

PRINCIPLES
FOR
ACADEMIC
EXCELLENCE

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Principles for Academic Excellence

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Table of Contents

Short Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Excelling In Career and Education	2
Chapter 2: Excelling in Academics	8
Chapter 3: Learning Outside of School	24
Discussion Questions	32
Bibliography	35
Endnotes	36

Short Introduction

I have been blessed with the opportunity to write a series of books. This particular book focuses on calling students to excel in their school work. I start by discussing the importance of finding your talents and trying to connect them to your education field. In Chapter 2, we examine ways to excel in academics.

Education comes in different forms: in-class experience and out-of-class experience. In chapter 3, I want to show you ways that you can learn outside the classroom. We need to keep learning wherever we find ourselves. If we are going to be better than Isaac Newton in Science, it might help to learn some things he did to excel in his coursework. This book will provide some tools to inspire the next generation of learners.

Please let me know if you have any questions as you go through the book.

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“I can do all things through Christ which Strengtheneth me.” Philippians 4:13

Chapter 1

Excelling In Your Career and Education

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (Proverbs 1:7, written by King Solomon).

“When you can do the common things of life in an uncommon way, you will command the attention of the world.” —George Washington Carver

“If a man has any genuine talent, he should be ready to make almost any sacrifice in order to cultivate it to the full.” —G.H. Hardy

A talent is a natural ability to do something well, and usually needs to be developed. According to dictionary.com, a career is an occupation or profession. One of the best things that can happen to people in their career life is to do what they have a passion and talent for and then get paid for it. A chemistry professor who has a passion for chemistry and teaching will definitely do well at his job, because he has what it takes to excel.

You could also enjoy your career life if you use the talents you have been blessed with appropriately. When

you use your talents to do things, you find them easy. Sometimes people will say they don't know their talents. There are several ways to find out your talent, but here is a short test to see where you possibly fit in.

Here are some questions you can consider as you start thinking of what your talents are:

1) What do you love doing all the time, even when you are tired?

2) What are you good at doing?

3) What do people commend you for most of the time?

4) What are the subjects you have an interest in? Chemistry, literature....

5) What do you find easy to do?

These questions should give you an idea of what your talent is. If you cannot think of what your talent is, then please invest in books that will teach you more about talents. Do your best to use your talents in the career of your choice. Keep in mind that you might not be able to always find a job that uses your talent in certain seasons of life but do not give up. Work hard at whatever is before you while you are in transition. Remember your talent may not be a major in college. When you do what you have a passion for, then no one has to motivate you to work. If you

do not have an opportunity to use your talent in your career field, then make use of it when you get a chance to volunteer. For example, a person who works as a lab assistant and has a talent in cooking can volunteer to cook at events where food is in demand.

As you choose a career, remember to watch the people you spend your time with. They could either encourage or discourage you. It would be good if you would surround yourself with people who will encourage you to work hard. Don't allow your friends hold you back, and don't be a friend that holds others back.

Find out what needs to change in your field and change it. Don't become a doctor and leave the field without striving to make a difference in the field of medicine. Don't be a Research Scientist without striving to make a difference.

“Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men”

(Proverbs 22:29).

Now let us look at the role education plays in our careers.

Relevance of Education

“Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire.” —

William Butler

“Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.” —George Washington Carver

In many cases, education helps to equip us for our careers. However it is important to learn to learn for its own sake not for how it will equip you for any particular career. For example, a person who wants to become a Lawyer can learn from his Economics class or a person who wants to become a Doctor can learn from his Literature class. As you go to school and as you learn, make sure you learn the material thoroughly. It is a privilege and blessing to learn so don't waste it. Take your studies seriously, and give your best.

Learn properly. Do not just go to your classes because you want to pass the test; go because you want to learn from your teachers. When you learn properly, the degree or diploma will come eventually. I attended a website-making tournament in 2005, and I made a mistake by not learning properly. Today I find it hard to design websites because I did not listen back then.

You can never tell when you will use the knowledge you gain today, so do your best to pay attention to all your classes. If you need to go back and listen to the lecture again, then make time to do so.

Learn for Mastery. If you want to be successful in your career, learn to spend time digesting the material you learn in school. Listen to your teachers, read the textbook, and spend some time doing more research on the material. Education is important, so make time for it. Dr. Ben Carson said that we should learn for the sake of learning, as opposed to “surface learning.” Surface learners are people who cram before a test: sometimes they manage to pass, but then three weeks later they retain nothing.

Now that you have some ideas of how to learn, I hope to show you ways that you can excel in the academic content you might have to face through school, whether it is high school or college/university studies. If you do not know what you want to study yet at the university level, please make time to research before you start. If possible job shadow a few people.

Practical Applications

1. Spend some time reading about the career you hope to practice in.
2. If you do not know what you want to study or what you want your future career to be, spend time talking with a career specialist. Remember to pray about it and ask God to show you what He wants you to do.
3. Encourage those around you to remain focused.

Chapter 2

Excelling in Academics

“Don’t let schooling interfere with your education.”

Mark Twain

In the last chapter I talked about careers and the relevance of education. In this chapter I hope to give you some advice on how to excel in your academic pursuit. I want you to aim for the best and give your best. Do not settle for anything less than the best you can offer. If you have never planned on getting excellent grades, I want to tell you it is possible.

If you have a solid foundation and the right principles, you will give your best at whatever you do. This is one of the things you ought to give your best in.

Before I look at ways to excel in specific types of classes, I want to present some important principles that will help you excel in all your classes.

General Study Principles

Eradicate frustration: The first step in excelling in academics is letting go of your frustration for any classes you are currently taking or will ever take. I once realized that my frustration for a certain class held me back from excelling. Also make sure you strive to understand all your teachers and subjects. Make time to talk with the professor if the material you are studying seems to be difficult.

Procrastination can lead to frustration. Don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today.

Learn to schedule: In order to excel, you have to make the best use of your time, and this will require sitting down to plan things out. The use of timetables will help you plan your time very well. Also, it will be very helpful if you have a reading timetable that you follow. For example, if you have chemistry on Thursday then you should put it in your Wednesday timetable Schedule so that you can prepare for it. A timetable will help to direct you, and with directions you will go further. Even if you do not have an assignment in a particular class, make sure you make time to review what you learned before in the class. A good schedule will be as precise as possible. If you do not put things in your schedule, you might forget something

important. It always helps to write things down. Here is an example of a detailed schedule for one day.

Wednesday's Schedule

Time	Activity
6:00 a.m.	Wake up, Pray
7:00 a.m.	Breakfast
8:00 a.m.	Class
9:00 a.m.	Class
10:00 a.m.	Class
12:00 p.m.	Lunch
1:00 p.m.	Class
4:00 p.m.	Class/Homework/ Work
5:30 p.m.	Dinner
7:00 p.m.	Fellowship meeting
8:00 p.m.	Study time with group in the student lounge
9:00 p.m.	Chat with friends then Study time alone
10:00 p.m.	Sleep

This is just an example. I hope this will help you to make a good schedule. If you follow a schedule, you will be able to accomplish more things. It is just like having a map. It will help you get to your destination more quickly. Reduce your time spent on movies and internet surfing, and increase your time on your books. There is a time for everything.

A time will come when you can rest from the work of the semester and read books that are outside the scope of your school work. Notice I did not say a time will come when you can just waste time. Even during your breaks from school, learning ought to continue happening.

Form reading groups: In his book *Think Big*, Dr. Carson tells us to “associate ourselves with people we want to become like.”ⁱ For example, if you want to learn how to jump over fences very well, walk with people who can do it well. If you want to improve academically, walk with people who are very good academically. As you think about forming a group, you can tell some of your friends to see if they are interested. In this reading group or study group, you can always discuss different subjects with your group members. When I was in my junior year in high school, I had some friends who I studied with, and they helped to keep me accountable to excellence. When we would take an exam, they would tell me to wake up if I got a low grade. These groups can serve to keep you accountable. Remember to keep people accountable in love.

Set aside a specific place to do your studying, such as the library or a desk in your bedroom. Have all required

materials present before you start studying. Set realistic goals for a particular study period. Make sure you have a notepad where you can put down important points. It might also help to have a separate notepad where you can write things you need to do later so you don't get distracted from what you are doing at the moment.

Find out your natural abilities, strengths and weaknesses. For example, some people are good in mathematics but have problems with biology. When you know your strengths, try and help others by teaching them that particular subject. Spend more time with the subjects you are weak in so that you can balance your strengths and weaknesses. This is especially important when it is required that you take a particular subject you might not be strong in. Later in life people can choose to stop doing certain subjects but in earlier grade levels, you might be required to do subjects which you might think you are weak in. Find the resources you need to excel during the times you face.

Please take time to read the application section in your textbook if it has one. Some authors take time to show the relevance of the particular topic you are studying. For example, if the topic is about lasers, then spend time looking at the various functions of lasers. This will help you understand the topic better.

Keep learning: Education should not stop after a semester. Please keep going. Use your holidays to study more and go deeper in different issues while you also take time to rest. It is always good to learn material: this does not need to happen only in the classroom. Please make time during your vacations to learn. In the next chapter, I will show you ways to keep learning. This does not mean that you should never rest during your vacations but even as you rest remember to make some time to read a little.

Stress hinders you from really understanding what you are studying, so please try and find ways to get rid of stress. Making time to get exercise or to relax and sleep at the end of a long day will help keep you healthy and keep stress from becoming overwhelming.

Learn to use mnemonics to highlight key messages: Here is an example of using a mnemonic device to remember things that follow a certain pattern. I learned this one while taking chemistry in high school. These are the first twenty elements in the periodic table:

He	Hydrogen
Has	Helium
Large	Lithium
Brain	Boron
But	Beryllium
Can	Carbon
Not	Nitrogen
Offer	Oxygen
Few	Fluorine
Nice	Neon
Subjects.	Sodium
May	Magnesium
All	Aluminum
Senior	Silicon
Police	Phosphorus
Sergeants	Sulfur
Come	Chlorine
And	Argon
Punish	Potassium
Charles.	Calcium

You may not need this formula, but I hope you get the concept. This will help you remember better. I learned this in 2004, and it has helped me.

Use the SQ3R method: this is a good tool to use when studying textbooks, to increase your knowledge of the material. I learned this method from resources I came across, and it is very helpful in understanding textbooks:

Survey: Get an overall picture of what you are going to study by looking at the table of contents, introduction, and chapter summary.

Question: Ask yourself questions from what you have read. Questions should focus on the who, what, when, how and why of the study material.

Read: Read the chapter and take note of tables, graphs and charts.

Recite: While reading, try and stop to recall what you have read.

Review: Go over your notes to clarify things you have read.

Discuss with someone what you have read: this is another reason why it is good to have study partners.

Prepare for examinations: An exam helps to “examine” how much you know about a subject. Since you know you will have to take exams at the end of the semester or each unit, remember to keep giving your best as you learn throughout the semester.

Don’t allow the failures of yesterday hold you back from succeeding today. As you go to school, there will be bad days—days that you wake up late or that someone decides to take your parking spot. These things could affect your grade on an exam if you lose focus. If you did not do very well on a recent exam, I want to encourage you to remain focused. If possible, explain this to your instructor. If they cannot do anything about the grade, then be more prepared next time. There is hope. Keep trying and giving your best.

Excelling in Mathematics and Calculation Subjects

“Everyone has some level of Math Competence; only some admit it.” —Amos Tarfa

Calculation subjects are like playing instruments or a sport.

The more you do them, the better you get at them.

Calculation subjects such as mathematics, chemistry and physics require practice. After you learn a topic, make sure you solve as many sums as possible under that topic. The more practice you do, the better you will become. I have a book called *Tools For Mastering Mathematics* which I wrote with Nathan Jersett and we address some of the tools necessary for Excelling in Mathematics.

Let us take a look at Mathematics, a subject some people dislike. Mathematics is important, because we need it in our daily lives but it is also beautiful independent of the applications we can get from it. We need it to calculate our budget, convert currencies and calculate the area of our land when we need to build something. These are just a few applications. If mathematics is so important, why do people despise it?

Here are some thoughts to help you as you try to find ways to excel in mathematics.

Math involves topics that build on themselves. If you do not understand topic one, then topic two might also be difficult. Do your best to understand every concept that is taught. If you don't understand a concept, meet your teacher during his or her office hours and ask for help. You can also look for a math tutor and ask for help.

As I said earlier, math is like a sport: the more you do it, the better you get at it. Mathematics needs to be practiced over and over again. Also, spend time looking for applications of topics in mathematics. This will show you why you need to know what your teacher is trying to present. It is interesting that even with all the resources online, people are okay with settling for low grades. We have made a website that has some resources for students as well (www.toolsformath.org).

The first step to doing well in mathematics is to seek to enjoy doing it. Then make time for it, and remember in the end you will not regret it, because your children might come to you asking you to solve something and you will be glad you can do it. There are numerous rewards to knowing mathematics. Spend time practicing math problems for fun, even during your summer holiday. Have a "math get-together," and solve math problems.

Mathematics is a blessing, and I thank God for giving us the ability to comprehend this subject.

Excelling in Non-Calculation Subjects

When writing papers, make sure you read through what you write, and look for people who will be willing to go through your paper for you. Many colleges have writing centers. Check with your school to see if this service is offered, and ask the staff to help you. Remember, writing counts as much as anything else you do. It helps clarify your thinking. Sometimes you do not really know what you think until you write it. To improve your essays, make sure you write on different topics and write on a regular basis.

Learn to read good books: Reading helps your vocabulary. It also expands your horizons. The importance of reading could fill another book. Learn to read good books like biographies of great leaders and world history. Develop a reading habit. I will analyze reading in more detail in the next chapter.

Don't just read, but understand what you read:

When you read, try to understand and then find out where it applies. Try to explain what you have read in your own words. Most times people read and don't understand what they are reading.

Use flash cards: when you see a word you don't know, write it on a card, find out the meaning and a sentence in which it is used, and put everything on one card. Later on take all the cards and go through them.

More Ways to Succeed

Attend education programs, such as science club meetings or an association for those that like mathematics. You never know where or how you can use the knowledge you gain.

If you already love reading, keep up the good work and don't be discouraged by names people will give to you for reading a lot. Stay focused.

Please try learning another language. If possible, study abroad and see what life is like in a different country.

Make sure you attend all class sessions if possible, so that you can remember what the teacher said while you were in class.

Do your best to read the chapter of the material your teacher is talking about. If possible, read ahead and be prepared for the next chapter.

During tests and examinations, don't lose points because of carelessness. Always double-check your work.

Make use of all the resources your institution has to offer. This will require research, but it is always helpful to know what your school is willing to give you. For example, some schools have writing centers. Check if your school has resources such as this so you can utilize it and be the best that you can be. Other resources could include math labs or media centers.

Ask your instructor for questions on past exams. Past questions will give you an idea of what to expect on your exam.

If you are having trouble remembering the material you are studying, try linking it to a material you already know. Try breaking large sections into smaller sections for better understanding. Use more than one textbook if possible.

What will you give up today to excel academically? Humility plays a very big role in success. If you want to be grow, you have to be humble. Learn to meet those who

might be better than you at this time in a particular course and learn from them.

Finally, visit www.studygs.net. This is one of the best websites I have seen for learning and study skills. Keep improving and moving towards academic excellence.

Practical Applications

1. Make sure you find out your best learning method. If you have more than one, then do your best by combining different methods together. There are tests you can take to find your best learning technique.
2. Watch extra lectures of subjects you don't understand. You can find lectures on different topics from iTunes U and other tools.
3. If you love studying in groups, look for people who also love doing this and make a study group.
4. Do your best to solve as many problems as you can of a topic in a calculation subject until you have mastered the topic. The more you practice, the better you get. Remember that when you study non-calculation subjects, be sure you read and understand the subject, then find the application.
5. Write down the grades you want to get and work towards those grades.

Chapter 3

Learning Outside of School

“The object of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives.” Robert Hutchins

“Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school.”

Albert Einstein

“Education must not simply teach work – it must teach Life.”

W. E. B. Du Bois

In the last chapter, I showed you ways that you can excel in your academic pursuit in the classroom. In this chapter, I want to show you ways that activities outside the classroom can help you in the pursuit of academic excellence.

Education is not all about going to school. Going to school is one way of learning, but there are other ways in which you can learn and get a good education. Education does not stop on the last day of school. You can keep learning during breaks and after you finish your degree. Learning is

a lifelong pursuit. In this chapter, I hope to show you ways in which you can learn and grow through methods other than going to school.

Here are five ways you can keep learning even when school is not in session:

- Utilizing your talents (sports, music, writing, etc.)
- Reading good books
- Attending seminars
- Watching Good documentaries.
- Having Productive conversations

Utilizing Your Talents

Each person has been blessed with different talents. It is when we start using those talents that we can learn more things about ourselves. It was in the summer of 2002 that I started playing tennis. It was while playing tennis that I learned to focus better. I also learned patience. My father also encouraged me to play the piano, and I thank God that he did. By playing the piano, I have learned to be disciplined. My piano teacher told me to practice every day, so I made sure I included it in my schedule and did my best to play for at least thirty minutes every day for a season. Here is a poem I wrote in the spring of 2009

encouraging people to find what their talents are and to start using them:

You might not have the basketball skills of
Stephen Curry

Or the physics and calculus skills of Sir
Isaac Newton

Or the geometry skills of Euclid

Or the singing abilities of Don Moen

Or the poetic skills of Robert Frost or Maya
Angelou

Or the intellectual reasoning of C.S Lewis

Or the soccer skills of Pele of Brazil

Or the tennis skills of the Roger Federer

Or the strength of the world's strongest man

But you do have *that which you have been
blessed with.*

All you have to do is tap in and start using
what you have been given with humility

As you develop your talents and partner with others
to do this, you will learn about ways that you can make a
difference.

Reading Good Books

“When books are opened, we discover that we have wings.” —Helen Hayes

Reading good books is another way to learn on your own. There are many books available all around us. Some of them teach philosophies that have failed in the past, so you have to be careful as you take in philosophies. Spend time visiting a public library to read their books or invest by buying some for yourself and your friends. Do your best to read at least one or two books a month, and do a book review. In the summer you can dive deeper and study different subjects.

If you can't meet a great intellectual, get their books and read them. It will be as though you talked with them. I learned this by reading C.S Lewis books. Although he is dead, I can still learn from him. Spend time reading good books, books that will teach you how to handle the challenges of life, because the challenges will surely come. I listed some of the books that have played a huge role in my life and the lives of those around me at the end of this chapter.

I am hoping this book will serve to encourage you to go out and read books that will build you up. Dr. Carson

also said, “The more you read the more you know, and the more you know the more valuable you become.”ⁱⁱ As I was reading the biography of Sir Isaac Newton, I learned that his college was closed for a period of time.ⁱⁱⁱ Newton chose to read during those times. He read a book written by Rene Descartes on a certain topic a few times, and this helped him understand the concept. Newton was able to go ahead and work on some theories, and today we study calculus and Newtonian physics. There is another lesson I want you to learn here. Newton read Descartes, and he remained Newton. He did not become another Descartes. You have been uniquely designed so don’t try to constantly compare yourself to others. You can learn lessons from Newton, but don’t try to be exactly like him because he had weaknesses.

Books That Have Played a Big Role in My Life

The Holy Bible

Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis

The End of Reason, Ravi Zacharias

Think Big, Ben Carson

You Can Reach The Top, Zig Ziglar

I could go on and on, but I hope you will take time to read good books—books that will help you to grow.

Attending Seminars

Invest in attending seminars to learn more about different topics. Some organizations sponsor seminars for writing. If you believe you have a writing talent, invest in a writing seminar somewhere close to you. There are also leadership seminars or music seminars you could invest in.

Seminars will help to empower you and prepare you in a particular field.

Watching Good documentaries

I know there are many things on TV today that are not healthy for anyone, but if you choose to watch to learn, I want to encourage you to spend time watching programs or documentaries that will inform you and help you to make a difference. Do your best to avoid sitting in front of the television set or computer screen for hours. Remember it takes time away from other purposeful things you could be doing.

Having Productive Conversations

As you go around every day having conversations with people, you can learn many important lessons. The people you spend time with will affect how you think because of what they say. As you speak with people, try to learn from them and also teach them something you know to be true. It

was during a friendly conversation I learned about how thunder and lightning work and how the weather people predict the weather. Make sure you make the most of the conversations you have. I also want to encourage young people to spend time learning from the older people around them. One idea I have for inter-generational interaction is for the young to teach the older people how to use text messaging and essential technological features while the older people can teach the young people life lessons. I have some discussion questions at the end of the book. All the best as you strive for excellence in your academic work. I will leave you with a quote from one of the authors I listed earlier.

“Man is not at peace with his neighbor because he is not at peace with himself, and man is not at peace with himself because he is not at peace with God.” —Ravi Zacharias

Practical Applications

1. Please try to pick at least one quote every week and think through it critically. Thinking about quotes could help you learn how to think from a different perspective.
2. Make a book-reading schedule and try to stick to it. Do your best to read as many books as possible during your

holidays. It will be good to have a place to write down the ideas you learn from the books you read.

3. If you do not know what your talents are, you can try taking a talent test. When you find your talent, try and connect with other people who have a talent similar to yours.
4. Do your best to start good conversations. There are many things you can learn from those you spend time with.
5. Don't be deceived: education and learning continues even after the semester ends. Take part in extracurricular activities, and make the most of every opportunity.

Discussion Questions

Here are some questions to consider for personal reflection and group study as you read through the book. You do not need to attempt all the questions at once. My friend Eric Svoboda helped me develop these questions.

Chapter 1:

- 1- When you think about the ways you are talented, what kinds of careers do you think fit those gifts?
- 2- Amos challenged you to make a change in the field you are entering. How can you apply that to your life right now and make a difference at your school? In your community?
- 3- How do you view school as it pertains to the rest of your life?
- 4- Think back over the last year of your education. What are things that your teachers tried to teach you, but you were unwilling to learn?
- 5- Are you a surface learner or a deep learner? Which is best? Can you become more of a deep learner by practice and hard work?

Chapter 2:

- 1- What are the things that draw you to settle for less than your best?
- 2- List three frustrations you have in classes you are taking. If they are allowed to continue unchecked, what can they become in your life?
- 3- How can you let go of those frustrations?
- 4- Who are some people in your life that you would like to become more like?
- 5- Find a place that you can do your studying that is free from distractions and share this spot with a friend or parent. Ask them to keep you accountable to do all your studying for a week in that spot. Journal the differences between this and your normal study time.
- 6- What were the most helpful suggestions for study that Amos shared? Also what was the method of study that you think will be most helpful to you?

Chapter 3:

- 1- What is the best way to find out what books you should read?
- 2- Compare the benefits of reading books to surfing the internet, being on Facebook, or playing video games.

- 3- Have you ever considered going to a seminar? Why or why not?
- 4- What criteria should we use when deciding which documentaries are good to watch and which are not?
- 5- What kinds of questions should you be asking friends and others during conversation to help you learn new things?

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Endnotes

ⁱ Think Big.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dunham, William. *Journey Through Genius* (New York: Penguin Groups, 1990).