The Average Student’s Guide to Success and Fulfillment

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Abstract

Throughout my life, I have considered myself many things. Skateboarder, artist, entrepreneur, etc. However, like most of my audience, I am a student. This paper is intended to go beyond those enrolled academically, as I believe that we are all students in life. Life is a great teacher and we have to be very keen listeners to get where we want to be. This paper was intended for those students to have the light shined on the positives of learning, and away from the struggles we face. I wanted to give students a sense of hope and direction. To prove that being young doesn’t have to be accompanied with being dumb. That success is available to everyone, no matter the age, race, or gender. Success is universal, and I believe this paper can help.
Introduction

When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up? Did you want to become an astronaut, or the President of the United States? If you were an imaginative child, perhaps you wanted to be a western cowboy with a flying green dinosaur as your pet. Whatever your dream might have been, as a student, it is likely that you probably aren’t pursuing that goal today. In the average four year college, there are no classes in anti-gravity space travel, or enacted presidential hearings; thus, we change our interests and align them with our potential careers. However, as students it is important to consider that although we have deviated from our childhood dreams, they have been replaced with new ones. If you frown at the thought of your fleeting childhood aspirations, you should lighten up. I’m personally very happy with my life without the gun-slinging stresses of a cowboy, though I could be happier if my pet cat was instead a flying dinosaur. No matter what your interests, hobbies, or college major might be, people from all paths of life find success in many different aspects. This paper is written with the intent to help guide us, as both students and human beings, in the pursuit of success and happiness in all forms of life and work. By doing what we do best as students, it seems best to study those who have already found success in their own lives and follow the examples they have laid out. In order to understand success, the following will make use of modern day statistics, research articles, and a personal testimony to help support the laid out principles of success. These will help contribute to defining success, what it is, why it’s important, and ultimately how we can find it.

Definition

“Success based on anything but internal fulfillment is bound to be empty”

– Martha Friedman (Artist & professor)

In order to understand success, we need to know exactly what it means, though finding a universal definition could be easier said than done. The problem with defining success is that it can vary greatly among individuals. For some, success is a life rich with money, and is furthered by accumulating more of it. For others, a life devoted to helping people in need is a rightful cause for their living, and in doing so increases their
own lives exponentially. Though my personal definition is somewhere in between the two ideas, it is important that we find a commonplace for each individual person’s definition of success. A shared platform, perhaps, on which we can all agree how success is defined.

Though frowned upon, the feeling of accomplishment gained through social media is persistent throughout today’s culture. However, I believe that feeling is still valid, although remarkably misguided. I believe the yearning for fulfillment earned by popularity could instead be aimed toward a higher calling. By transcending social restrictions and refocusing our life’s purpose towards that which gives our life meaning. In return, our lives would then be geared toward progressing that goal through enjoyment. Likewise, if an individual does not have a goal, they could instead direct their lives toward finding out exactly that which fulfills them. Those who engage in what satisfies their being are most likely to find joy in what they do.

While we begin defining success, I would also like to reflect on what it means to a nation living in a technologically advanced era. In literal terms, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines success as both, “the correct or desired result of an attempt”, and also, “the fact of getting or achieving wealth, respect, or fame.” (Merriam-Webster). However, it’s the latter that seems to hold true to today’s generation. In an age where social networks are the norms for networking and popularity is confused for fame, our nation’s overall opinion of work has begun plummeting. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, a non-partisan think tank that studies demographic trends, showed 34% of 25-29-year-old Americans have moved back in with their parents. “Young adults 18-to 24-years-old, who were employed, had fallen from to 54.3% —the lowest level since the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics began collecting such data in 1948” (Taylor). Though the recent economic downturn has affected the availability of these jobs, the flailing rates are also associated with college enrollment rates as well. “In 2011, the employment rate fell from 47.6% in 2007 to 40.7%. Excluding those enrolled in school, enrollment fell from 73.2% to 65.0% over that same period” (Taylor, Paul).

Based on these studies, the evidence that the popular opinion of work and school has changed is becoming clearer. In return, this change has caused a backward
movement among today’s generation. Perhaps our misunderstanding of success is the root of these problems; that society’s predetermined definition of success then generated a shared egocentric mindset. The solution then, is to redefine “success” to be felt with a deeper meaning. A new definition could then re-align these backward thinking mindsets and push young people to move toward their own definite aim. In unison, this redefinition would then be true to its word, and as thus grant, and be granted, fulfillment.

Ah, “Fulfillment”. Now that is a word more suited for use, rather than success. As follows, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word “fulfillment” as, “to succeed in achieving something; to make something, such as a dream, true or real.” (Merriam-Webster). When compared to the definition of success (the fact of getting or achieving wealth, respect, or fame), this definition seems most fitting, and more closely alludes to what drives people toward their goals. It more closely resembles and embodies a feeling that can be shared universally between individuals. Thus, I propose “fulfillment” not only be synonymous with success, but interchangeable as well. Though I cannot physically see your hands in vote for the use of fulfillment as a replacement for success, I hope we can all agree that change is needed; and by changing one word, maybe we can affect change on a much larger scale.

Why

“Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have with you the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world.”

-Harriet Tubman

Now that we’ve defined what success is, there is a rather large matter of finding it. The first problem, however, lies in actually knowing what it is you want to succeed in. As young adults making our way through life, there can be a lot of “whispers” telling us what to do next. No, I’m not referring to schizophrenic tendencies. I refer to “whispers” as voices and/or opinions of others that push us down a path that might lead the wrong way. The issue with having these voices is that we fail to recognize the path to which they’re leading us. They might also echo different voices, as well as different messages. Advice given by your parents, teachers, friends, and role models are the most common.
It is important to realize that these opinions might be driving us down a path that might have been right for them, but could certainly be wrong for us. Thus, we have to really begin asking ourselves, “What do I really want in my life? What kind of meaning do I want to create for myself?” My answer is most likely different than your answer, as it should be. The contrast in our college majors is a testimony that we are individuals who have the choice of just where we should direct our lives.

There is always a beginning to every great feat throughout human history. Though arguably one of the most essential parts of the success achieving process, the mere beginning can, at times, prove to be the most difficult. The question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” should be asked with the same importance as, “What is the meaning of life?” As a college student, when considering what our intended careers will be, this question is not often posed. What is instead presented are the worries, centered on finding the best paying jobs or those with the highest demand. However, if you intend to find success, you have to take your time and happiness into consideration, as most others don’t. Use that time to find an answer to the aforementioned questions, and steer your life in that direction. While most whispers try to answer them for you, be aware that advice and expectations are two different things. Listen to your heart’s calling, not someone else’s.

Testimony

Before we begin to delve into the “how” of achieved success, I’d first like to begin with a short story about a man whose story might prove useful to budding young adults like ourselves. His story embodies every lesson that this essay tries to convey, and more. He is a man of great success and little pride. Though he is well into the years of his life, I have come to know him very well over the past few years, and have had the greatest pleasure in accompanying him on his adventure. Seeing through the foreign eyes of a Pakistani man, I learned of the differences and obstacles he has had to overcome in the mainland U.S. and of the reason why he has decided to live in Hawaii. Though he was not born here, he has fared a good way in concerns of his success. In
fact, this story will hopefully inspire others to push past their own boundaries, whether they suffer the same hardships or not.

His name is Muhammad Ali, but his birth name is Murad. Muhammad Ali is but a family name, and (sadly) has nothing to do with famed boxer, Cassius Clay; though, I wouldn’t doubt he has ever picked up and donned a pair of boxing gloves. He is a rather tall man, though he is quite plump. He speaks from behind a thick curtain of black hair, dangling from the top of his lips, though you can still see his smile shining from ear to ear. The whiteness of his teeth is contrasted against the dark brown color of his skin. Always gleaming with a smile, he usually takes my hand with both of his and then shakes them with a feverish grip, as though he were locked inside a hot Indian kitchen all day.

“My friend!” he says through his thick foreign accent, “How are you?” Though I’ve heard the same greeting every time we cross paths, it never fails to bring a smile to my face.

“I’m fine,” I usually say, “You’re looking well.” He smiles and says, “Ah yes! It is because I am now sitting here with you!”

I had asked him prior to meeting if we could talk about his successes in life, and if he could offer some advice to college students. When I asked, he leaned forward, put one hand his pocket and the other on my shoulder and said, “My boy, only if you aren’t the one writing it!” He threw his head back with a laugh, waved his hands in the air to signal his humor, and then walked away with glee. He returned with two fold out plastic beach chairs, and placed them at the concrete foot of his garage. Though he did ask me not to disclose the name of his businesses, I do have permission to mention what they are. He has found success in three self-owned businesses, two of which exist in Pakistan as clothing and furniture manufacturers, and the other being a Japanese tour bus company here in Oahu. He credits his success to many factors, like his years spent perfecting his craft, habits he’s had to create and set for himself, and the tremendous luck he’s had with all his years in business. However, he did make it a point to note that none of these factors were more essential to his current successes than his multitude of failures throughout the course of his life. One in particular had helped to shape his life
into what it is today, and it occurred during one of the most fragile points in his life. It happened during college.

“I went to school in Pakistan,” he says, leaning back in his foldout beach chair. “It was a college named Abbottahad. At this time it was a boys only school, where we had to work very hard to make the good grades. My family had sent me away to live in school so that I would become focused. After I finished one year at the university, I felt very ready to become a good businessman. But I was a foolish boy. I started a new business on the school campus, printing t-shirt designs for students and alumni.”

He pauses for a moment, and pulls a small cardboard box out from underneath the thin aluminum legs of his armchair. From it, he holds up a red polo shirt, lined with a white collar and lettering in a foreign language, similar to what cursive writing in English looks like.

“Haha!” he exclaims, handing me the shirt. “Is good, yes?”

“Wow,” I say. “You were very good even then!”

“Ah yes, it was a good time for me and my friends. We were making lots of the money!” He throws his head back again to let out a laugh. “But like I said, I was a foolish boy.”

He reaches back into the box and pulls out a different version of the shirt I now held in my hand. It was smaller, stiffer, and slightly faded compared to the first shirt. Holding up both of them next to each other, one was noticeably dinkier than the other, and looked like something you’d buy off a cheap street vendor. By this time I had already figured out why he had put down his former self.

“After I finished a school course in business, I felt I did not need to spend so much money on the material of the clothes I made. The customers who were buying my clothes stopped, and did not want to keep buying from me afterward. I told them that the material is better, more affordable, and will be good for protection against the heat. But they did not listen, and for a long time I did not realize that it was I who had made a mistake.” Looking apathetically to the floor, he runs his fingers over his moustache. When I asked him if he ever resolved it, and if he ever realized the mistake he made and fixed it, it seemed to put him in an even worse mood.
“Yes,” he said, still looking down at the dirty concrete. “But by that time it was very late. My customers did not want to buy from me, and the people in Pakistan find it hard to look past an old mistake.” As he sat and reflected on that thought, he suddenly stopped feeling so gloomy. His body perked up with a jolt, as if the air of the conversation had changed in an instant.

“Well!” he said excitedly, “That is in the past now, and today I am a happy man!”

He has always had this way about him; he never let anything get him down. It was always so puzzling as to how he stayed so positive, and the surprising change of his mood always catches me off guard. Thinking about his failure in contrast with his success as a clothing manufacturer today urged me to ask how he recovered from his failure, especially in such an unforgiving place.

“So I need to ask,” I said, “how did you manage to stay so positive?”

Without missing a beat, he answered, “Because I did not let it get me down. You see, I knew that one day I would find the winning idea, I just had to keep trying.”

“Even after so many people doubted you?” I asked.

“Ah yes, but you see my boy, I have made a lot of failures before this, and each one was as horrible and painful as the first. But I had unshakeable faith that I would make a good life for my family and me. Most importantly, I wanted to make that life trying to succeed where I had not in my failures.”

This made me reflect on any advice I had previously received on what it means to be successful. Among the stories I’ve been told, this one in particular made me realize how universal the key elements of success actually are. From our history as friends, I feel as though he made it a point to share this story with me. I know when he teaches he intends to tell each important lesson subliminally, rather than give a straightforward answer. He would rather have you learn a lesson through experience, as opposed to learning through words.

In contradiction of his own personal preference, I asked him to leave a quote for students as they continue their college journey on through the rest of their lives. He said, “Life is a lesson on its own. You should never stop learning, whether it’s by your achievements or your mistakes.”
With the story now behind us, and fresh in our minds, we can begin to delve into the lessons I believe he wanted to convey. The most obvious message is the power of persistence, which is what took him from failure to being successful. The second lesson I believe he was trying to teach was the power of attitude, and how choosing his attitude ultimately helped correct his direction. Third, was the confidence he had in himself to succeed; otherwise, his attempts at success would have continued to be failures. There may be other messages that you’ve come across while reading this testimony, pertaining to the universal elements of success that I myself haven’t touched upon. Sometimes the greatest lessons are those that are never told; and in the same fashion as Murad Muhammad Ali, the best lessons are learned through experience, not words.

How: Persistence & Failure

“Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talents will not, as nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Geniuses will not, as unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”

-Calvin Coolidge (30th President of the United States)

Being college students, we are faced with some of the greatest adversities available to the western modern man. We are hard pressed with deadlines, stresses of homework, and class presentations to complete, which all ultimately affect our direction toward attaining our degrees. This challenge is a hardship never before felt in all our years of schooling until our experience as young adults. Considering the constant balance of hard work and maintaining expectations of yourself and what others have of you, it’s not hard to imagine the seeping pressure ultimately cause a student to give up. Thus, as a result, students begin dropping out of college. Some put a hold on their college careers, except that they never return to them.

According to a recent study done by Jordan Weissman, a writer for The National Student Clearing House, “Only 39.6 percent of undergrads attended full time during their
whole stint in school. They fared well: More than three-quarters of them finished up their four-year degree within six years. On the other hand, the 53 percent of students who attended both full and part time struggled. One-third had dropped out entirely. Given that few students who spend more than six years in school finish, chances are most of them will drop out as well” (Weissman).

The following chart is a reflection of that research, providing a visual record of student enrollment rates in a four-year college, over a six-year period. It organizes four different tiers of college completion rates, characterized by matching colors. Indicating completion at a starting college (blue), completion at a secondary college (yellow), students currently enrolled (purple), and students who dropped out altogether (green). These rates are defined by student enrollment hours, dedicating their time to full time schooling, part time schooling, or a mix of both (Weissman).
Depending on your outlook, this chart could reflect good rates of enrollment or bad ones. For the students who finished their four-year degree within a six-year period, most certainly displayed persistence, especially in the case of exclusively part-time students. The students who have not finished their degree in all four categories might consider their attempt as a failure. Perhaps they found success by other means; however, the reason we become students is to further our thinking and ourselves, and by dropping out they have missed the opportunity to learn a very valuable life lesson about persistence.

Though the lesson was lost, the time spent having those experiences wasn’t wasted, as the feeling of defeat is vitally essential to knowing success. As world-renowned entrepreneur Napoleon Hill once said, “Neither temporary defeat nor adversity amounts to failure in the mind of the person who looks upon it as a teacher that will teach some needed lesson.” Thus, we should look upon all of our failures as a lesson to learn from, and in the mean time, find a new understanding of what it means to “fail” and to be a “failure”.

Under ordinary circumstances the term “failure” is a negative one, as any aspect of the word has never reflected a positive indication. However, for the remainder of this essay we’ll assign it a neutral meaning, as the term should only mean temporary defeat. By no means will the existence of this essay reflect permanent change on what it means to fail, at a global level. Though, if it does convince you to change what it personally means to you, there might then be an advantage; as the rest of the world flusters with its past mistakes, you are able to overcome your own.

If you were convinced, then your understanding of what a “failure” is and what it means to “fail” would have a more affirmative effect on your progression and motivation. Any experience where you “failed” wasn’t wasted; as world-renowned entrepreneur Napoleon Hill once said, “Neither temporary defeat nor adversity amounts to failure in the mind of the person who looks upon it as a teacher that will teach some needed lesson.” Any student should take this, more than any piece of advice, to heart. As aforementioned, students are the most susceptible to failure. However, with a different
understanding of failure, students can then begin to pursue success without the guilt brought on by their past mistakes.

Persistence is the key to success. As a life learner, students should carry this advice with them to the grave, as giving up today is equivalent to giving up when you started.

How: Attitude & Self-Belief

“I think therefore I am.”

- René Descartes (French philosopher & mathematician)

We’ve all heard the expression, “Your attitude determines your altitude.” So much so that it’s become a cliché. When brought up in conversation, you instantly know what someone is about to say before they can even make the reference. Before the words can leave their mouth, your eyes are already rolling over your eyelids like the sun across the sky. You lean back into a slump with arms crossed while you block out the next chunk of banal words that dreadfully follow the ignored statement they spewed out earlier. However, perhaps that’s enough evidence to convince you that maybe the statement that you chose to ignore is actually true.

In case you missed it, the quote from earlier was, “Your attitude determines your altitude.” The message being: How you choose to approach a situation determines the success of the outcome. If you’d like for something to be better, finding a new perspective on how to improve the situation can change its course entirely. Whilst you think it’s essential to step away from the conversation, it’s just as important to take a step away from yourself. If you can’t recognize the fault with your attitude, you will never learn. Founding father Thomas Jefferson once said, “Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong mental attitude.”

Attitude has everything to do with success. You might find it important to realize how this thinking can affect your life. The constant positive attitude that accompanies how you listen can change your perspective on the things you think negatively about. As a result, you might become more accepting of others, discover new ideas, and adopt
better opinions of things you kept your mind closed off to. This is a key feature to keep in mind, especially when considering the path you are walking to find your own success.

Along with the importance of choosing your attitude, keep in mind that self-confidence is a product of that mindset. When thinking about success and what makes a person successful, people often associate them with self-confidence. No great leader could have become successful without having any great belief in themselves. It is enough to make a poor man rich. Even today, the idea goes unchallenged. The subliminal influence of self-confidence is what drove those leaders to become known throughout history.

Though it may not seem so, self-confidence alone is not what creates success and leadership, as neither could exist without some fuel to drive the fire. The driving force behind self-confidence and leadership is enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is a state of mind that empowers yourself and others to put a task into action. A correct attitude is driven with power, and it is as essential to self-confidence as the ability to deliver a winning public speech. After subtracting enthusiasm from the equation, success can rarely be found. Without it, a great speaker cannot perform whole-heartedly. Others doubt him, and in turn he begins to doubt himself. Like a dog that only barks and doesn’t bite, an unenthused life is as empty as the words it fakes. It drives a person’s winning factor downward, and only adds self-skepticism to the mix of what they understand as “self-confidence”. Those who have found the perfect mix of enthusiasm and work are those who most enjoy their lives. Once that enthusiasm is applied, it does what steam does to a locomotive. It is the cup of coffee that energizes you after half a night’s worth of sleep. It is an individual’s most precious commodity, and quite possibly might be the driving force behind all acts of progression in life.

In addition to enthusiasm, it is also highly important to consider initiative as the secondary force behind that which gives a person power. It is the power or opportunity to act or take charge before others do. As students, we have taken initiative in our studies by proactively applying ourselves to college and undertaking any responsibilities that follow, such as homework and tests (though some might apply themselves more than others). During our youth, it might be more compelling to say that leadership
Self-confidence, enthusiasm, and initiative are all essential elements to the improvement of your attitude. I beg that these key factors don’t become clichés, as all matters concerning success often do. The importance of one successful aspect does not outweigh the role of any one other. The true case, however, is that those who have found greatness have filled their life with a balance of attitude, self-confidence, enthusiasm, and initiative.

Closing Statement
A beautiful thing, quotes are. They are a time capsule of wisdom, and can be used to bring knowledge to present situations from dated ideas. They have the ability to embody the spirit of a person, bring great thoughts to their character and wisdom, and inspire others to take action, all within a few lines of text. However, the most important thing to remember is that the reason we quote great people is because we believe they have achieved great success. All throughout history, these ideas have embodied the secrets of each individual person’s success. They offer a guide to what others believe to be the path to fulfillment, and, should we choose to follow them, will lead us to find a path of our own. No matter if your dream is to write a novel or to become an astronaut, it is important to know that we may find success in whatever it is we may do. With new perspectives on what it means to be successful, why it’s essential to living a full life, and the multitude of ways we can find success, I believe can bring about change in ourselves and our society. Change starts small, but it can be infectious. Perhaps when quotes of success finally become a cliché, the future students, authors, presidents, and astronauts would then take it upon themselves to craft new material to be quoted, researched, and studied by future generations to come.

Works Cited
The Average Student’s Guide

