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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

An Argument Worth Having

By GERALD GRAFF

Freshmen are often overwhelmed by the intellectual challenge of college — so many subjects to be covered, so many facts, methods and philosophical isms to sort out, so many big words to assimilate. As if that weren't enough, what your different instructors tell you may be flatly contradictory.

Students understandably cope with this cognitive dissonance by giving each of their teachers in turn whatever he or she seems to want. Students learn to be free-market capitalists in one course and socialists in the next, universalists in the morning and relativists after lunch. This tactic has got many a student through college, but the trouble is that, even when each course is excellent in itself, jumping through a series of hoops doesn't add up to a real socialization into the ways of intellectual culture.

What the most successful college students do, in my experience, is cut through the clutter of jargons, methods and ideological differences to locate the common practices of argument and analysis hidden behind it all. Contrary to the cliché that no “one size fits all” educational recipe is possible, successful academics of all fields and intellectual persuasions make some key moves that you can emulate:

1. Recognize that knowing a lot of stuff won't do you much good unless you can do something with what you know by turning it into an argument.
2. Pay close attention to what others are saying and writing and then summarize their arguments and assumptions in a recognizable way. Work especially on summarizing the views that go most against your own.
3. As you summarize, look not only for the thesis of an argument, but for who or what provoked it — the points of controversy.
4. Use these summaries to motivate what you say and to indicate why it needs saying. Don't be afraid to give your own opinion, especially if you can back it up with reasons and evidence, but don't disagree with anything without carefully summarizing it first.

It's too often a secret that only a minority of high achievers figure out, but the better you get at entering the conversation by summarizing it and putting in your own oar, the more you'll get out of your college education.

Gerald Graff, the past president of the Modern Language Association and a professor of English and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has been teaching since 1963.

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