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## Alumni Corner | What Did You Actually Learn in College

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## Alumni Corner | What Did You Actually Learn in College

## Alumni Corner

### What Did You *Actually* Learn In College

*Kathleen Larey Lewton '70*

The issue of the real value of college is being widely debated in the U.S., with many arguments about how to measure what has been learned. Those of us who made it through undergraduate degrees, even if it has been many years (or even decades) ago, can probably rattle off a decent list of the courses we took and the subject matter. Those of us who were lucky enough to attend a small, private liberal arts college can probably even dredge up the names of some of our professors and what they taught us (depending on how many decades it has been since we accepted our diplomas and went off to change the world). In my case, and I would warrant that of many of my classmates, the concept of what we knew and who we were when we arrived on campus in the fall of 1969, and what we learned by June, 1970, go far beyond a list of classes.

Not that our classroom work wasn't valuable. Clearly most of us went on to work in a field related to our majors, and our class content helped us in that first job and throughout our careers. For me, my English major meant learning to go beyond reading a lot of material under deadline pressure to be able to analyze and find the meaning – an invaluable skill. And writing – ah, writing. The global Commission on Public Relations Education that I chair has been asking PR employers for 40 years what key skills new hires need, and it hasn't changed in all that time. Skill #1 – writing. Yet even today, when the employers are asked how well the new graduates can write, the answer is still “Not well enough.” This is striking because PR and communications majors, by virtue of what they are studying, should be good if not great writers. So when a client comments on my writing, I silently thank the professors who made us write and write and write – and the time they spent editing and editing and editing. We didn't just get a grade – we got detailed commentary and were sent back to rewrite and re-rewrite.

But classroom work in our majors was only one part of what we learned. Electives, the classes we got to choose based on anything from the time it met to “my roommate liked it”, opened up new worlds. Through taking *Religions of the Orient*, after 12 years in Catholic schools in Illinois, I learned that the world was full of people with different beliefs and values that were as valid as mine, just different. In today's political environment, when I hear comments about “those \_\_\_\_” (fill in the blank, often with the name of a religion), I thank God, quite literally, for what I learned in that class, on our field trips, and from discussions with outside speakers.

Learning didn't stop at the classroom door, however. The options for involvement were so plentiful. My guess is I spent as many hours as a Student Senate officer, being Homecoming chair (back in the days where we had floats and parades and all that), and as a sorority officer, as I did in the classroom. And I learned so much even though at the time, it simply seemed fun. It was only in my 30s that I began realizing the skills I

picked up through that “extracurricular” activity.

- *Management, people.* Organizing and leading teams of other student volunteers, many of whom I barely knew when we started working together. *And management, projects.* Figuring out at age 19 what it took to put on an event without losing money (so non-business majors picked up budgeting skills) or win an award or finish a community service project.
- *Tolerance.* Working with people you didn’t necessarily agree with – or even liked. While we may have gravitated to people who were like us to be close friends, we still had to work, whether in class research projects or sorority fundraising or whatever, alongside people with whom we had little in common. That alone is a career skill worth a year’s tuition.
- *Persuasion.* An essential skill when confronting campus “issues”. From faculty who said “no women in jeans” in class or administration rules that required women to be locked in at standard hours every night, we learned how to make our case with facts and emotions. And even when the issue was the war that divided campuses across the country – somehow at Wesleyan we managed to have opinions expressed, demonstrations held, without violence. After the killings at Kent State, when some students wanted the flags lowered, it was done after a hastily requested 1 a.m. meeting with then President Robert Eckley, who asked that we poll Student Senate to make sure that there was at least majority support. We did, there was, and the flags were respectfully lowered by students, with the presence of Campus Security officers to make sure that all students were able to express their views. And they did. We even had a self-created student organization that “managed” our efforts, the Action Committee for Peace, complete with a PR committee. Beyond marches, we also went to churches -- to explain to local citizens that we were non-violent. And we built mutual understanding and respect.
- *Creating consensus.* When the issue of Commencement demonstrations arose, a senior class meeting (first one ever) was convened and all opinions were heard, to decide that students who wanted to make a statement would wear peace symbols on their caps or gowns. Many of us did; those who strongly opposed our actions nevertheless said they were glad they had a chance to be heard.
- *Being open to the unfamiliar.* Taking advantage of what’s there for you on a campus simply because it’s there. On a dateless Friday night, someone says let’s go see that play, and the play you never heard of is “Marat/Sade,” the first time it was ever performed on a campus. Or a concert when you are NOT a music person. Walking into a lecture in the Main Lounge and listening to a speaker on a topic that was brand new to you. As a die-hard liberal, getting to know the president of Campus Republicans via Student Senate, who ended up being one of my closest forever friends (and we’re still working together -- now it’s class reunions).

So many things we learned stay with us today. Skills that further our careers, clearly, and skills that broaden our lives. Listening. Explaining. Tolerance. Working with people who come together from different backgrounds and values, sharing a common goal.

What did I really learn in college? Everything that allows me to do what I do. Even better, most of the things that make me who I am. An investment that is truly priceless.

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