



One Serious Education

What the British taught me about school, work, and maturity.

By NICK CUNKELMAN

I never thought studying abroad for a semester would mean traveling through time. Sure, had I gone to dig ruins in Greece or walk the Silk Road, my sense of being in a Ray Bradbury story would be understandable. But I had gone from Maine to St. Catherine's College in Oxford, England – land of Stonehenge and the gleaming City of Westminster – with the intention of continuing my 2½-year-old journey into higher education. Why, then, as I conversed with British students at my new university, did I feel like a freshman again?

The easy answer – that I had to reorient myself to an entirely different culture and institution, from meeting new faces to learning how to print my papers – covers only part of my McFly complex. Indeed, no matter where one travels for an extended stay, a sense of inadequacy is natural. Reading the blogs of friends in New Zealand, Africa, and South America and their respective adaptations to learning the rules of rugby, eating *matoke* in Uganda (a plantain dish that a friend nicknamed “the gut brick”), or calling everything in Patagonia “artisanal” only drove home this point. Besides, this readjustment period ends. One month in, I was used to the feel of two-pound coins and

saying “Cheers” after ordering a ciabatta.

Yet even as my darts game improved and the BBC became my new Wikipedia, talking with the full-time British students – first-years included – still brought back a sense of being the little man on campus. Two things struck me: their knowledge base and, simply, their confidence. As much as they tried to downplay it, my fellow scholars took their studies, and their place in college, quite seriously. With loads of free time before exams, they spent much of it studying (what they called “revising”). And due to only a few hours a week in class (“tutorial”), they essentially *had* to manage themselves well if they also wanted to play football, attend

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concerts, and take in the local drama scene.

Inspired by the standard they set, I took to the books more than ever and, through my talks with classmates, essentially added a third tutorial: British Ed. In the United Kingdom, secondary education is required only to age 16, and those who wish to go on to higher learning must take public examinations (called A-Levels) that usually cap off two additional (and purely optional) years of preparation. Before that, teachers guide students toward certain subjects around age 13, encouraging them to pursue the ones in which they excel. And with “taster sessions” exposing students to new subjects before they even get to college, or “uni,” many of my fellow scholars in England had already taken courses in economics, philosophy, political science, religious studies, theater, and more.

To me, all of this sounded like attending a liberal arts college before going to college, but I couldn't help but wonder what was lost. Sure, the British system means earlier specialization, which partially explains why first-year students knew roughly as much about their subject as rising American college seniors did about their major, but what about flexibility? I didn't meet one student who had changed his or her major at uni, nor one who had taken classes at the uni level in subjects outside of his or her degree area. If, while at secondary school, you wanted to continue a course of study but didn't have the grades, tough luck. Seems quite early, I thought, to make a life-changing decision.

Still, I couldn't help but admire British students for their clarity and drive. And I kept coming back to something an adviser told us foreign students during an orientation session: “Do your schoolwork like it's your job.”

I could see the benefits of approaching college with as much professionalism as passion. For most of my British friends, uni was an occupation all its own. Their primary focus was to pursue a field in which they excelled, whether they liked it or not. However rigid and overly pragmatic this approach can seem to outsiders, it teaches students how to manage themselves not just for careers but for *life*. And that, in turn, breeds confidence.

I'm back in Maine now, a senior majoring in philosophy. People sometimes ask me: What can you do with that? My answer is still the same: What *can't* I do? But as I take to revising in the library, I believe it now more than ever. I think my British friends would be proud.

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