

What Would You Teach the You of Yesteryear?

If ever there was a perfect example of the nature vs. nurture argument — which one most defines us as individuals — business is it. Despite what college teaches us, the most important lessons in the business and working world usually come from what college doesn't teach us. Business classes nurture us with theory and history; economics classes with a practical understanding of the numbers. But life gives us experience, and it is our nature that determines how we deal with it.

We were curious what successful entrepreneurs and businesspeople learned outside the classroom that has made the difference for them. We posed a simple question — If you could teach a college course in something that you wish you could have learned in school, what would it be? We made an effort to steer clear of the usual college classes and culled responses geared toward more intangible things.

The idea for the following collection began with U.S. 1 Preview editor Jamie Saxon, who has long-regretted not taking a course at Tufts University on decision making as a necessary component of work life. College, after all, gives us many options, but few tools to help us decide.

Following is our collection of responses from entrepreneurs and executives, in the writers' own words. The responses run the gamut from the scientific approach (by Michael Paluszek of Princeton Satellite Systems) to the spiritual (by Bob Carr of Heartland Payment Systems).

Social Activist Melissa Gertz: How To Be Practical



A social advocate from an early age, Melissa Gertz grew up in Ringoes, where she first learned about the civil rights movement during middle-school classes. In high school she was active in Amnesty International, and went on to study sociology at Oberlin College and at Eugene Lang College in New York, earning her bachelor's there in 2002. She also minored in gender studies. She earned her J.D. from Rutgers in 2005.

From 2005 to 2008 Gertz worked as a staff attorney at the Community Health Law Project's central New Jersey office on East State Street in Trenton. There she represented indigent and disabled people in a variety of civil matters. Gertz also is the founder of the New Jersey chapter of the National Lawyers Guild.

This background, entrenched in grassroots justice, offers Gertz and those who know her a chance to laugh off a question everyone seems to ask when they learn that she was nearly killed in a traffic accident in 2004 — “Did the crash change the way you looked at the world?”

“I get it all the time,” Gertz says. “But it’s not the sexy answer everyone wants to hear.”

The crash left Gertz severely injured and partially robbed her of her sight. Her founding of the Community Justice Center, a Trenton-based legal services nonprofit that assists the low-income disabled and veterans in central New

Continued on following page

U.S. 1
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Continued from preceding page

Jersey, four years after her accident leads a lot of people to believe the crash was akin to the conversion of St. Paul.

But no. She already had the drive to help the disadvantaged. But the perspective the accident did afford her is to help her believe in people who are sick but don't look it. "I don't look sick, but I am," she says. "And a lot of people are like that."

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I never planned to be an entrepreneur. I had always dreamed of becoming a lawyer, but a businessperson? That was for those corporate MBA types, definitely not for me. I had very little background in business and even less interest.

But life, as they say, is what happens when you're busy making other plans. On July 24, 2004, life definitely happened, as I became the victim (and thankful survivor) of a near-fatal car accident. I was left with physical, neurological, and mental wounds requiring countless surgeries and rehabilitative therapies. I was left with a choice: abandon my dream of becoming a lawyer, or forge my own path. But how on earth would I do that?

Fast forward a few years, and I am spearheading a non-profit that in part helps disabled veterans who share some of the same injuries as I. Having started with nothing but an idea, drive, and enough persuasive charm to convince scores of others to join me, the Community Justice Center is now transforming lives — not merely by providing legal assistance, but by providing something far more priceless — hope.

I'd teach a class to those who for whatever reason want or need to forge their own paths, and offer the following lessons:

Find your niche. You are probably going to have to create your own space. Rest assured, there is always room for the truly authentic, for those who don't fit the mold. Figure out how you will fit in to the field that interests you. Do your homework. The media and others whose support you will need

will always want to know what makes you unique and different from others in the field. It helps if you have an answer.

Don't underestimate the value of in-kind support. Cash flow is always an issue in any small business, but instead of asking for cash assistance, pursue as many forms of in-kind support as possible. You'll not only save more expense than you imagine, you'll also end up with a fantastic pool of talent to learn from and lean on in a pinch.

Learn to like hats. Understand that, especially in the beginning, you will spend a lot less time working in your field, and a lot more time being everything else — a businessperson, a manager, a

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bookkeeper, a fundraiser, a salesperson, and the face of human resources, public relations, and outreach.

The more you know about

these fields before going in, the easier they are to juggle. Often what you cannot obtain through in-kind support, you can save by learning to do yourself. In the beginning, this might make the financial difference between sinking or sailing.

Momentum doesn't just happen. When you are new, customers (or in our case, clients) don't just fall into your lap. We worked endlessly on promotion — giving many presentations a week to those in our fields and in other fields working with the same consumers. We maximized free media, such as Facebook and local television and radio. We convinced every newspaper in town that we were worth writing about, and then used the press in our promotion packets. We got endorsements from prominent politicians, leading to a "jump on the bandwagon" effect. But even after seeing the effects of the momentum, the trick is to keep it going.

Know when to say no. Much easier said than done, but key to not getting overwhelmed and burned out too quickly. Have clear priorities that further your goals, and be wary of saying yes to things that deviate from that. There is always room to change your priorities, but the slippery slope of saying yes to too many things will leave you

feeling as though you have been successful in none.

Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate. Constantly evaluate your progress. Know what's working for you and what isn't and be willing to redirect your path when necessary. Rather than trying to compensate for a weakness, focus on your strengths and use them to propel you forward.

Surround yourself with inspiration. There will be many hard days when you question everything — "What have I gotten myself into? There is no way I can be successful in this endeavor!" And on and on and on.

Know what makes you happy personally and make room for it. The first year of operation can take over your life, but that imbalance isn't healthy for you or your work. When things seem overwhelming, consult your mentors or other sources of inspiration. I found that the book "Naked Idealism" by Dave Wheitner infused me with motivation on the doubtful days.

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