

Foreword

Having been involved in higher education for over thirty years, I've had the good fortune of working with bright, talented, ambitious, and success-oriented students. That being said, I often find myself wondering why some of these students choose to attend college. What motivates them? What do they hope to accomplish? Are they applying to college only because it appears to be the “thing to do”? Are they really interested in learning, or are they just trying to get a degree? Maybe they would be better off taking a gap year or two before starting college, so that they would gain the maturity and perspective necessary to have a meaningful college experience.

Frankly, there should only be one reason to pursue a college degree: to become a better-educated person. To become better-educated doesn't simply mean that you've accumulated new information; instead, it means that you've learned to apply new information for the betterment of society, to look at situations with an open mind, to solve problems by synthesizing data from various sources, to be able to work in a team, and to communicate ideas verbally and in writing. It took me a number of years to realize this, however, as I initially thought that education was just about memorizing facts and then regurgitating them. Had I embraced this more comprehensive approach to learning as an undergraduate student, I would definitely have been a happier and

more fulfilled student, because I would have seen the value in the hours I spent studying. In addition, I would have taken a more active role in connecting with my peers and with faculty members as I pursued my intellectual passions.

So when I learned that Daniel Wong was writing *The Happy Student: 5 Steps to Academic Fulfillment and Success*, I became intrigued and encouraged—intrigued because I wondered how Daniel would define and approach happiness, success, and fulfillment; encouraged because I truly hoped that he would focus on the process of learning and not just the outcome.

I was not disappointed.

This book is a wonderful resource for any high school or college student who wonders if there's more to education than getting good grades. Daniel shows you, from a student's perspective, that there is—even more than you could imagine.

As Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students at Duke, I had the privilege of meeting and getting to know Daniel toward the end of his undergraduate career. By the time we met, Daniel had evolved into the active, engaged, and engaging student that college administrators hope all students will become. Little did I know that Daniel had not always been a happy student, in spite of his obvious and overwhelming academic success. How refreshing it is for Daniel to identify in *The Happy Student* that a “holistic attitude is vital if you want to become a happy student, and happiness must be investigated in the context of a balanced approach toward education and life.” I couldn't agree with him more, and I applaud his courage in being willing and able to articulate this important sentiment. Not only does Daniel explain why it's essential to have this attitude; it's also evident that he lives out this attitude on a daily basis. This makes *The Happy Student* all the more encouraging and inspiring.

Today, many students (and their parents) worry too much about what majors and minors will lead to a lucrative career. Unfortunately, they fail to realize that such an approach is unlikely to lead to happiness and fulfillment. Daniel has achieved remarkable success as a student. He was a top performer from elementary school all through college. At Duke, he majored in mechanical engineering and economics, and graduated *summa cum laude*. But earning a “marketable” degree and attaining great academic success, on their own, did not make Daniel happy. For many years of his formal education, he was just going through the motions. It was only after high school that Daniel found the true purpose of education and uncovered the key principles to becoming a happy and motivated student.

We’re so fortunate that Daniel has shared his experiences and sage advice in this book, so that students can avoid making the same mistakes he made.

Education happens both inside and outside the classroom. As an experienced educator, I guarantee that you’ll have to take risks if you want to maximize your education. I completely agree with Daniel’s suggestions that you take risks, such as enrolling in classes and getting involved in extracurricular activities that are outside your comfort zone.

Education is a lifelong journey, one that definitely doesn’t end when you receive your high school diploma or college degree. If you take what Daniel has to say to heart, you’ll discover that education is an adventure that’s full of challenges and excitement. Listen to his advice—your happiness as a student and lifelong learner depends on it.

Sue Wasiolek, Ed.D.

Co-author, *Getting the Best Out of College*

Preface

I started writing this book after my third year of college. Initially it felt pretty weird telling my close friends that I was trying to get a book published. Most responses I got went something like “What credentials do you have? Who wants to read something written by someone who hasn’t even graduated from college yet? Maybe you should wait a few years before you try to get the book published.”

Those remarks were discouraging, but I decided (in naïve self-confidence, not bitter defiance) that they were somewhat irrelevant. This is a book written *by* a student *for* students. I don’t have a PhD in psychology or education, and neither do I have any experience as a teacher. The five-step program I’ve developed, which will help you become a happy and fulfilled student, wasn’t born out of hours spent analyzing data and running experiments. Rather, it was born out of sixteen years of schooling and relentless questioning as to what the true purpose of education is.

During my career as a student, I achieved a lot of academic success—although I’m sure that some of you readers out there have achieved much greater success than me. I graduated *summa cum laude* from Duke University with a double major in mechanical engineering and economics (and a GPA of 3.98 on a 4.0 scale),

was inducted into three academic honor societies in college, didn't get a grade lower than an A- throughout high school and college, and was the salutatorian of my high school (out of a graduating class of 850 students).

Yet these achievements, in and of themselves, didn't bring me happiness. I accomplished what most students dream of, but for most of my academic career it only led to a greater feeling of insecurity and emptiness. I was acing every test and exam, but I felt like I was failing life. My accomplishments made me wonder, "Surely there's more to life than getting A's and trying to get a good job?" I now realize that academics are important, but that they aren't everything. Good grades really don't lead to happiness. In fact, being obsessed about grades leads to *unhappiness*.

The Happy Student is the story of how I discovered real meaning in the pursuit of academic success, and how every student can, too. It's a story that will resonate in the hearts of every college student and every future-minded high school student.

I'll admit that happiness itself is a vague concept. Is it a temporary emotion? Or is it something more than that, something you can experience at a deeper level even when you don't *feel* particularly cheery? In this book, I'm going to use the latter definition and talk about happiness in relation to your academics. At the same time, I've realized that focusing solely on your academics isn't the key to academic fulfillment. A holistic attitude is vital if you want to become a happy student, and happiness must be investigated in the context of a balanced approach toward education and life. The subject matter of this book reflects an understanding of this reality. Because of the complexity of this reality, I'll admit that the title, *The Happy Student: 5 Steps to Academic Fulfillment and Success*, captures the heart of the book but doesn't fully describe the wide-ranging content.

Interestingly, when I was doing research on what similar books are on the market, I discovered that every book that aims to motivate students academically focuses on extrinsic measures: new classroom management techniques, innovative systems of rewards and punishments, novel approaches to incentivize learning. (Not surprisingly, most books related to education are about helping students get more A's, regardless of whether they feel fulfilled.)

In other words, most authors assume that students are intrinsically *unmotivated*—and that there's nothing you can do to change that. I don't believe this to be true. To become intrinsically motivated, students must come to a deep realization of the joy of learning and the beauty of education. They must become purpose-driven rather than performance-driven. They must ask the “why” questions before they ask the “how” questions. They must learn how to climb the ladder more effectively, but only after they've made sure the ladder is leaning against the right wall.

I invite you to join me on this journey of asking those all-important “why” questions. This is a challenging process that lays the foundation of your happiness as a student, but it's not for the fainthearted. Happiness isn't just something you feel; it's something you work for. I trust that you're ready to get down to business.

HOW THE BOOK IS STRUCTURED

The introduction describes my transformation from unhappy overachiever to happy straight-A student, which is the basis for why I wrote this book. It details how I discovered the five-step program and how you, too, can benefit from it.

Chapters 1 through 5 elaborate on each of the five steps:

- 1. Decide to run your own race**
- 2. Decide what kind of race to run**
- 3. Start running and stay on track**
- 4. Keep running despite your fears**
- 5. Stay motivated, stay strong**

Each chapter ends with a series of reflection questions. It might be tempting to skip over them, but I encourage you to thoughtfully write out your answers. Doing this will help you clarify your thoughts and make a stronger commitment to take action. Reflection is what you need to turn experience into insight, and information into true learning. This book will give you the information you need to become a happy student, but it's only when you reflect and take action that you'll begin to see a real difference in your life.