

HOW

EVEN IN A SUCCESS-ORIENTED CULTURE, “MAKING THE GRADE” CAN BE HARD TO DEFINE
BY MARGARET WINCHELL MILLER

What do Thomas Edison, Walt Disney, and Truman Capote have in common? None of them earned a diploma. Edison dropped out of elementary school. Disney didn't finish high school. Capote never went to college. The fact that many men and women achieve extraordinary success despite a lack of formal education suggests there's much more to “making the grade” than earning good grades in school.

Robert J. Sternberg, Ph.D., rated one of the “Top 100 Psychologists of the 20th Century” by *APA Monitor on Psychology*, the magazine of the American Psychological Association, has studied human intelligence and creativity for more than three decades and is the author of more than 1,000 books and articles on the subject. Sternberg, who graduated *summa cum laude* from Yale, first became interested in the study of intelligence as a student in elementary school, when he did poorly on IQ tests.

Am I Doing?



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“The school psychologist would come into the room ... and I would freeze up,” he remembers, “especially when I heard other kids turning the page and I was still on the first or second problem.” This experience led him to what has become his area of expertise—the relationship between intelligence and creativity. What helps people become successful in life isn’t a naturally high IQ or knowledge gained through formal education, but what Sternberg terms “successful intelligence.”*

“Being successfully intelligent means knowing when you’re in the wrong place at the wrong time—the wrong job, the wrong relationship, the wrong place to live—through a combination of analytical, creative, and practical abilities. You need creative skills to come up with ideas. You need analytical abilities to know whether they’re good ideas—to evaluate the ideas. And you need practical abilities to make your ideas work and to persuade other people that your ideas are worth listening to.”

For some parents, no bumper sticker elicits more pride than the one that reads, “My daughter is an honor student at Neighborhood Elementary.” The reward system works well as an incentive for performance—whether it’s a bumper sticker, a blue ribbon, a trophy, or a medal—and many students find great satisfaction in earning a place on the dean’s list or honor roll. For others, whose interest may lie in one particular discipline, high performance across the board is unlikely. One reason many accomplished writers, artists, scientists, inventors, and athletes don’t excel in formal academic settings is that a broad curriculum distracts them from their area of interest. People who attain success by their own standards generally are people who have found something they do really well.

“For some, [the goal is] to get very good grades in school and to do well on tests,” Sternberg says. “For oth-

ers, it might be to become a very good basketball player or actress or musician. ... so they capitalize on their strengths.”

By these measures, making the grade means finding something we do well—and enjoy doing—and making the most of it. “I constructed a theory of foolishness,” Sternberg says, “and I realized the flip side of that is wisdom, and that intelligence is a piece of wisdom, but that it also involves creativity and knowledge and most important, using your intelligence, creativity and knowledge in combination for a common good.”

First Steps

Elementary school is the first in a long series of steps children take in the world of academics. From kindergarten through high school, parents and teachers emphasize the importance of earning and maintaining good grades. Yet many educators believe concentration on academic performance does a disservice to young students. A report by The Alliance for Childhood (www.allianceforchildhood.org) reveals that more and more kindergartens are spending between two and three hours each day on reading, writing, and math skills, with only 30 minutes or less set aside for play.

Robin Wheeler has 20 years’ experience teaching preschool and kindergarten—the years when social and emotional development takes place, language and speech development are refined, and motor skills are honed. Children improve and progress most effectively through play, which, Wheeler says, is their work.

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always the exception, but the majority just aren’t ready.” Testing children too soon or identifying bright students as “gifted and talented” at an early age may do more harm than good, pushing them to perform rather than giving them time to work at their own pace and capitalize on their strengths.

Working the System

From the day children find their cubbies in kindergarten through their last college exams, students will be graded by approximately 100 teachers. Each brings a different set of expectations to the classroom.

Jay Mathews, education reporter for *The Washington Post*, suggests some straightforward strategies for students who aspire to academic excellence in his article “More Than One Way To Make the Grade.” “Go to class and take notes yourself,” he writes. “Speak to your professors frequently. Study in an isolated place as early in the day as you can, and do a 5- to 10-minute break every hour. Let experts look at drafts of a major paper.” And finally, though this strategy should go without saying, “Schedule schoolwork—and actually do it.”

Dennis Huston, Ph.D., professor of English at Rice University in Houston, Texas, says his best advice for students who want to make the grade is to learn what the teacher

wants—and then do it.

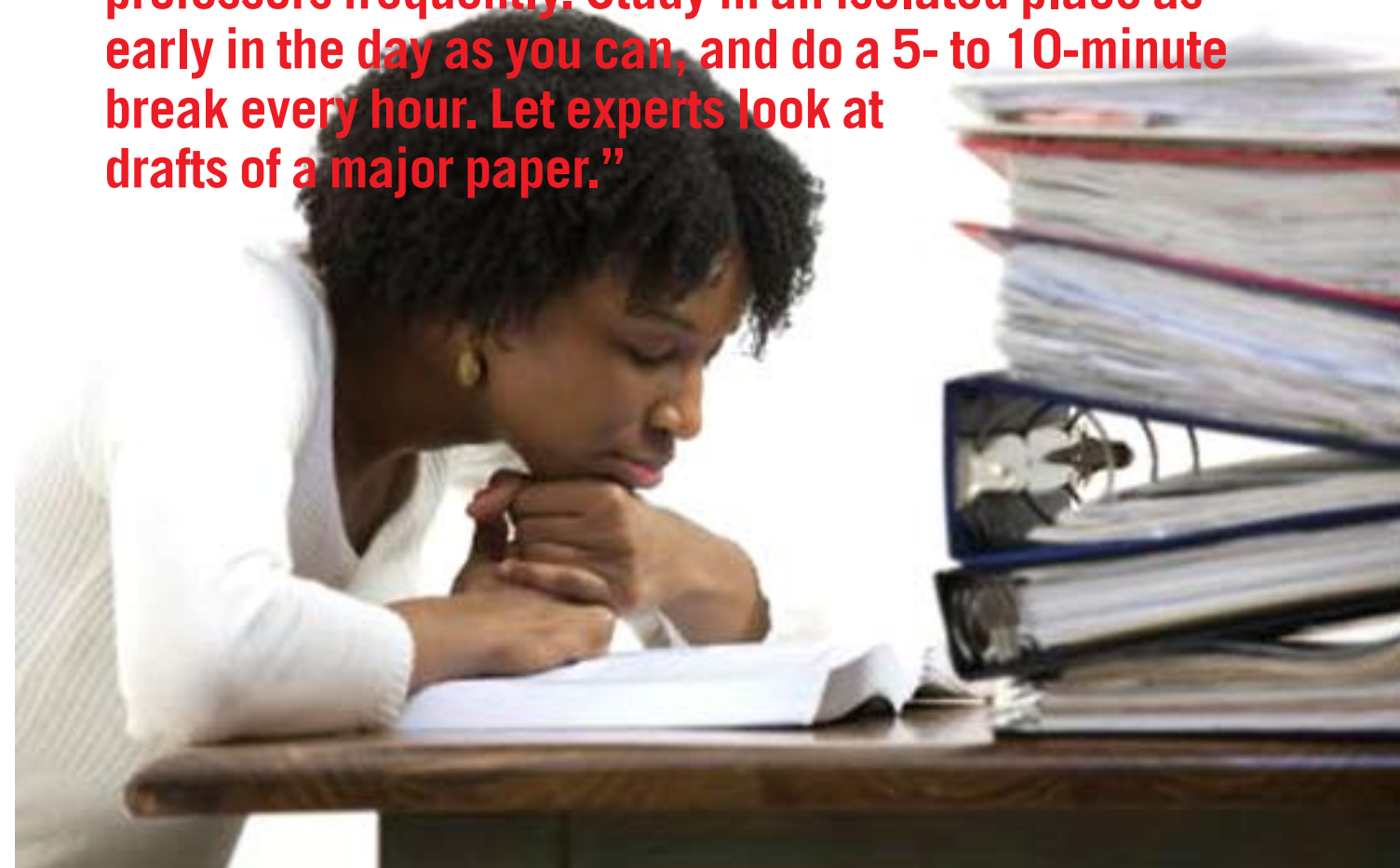
Huston spends a great deal of time in his first class of the semester talking about writing style—what he wants and what he doesn’t want—so his students know the ground rules.

“It’s the only fair way to evaluate a student,” he says. “Early in my career, I realized that I needed to make clear to my students that I didn’t want pretentious prose. Lots of students want their writing to sound ‘flowery.’ But words you might have learned for the SAT test often don’t fit into college essays. Other professors might be impressed by this—and that’s fine—but I want prose that sounds like spoken English.”

He also wants students to write imaginatively. “If a student writes a paper reiterating what’s been said in class, I tend to give it a B or a B minus. I don’t want my own ideas or ideas we’ve already heard in class. Even if it’s well organized and well written. I don’t want it. These are the rules in my course.”

Huston says that while he’s reading through a paper, “the grade pops into my head. There’s no way I could explain it.” He believes teachers’ varied styles of grading prepare students for life after college. “There’s no universal standard for performance in the business world. You can do a job for one person and earn a promotion or a

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raise. Then you move on to the next supervisor or career and it's altogether different."

Evaluating the Ineffable

Students in art, music, and drama classes might never make the grade if instructors evaluated them on ability alone. Stephen Crawford, instructor of music at Houston's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, assesses his students in four areas—performance, portfolio, preparation, and practice time—so their grades reflect a comprehensive "intelligence" of the discipline.

"Each marking period, I base 50% of my students' grades on several solo performances on their instrument," Crawford says. "I adjusted the assessment form from the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills rubric for music to fit my priorities for my students, and I mark it as I listen to them perform. This is a really useful format that allows me to assign point values to each level of accuracy in several different categories and makes clear the weight of each one."

Crawford's grading system measures analytical, creative, and practical abilities, mirroring Sternberg's theory of successful intelligence. The system means even students whose musical ability is only marginal can succeed.

In the world of sports, Super Bowl rings, Olympic med-

als, and the coveted MVP title are the ultimate marks of success. But sometimes making the grade means simply achieving a goal—whether it's finishing a marathon, swimming a mile, hitting a home run, or mastering a desired level of skill in riding. Lisa Cantwell teaches beginning English and Western saddle seat equitation on her family's farm near Hagerstown, Maryland. Goals are set during the first lesson, from riding independently at a walk by session three to trotting by session three or four. Riding excellence can follow only after communication between the student and horse is developed.

Cantwell explains that beginning students aren't evaluated on riding style, but on their relationship with the horse. "The horse will let the students know when they're being too harsh with their grasp on the reins or when they're putting too much pressure into the horse's sensitive sides with their legs." Both the horse and rider are involved in the evaluation—when the animal is calm and not fighting the rider in any way and shows willingness and cooperation, then the horse and rider team are ready for their reward—a trail ride through the woods and fields.

Honor System

For the past several years, cheating among students has increased—in part, some say, because of an overemphasis

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on good grades and the competitive pool of college applicants. Honesty is valued less than achievement, perhaps because students believe being honest doesn't always advance them toward their immediate goals. It may surprise them to learn that, in the end, their personal accomplishments may trump others' high grade point averages and standardized test scores.

"GPA receives the most weight when we calculate an applicant's academic rating," Kurt M. Thiede, dean of admissions at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, acknowledges. "Standardized test scores follow in importance. We also look closely at the strength of the schedule taken by the student. Personal qualities—what each student will bring to the campus community they are joining—are very important in the final selection of those students who will be offered admission." Thiede reports that although approximately 80% of the applicants he reviews have the academic skills to be successful at Bucknell, fewer than 30% are admitted. "So there's a lot of art applied to our work as we strive to enroll the best qualified and most interesting class possible," he says.

Sometimes determination and persistence account for more than talent or intelligence when you want to achieve a goal. Eagle Scout, the highest rank achievable in Boy Scouts, is one example of a goal most young men can reach with effort and perseverance. To achieve the rank, a Scout must earn 21 merit badges. Some require mastering skills thought to be essential to all young men, such as cooking, citizenship, camping, and personal fitness. Other badges are electives in areas that interest him. There are more than 100 choices, from architecture and auto maintenance to water sports and woodworking. Blake Winchell, a managing director of the Fremont Group in San Francisco, attained the rank of Eagle Scout in 1969 at the age of 16. Getting through all of the requirements takes hard work, he says—but, more important, you have to stay with it.

According to the Boy Scouts of America (www.scouting.org), more than 2 million Scouts have achieved this rank—among them are Neil Armstrong, President Gerald R. Ford, Bill Gates, and Steven Spielberg. Winchell, a Rufus Choate Scholar at Dartmouth with an MBA from the Stanford University Graduate School of Business, has made the grade in more ways than one. But achieving Eagle Scout, he says, is among the accomplishments he's most proud of: "It's on my resume."

Life Lessons

Even life itself tests us. The death of a loved one, a cancer diagnosis, a drug-addicted child, any number of stressful circumstances can put us in the position of being evaluated by others or hard on ourselves. Sometimes the most important criterion for making the grade is stamina. Even new and exciting opportunities can be stressful. Sternberg rec-

ommends exercising "successful intelligence" in challenging circumstances, such as when starting a new job or entering a new relationship, by adapting to, shaping, or selecting the environment.

We all want to "make the grade"—to fulfill our potential, to leave the world a better place for our children, to learn from hardships, to experience challenges and triumphs. In the June 1 edition of *Time*, First Lady Michelle Obama spoke about what's most important to her as a parent: "I tell my girls this every day: 'It doesn't matter what grade you get, but it matters how well you do. My question is, for them, 'Did you do your very best?'"

When it comes to making the grade, perhaps this is the question parents should ask their children—and each of us should ask ourselves—every day.

Writer Margaret Miller practices successful intelligence in El Paso, Texas, where she recently moved with her new husband.

**Note: Remarks by Robert J. Sternberg are used with the permission of Jonathan Plucker, Ph.D., whose interview with the psychologist is available in its entirety at www.indiana.edu/~intell/sternberg.shtml.*

