

THE UNIVERSITY GAME

by Dick Nimmons

A large part of the students who are arriving back at this university this year have one basic purpose in mind: Get a degree (no matter how worthwhile) for what ever usefulness it might have. This is a guide to getting such a degree with a minimum of effort.

FIRST STEP

The first step in gaining a bullshit degree after you have chosen what faculty you would like your degree to come from is to look closely at the course requirements. This is your basic outline of where you must go to get the courses of your choice.

Assume for a moment that you have chosen to get a B.A. (A reasonably good choice because Arts degrees are among the easiest to get—although there is a drawback in that they have very little market value). You have to have a major subject of four or five courses and a minor of three or four courses. Also, two science courses are required one of which must be a lab science.

In obtaining an arts degree you may take as many as seven first year courses. Five of these will come in your first year and the other two may be used to make your course load lighter in your second or third year.

These same or similar advantages may be exploited in other faculties by a careful reading of the calendars.

For example, Physics 342 *Contemporary Physics*, which is known as 'jelly rockets' to its friends, is not available to Science students, but makes a fantastic filler course for Arts or Education students anxious to complete their science requirements.

First year students have a particular problem in that they neither know the rules of the game nor do they have much choice in the courses they take. However, they do have an advantage in that most first year courses have absurdly large classes and lectures can be missed without the professor noticing.

Further, any course or professor who obtained a rating of 3.50 or less on the Students' Union Course Guide probably deserves the same amount of regard.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Once you are in the classroom, the battle for the degree enters its second phase. Now, the important thing is to impress the professor—not with your intelligence but with his own.

At this time, it is your duty to give the professor every opportunity to astonish you with his intelligence. No effort may be spared in the attempt to reinforce his ego at every turn. He must be made to feel that you really do appreciate his style and capability in communicating his knowledge to you.

The basic method of playing to a professor's ego is by asking questions. It doesn't matter how intelligent they are so long as they give him an opportunity to continue talking.

If you aren't really puzzled by anything he has said lately there are a number of means of coming up with something to ask.

If you were naive enough both to buy the textbook for the course and to lug it around with you to your classes you can:

- a. Ask a question about material covered two pages further on in the book, or
- b. Ask about some trivial exception to the rule.

The first works particularly well in the science courses as it both indicates to him that he has successfully taught you something (after all, you aren't asking him about the material he has just covered) and it gives him an opportunity to continue directly into the item that he wasn't quite sure how to tie in with what he had just said.

The second means of getting a question from the textbook works equally well in science and foreign language courses. As before, you have made the professor think that he has communicated something to you, but now, you make him feel even more superior by pretending that only he can guide you through the complexities of the subject matter.

Even if you didn't bring the textbook, there are still a number of ways of asking questions. For starters, you can ask the professor to expand on the meaning and application of some unimportant word or phrase in what he has just said. Always choose a Latin-sounding word of at least three syllables—they have much more confusing meanings and will probably keep him busy for four or five minutes while you prepare a follow-up question.

Follow-up questions (which always begin with 'then...') serve to make the professor believe he has just made the obscure clear to you—even though most of the class probably understands less now than it did before.

Another technique for those who have not equipped themselves with textbooks is known as the 'relevant item dodge.' In this case, the object is to think of something that you have already taken on the course which can be applied to what has just been said and bring it into the discussion.

The professor will either have to affirm your judgement (thereby acknowledging you as an attentive student) or take time out to explain how the application of the idea was incorrect.

Finally, there is always the old standby: The Dumb Question. The dumb question is any question which shows you haven't understood anything of what you have just been told. The advantage of the dumb question is that any half-intelligible thing that you say on the exam will seem like brilliance on your part. Your mark will rise accordingly.

In general, the basic advantage in asking questions is that the professor comes to know of your existence and will therefore remember you when it comes time to prepare the final marks. Whether this is a plus or minus in your case

depends on how well you have been able to impress him with himself.

There is, however, a disadvantage in that he may come to look for you in the classroom and regular attendance may become a necessity.

Aside from asking questions, only one other major opportunity for impressing the professor remains open to you during class time.

Every professor has the habit of breaking off sentences in a way which invites the members of the class to 'fill in the blank'. These are golden opportunities in that the professor is all but begging for some reaction from the members of the class by asking something that he feels sure is easy enough for them to respond to.

Indeed, these questions are either so ridiculously simple that anyone can answer them, the response has been given in the last few sentences. Only an idiot can miss these chances to cover himself with glory.

You will know that you really have it make when, after fifteen seconds of agonising silence, he looks towards you for the answer.

All of this leads to one piece of advice: Never underestimate your professor's intelligence; actually, he is probably more intelligent than you are. His weakness lies in believing himself to be more intelligent.

Your task lies in playing to this belief without ever letting him come to think that you are insulting him. If he begins to think that you've blown it.

To insure against this, it is sometimes good to invest time after class in relating to him as a person. Although this may not raise your mark, it will certainly prevent him from ever thinking of you as a 'run-of-the-mill' student—most of whom, he believes, want nothing more than a mark from him.

EXAMS AND ESSAYS

Essays are one of the easier problems to deal with in the course of getting a degree. In general, the art of writing an essay depends on listening closely to what the professor says in class and then handing it back to him with as much illustration as possible.

Essays are usually assigned in one of two forms: Either the sheet of possible topics has a single sketchy question which loosely defines what the professor wants, or each topic is covered by a long series of items and questions which demand detailed responses.

The latter style of essay is much easier to prepare than the former for the simple reason that one only has got to go to the library, consult a number of 'expert references' in the subject, choose to borrow one of them and mention the others while writing basically what the chosen expert has to say. It is usually best to choose the one who most closely resembles your professor in what he says. The first sort of essay is more difficult for three reasons:

1. You have to do your work in thinking out what you are to do.

2. Form and length are less easily controlled.

3. The answer the prof wants is far less clear.

The first two difficulties can be eliminated by writing a number of questions about the topic for yourself, the third will remain unless you have thoroughly acquainted yourself with his pet theories and preferences.

Papers which are prepared for non-literary subjects are by far the easiest ones to prepare once the basic research has been done. All that is needed is a straightforward statement of what can be discovered about the subject. Absolutely no literary grace is required.

Indeed, aside from the actual presentation of facts in simple standard English, nothing else is wanted—science profs being inclined to think that literary merit is a handicap to a budding scientist.

Exams are the final hazard which stands between you and your degree. They come in two basic shapes: open book and closed book. If you have a choice, opt for a closed book exam. Since it is usually possible to anticipate the areas of the course which a professor will draw his material from, an intelligent person can probably commit enough to memory from those areas to fill up the exam period. The basic advantage of the closed book exam is that because the student has not had access to the questions and the textbook at the same time, the professor has to be less demanding in his standards of judgement.

In the open book exam—whether the student is allowed to bring his books into the examination room or given the questions in advance—the professor can be much more demanding in terms of what he will accept on the paper. A further disadvantage of the open book in the exam room is that frequently too much time will be lost checking sources.

A special problem waits for students taking science exams. Since science exams usually require the solution of a set number of problems, the student really has no way in which he can bullshit his way out of it.

The only short-cut which exists for most university science courses is to remember that they are basically 'number-pushing'—that is, numbers are chased around a page until what looks like a reasonable answer is obtained. What you must do, in a science exam, is memorize the units of every symbol which could be of use (as well as the equations if the prof announces that they will not be provided). This will give you the direction you need in choosing the equation which will give you the correct answer.

These are the primary techniques which will get you the degree you want.

If you are in doubt about the use of these techniques, watch your fellow students. The ones whose names you know after the first two weeks are probably doing what you should be doing: Getting themselves noticed.

Watch these students and imitate their style as best you can. They, certainly, are set on the path to their degree.

The Gateway needs YOU

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