduated.

In just the last ten years, I've gotten [married](#). I've had [two kids](#). I've celebrated [selling](#) and [buying back](#) a company. And I've experienced the first [real personal loss](#) of my life. Craig and my other closest friends from college have been there figuratively (and often literally) for all of it. To enjoy those relationships that began during our college years and continued as adults who are now on the edge of our fifties is like a recurring gift that my college keeps giving me.

I don't think that anyone should attend college just to make friends (and I'm certain nobody should go into debt for that reason alone). But friendships are one of countless discoveries and potential benefits that await students at college but that can't be predicted or evaluated like you can the size or location of the school. Those unpredictable rewards are one of the most important reasons why all of us at Collegewise preach that the most selective colleges don't have the market cornered on wonderful college experiences.

Students and parents, as you progress through the college search and selection process, try to balance your astute research into the qualities you can evaluate with your resolute belief that some of the most enriching parts are there waiting to be discovered. The unpredictable benefits can impact your life as much or more than the degree will.

Craig's son is now a senior in high school and a Collegewise student. We certainly couldn't have predicted any of that when we moved into our tiny dorm room together 30 years ago, with no idea what was in store for us but excited to take the unpredictable journey.

11. Find your personal “why”

During my ten years of daily posting, I've received a lot of well-intentioned but unsolicited blogging advice. And from running ads, to allowing comments, to writing headlines that were SEO-strategic, almost all of it ignored the reason I was blogging in the first place: I've enjoyed doing it.

Lesson 11:

Be clear with yourself about why you're doing what you choose to do.

One of the reasons I've been able to keep blogging for so long is that I don't measure it. I have thousands of loyal readers, but I've never paid regular attention to the number or tried any contorted plan to increase it. I don't try to make money with it. I don't have to check with anyone before I post. I don't have to convince people to show up or to stay here. I realized early in the ten-year streak that I love writing this blog for the people who enjoy reading it. That's why I do it. And anything that impedes my pursuit of that “why” isn't worth embracing.

The cliché is true: there really are only so many hours in a day. And for any regular practice that takes your time and energy, it's worth getting really clear about why you're doing it. Maybe it's because you have to, or you enjoy the comradery it brings, or you find the pursuit of getting better to be a thrilling practice. Maybe it's just flat-out fun. Whatever the reason, finding your personal “why” for the things that you do can help you keep doing—or stop doing—it for the right reasons.

12. In email, open with the ask

In the ten-year daily search to notice and share something interesting here on my blog, I uncovered two tips that have saved me hours of email toiling to find the right tone and message.

Lesson 12:

When asking for something over email, open with the ask.

I first found and [blogged](#) about this gem of advice from Simon Sinek in 2015. When asking for help, a favor, or anything else over email where you aren't sure the person will agree, it's tempting to try to butter them up for a paragraph or two before you hit them with the ask. That's the wrong order. Ask right away. Then get to the pleasantries. The former feels manipulative and selfish. The latter feels more direct and generous.

13. End with the thanks

Yesterday's post recommended that writers open with the ask when emailing a request for a favor. But with the thank-you, the order is best reversed.

Lesson 13:

When writing a thank-you note, end with the thanks.

I first encountered (and blogged about) this tip in 2016 via an NPR story, and it really resonated with me. I find this recommended order often makes it easier for the writer. It's sometimes difficult to find enough substantive things to say as supporting evidence of your appreciation. But ending with the thank-you frees you up to express any number of things the person you're thanking might be interested in hearing from you.

Here's an example of how that might look for a student writing a thank-you note to a teacher who wrote recommendation letters on the student's behalf.

Dear Mr. Lloyd:

Last week, I officially committed to attend Oberlin College in the fall! Words cannot express how excited I am, but they might be able to once I enroll as I've decided to study comparative literature. I have to say that until I took your class last year, I probably would not have considered that path. But the days I spent in room 102 discussing Chaucer, Twain, and the other authors whose work you somehow made come to life were some of the most engaging class hours I spent at Poly. In fact, one of the reasons I chose Oberlin was because I want to enjoy similar experiences learning, discussing, and debating ideas in class while I'm in college.

I also wanted to thank you for taking the time to write my letters of recommendation. I know how many of my friends asked you for the same favor and I can only imagine how much time it must have taken. But they clearly helped me gain admission to the college I most wanted to attend, and I hope you know how much I appreciate your work on my behalf.

All the best to you,

Cherise A.

The number of sentences expressing thanks in this message is only three. But the sincerity and appreciation ring true because of the order.

14. Accessible influence

My daily search for shareable advice over the last ten years has produced more than just writing fodder. It's also introduced me to two of my personal heroes: [Jason Fried](#) of Basecamp and blogger [Seth Godin](#). So much of what I've read, listened to, and absorbed from these two greats has impacted and, even more importantly, often changed my thinking about business, writing, and education. And while I've actually had the opportunity to correspond with and even meet both of them on a few occasions, those exchanges were brief and comparatively uneventful when compared to their influence that had long before taken hold.

Lesson 14:

Heroes are there for the emulating.

Of the countless benefits the internet delivers us, one of the most impactful for me has been the virtual access to heroes. And while I've certainly benefited from the fact that Fried and Godin are prolific writers and sharers who freely put their ideas and perspectives into the universe, there's almost nothing to stop you from learning from—and even more importantly, emulating—your heroes, no matter who inspires you.

From athletes to CEOs, social activists to artists, musicians to educators, political pundits to programmers, you don't need to meet them. You don't need them to be your personal mentors. You don't need access to their time or attention. You can still learn plenty about them and their work. And more importantly, you can turn around and emulate it. Whoever inspires you, what are you doing to honor their influence? How are you learning from and then doing more of what they do in those things that matter to you?

The best thing about today's heroes is that even when you can't access the people, you can always access—and emulate—their influence.

15. Asking “Who and/or what is this for?”

I'm writing this from 30,000 feet en-route to Louisville, KY, for the annual NACAC (National Association of College Admissions Counseling) conference, attended by over 6,000 counseling and admissions professionals. But I'm not going there just to see what happens. I've got specific plans to make the most of my time. I'm presenting [a session](#) on Thursday, and I'll be spending as much work and social time as I can with my 20 colleagues who will also be in attendance.

Sure, I'll attend some other sessions. I'll meet fellow professionals. And there will inevitably be some opportunities to learn or connect that I couldn't have possibly planned for. But I know what I'm there for. I'm there to deliver the very best speech I can, and to connect with my colleagues (none of whom I get to see every workday as we're spread all over the country). If I don't do those things, I didn't get the full personal, professional, or financial value for the trip.

And it's not just me. Each of my colleagues in attendance has done their own examination of just exactly why they're attending and what they hope to accomplish. Some are there to learn as much as possible from the sessions. Some are there to evaluate business opportunities. Some are there to connect with friends and former colleagues outside of Collegewise who make their life and work more enjoyable. But nobody goes just to go, or just to say they went.

We take this kind of intentionality seriously at Collegewise. Last month, my colleagues Allison and Arun, both of whom have attended this conference over a dozen times, held an internal webinar for the NACAC attendees. They laid out our collective goals and expectations. They reviewed some conference best practices. They explained the schedule of events we're expected to attend and delineated those from the blocks of time when people could choose their own conference adventure.

To a person, and as a company, we've planned to make this conference a valuable use of our time and energy.

Lesson 15:

Start anything worth doing by asking, "Who and/or what is this for?"

This email you're about to send, who and what is it for?

The meeting you just scheduled, who and what is it for?

The event you're planning, the ad you're running, the speech you're giving, who and what is it for?

Don't let yourself off the hook with an easy answer like, "Sharing information is what this speech is for." If that's your actual answer, you don't need to call people into a room to give a speech. Write a memo instead. But when you get clear about who will be in the room, why you want to bring them there, and how you'll know if the time was well spent, your speech gets a lot more focused and effective for you and for the attendees.

Neither I nor Collegewise as a company have always been so intentional around this conference. We used to send most of our counselors because it felt like the professionally responsible thing to do. But when we asked hard questions, it was pretty clear that some people enjoyed and benefitted from the conference a lot more than others did. Even those who found it worth their while did so through a combination of planning, intuition, and luck. And that's not a good recipe for success if you apply it to a larger group.

I'm not suggesting that everything you do needs to achieve some sort of productive outcome to be worth doing. Your answer for your upcoming vacation might be, "This is vacation is for me and my family to spend as much time as we can together and to enjoy the spontaneity that comes from having no scheduled activities." Guess what—the fact that you asked and answered the question just dramatically improved the chances that you'll get exactly what you want from your time away.

Don't do things just to do them or to say you did them. Your time, energy, and commitments are too important for that. Instead, decide ahead of time why you're doing what you're doing and how you'll know if it was worth it. And one of the best ways to get there is to start by asking, "Who and/or what is this for?"

16. Living life out loud

This week [a story](#) hit the press about an angry Philadelphia Eagles football fan who'd been captured on camera vociferously expressing his in-game displeasure with the referees. That alone isn't much of a story. But the fact that that apoplectic fan was the Dean of Admissions at the University of Pennsylvania? That made it slightly more newsworthy.

The discovery that admissions officers are, like the rest of us, real and occasionally flawed human beings outside of work was not exactly a newsflash to anyone I know in the admissions or counseling industry. It's one of the many reasons I remind students here that colleges don't expect that students will be perfect, and that applicants should be themselves in their applications.

But this is another area where social media has changed the game. 20 years ago, a fan caught on camera at an NFL game might only have garnered amused acknowledgement from their own friends, colleagues, and family who happened to be tuning in at that precise moment. Today, the ease of sharing just about anything on social media amplifies that story to the level of broader interest in the subject matter.

Lesson 16:

We're all living life out loud.

That email you're sending, that tweet you're composing, that picture you're posting—would you feel comfortable doing the same if it were shared far and wide? For better or worse, we only get to decide what we say, do, and post. More and more, the decision of whether or not to share it, and with whom, is made for us.

None of us can be perfect all the time (including when your beloved team is losing at home). But we can't reserve our best behavior for only those occasions that are designed to be shared publicly. Increasingly, we're all better off assuming that we're living life out loud.

17. Rethinking meetings

I'm not sure I'll embrace the specific action Dan Pink recommends in his [latest video](#), a 90-second snippet that shares one company's method for keeping meetings on track. But I agree with the overarching point that meetings need some drastic fixing.

According to Pink's most recent newsletter, American workers attend 55 million meetings each day. And that's not even including high school students who meet regularly with their clubs and organizations. How many of those meetings were actually necessary? How many of them drove to a decision (other than to have another meeting)? How many of them are standing meetings that take place on a given day without first asking, "What's this meeting for?"

And that's another lesson I've learned in the ten years since I started writing this blog:

Lesson 17:

Don't have a meeting just to have a meeting.

Before I started writing this blog, I'd participated in plenty of meetings that broke almost all of those tenets. In fact, I'd called far too many of them. There's something about putting people in a room together and discussing things that makes you feel like you're doing something important.

But if you finish that meeting with no action to be taken, no decisions made, no recognizable difference to be found in an examination of the before and after of the meeting that just took place, chances are that all you did was meet. Multiply the number of people by the time spent in the meeting and that's exactly how much productivity your organization just sacrificed at the altar of the meeting.

I'm not against having meetings. I'm against having meetings that didn't need to be had. So here's a two-step process to make your meetings less frequent, and more efficient.

1. Before you schedule a meeting, consider this question: "If this meeting were going to cost us money (pick an amount that would be noticeable but not necessarily a deal-breaker for your group), would we still have it?"
2. If so, ask, "What needs to happen by the end of this meeting for us to have gotten our money's worth?"

Your work will get better if you rethink your meetings.

18. Run towards it

Financial Aid expert Mark Kantrowitz shares a timely and very helpful piece, "[What is the FASFA?](#)" The FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) is the starting point for accessing need-based aid. It's the single most important

step to acquiring the financial assistance you need. For students applying to college this fall, the form goes live on October 1. And the earlier you file it, the better—as Kantrowitz points out, “Students who file the FAFSA during the first three months tend to get double the grants, on average, of students who file the FAFSA later.”

And yet many families, including some of those most worried about their ability to pay for college, will put off filing the form. Some families will resist filing it at all.

Lesson 18:

Sometimes it's best to run towards what intimidates us.

There are a lot of reasons why a family might not file the FAFSA, ranging from a lack of knowledge, to a lack of opportunity, to a lack of access to good advice. But in many cases, the unspoken reason is that they're intimidated.

The form seems complex. The questions are invasive and prying. The process by which your need for aid is determined can feel mysterious. Discussions of money (and our lack of it) can feel uncomfortable. The price of making a mistake feels too costly.

But none of those fears change this simple fact: You will not get financial aid for college if you don't file the FAFSA.

If you're feeling some FAFSA intimidation, it's time to run towards it.

When I first started writing this blog, I knew a lot about college admissions, but almost nothing about financial aid. At the time, the families who hired us at Collegewise weren't looking to us for financial advice. If they needed assistance

with financial aid, we would refer them to an outside expert. If a high school invited me to speak to their families about how to pay for college, I declined. I claimed that financial aid was not my expertise, which was true. But it was also true that I was just too intimidated by the topic to even attempt to learn about it.

That all changed when the recession hit in 2009. It quickly became clear that we would be doing our families and our business a disservice if we didn't provide at least some guidance in this area. So I ran towards the intimidation. I read a [fantastic book](#) on the topic. I enrolled in a financial aid and scholarships course in UCLA's college counselor certification program. I pored over all of the aforementioned free information from Kantrowitz. And because the best way to learn something well is to teach it to someone else, I prepared a 90-minute "Paying for College" seminar for our Collegewise families. In just three months, I went from being intimidated by financial aid to being comfortable teaching it to audiences.

The transformation was professionally fulfilling and personally thrilling. I still don't profess to be an expert in financial aid. But I'm conversant in the topic, and knowledgeable enough to inform the admissions advice I dole out here regularly. Today, I can say the same about our counselors at Collegewise.

Sometimes our fears are founded. I'm not suggesting that everyone should necessarily run out and go cliff jumping.

But often, the thing that's so intimidating feels that way because we know we need to take some action towards it. It's that collision of unfamiliarity and the need to address it that causes the stress. I've never felt intimidated by the idea of walking a tightrope because I can't imagine a circumstance where I would ever need to do that. But the financial aid process was intimidating because deep down I knew it was something I shouldn't keep avoiding. That experience taught me to recognize that feeling, and when it happens, to try to run towards it.

Financial aid is awarded on a year-by-year basis, which means that a student will likely submit the form four times during college. Unless you can painlessly write a check covering the full cost of attendance (tuition, room and board, travel and living expenses) for college next year, there is no logical reason not to file the FAFSA.

Don't make excuses. Don't claim that you'll never qualify or will never get enough. And please don't listen to people who tell you that applying for financial aid will hurt your chances of admission (more on that [here](#)). The truth is that you have nothing to lose but the time you spend filling out the form. And what you have to gain could be the aid you need to attend the college of your choice.

The FAFSA goes live on October 1, and the process to file it might well feel unfamiliar. That's a recipe for intimidation. But if that feeling comes over you, the best thing you can do is run towards it.

19. Preparing for college vs. preparing for life

In the years after I started Collegewise and was still counseling students myself, I learned that there were different kinds of high achievers in high school.

Some of the kids I'd meet were genuinely curious and interested in learning. They had a favorite subject and teacher. They chose their activities based on what they enjoyed, and they thrived brilliantly in at least one. They were engaged in their college planning, thinking about their futures, and while they were often interested in at least one highly selective college, they were resolutely confident that no matter where they ended up, their traits and work ethic would take it from there. Their stellar records in and out of the classroom were byproducts of their inherent make-up, not

the product itself they'd worked to manufacture. And most notably, these kids were almost always driving their own goals and education, cheered on and supported by their parents, but not managed or directed by them.

The other kind of high achiever looked similar on paper, but they made every high school decision based in pursuit of those recorded achievements. Whatever they'd been told the most selective colleges want, that's what they'd do. Whatever it took to get the "A," or to raise the test scores, or to excel in an activity they believed colleges would find desirable, that's what they'd do. It wasn't about their own interests or fulfillment. Their work and in fact much of their high school life was predicated on achieving a desired result and eventually a desired outcome in the form of an admission to a highly selective college. In pursuit of that outcome, their days were filled with commitments, from classes to tutoring to extracurricular activities, leaving them overscheduled and under-rested year-round. And the desire to achieve those outcomes was shared or, worse, explicitly led and directed by their parents. My colleague Arun, who read applications for University of Chicago, Caltech, and UCLA, defines these kids as "[trained to execute, but not to initiate.](#)"

I want to be clear here—those executors have a laudable drive. In fact, many of them work much harder and much longer hours than some of the hardest working adults I know. And for years, I assumed that while those kids would get to college and not necessarily abandon that work ethic, they would happily adjust to their new world where they were encouraged and in fact required to take agency for their own life and education. But since I began writing this blog ten years ago, I've learned I was wrong.

Lesson 19:

When we overprepare kids for college, we underprepare them for life.

When kids arrive on college campuses having spent the last four years with every decision, every metric, every goal focused on achieving a specific outcome, they've been trained to get the right answer. They've been trained to ask, "Will this be on the test?" They've been trained to follow directions, to do what they're told, and to expect that every challenge put in front of them is best attacked by getting the allusive right answer. But as I've written [before](#), you can't earn straight A's in life. And that's exactly why so many of those students, when confronted with a comparatively simple problem like a class that conflicts with their internship, will ask their parents to intervene. They don't have the past experience or the current tools to handle what they're facing. Their overpreparation for college has left them underprepared for life.

This is an area where I don't fault those kids or their parents. They didn't decide that our society would fetishize the 50 most selective colleges in the country in spite of the fact that those schools don't produce better outcomes or happier graduates. They didn't decide that seemingly everyone involved in this process would emphasize grades, test scores, and other pursuits of the correct answers, or that so many colleges would reward perfection in those areas. They didn't decide that the way those aforementioned colleges ultimately make decisions would so often be shrouded in mystery. They're simply responding to those influences.

But with all those pressures, the associated rise in the rates of teen depression and anxiety, and the rising cost of college that has only increased the need for a tangible college ROI, there's an urgent need to help those kids, to relieve them of these notions that if they can just work hard enough to achieve high school perfection, they'll have climbed the mountain and be prepared to succeed in a similar fashion for the rest of their lives. And until we see a broad, systematic change in the process, the best place to start is at home.

To those parents who protest that it's their teen, not Mom or Dad, who's applying all that perfectionist pressure, I believe you. And that makes it even more important that you set the example at home [to praise effort over outcomes](#), to [resist the urge](#) to over-parent, and to do your [most important college admissions job](#) well.

For additional evidence of, and advice to address, this problem, here are some of the best resources I've found.

Julie Lythcott-Haims, a former Stanford dean of freshmen who I've referenced over a dozen times on this blog, wrote a [best-selling book](#) and delivered an equally popular [TED Talk](#) on this topic. If you agree in principle that our kids deserve better but don't know where to start to help them, her resources are the best I've found.

The folks at Challenge Success offer some wonderful resources, including [Raising Well-Balanced Kids](#), a slew of [short videos](#) on specific topics, and some [excellent advice](#) to help kids thrive in school. Their co-founder, Madeline Levine, also wrote an excellent book, [*Teach Your Children Well: Why Values and Coping Skills Matter More Than Grades, Trophies, or "Fat Envelopes."*](#)

And Seth Godin's Stop Stealing Dreams—a manifesto that asks “What is school for?”—is available as both a [PDF](#) and a [TEDxYouth](#) talk.

I've never met one of those executing high achievers, or the parent of one, who didn't genuinely believe they were behaving in the best interest of the student's future. And I don't fault either party for that inclination. But the statistics and the anecdotal evidence are there. And it's time we all shift our focus from preparing kids for college to preparing them for life.

20. The magic is in the extra

I've just returned from the NACAC conference where I purchased a surprising amount of mediocre coffee from a tiny convenience store in my hotel that somewhat misleadingly called itself a deli. There were plenty of coffee shops within a short walk, from the artisan to the big chain. But every morning (and a few tired afternoons), I went to the same counter to get the same bland cup o' joe, one that I would never talk about were it not for something extra.

The staff who worked there changed the entire experience.

I don't know if it's good hiring, personal predisposition, or just Kentucky charm, but these women used every interaction with a customer as an opportunity to turn that job into an art.

Their greetings made you feel like you were making their day just by showing up (a tenet also described in one of the best customer service books I've read).

By the third day, they remembered my order and poked some playful fun at me with, "You know, we've got more than just black coffee here. Don't you ever drink anything else?"

They sent everyone away with an endearing, "Bye, Sugar."

You just couldn't help but leave feeling a little better than you did when you arrived. That's a remarkable transformation to take place when you're buying an unremarkable cup of coffee.

Lesson 20:

The magic is in the extra.

My point here is not that even people in the service industry can be happy doing their jobs (that message is both trite and offensive). The lesson is that each of us goes to our version of work every day, whether that's a job, school, raising a family, etc. And each day we get to make a choice. Are we going to do the job just by executing the particulars? Or will we view it as an opportunity to do something extra and bring some magic to our work?

Not more hours, not more work necessarily. Just more extra, the emotional kind that goes beyond the work itself and turns it into an art.

A student can bring that magic to their Spanish or biology or history class even if they don't earn the highest grade. A counselor can bring that magic to their meeting with a student even if they don't have the perfect solution the student might be seeking.

The lawyer, the electrician, the librarian or accountant or cable TV repairperson—every one of them (and every one of us) has a chance to do something extra.

Your favorite teacher does this. The favorite uncle does it. The favorite mechanic or friend or neighbor—they don't become your favorite by doing what they're supposed to do. They become your favorite by doing the extra.

And the extra is where the magic is.

21. Making a decision once

Over the last ten years writing this blog, one of the questions I've been asked most frequently is, "How do you find the time to write something every day?" Almost every weekday, I find the time to write. Before a weekend, a holiday, or a vacation, I write my posts and queue them up ahead of time. My wedding day, the day each of my two kids were born, the days during my move from California to Washington, and every day in between, a blog post has gone up here (the answer to the other most frequently asked question, "Have you ever missed even one day?" is no).

I'm a fairly disciplined person, but I've never been as disciplined about doing anything else every day as I have with this project. And in retrospect, I stumbled into one part of decision-making that can be applied to other areas of our lives.

Lesson 21:

Some decisions are best made once.

When I started this streak on October 12, 2009, I decided that I was going to post every day, without fail. Had I decided "I'll blog more often," or "I'll blog three times a week," every day would have required that I revisit the decision of whether or not to post. And that would have made it easy to consistently decide that it just wasn't a good day or that I didn't have anything interesting to say. But once I decided to post every day, that decision had already been made. I didn't have to wrestle with it. And that freed me to move to the next daily decision of, "What should I blog about today?"

Making good decisions is a skill, one that we can learn, practice, and improve. And while some decisions shouldn't or simply can't be made just once, those that can be often should be.

How can you turn that to your advantage to help you reach your goals, personally, academically, or professionally?

Students, what would happen if you decided once that you will study with your phone turned off? Or that you will work on your college applications for three hours every Saturday until they are all submitted? Or that you will raise your hand and contribute to the discussion at least once every day in your AP English class?

Parents, what would happen if you decided once that you will give more attention to your student's strengths than you do their weaknesses? Or that you will not participate in comparative discussions with other parents about your children's college application process? Or that while you will encourage your student to seek feedback from their counselor or English teacher, you simply will not make suggestions about the topic or approach of their college essays?

Even a one-and-done decision isn't akin to keeping that decision forever (more on that tomorrow). But if a goal that's important to you requires a potentially recurring decision to be made, you can spend less time deciding and more time working towards the goal if you make the decision once.

22. The discipline for a new decision

Ten years ago, I made a decision once to write this blog every day. That single decision carried me through more than 3,600 posts without ever missing a day. But circumstances at work and at home have changed. My world isn't the same as it was in 2009. And it eventually became clear that the original decision had run its course, and it was time to make a new decision.

Lesson 22:

When facts, events, or circumstances bring change, have the discipline to make a new decision.

My life and work are very different today than they were in 2009. Ten years ago, I ran Collegewise alone. We had fewer than ten employees and only four locations. I was arguably the most knowledgeable of our counselors and the only Collegewiser who wrote and published advice regularly. I wasn't married and I didn't have kids. The decision to start blogging daily made sense as an experiment, one that I would carry on as long as it continued to make sense.

Today, I enjoy sharing Collegewise leadership responsibilities with my partners. I've forged new expertise around managing, leading, hiring, and training, all of which I get to use here every day. There are dozens of counselors here who are more in touch with the most recent trends in admission than I am. And my work hours are more defined now that I have a family at home. I still enjoy blogging, but the decision that made sense ten years ago doesn't make as much sense today, and it was time to make a new one.

Sometimes we attach ourselves to a past decision because it's too hard to give it up. We don't want to acknowledge what's different today. We worry we've invested too much to change direction now. We're afraid of the change in ourselves or our work or our life. It feels safer and easier to just stay the course.

But part of good decision-making means [confronting the facts](#), no matter how brutal they may be. It means [ignoring the sunk costs](#) and [viewing a decision like a bet](#) where the decision and the outcome are separate entities. And sometimes it means having the discipline to make a new decision that improves our odds of getting where we're trying to go.

That decision you made long ago to play the piano or apply to Duke or major in business, does it still make sense today? Or have facts, circumstances, or events presented the need to make a new decision?

There's a lot of value in sticking with something and working through the difficult part. Most successful people get that way in large part because they don't bail out just because the going gets tough. But they also don't keep going [just to say they kept going](#). They're willing to strip emotion out and compare their world of yesterday to that of today. And when it improves their odds to do so, they have the discipline to make a new decision.

23. Find what won't change

Last week, under pressure from the Department of Justice, the National Association for College Admission Counseling reluctantly voted to make several significant changes to their code of ethics. Broadly speaking, the ethics code used to prevent colleges from doing two things: (1) offering incentives to students who applied under binding early-decision programs, and (2) continuing to recruit a student once he or she has submitted a deposit to another institution. As of last week, those clauses of ethical standards no longer exist. Eric Hoover of The Chronicle of Higher Education does a wonderful job laying out the story behind the changes [here](#), and counselor Patrick O'Connor brings his usual combination of expertise and empathy in [his post](#) to fellow counselors about the potential impact on their work.

The scope and impact of this change will likely vary based on a number of factors. Depending on where a student applies to college, many families likely won't even notice—it will be college-application-business as usual. Some counselors, as O'Connor describes, will see changes not just in the nature of the conversations they have with their students, but also when those conversations take place. And the admissions staff at some colleges will likely see big

changes as they assemble—and now will have to work harder to keep—their incoming classes, especially at those schools that have traditionally had to compete with other colleges to attract similar applicants.

But while tomorrow's lesson will explore the wisdom in embracing change and the opportunity it presents, today's is just as important.

Lesson 23:

Seek opportunities to invest in what won't change.

Most of us have never lived in a time of greater change than we do today. At work, at school, and even at home, the world and technology and the implications of it all can be dizzying to try to keep up with, much less to look around the corner of tomorrow and anticipate what may be coming next. But there's a lot of potential opportunity in stepping back, recognizing what won't change, and then investing in it.

Collegewise has been through repeated substantial changes over the last ten years. We've grown exponentially. We've been bought and sold. We've launched new products and initiatives, some to great success, some not. But through it all, every single day, we've stayed focused on what we knew would not change: Collegewise counselors will always be sitting down individually with families and helping them through an important, stressful time. So we invested in finding and training the very best people to join us, and in creating a company where they could do their very best work. We've broadened that investment to many roles that didn't exist here ten years ago. But we knew that if we could consistently invest in and improve on what would never change, we'd be OK no matter what changed around us.

Families experiencing the anxiety of college admissions can regain control and comfort by investing in what won't change. A student's work ethic, curiosity, and character will always be central to their success and happiness. Kids will

always benefit enormously from supportive parents who love them unconditionally. No grade, test score, or admissions decision from a college will change those truths. And right there is your opportunity to double-down on that investment.

Whether the resulting changes from the NACAC policy shift prove to be subtle or substantial, kids will always benefit from a school counselor who hears them and genuinely wants to help them get where they want to go in life. Counselors will always be even better at their jobs when they make reasonable efforts to provide themselves and their student communities with good college planning information. Colleges will still need to create environments that inspire the right students to say, “Yes—this place feels right for me.” And any professional involved will never have trouble looking at themselves in the mirror at night if they can honestly say that they acted in the best interest of the student(s) that day.

To do this well means differentiating between what won’t change and what you hope won’t change. It’s one thing to say, “My son will always be able to talk to me when he wants to.” It’s another to say, “My son will still talk to me every day when he goes to college.” But once you make that distinction, the investment opportunity becomes clear.

Sometimes the best way forward is to find what won’t change and then invest in it.

24. Greatness lies in meaningful change made

Too many students approach their academic and extracurricular commitments like a checklist. Take this course, complete community service, take a leadership position—check, check, check. But the most successful applicants don’t just enroll and participate—they make things better as a result of their involvement. The classroom discussion is better with them in the room. The team is better with them on it. The club is better with them in it. The group is more focused,

the customers are happier, the orchestra is more enjoyable. There's a noticeable difference when they're involved, a clear before-and-after effect. They make an impact, they leave a legacy, and they're missed when they move on.

But I've realized over the last ten years that what these impactful students do is create change. And that's the lesson that anyone can apply to their work, their project, and their life.

Lesson 24:

Greatness lies in meaningful change made.

If you want to make your time, project, or other commitment more impactful, start by asking, "What change am I trying to make?"

The most impactful leaders don't just chair meetings. They envision a better future and then rally people towards it. They paint a contrast of where the group is today and where they could be tomorrow. The process of getting there is the change a leader strives to create.

The most impactful teachers create change in their students. You understand algebra, or look forward to their class, or find a new academic interest because of them. That's the change they make.

A great participant in a meeting doesn't just share their opinion. They ask the hard questions. They seek the thoughts of those who aren't speaking. They focus the group, elevate the agenda, and move others to take some action. The meeting is better with them in it because of the change they make.

A great speech doesn't just share information. It changes the audience. They leave the talk knowing, feeling, or thinking something that wasn't there before they arrived. A great speech changes people.

A great addition to a team can lead the team in scoring. But they can also be the most effective passer. Or they can [lead from the bench](#), bringing enough enthusiasm and commitment that the team changes for the better with them on it even if the game never sees them in it.

My mother taught high school English for 30 years. And she often wrote letters of recommendation for kids who didn't break the curve in her class, but who found a way to create change anyway. One C student captivated the class during his project. He created a skit in which he and a friend reenacted the sword fight between Shakespeare's Macbeth and Macduff. That one day, that student made the class better. He changed things, and that change showed colleges a glimpse of his potential.

Our counselors at Collegewise focus every day on creating change. We want to send that family away from our meeting feeling better than they did when they arrived. We want the audience at the school that invited us to speak to feel more optimistic about their college process than before we arrived. We want our Common App guide to make a student's application a lot less common. And everyone at Collegewise tries to leave work a little better than they found it each day.

[Change makers](#) don't have to be the smartest, the fastest, or the best at what they do. They seek the right opportunities, they bring their best selves to them, and they look for opportunities to make their impact. When they apply to college, they communicate [how they made things better](#) as a result of their involvement. Big or small, over time or today, for one person or a group or an entire community, meaningful change is at the heart of all of it.

Showing up is just the start. Participating is doing what you're asked to do once you're there. But if you want to bring your best self to what you're doing, if you want to be valued and appreciated, if you want to earn a reputation as someone who's always a positive addition to a meaningful group, cause, or project, your opportunity for greatness lies in the meaningful change you make.

25. Real communication is human

"We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused."

Have you ever felt better when a company or service says that? Has anyone?

What's the point in sharing those words? What did the person who made the decision behind that messaging think or hope was going to happen to those who read or heard it? And more importantly, why didn't a real person just communicate like a real human? Imagine the difference between the boilerplate language and, "We know we let you down. There's just no good excuse. We're so sorry. We really want to make things better if you'll let us."

Lesson 25:

Sound like your real human self.

I understood the basis of this lesson long before I started writing this blog—since 1999, we've been teaching our students at Collegewise to sound like themselves in their college essays.

But what I didn't realize ten years ago was how pervasive seemingly non-human communication is.

Banal cover letters from job applicants, canned statements from CEOs, prepared talking points from politicians, bullet pointed presentations (read aloud to audiences) from speakers, emotionless email requests for meetings or information or advice—all of these examples would be dramatically improved if the human composing the message just communicated with the humans on the receiving end.

To improve any of your communication, in an email, in person, on the phone, to a group or an individual, start with these four questions:

1. What is this communication for?
2. Who is it for? The more specific, the better.
3. What change are you trying to create as a result of this interaction?
4. And most importantly, how would you say it if the person were sitting in front of you?

Lifeless and programmatic is fine if you're writing code for a computer. But as soon as there's a human involved, your communication improves when you sound like your real human self.

26. Responsibility sits with the student

Over the last 25 years, earning a college degree has simultaneously gotten more and less important.

The United States has the most robust, open, and accessible system of higher education anywhere in the world. And there's never been a time when more students have availed themselves of it. Considering how many job postings still list a college degree as a requirement, a person without those credentials has fewer options. And even candidates with

a degree in hand often find themselves much deeper in a long line of qualified applicants than they might have been a generation ago. Given that it's perfectly normal for a 17-year-old to not yet know what they want to do with their life, taking college off the table preemptively removes options that might later appeal to the former teen turned young adult.

But knowledge has never been more widely and cheaply available than it is today. Almost anything that interests you is just a few clicks and searches away. You can save the test-taking, application angst, and student debt of attending MIT and instead take more than 2,000 of their [courses](#) for free. The price of attending college has risen so much that the magic to be found by engaging on campus often doesn't justify the lifelong debt that can accompany it. And while there's a good reason someone can't become a YouTube-self-taught heart surgeon, there are hundreds of other disciplines that can be learned and mastered on-the-cheap, and an increasing number of industries and professions that care a lot more about what you can do than if you earned a college degree at all, much less from a famous college.

My take: Going to college is still important. The name-brand prestige of the school is not. And nothing is more important than what the student does while they are there.

Lesson 26:

The student owns responsibility for making their college experience worthwhile.

I've always said that enrolling in college is like enrolling at a gym. The work and effort you put in, not the expense or reputation or staff around it, ultimately decides whether or not you get the results you want.

But the change I've noticed in the last ten years is that a student used to be able to get by in college without extracting much from the experience, yet still somehow be OK on the other side as long as they emerged with a degree in hand. They might later regret not making more of what was available to them at the time, but they'd get their first job and find their way.

That outcome is a lot less certain than it used to be.

Just having a college degree means a lot less than it used to. There are simply too many other people who have the same qualification. And the mounting student debt figures are proof enough that the investment of college carries a lot more risk than it used to. If you're going to do it, you'd better be ready to do your part to maximize that return.

I've seen so many families rigorously evaluate everything about potential colleges—what they offer, who they employ, where their graduates get jobs and for how much pay, etc.—without ever considering what the student will contribute to extract that purported value. Would I rather a student have professors that are engaged than disengaged? Sure. But an engaged student will always find a way to get educated no matter who's standing in front of the room.

College is not an amusement park ride where you sit back and enjoy the experience until it's over. It's a four-year opportunity, almost all of which will be available for the student who wants to drive their desired outcome, almost none of which will be foisted upon any passive rider.

What makes college worthwhile can and should be different for different students (and for any parents who are paying some or all of the bill). But whatever your version is, please say it out loud. Discuss it as a family and with your counselor. Find colleges that can give you the right combination of opportunity and offerings and affordability. And most

importantly for the student who will be attending: accept, embrace, and maintain your responsibility for making your college experience worthwhile.

For more advice on how to make your own college experience worthwhile, here are a few posts and resources:

First, a [past post](#) of mine with advice from Richard J. Light, a professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education, on how to make the most of college.

Another of my past write-ups, "How to build a remarkable college career," is [here](#).

A couple posts on using college to prepare you for a job after graduation are [here](#) and [here](#).

And finally, computer science professor Cal Newport has authored two fantastic books on college success: (1) *How to Win at College: Surprising Secrets from the Country's Best Students*, and (2) *How to Become a Straight-A Student: The Unconventional Strategies Real College Students Use to Score High While Studying Less*.

27. The magic of "No."

One of the most under-utilized and underrated secrets to doing more and better work in less time is saying "no" more often.

The quest to stand out, to be productive, and to be recognized pushes too many of us to take on too much. High school students who are overscheduled without a moment to breathe. Working professionals who feel compelled to be reachable at all hours. So many of us have somehow embraced the ideas that success is the product of constant

busyness. But a growing body of experts, research, and just plain common sense disagrees. Successful people get that way in part because they honor what they've committed to by refusing to distract themselves from it.

Lesson 27:

Successful people say "no."

Do you really want or need to add that new commitment to your schedule? That club, meeting, committee, position, etc.—will saying “yes” allow you to give your best work and take some growth, learning, or benefit away from the experience? Or will it simply be yet another thing to say that you’re doing? If it’s the latter, why not say “no” and redouble your efforts to complete what you’ve already said “yes” to?

Saying no doesn't dilute your ambition. It prevents you from distracting it.

Saying no doesn't eschew hard work. It honors where you've already chosen to do it.

Saying no doesn't have to be selfish. It can give you more opportunities to be selfless.

Saying no gives you the time, space, and focus to honor what you've said yes to.

Here are a few past posts, and some other experts' takes, on the value of saying no.

My past posts that link to the research and writing on this topic are [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Stanford professor Jim Collins calls it a [“Stop Doing” list](#). Study skills author Cal Newport preaches the value of [under-scheduling](#). And author Marcus

Buckingham says in his book [The One Thing You Need to Know](#) that the key to sustained success and happiness is to "Discover what you don't like doing and stop doing it."

28. Learn by teaching

In the daily search for interesting blog fodder, I've come across a lot of advice about how students can best learn and retain information. But one particular approach stood out. It's so advanced that it's named after a Nobel Prize winner in physics. It's so simple that any student can use it. And it's so effective that I not only wish I'd known about it back when I was a student, but I also use it today whenever I'm trying to wrap my head around something unfamiliar.

Lesson 28:

The best way to learn something is to teach it.

When I think of all the study hours my high school and college-age self spent reviewing, studying, and reviewing again only to have the material a) still not fully sink in, or b) seemingly sink in only to evaporate in the first minute of an exam, I can't believe I didn't discover this learning gem sooner.

Whether you're taking in a new idea for the first time or studying past material to prepare for an exam, the single best way to not just recall, but deeply understand whatever you're trying to learn is to teach it. Out loud. As if you were standing in front of a class (this technique does not require the use of a live audience).

Named after Richard Feynman, a Nobel Prize Winning Physicist, you can find a great explanation of the “Feynman Technique” [here](#) from study skills author Scott Young (who learned all the material for MIT’s 4-year computer degree in one year, and did so online). But here are the most important steps if you want this to work.

1. Actively imagine that you’re preparing for a lecture in front of a class full of students who are unfamiliar with the topic. How would you best explain it so they could understand it? That thinking is forcing your mind to work in a way that it doesn’t if you’re just reviewing notes. It’s not necessarily easy to do. And that’s the point. Anything you don’t truly understand, including subtle connections between topics, exposes itself in a way that passive studying does not. You wouldn’t get up in front of the room unless you knew exactly what you were talking about. And this preparation gets the same real result without the real crowd.
2. Actually stand up and deliver your lecture, without notes, to an imaginary crowd. You don’t have to project like a crazy person. But if you don’t actually act out the lecture, it’s too easy to accidentally let yourself off the hook in those portions where you haven’t yet made the necessary connections. And once you can nail the lecture, that material is locked away in your memory.

You can spend hours passively reviewing notes and actually not remember any of it. Spending that time actually working through problem sets is a much more active and effective approach. But if you can stand up and teach that material, step-by-step, that’s when you really understand and remember it.

Counselors and other working professionals can use this method, too. Maybe you’re trying to learn how to best pitch your project, or sell a solution, or use a new system? Try explaining it to an imaginary room and you’ll see the learning pick up quickly. I’ve even used it when trying to understand a non-fiction book.

The truth is that my high school self may have rolled his eyes at this suggestion. But students, don't mock it until you try it. I promise this works.

29. Don't delay happiness

It seems too many people treat their own happiness like delayed gratification, something they'll discover once they get or do or find whatever it is they want. We've seen this for years at Collegewise with those students who've convinced themselves that if they can just get an acceptance from a prestigious college, all their hard work will have been validated and they can finally get on with enjoying their lives. And it's not just teenagers. Plenty of adults hope that new promotion or house or relationship will provide the missing piece to finally vault them into a state of happiness.

But according to science, that approach is backwards. The secret to getting what you think will make you happy is to start being happier today. And it's a lot easier to do than it might sound.

Lesson 29:

Happiness leads to success, not the other way around.

In 2013, I stumbled on the work of author and positive psychology expert Shawn Achor. Achor's overarching message is that while most people believe success creates happiness, happiness actually fuels success. The more positive we are, the more engaged, creative, energetic, resilient and productive our brains become. And the results can be life-changing, improving our success at work or school, our health, and our relationships with friends and loved ones.

Achor's insights resonated with me for several reasons, not the least of which is that they just seemed to make sense. But I also appreciated that he isn't just a psychological cheerleader recommending that we all simply smile our way to getting everything we want. All of his recommendations are based on neuroscience. The man has spent an inordinate amount of time looking at brain scans and he's seen the neurological changes that take place just from making small changes.

Here's one example: Start every day by making a list of three good things that happened the day before. They don't have to be big. A great meal, a fun interaction with your kid, even a friend's story that made you laugh—just write three down, small or substantial. When you do this, your brain is forced to scan the last 24 hours for potential positives. According to Achor, this practice trains your brain not just to notice what's good in your life, but also to get better at spotting and seizing opportunities. You don't just become happier. You make more progress towards the things you want the most. The science is there. You can actually change your brain in five minutes a day.

Achor's [TED Talk](#) provides a great overview of his approach and some specific strategies you can use (heads up: I found the tone a little too infomercial-style for my taste, but the content is excellent). And his [book](#) dives into all the research with even more strategies you can use right away.

If you need a little nudge, consider this. If someone offered you an FDA-approved pill that would make you happier, with the only side effect that you'd probably get closer to what you want in your life, would you take it?

Don't delay your own happiness. Start now.

30. Forget well-rounded

We're taught from a young age that we can be great at anything if we put our minds to it. When paired with the pressure surrounding the college admissions process, this thinking leads many families to spend far too much time focusing on what they perceive as the student's weaknesses. The highest grade on a report card barely catches the eye as a parent is instinctively drawn to the lowest grade. Students abandon activities they enjoy just because they aren't excelling in a way they believe will resonate on a college application. And the test-preparation industry is the commercial giant that it is not because higher scores make kids smarter, but because lower scores are deemed an imperfection that can be polished with enough time and money.

This thinking often doesn't stop once teens become adults. How many working professionals have been in a performance review where your boss spends the first 5 minutes reviewing your successes and the remainder of the hour strategizing about how to improve or otherwise change you? Those interactions might be well intentioned. It certainly makes sense to think that defining areas of improvement is predicated on pointing out flaws.

But it's all predicated on this idea that the best people are well-rounded, that the key to reaching your potential is just to keep addressing weaknesses until you're good at everything. And that thinking is woefully misguided.

Lesson 30:

Your strengths are your best opportunities.

Early in my career at Collegewise, I discovered Marcus Buckingham's groundbreaking research as part of the Gallup Organization. And his findings can fundamentally impact your potential, success, and personal fulfillment.

Buckingham's work focuses on three overarching principles:

1. We can't all be good at everything no matter how determined we may be. But every one of us has unique strengths where we can be great.
2. Our strengths actually improve more with effort than our weaknesses do.
3. If you want to discover your potential, focus less on improving your weaknesses and more on maximizing your strengths.

Buckingham isn't arguing that we should all ignore our weaknesses entirely or abandon any notion of self-improvement. Failing biology could impact a student's chances of graduating from high school, much less getting accepted to college. If you're a terrible listener, you could damage your relationships with the people you care about most. A refusal to address those weaknesses carries a heavy and potentially long-term price that you'd likely rather not pay. So by all means, let the improvement begin. But it might also be worth abandoning any notion that you'll one day major in biology or become a family therapist. Why not redirect more sustained efforts into developing those areas where you already excel?

It's important to make the distinction that a strength isn't simply something you're good at—it's also something that energizes you. The fact that you're really good at meeting and getting to know strangers isn't a strength if those interactions exhaust you. But if you're consistently drawn to talk to people you don't know, you enjoy your time doing it, and you can't wait to do it again when you're done, you've got yourself a strength. What a wonderful opportunity to consider how you could bring even more of that out to help you become your best, most successful and fulfilled self.

For 20 years, we've embraced this notion of strengths at Collegewise. We encourage our students to do more of what they love and to spend less time polishing perceived imperfections. We hire employees who already have the necessary strengths to thrive in their intended role, leaving our training to fill in the gaps of knowledge that don't rely on innate talents. When we assign people to projects, or conduct performance reviews, or consider someone's potential for a new role, we start by looking at those areas where they already excel, the parts of their work that they seem to love doing most and consistently do very well. In return, they get to do what they do best every day. They constantly feel the thrill of progressing towards mastery. And we have some of the most engaged, successful employees in our industry.

We should all be defining ourselves by who we are rather than who we're not. Acknowledge that your weaknesses exist. Manage around them when they get in your way and negatively impact your work or life. But please don't spend your life fixing, polishing, or otherwise trying to change who you are in pursuit of being well-rounded. Well-rounded is average. Well-rounded is unexceptional. Direct more time into developing your strengths. You'll bring out more of the very best in yourself. And that's the surest way to stand out.

If you'd like to learn more about Buckingham's strengths-based research, his blog is [here](#), and his books are [here](#).

31. The final post

On October 12, 2009, I began writing one post here on the Collegewise blog every day. Today, exactly ten years and 3,653 daily posts in a row later, I write my final post.

I'll admit to feeling like I'm saying goodbye to an old friend. Every day for the last ten years, good days, bad, and every day in between, the blog has been here through all of it, ready for me to write and share whatever I hoped would be blog-worthy that day. The technology that makes this blog possible might be inanimate, but the words that went into each post were not, and neither are the readers who've been here with me to read them. It feels very real to say goodbye to both.

But the emotion I'm feeling most overwhelmingly today is gratitude. What an extraordinary privilege to get to do this, to so easily put thoughts and words out into the internet universe and, over time, find an audience with whom they resonate.

I've heard from so many high school counselors over the years who've told me they start their workdays with coffee and my blog, professionals with whom I never would have connected were it not for this platform.

I've heard from parents who've read my posts through their own children's college process. Some did so with two or three—and for one reader who reached out, four—kids. Some emailed just to say thank you and to tell me that while their family had finally aged out of the need to keep reading about college admissions, they were recommending my blog to their own friends with college-prepping kids still growing in the wings.

My parents, both of whom are in their late seventies, dutifully start each morning with my blog. They've forwarded entries to friends whose kids are going through the college process. Now that I've become a parent myself, I understand they've done this because parenting never really stops no matter how old your kids get. Mom and Pop, most of these posts didn't have applicability for you. But you've been my most loyal fans for a lot longer than the last ten years. I hope you saw your influence as much as I felt it in so many of those posts as I wrote them.

Blogging has been a ten-year journey for me. And the readers who've shown up, whether for a single post or for years, arrived here because they were on a journey of their own. They were applying to college. They were the parent of a college applicant. They were a counselor or a teacher or an administrator hoping to make things better for the students or employees they served. None of us are going to play those roles forever. But our respective journeys intersected during this time, and I'm so grateful that they did.

Today, my final lesson learned from daily blogging is the one that's taken me the longest to learn, and it's been the most transformative for me. I hope it can be for you, too.

Lesson 31:

We're all on a journey together.

One of the most important life skills we can hone is also one of the most difficult to practice in the moment: to see the distinction between what feels important today and what will actually be important many tomorrows from now. One way to do this is to think of life as a journey, one that each of us is on in our own way.

Students, how many of you recall a day in freshman year when you thought everything was falling apart, only to look back today and smile at your resilience and maybe even at your fourteen-year-old naivety?

Parents, how many times did your kid do something that drove you crazy in the moment but later became just a story, maybe even a funny one, you shared together? As my wise mother-in-law [once said](#) about a challenge my wife and I were facing with our then infant, "Someday this will all be just an anecdote."

That presentation that flopped at work, that test that just didn't go well, that unconstructive criticism that stung even though the critic didn't know you or your work well enough to comment--you may have felt the weight of it on day one. But it's comparatively light when you frame that day as just one tiny step on a much longer journey.

The perpetually disgruntled boss or the irascible neighbor or the student who shows you every day that they care a lot less than you do about whatever you're trying to help them with, they become easier to manage when you consider that they're on a journey, too. How did they get to this place? Who or what made them this way? And how can you best continue your own journey for whatever time it intersects with theirs?

The college admissions process is still spinning out of control as much as it was when I started this blog (and maybe even more so). But one of the best antidotes to it for both parents and students is to reframe it as just one comparatively short portion of a much longer journey. Everything from the grades to the test scores to the admissions decisions carries so much weight in the moment, but that weight diminishes over time. These students are in the earliest stages of their lives. They're not who they're going to be yet. And almost nothing that's part of the college admissions process can permanently disrupt their chances for a happy, fulfilling, successful life.

Treating our life like a journey means that we zoom in and try to make the most of each day while also zooming out to see the bigger picture. It means we aren't surprised when people behave badly or when things don't go as we'd planned. It means we double down on the things that will matter for the long run and let those things go that ultimately just aren't that important.

And when we embrace that view, both our days and our journey itself become more enjoyable and fulfilling.

To the students who read this, I hope you're excited about your journey to and through college. You've got your whole life ahead of you, and you're about to take your first truly independent steps. Work hard, treat people right, and trust yourself. Things will work out.

Parents, nobody gave us a manual on day one of this job. We're all just doing our best. Give yourself the grace to occasionally get it wrong. And give your kids the same. You might struggle with the notion that your kids will soon be out on their own. But experience at Collegewise has shown me repeatedly that the best is yet to come for both you and your kids. When they depart for college, know that saying goodbye to this part of the journey as a parent is just the opportunity to begin the next even more enjoyable portion.

Counselors, you've earned the privilege of intersecting your professional journey with the academic and personal journeys of your students. What a gift you bring to them when you honor the path they're on and try to help them find their way. They may not see and appreciate it today. But that's only because they aren't far enough along in their own journey yet.

We're each on a journey, just doing our best as we go. Make yours better, and as much as you can, do the same for those who are important to you.

As I say goodbye, I have one final parting gift to resource to anyone who's interested. I've bundled my final 31 posts into a shareable PDF. I hope you enjoy it, and more importantly, I hope you share it with anyone who you think might benefit. It took me ten years and 3,653 daily posts to learn these lessons. I'd love to pass them along to people who might want to enhance their own lifelong learning curve.

Our journey together as blogger and reader is coming to an end. I hope you enjoyed this mutual merging of pathways we took together. I certainly know that I did, each and every day, for the last ten years.

Thank you for showing up, for reading and sharing, and most importantly, for letting me join you on this small part of your own journey.

With profound appreciation and gratitude...

Cheers,
Kevin

Bibliography and further reading

Books:

[Big Potential: How Transforming the Pursuit of Success Raises Our Achievement, Happiness, and Well-Being](#) (Shawn Achor)

[Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World](#) (Cal Newport)

[Drive: The Surprising Truth about what Motivates Us](#) (Dan Pink)

[Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success](#) (Adam Grant)

[Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance](#) (Angela Duckworth)

[How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success](#) (Julie Lythcott-Haims)

[It Doesn't Have to Be Crazy at Work](#) (Jason Fried and David David Heinemeier Hansson)

[Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?](#) (Seth Godin)

[Rework](#) (Jason Fried and David David Heinemeier Hansson)

[So Good They Can't Ignore You: Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love](#) (Cal Newport)

[Teach Your Children Well: Why Values and Coping Skills Matter More Than Grades, Trophies, or "Fat Envelopes"](#) (Madeline Levine)

[The Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact](#) (Chip and Dan Heath)

Blogs, podcasts, newsletters, etc.:

Adam Grant's [newsletter](#) and [podcast](#)

Dan Pink's "[Pinkcast](#)"

Seth Godin's [blog](#)

Marcus Buckingham's [blog](#)

[Signal vs. Noise](#) from Basecamp

My [blog](#)

Thank You

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