

Advice for a grandson heading off to college



Peter H. Wolf
Guest columnist

- 1.** In college you're not "preparing for life"; you're living it now. Every day there is just as much a part of your lifelong existence as anything else.
- 2.** Be glad you're there, wherever it might be. It's the great halfway house of life; you're not yet self-sufficient; you're in transition; it's your chance gradually to handle increased freedom and responsibility.
- 3.** Also, be glad you're there primarily for how it helps your brain. If you don't learn to think critically and perceptibly it's not worth it. Do so eventually within a chosen discipline.
- 4.** Your brain is what distinguishes you from any other animal. Don't mess it up with drugs; don't play Russian roulette with it. Marijuana, for example, stays in your system for about a month (unlike alcohol) and can affect the way your brain behaves, remembers and thinks. Thus, it affects most what you're in college for in the first place.
- 5.** Anticipate. Think, for example, about what you put on or disseminate from your computer or smartphone. Potential employers these days ask for your Facebook password so they can look you up. And you even must be careful of "friends" taking a picture or video of you doing whatever and posting it wherever. Imagine anything you say or write or do appearing the next day on the front page of the newspaper. If it won't pass that test, don't say it or write it or do it.
- 6.** Your brain is under construction until young adulthood, about 25 years of age — that's after you will have graduated! The part of the brain that is most underdeveloped is the prefrontal cortex, the area responsible for making good judgments, suppressing impulses and considering the consequences of actions. There's nothing you can do about it, except to slow down and think. If you should feel the need, most colleges these days offer stigma-free mental health consultation and treatment.
- 7.** Take advantage of the countless offerings any college or university presents all the time — concerts, plays, lectures, renowned visitors and speakers, athletic contests, trips, student government, fraternities and sororities, interest groups, clubs, honor societies, community service opportunities, student organizations (from yearbook to newspaper to radio station to glee club). Most are free.
- 8.** Audit or take some courses of famous professors. Take courses outside your chosen field.
- 9.** College costs a lot! If you're inclined to cut a class, you're probably wasting \$100 or so (do the math). Get your money's worth.
- 10.** You'll meet a huge variety of people in the halfway house. You'll meet social misfits and others who make you think, "Why can't I be that cool?" You'll meet foreign students, liberals, conservatives, religious fanatics, atheists, people who get mean when they drink and those who become sweet. You'll meet rich kids and poor, Yankees and rednecks, leaders and followers. It's a great time to try to learn to deal with them all and experiment with how you relate to wildly different types of people.
- 11.** You yourself will be changing, as other people deal with you. Don't try to be something you're not. Be introspective; analyze how you relate. If in doubt, just be quiet for a while, think, and gradually change or adapt.
- 12.** Find your niche or niches in a big college or university. There are several you can fit into and whittle your experiences down to a manageable size.
- 13.** Don't, as too many guys do, objectify women or girls. They are people to connect with just like everybody else in college. Learn from them; they aren't mere sex objects.
- 14.** Get a different job every summer. Often jobs can relate to what you're studying, but even if they don't, take the opportunity to do something different, be it the work itself or where it's located. But you've got to keep your ears open and plan ahead.
- 15.** Don't be afraid to apply for opportunities you never dreamed of: for example, becoming a teaching assistant (free tuition), or being a resident upper class dorm counselor for freshmen (free room).
- 16.** If you've learned nothing else from the above advice, just remember the word used most — think. No surprise. That's what college is all about. Make the most of it, enjoy it, live it.

Peter H. Wolf was a trial judge in Washington, D.C., for 40 years before retiring and moving to Winston-Salem.