



What Next?

As thousands of students get ready to make the crucial decision about their future, a look at the choices they face

By Prabin Moktan

A few years ago, sometime in the month of June, a teacher in a local school got a long distance call from Bangalore. It was from a student who had just passed his ISC examination that year. The boy was in the city with his father, a Dharan based goldsmith and they had a decision to make.

Bishal, as we will call him was keen to become an engineer but had failed to procure enough scores in the entrance examinations to qualify for admissions to premier Govt. Engineering colleges.

A private Engineering college in Bangalore was offering him the course of his choice against the payment of fees that ran into a few lakhs. The father had the money but no clue as to what he should do about the offer. The future of his son, not to mention a lot of his hard earned money was at stake. With the deadline beating down on them and no one to look for advice, they made that frantic call.

Fortunately things turned out alright because as soon as the teacher - who used to handle career counseling for his

school- heard the name of the institute, he remembered a gentleman who had a son, another ex-student, studying there. The gentleman and his son were contacted and the antecedents of the institute checked. Satisfied, they were given the green signal to make the payment. The boy passed out his engineering in Computer science, did his MBA and is now well placed in a telecommunication firm.

But not all such stories have happy endings.

Back Story 2

Tribhuvan (name changed) from Darjeeling was keen to get out of the hills and pursue his higher secondary education in the cities. Many of his neighbors had done the same thing and to him it seemed such a cool thing to come home for the summer holidays and tell the world about life in a big city. The parents too were aware about the benefits of education in a city, how it provided exposure and widened the horizon.

Tribhuvan's problem was his low marks; getting admitted to some of the well known schools was out of question. This was when he attended a career fair in a nearby town. An institute caught his fancy. It seemed to be just the ideal place to realize his dreams of a city based education. Contacts were made, forms filled and money exchanged hands.

The boy arrived in Pune with his businessman father. They were well received at the airport by the representatives of the school and taken to a nice hotel. The hospitality was great and the representative very accommodating. The only problem was that when the father and son wanted to take a look a look around of the school campus, they were told that it being a Friday evening everything was shut. They could go only on the following Monday. However he was kind enough to tell the father that if his busy schedule did not permit, he could return home and that his son would be well looked after. The offer was too good to be refused and the man leaving his son in the charge of the helpful man, returned home. The next Monday when the boy was taken to his new school he got the shock of his

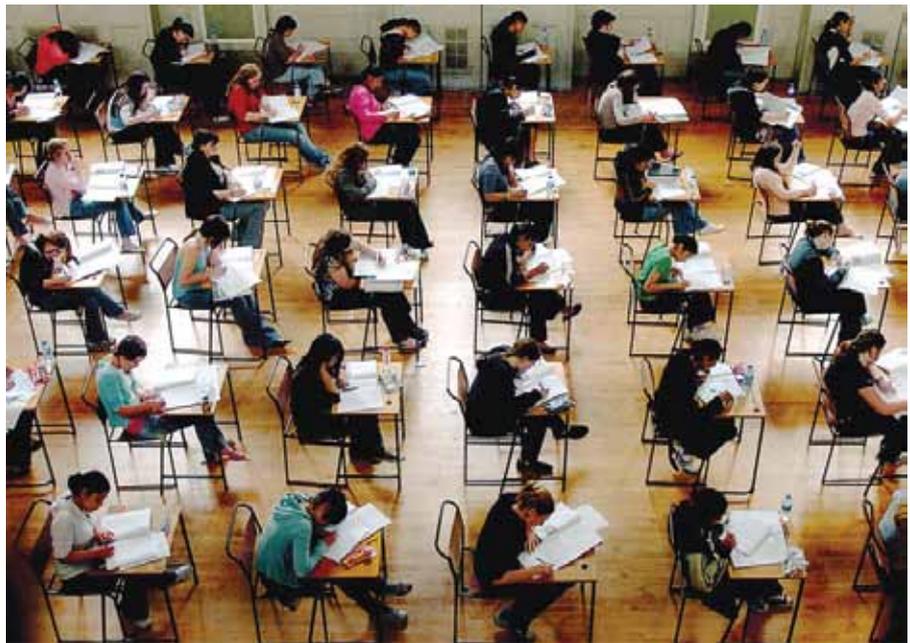
life. The school, with the fancy name and everything, was housed in a nondescript building in a busy area of the city. Of course the boy wouldn't study there. And since it would be too embarrassing to return home with that sorry tale, he did the thing that would save his face. He went to his relatives in Nepal and got himself admitted to a Campus there.

Back Story 3

Ms Thapa, knew her son had the potential to excel in Sciences. He was good with computers, wrote programs and frequently troubleshooted for friends and family. The problem was that he was extremely unmotivated. In spite of his lethargy, the boy topped his school. That was when he expressed his desire to study Computers. The problem was that the entrances exams had all been conducted and she didn't want her son to lose a year. Just on a whim she contacted a much advertised Private University. They had a few seats left and since the board marks of her son were about the 90%, he could get admitted to the institute. However, she was told to hurry with the payments since the seat could not be indefinitely reserved for her son. In the meantime, she tried looking around for other options. That was when that private institute started calling again. They began to offer discounts and in the end made an offer that was just 30% of what was quoted in the beginning. Ms Thapa was quite confused by this bargaining and did not know what to make of the Univ, which on paper had impressive credentials.

Making the right choice

The predicaments talked about in the aforementioned accounts are not just stray incidents. Most hill students and guardians sorely lack the relevant information needed to make sound choices as far as higher education is concerned. Peer pressure, personal and parental aspirations that are not based on a sound appraisal of skills and aptitudes, lack of good marks and the relentless assault by slick marketing campaigns of private institution all contribute to the confusion that plague students and guardians especially after the plus two



results are declared.

Even the most progressive of schools do not employ a full-time career counselor and career fairs that are organized during this time of the year are done with the intention of cynically preying on the confusion and vulnerabilities of the clueless guardians and their wards.

However it is not necessary to be so unprepared for what is perhaps the watershed decision in the life of a family. Ideally speaking the groundwork for the specific career or the line of study that a student would choose to undertake is laid out in the school. It is indeed possible and necessary to go beyond the usual clichés of saying that one wants to be a doctor or engineer. A regular appraisal of a child's attitudes and aptitudes by both the teachers and parents actually help.

School visits by role models (preferably ex-students) from diverse disciplines help a student in setting up goals toward which he or she can begin to work in right earnest. If necessary, appropriate focus should also be given to livelihood oriented vocational education that seeks to impart specific skills for blue collar jobs. In fact the fallacy that only a University Education guarantees success in life should be corrected at an early age, especially in the light of the revelations that most Indian graduates are unemployable when they come out

fresh from colleges.

It is indeed now well understood that a well-rounded school education is what imparts the edge when one enters the job market. As one finishes high school and is readying oneself for college there are a few basic things that one should be aware of.

The first is the choice between a degree and a diploma. A degree (such as BA, BSc, BCom) is an academic certificate whereas a diploma is generally given for courses with a professional focus.

In the recent times, new courses such as BBA, BCA etc have also been added to the bewildering array of choices that are offered to fresh high school graduate. However unless there are very compelling reasons to take them (BBA, BCA) up, academic subjects at the graduate level, according to a handbook prepared by Institute for Career Studies, 'facilitate a wider knowledge base and the development of thinking skills, which are vital for professional growth in any field'.

There are also a number of fallacies that need to be cleared. The most widely held misconception being that there isn't much scope for the Humanities student. As a result, regardless of aptitude or interest students are forced to take up Science. However if one were to study the education-trajectory of these

students, it won't come as a surprise that the majority give up science and opt to take up other subjects at the graduation level. Another mistaken point of view is with regard to what are called the Honors courses. If the idea is it to just graduate and then get into the job hunt, by sitting for competitive exams, pursuing a general graduate degree (the so-called BA pass) with additional focus on developing analytical, logical, mathematical and language skill would be a better idea than going in for honors classes. Honors syllabus are rigorous and may suit only those academically inclined.

New Career Options

A glance at the new career options opening up however reveals that the job market of today, offers a lot for people coming in from any discipline. A lot of the emerging career options have to do with what career counselors call the I-C-E sector.

The acronym which stands for Information, Communication and

Entertainment, have opened up a wide spectrum of job opportunities. Directors, scriptwriters, performing artists, VJs and RJs, set designers, sound engineers



and journalists are just some of the professionals fall within the domain of I-C-E jobs. Besides those jobs, demands are being made for advertising and public relation officers.

Design too has become the cornerstone for almost every enterprise today. Ceramics, textiles, interiors, fashion, jewelry, automobiles, instruments, animation are just some of

the few areas in which a creative person may find a fulfilling career.

The service sector with focus on tourism and hospitality management, education, insurance and IT enabled 'outsourcing' services is also a high growth area that provide opportunities for millions.

The problem then is not so much about the availability of jobs, as it is about the lack of preparedness to take them up. Sadly most begin to get a career focus only quite late in life. It is however necessary and possible to be invested with employable skills right from school onwards. The art of communicating effectively, the ability to think critically and quickly and on ones feet, speed reading, are some of the skills that can be developed right from the day one enters school.

Of course, it is often said that education should not be only about employment. However it goes without saying that a good education while preparing one for life, also equips one for a livelihood.



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Higher Education: Where is it leading to?

by P.D Rai

Higher education, which happens in colleges and universities, is now in focus once again. We can attribute two reasons for this. One, the examinations of the various boards of secondary education is just out and the scamper to get admission into 'good' colleges is on. The second, though unlikely, is the spat between Minister Jairam Ramesh and his colleague Kapil Sibal about the quality of research being done by faculty in IITs and IIMs. Jairam says that IITs and IIMs are great because of the students who populate them and not because they get good teaching there. Kapil necessarily defends these Institutions as being great because of students as well as great faculty. The debate continues. All these point to a concern on falling educational standards.

Whatever the outcome of the debate the question is why is it that children, parents and others have such a hard time getting the course of their choice? I have been watching this scenario for some time now and it definitely is getting worse.

We have not paid adequate attention to higher education for a very long time. Capacity increases in some of our major Institutes are just about being expanded. New institutions are being built but all in the last few years only. Critical resources like faculty will remain a severe bottleneck for a long time. Hence there is a huge deficit in the number of seats available and the demand for the same keeps rising. Consequently demand outstrips supply many times over leading to ever rising cut off marks and entrance results. All this leads to a season of nightmares for many very good students as well. Imagine how this negatively affects the morale of our young population. Are we headed for demographic dividend or for disaster? There is ample scope for reality check here.

What is being done? India needs more than 2000 universities to be set up in the next decade or so. Even then with our growing population and greater aspirations of our children will continue to fight for entrance. The GER

(gross enrollment ratio) is just 12 percent at present in India. Imagine what would happen if it just doubled without proper increase in the number of seats available. Hence the task is too big just for Government to handle both in terms of human capital needed but also it will mean huge investments which it does not possess. Perforce there will have to be participation of the private sector. However, this is something which is still to be sorted out in terms of firm public policy.

So the picture does not look too bright. How will anyone survive this ordeal? The class XII milestone is therefore a really significant one. Based upon the performance here one can either sail through or face a real challenge in obtaining a good degree. Hence, parents and teachers always insist on their children to do nothing else but to keep studying and tuitions are omnipresent leading up to the class XII examinations.

But then is this all there to life? I for one can vouch that children need to play, learn to interact with peers and adults alike, learn languages, learn to communicate and speak up in public. They must learn to be inquisitive and explore to find answers. All this and much more!

Yet the picture looks frightening when painted the way as

aforementioned.

Therefore, one possible answer to all this is to take the controls right back onto oneself. So it has to start with the home environment. Guidance at home is the key. We understand that there are issues to this as most of our young students are first generation school goers. So it is up to the community and builders of thought leadership who have to instill a better sense of how to cope. However, those who can afford it bypass the system by getting admission to universities abroad, the United States being the favourite. Somehow this plays out well with even average students as holistic education does something really good to young people. Liberal arts, being a good example wherein science and humanities subjects are taught side by side giving rise



to a balanced state of mind. Creativity is a direct outcome.

We have no choice in an environment of this kind where getting into a good college has gone beyond the realm of competition. It is bordering on making super kids of our children. We cannot call this normal by any standards. Therefore children will have to be micro-guided. This means that we have to map the talents of our children more minutely. Then we need to stream them. This way there will be niche areas where children can, not only survive but thrive as well. Not all will make it to the top schools and universities but if one looks around there are plenty of good institutions which can make the grade.

Here is also where we can look at some of the key attributes in successful people. Public speaking, confidence, languages command, both in articulation and writing and a definite knowledge of arithmetic I would term as life skills. Follow this up with a positive and a can do attitude, along with a problem solving sense is enough to land one into a good job or livelihood. A definite skill would help and that

is what one can pick up with higher education. However, all this is easier said than done as we have weak links in the form of school education for majority of the children. For those who choose not to go to universities they can look for skill development courses to enable them to move ahead.

So, the challenge is right upon us. There is no place to hide. Facing it squarely means a lot of hard work and focused attention. Micro guidance is the key. With a dose of good luck it should not be insurmountable!

Good luck to those of you who are in the thick of all this. To others it is about time to put our thinking caps on and get into real action of adding value to society in whichever way possible.

[The author is a sitting Member of Parliament from Sikkim. He is a member of the Consultative Committee attached to the HRD Ministry, GOI. The views expressed in this article are his personal and do not reflect those of the Government or the Party he represents]



Back to the Old Ways

by Jiwan Rai

To me our education system seems like an overambitious commoner girl dreaming of a prince to appear out of the blue to kiss her and turn her into a princess. As young and evolving a culture as Sikkim is, it cannot afford to wait any longer to set the flaws in the system right. Sikkim, albeit, a progressive state with a will and promise, has already messed up a lot of things. A poor work culture, a not-so-competent manpower, corruption and a dearth of thinking intelligentsia can be attributed to the flawed education system. What Sikkim will be a few decades from now depends to a large extent on how the education system will be managed from now on.

One of the silver linings in the otherwise dark clouds hovering over our education system is the political will generated in the leadership. The historic confession of chief minister, Pawan Chamling, in last year's 15th August address at Paljor Stadium betrays the felt need at the highest level of governance.

There is a sense in which the quality of education has been deteriorating in Sikkim. Let me hasten to add that, during those good old days, barring a few, most of the schools in Sikkim were self-run, self-managed and self-overseen by community people. They established

their own schools, employed their choice teacher/s and monitored them. There was a great value attached, not only to "education", but also to the "way it was managed". The sanctity of education was upheld by the exceptional mutual-accountability. The results were good. Educated ones of those times stood out from the rest.

Ever since education became a subject of the state, much has happened. More schools, more teachers, more students. Perhaps better infrastructures, better pay for teachers. But nothing has happened quality-wise. There is no question mark against the intentions of the government. It is the system that is fundamentally flawed.

Numerous comparisons between private and government schools have been made by all and sundry. Much has been said for and against the poor performance of government schools. But nothing happens 'next'. The fact of the matter is, however, that privately run schools, whether they are run by individual families, trusts or holy/religious-orders have been conventionally outperforming their government counterparts in our country. We have developed a philosophy that conveniently underplays this time-tested fact. Yes, differences in the socioeconomic status of kids in government and private schools cannot

be ruled out. Social inequalities and familial motivation as in parental involvement in kids' studies do play a role. However, abilities or academic competence are never the exclusive traits of kids born in wealthier homes but can be developed and honed in every child by schools. Herein lies the urgent need for institutes to iron out the social discrepancies that plague less fortunate children.

The reasons government schools are giving poor results are many. The following three could be some of them.

Lack of autonomy in school administration:

The significance of the heads of schools is little more than ceremonial. An effective school administration involves complete liberty for the heads in choosing the right kind of team. You can perhaps constitute a cricket team with footballers and hockey players but you can't expect a Dhoni to lead them to win a world cup. Much less when you form a cricket team with non-athletic members.

Large bureaucracy: Our education system functions as an Indian joint family where bureaucracy is a mighty grandpa.

He is always stressed out as he has too big a family to look after. Moreover, the married sons and daughters-in-laws have a somewhat confused identity in the family as they seldom get a chance to operate as 'papa' and 'mama' in the family. Grandchildren look to their parents and grandparents and ask "who runs this house?" That may be manageable at home but school can't be run that way. Accountability becomes improbable. Our bureaucracy is so large and so intricately designed that the buck skids all over the place for the lack of a place to stop. The hierarchy

of immediate bosses stands like a Tower of Babel. Truly, the education system doesn't and mustn't function that way.

Lax selection procedure for heads of schools: With the senior heads of schools retiring in clusters, vacancies are being generated like potholes on our highways. "Young blood" has been the slogan. However, the other elements that need to be accentuated are a genuine passion for the profession, visionary thinking, a bent to an academic lifestyle and a track-record to prove them. Nobody can choose a leader of an academic institute merely by conducting a written test and viva voce. There has to be a trustworthy mechanism to track the history of candidate teachers. The Annual Confidential Record (ACR) doesn't indicate much as it can be manipulated. How many ACRs in the HRDD tell the true history?

The government can attempt a few flagship projects to see if an autonomous, de-bureaucratized school with a genuinely passionate headmaster can answer the long standing question- "how can a government school be at par with private ones?" The HRDD perhaps needs an autonomous board consisting of academicians of good repute and apolitical, visionary prominent figures from different fields to monitor such schools. Each school must have a no-nonsense managing committee consisting of stakeholders to oversee its functioning. The role of bureaucracy has to be confined to looking after the physical infrastructures.

[The author is a teacher who received the National BOLT Award from the president of India in 2006.]



Go kiss the World

by Dewaker Basnet

We are but products of the choices that we make in life – Anon

The quote could not be more relevant than now for a lot of youngsters making their first real time educational transition from "school life" to "college life". From the comfortable aegis of a school to a wide open habitat of a college is quite a change for students. The shift means, the days where a student can expect overprotective teachers who know each student by his/her name is over. Days when students are punished for not having submitted their homework on time or reprimanded for not bringing the required book to class is

history and so are a lot of things that youngsters have been following as a routine while in school. College brings in a new paradigm for students. Here friendships are redefined, canteens attract more of a discussion than a regular classroom and "teacher" is no longer a teacher but a "lecturer." Small or big, the transitions are for real.

College as a lifestyle comes along with its own charms and perks. These benefits can be life changing, positive way or otherwise. As students move from schools to colleges, happy on the shift, the liberty of taking one's life in one's hand is something which comes as an added responsibility. And

this is why it is important to understand and experience the transition from school to college. The freedom to choose the right from the wrong is quite an arduous task for a young adult.

There is one thing that a youngster has to understand about freedom though - "With freedom comes along a sense of accountability and self responsibility." If the youngster is able to understand the ethos behind the statement, there are brighter chances that he/she will excel in whatever task he/she undertakes.

As a smart young individual as you transition from school to college, there are a few tips which could be handy and help you leverage yourself better in the long run –

Think and act like a young adult

Remember, now that you are in college you have a lot of perks in your hand and the most important perk is the ability to make a lot of decisions for yourself. There will be attractions and distractions that would come as a part of the deal. Be careful while deciding on the line that you are towing. Look at the long and the short term benefits of the actions that you take. You are a young adult. You have the freedom to decide your acts. Do think and act like one!

Mingle with people beyond your comfort zone

I remember when I first landed in Bangalore to study, there were a group of friends from back home in my college. I always found it strange and funny that they always mingled with the people from Sikkim. Now what's the point in only mingling with only your people when you go out to get education and exposure? Stretch yourself. Meet people from all backgrounds, be comfortable with them, learn from them, make your contacts and that's where one of the aspects of getting exposed comes into play. From experience, I assure you that it will be wonderful enrichment meeting people from varied degrees. However, do not forget your state-mates too. And if you intend to study in Sikkim, make sure that you do not hang around only with your friends from school. Connect yourself to people of diversified backgrounds and share your learning with them.

Attend classes and also attend value added sessions in your college

These days, about 75-80% attendance in most of the colleges in any part of the country is mandatory. So don't worry about the regular classes. You have to attend it anyways. What is important for you is to attend the various non mandatory guest lectures that come to your college. Listen to the speakers who bring along with them years of experience, ask them questions, share your thoughts, listen to their views and this is how you learn and grow in confidence.

Participate in various intra and inter college events

College is a good place to enhance your skills and showcase the talents you have. If you have been participating in events while at school, accelerate the participation level at college.

You might not perform well at the first instance, but you will realize that with time, you will gain the confidence and the flair of performing well. And also, if you start performing well, you will gain recognition and accolades will follow your way. What more do you want to ask for?

Get yourself a weekend part time job!

If you can, do get yourself a weekend part time job. It could be helping some event management company with their shows, some telecom company promoting their brand, some consulting company looking for executors who help them with some surveys etc. The advantages are–

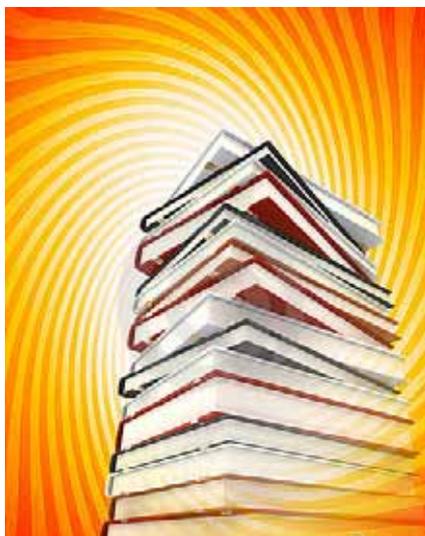
You get to meet and interact with a lot of people which will help you shed away your reservations and help boost your confidence.

You will make some bucks for your pocket money along with making a huge ton of friends and people who can help you in the coming times

It would help you polish your resume in the coming times when you go out to a company seeing for a job.

We are but products of the choices that we make in life. Make refined choices choice. Be a star. Make yourself counted. To borrow a title from Subrato Bagchi's book – "Go Kiss the World!"

[The Author is the founder of 24hoursinspired, a personality development training firm based out of Bangalore. He is also the author of "Moving Ahead", and an e-book titled "Springboard your life".]



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Thinking out of the box

by Maria Lauenstein Denjongpa

In his address at the 98th Indian Science Congress last January, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh urged scientists to “think big, think out of the box, think ahead of the times.” Former HRD Minister Kapil Sibal echoed this request for change by adding “We need a new paradigm of higher education that is developmental and individually centred, environmentally sound and all-inclusive.”

This call for innovation in higher education makes the early 21st century an exciting time to be a college student in India. But thinking big and out of the box is not a skill that can suddenly be turned on when a student goes to college. Thinking creatively begins—or doesn’t—at an early age and must be nurtured by caring parents, wise teachers and innovative schools. This is why teaching methods that encourage critical thinking are so essential. Having the courage to “think out of the box” requires children feel confident enough to ask questions. Everyone has heard the expression, “there is no such thing as a stupid question.” While that may not be true 100 % of the time, it is definitely true that students who feel confident to ask “Why?” in maths, science, history and literature classes are more likely to succeed in “thinking big and ahead of their time.”

Of course, the confidence to ask questions is only the beginning. Thinking out of the box requires that teachers know how to foster critical thinking skills as well as the content of their subject. Twenty-first century teachers must be well versed in Bloom’s taxonomy, the categories of higher and lower thinking. The first level is being able to recall basic facts, but that is only the first and most basic level. To activate higher levels of learning, students must understand the facts, be able to apply them to other situations, to analyze and evaluate, and finally create new ideas. The creation of new ideas, the highest level of learning, includes all the lower levels and is what Prime Minister Manmohan Singh calls, “thinking out of the box.”

Incredible innovation has been happening in India in this area in the last decade. Ashish Rajpal, founder of idiscoveri and Xseed has developed a cutting-edge curriculum combining the content of ICSE and CBSE with teaching methods, that implement higher levels of learning. He introduced an impressive teacher-training program where teachers learn to how to teach at this higher level. The results have been impressive. Students not only score higher on board exams but also better understand concepts

and can analyze and evaluate. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGEYFZAATLs>)

At the same time, Xseed (and any curriculum based on Bloom’s taxonomy) requires that schools change their pedagogy, and teachers learn how to ask open-ended questions (Questions that require an explanations rather than a yes or no answer.) You can easily recognize a “higher-level” classroom because teachers are asking questions like “How?” and “Why?” and “Can you elaborate on that?” Instead of asking “What is photosynthesis?” for example, a teacher may ask, “How do plants make food?” and expect their students to be give a thought-out answer in their own words. Teachers have to be comfortable with questions like this: You are at a construction site, and you see a small sparrow trapped in a 1 foot long hole, the diameter of which is such that the sparrow cannot get out on its own. How can you save the sparrow? (Clue: Use your knowledge of Archimedes Principle to solve the problem)”



Imagine how many more brilliant scientists, mathematicians, writers, doctors, political scientists and artists we could produce simply by training our teachers to give their students the tools to think critically, ask questions, analyze, and evaluate.

“The approach and methodology for creating an inclusive and sustainable innovation ecosystem has to be essentially our own — that is, Indian,” Minister Sibal added to the Prime minister’s comments.

Sibal’s “innovative Indian ecosystem” requires parents and teachers working as a team to create a safe and nourishing environment where children can reach the higher levels of thinking. To accomplish this, parents and teachers must be comfortable saying, “I’m not sure. Let’s find out together.”

Innovation doesn’t happen over night, but education, fueled by the burgeoning economy, is definitely evolving at a rapid pace. It is exciting to be involved in primary and secondary education at a time when such change is not only encouraged, but also required by law.

[Maria Lauenstein Denjongpa teaches Literature and English at Taktse International School. She received her BA honors in anthropology from Brown University (magna cum laude), Providence, Rhode Island and her MFA in literature and creative writing from Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont.]



Deciding on a career? Look inwards first

by Naresh Agarwal

It is a great time of your life when you are done with school and bracing for a new world of higher education. It is also a time of uncertainty and confusion when you do not know which path to choose. Each one leads to a different destination and you're not sure if this is the one for you. You're also not sure what options you have. How is one to know what steps to take and what to do then?

The problem with 'scope'

Many a times, I've had questions from parents, or sometimes the students themselves, asking which field has a good "scope". What they typically imply when they mention scope is which career choice will assure a good job and salary once their children complete the studies. There are a few problems with this: 1) the question coming from the parent rather than the student themselves 2) basing your choices on what others are doing rather than what you want to do in life 3) using money or salary at the end of studies as a deciding factor. What ends up happening then is that you choose careers where there is maximum 'scope' i.e. what a huge majority of people are doing, and it may or may not be what you want to do or what you enjoy doing. The choices, most often, boils down to being a Doctor, Engineer and these days, doing an M.B.A. or being an Investment Banker. There is nothing wrong with these career choices – just that you need to be sure that this is what you want to do and be, as you'd need to be sure before making any other career choice. Once chosen, any choice will mean a lot of hard work.

Look inwards

The time really is for self-introspection. First, forget which field has a good scope or what others are doing. For a moment, also forget what your parents want of you. Then, taking charge of your own life, ask yourself these questions. It might help to sit alone in a quiet room with a pen and paper and write down the answers or the thoughts or questions that you have along the way. Put your phones, laptops and other devices away for a while so that you're not distracted during the span of these 20-30 minutes or more. Reflect on yourself and your life thus far. What have you achieved so far in life? What are the things

about you that you are happy about? What are the things about you that you are not happy about and would want to change? What is it that you enjoy doing? What are the things you are good at? What is it that you're passionate about? What are the things you hate doing? What is it that you detest? Next, reflect on the journey ahead. What do you want to achieve in the next 5 years (imagine what you see yourself doing during these 5 years)? What do you want to achieve in the next 10 years (imagine what you see yourself doing during these 10 years)? What do you want to achieve in the next 50 years (imagine what you see yourself doing during these 50 years)? When you are old and look back at your life, how do you want to see yourself as having lived it? What is it that you want to do in life? Why were you born? What is the purpose to your life?

As a next step, imagine a career that you'd be very happy pursuing (forget, for a moment, whether it pays enough money, or whether you've scored high enough, whether you'll beat the competition or whether you'll get the college seat). It might help to think of the skill sets you excel at (things that you enjoy, are good at and passionate about) and careers where these skills might be valued. If you're not sure about the career options, just write down your skill sets and wait until you seek more information.

Gather information

After you've done the first step, it's now time to talk to as many people as possible, do a Google search and reach out to various universities and colleges. Your parents, teachers and mentors can also help point you to the right resources. It might also help to attend career workshops and seminars, and check out your local library for books. Google might just be the best place to begin. Try out searches with various keywords. Search for the list of top colleges in the discipline you are looking for – both in India and abroad, scholarship options, etc. Scour each website in great detail. If email addresses are provided, write to people inquiring about their programs, but don't ask questions before looking through the website. The questions you ask over email must reflect the research you've done. Inquire about things which are not there

on the website or which build upon the things mentioned there. Search for Facebook groups and pages belonging to the institutions and organizations and connect with people who are part of those institutions. To search for Twitter feeds or tweets, you may go to <http://search.twitter.com>. If you want to be an engineer, talk to engineers (whether in person, on the phone, skype, online chat, email or Facebook) and ask what the life of an engineer is like? Does the person enjoy the work? What are the things s/he likes about the job? What are the things s/he doesn't like about the job? What is a typical day for the person like? What are the major challenges of the job? If you want to be a graphic designer, connect with and talk to graphic designers and ask similar questions finding out about the typical day of a graphic designer. Do that for any career option you want to pursue. Each phase of information gathering should give rise to more questions. Keep writing the options and answers you've resolved so far and the further questions you have.

Evaluate your options

As you gather enough information, you need to continuously evaluate your options. Based on your skills sets, write down the career options that are best for you. Try to come up with three or four options in decreasing order of priority. For each of your options, list the names of the colleges or universities, the websites and contact details. You need to have done an extensive research on these websites and contacted the admissions departments in these over email. You can always send informal emails before you send in a formal application. Don't just sit waiting for replies after you've sent emails. Keep writing to more and more people in different institutions. Based on your scores in your exams, come up with a list of options you have.

Apply far and wide. Different colleges, universities and institutions have their own admissions process. Spend time studying the application process of each in great detail and prepare required materials accordingly. Depending on different institutions, you might be asked for things like your resume (make sure it is professional and well-formatted; remove all redundant words; seek help if needed), personal statement (a 1-2 page essay about yourself where you describe yourself, why you want to pursue studies in this area and why you've chosen to apply to that institution – a very important document for people evaluating your application; other places might require a cover letter; seek feedback and help here), copies of transcripts/mark sheets, certificates of extracurricular activities, letters from the school, letters of references, etc.

Customize and give adequate time to each application. Seek opinion and feedback to refine your application before you send it out. Do this for each of the applications you send. When applying, both quality and quantity is important. You need to be proactive and to persevere. While it is very important to spend time in each application, you also want to apply for and wide. Throw a wide net so that you'll finally get at least a few options to choose from. Keep in mind that there might be application fees involved, so here you might have to be selective. For applications with no or minimal fees, make sure you apply to all of these. Also keep in mind that most applications have a deadline. Your applications must reach these institutions by a certain date. Plan accordingly.

The interview process

Once you get shortlisted in a few places, you might be shortlisted for interviews or called for entrance tests. Be yourself, but be your best self. The question 'Tell us something about yourself' actually means, 'Why should we take you or choose you over others?' Prepare for all possible questions. The typical ones pertain to your strengths, your weaknesses, your reasons for wanting to choose that career, your reasons for wanting to join that institution, your scores, etc. Be honest, forthright, polite and confident.

Enjoy the journey

Once you gain admission to a college, prepare to do very well. Don't just go to college wanting to enjoy, though you'll certainly enjoy the process. Go to college wanting to excel and being the best student that college or institution has ever seen. Use it as an opportunity to improve and change things about yourself and to build upon your strengths. Approach each course and each assignment wanting to get an A+ in it. Once you set your goals high enough, you won't falter. Remember that this might just be a stepping stone to your greater life goals and you might change and pursue further studies as your move along. If you fall or falter, get up and keep moving. The idea is to keep learning, keep contributing at every phase of your life. I'm sure you'll do very well. My best wishes are with you!

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