Understanding Politics as an Activity

The primary purpose of this class is to explore the nature of politics as a distinct human activity and a distinctive context in which leadership is exercised. Embedded in this broad goal are numerous distinct questions:

- How is power exercised in the context of democratic societies?
- What specific techniques do leaders use to obtain, maintain, increase power?
- Under what circumstances can politics be an instrument for promoting the public good and advancing racial and social justice?
- How does the use of political power affect those who hold it?

These questions will be explored within the specific setting of the contemporary United States. American democracy is widely described as being in crisis, with an uncertain future. This is manifested in the sharp drop of trust of American citizens in government and its capacities; in widening economic inequalities and inequalities of political influence; and in the potential long-term damage to political institutions and constitutional norms resulting from the Trump presidency. The first part of the course thus focuses primarily on presidential-level leadership in the United States from Franklin Roosevelt to Donald Trump, with an emphasis on governance and policy, not simply electoral results. Focal points include (but are not limited to):

- Understanding the role and workings of the modern presidency and executive branch in U.S. history
- Understanding the relationship between the executive, legislative and judicial branches
- Understanding how the New Deal fundamentally shifted the role of the federal government in society and the impact this had on the presidency and on the nature of American democracy
- Understanding the impact of presidential-level leadership on major recurring policy matters including economic security, economic inequality, racial equity, as well as foreign policy and international affairs
- Understanding the continued legacy of America’s history of racial domination and exclusion on American political life
- Understanding the changing role of money in politics over the past half-century
- Understanding the role of individual political personalities and of “fateful choices” in driving outcomes
• Assessing the disconnect between national politics and growing discontent with American democratic institutions, and considering whether the presidency has become a failed institution
• Assessing what resources the U.S. Constitutional tradition and broader democratic traditions in the United States may have for addressing the current situation

In the final section of the course, we will pivot to consider local politics, both as a site of democratic political leadership very different in tone and substance from national political leadership, and as potential site of democratic renewal and redress of our governance failures.

In short, in this course we will consider fundamental questions concerning leadership, the nature of democratic systems, the relationship between political processes and policy outcomes, and the nature of the American political system. Drawing largely on narrative materials (memoir, journalistic accounts, historical scholarship), we will seek to come to terms with the current condition of American political institutions.

In many Jepson courses, an implicit goal is for students to develop a view about the “world as it should be.” That is a worthy goal. In this class, however, our primary concern is not understanding politics as it should be but as it actually is. A realistic assessment of political leadership is a precondition for fruitful thinking about how politics might be improved.

In the final week, we will discuss possible future directions for American politics drawing on our discussions of both national and local politics.

**General Requirements and Expectations**

This is a reading-intensive course. It is expected students will come to every class prepared to talk about the assigned reading for the date. Some of the texts in the class are dense and packed with information. But these readings are also engaging and at times feature brisk and compelling narratives. As a reasonable rule of thumb, you should plan on reading for this course at least one hour every day during the semester. This is not a light requirement, but it is one students can meet with a reasonable amount of dedication.

To assure reading accountability and engagement with the material, a 600-800 word paper pertaining to the week’s reading will be due each Friday. Students are to bring a working draft of this paper to class in hard copy to use as notes, and may be called upon to share what they have written in class discussion.

This class will not have a term paper, but will have a final written exam.

**Assignments:**

1. Weekly reading, consistent participation, and one or two short classroom presentations (including preparation of discussion questions). 15% Any unexcused absence will lead to a one-third drop in your final course grade.
2. Weekly 5 question quiz administered at the start of class.
3. Weekly papers of 600-800 words. Graded 1-15 scale. Due Friday 5 pm each week. **Bring a rough draft, printed out, to class each week.** Following class you will have until the end of the week to make revisions. **Papers will be returned the following week.** 60%.

4. Each week (beginning week 2) you are to bring to class a clipping or printout of one or more articles from the previous seven days *New York Times* or *Washington Post* of relevance either to the weekly assigned reading or the general themes of the course. (You have access to these newspapers through the *Lexis-Nexis* service provided by the library, and hard copies of each paper are generally available in Dining Hall. You can find articles of interest on the website of each paper and use *Lexis-Nexis* to access full text as needed.) Students will be called upon randomly to talk about the articles they picked during class; you should keep each article collected until the end of the semester for inclusion in your portfolio.

5. Attendance at the Mayor Stoney special lecture on September 12 (during regular class time) and the Blanche Wiesen Cook special lecture on December 4.

6. Turn in portfolio of all written work completed for the class, including copies of all returned papers and quizzes as well as your weekly newspaper clipping.


**Additional Class Events:**

1. Students are required to attend at least one of the following events in person over the course of the semester and write a one-page write up on the event, for inclusion in your class portfolio: a campaign rally, a candidate debate, a meeting of Richmond City Council, or observation of a polling precinct on Election Day (November 6). Each event or observation must be a minimum of one hour long.

2. There is one mandatory class film night, Sunday September 23, 7:30 p.m. Pizza will be served. Film: “Advise and Consent.”

3. We will have an informal watch party with dinner and drinks from 8:00 pm to 9:00 pm the night of the November mid-term elections, in Jepson Hall. Attendance required. (If you have an unavoidable conflict, you must attend a second out-of-class event.)

**Grade Components**

- Participation: including attendance, participation in class, collection of newspaper clippings, attendance at all special events: **15%**
- Written work: Including weekly papers, event write-ups, and preparation of your semester-long portfolio: **60%**
- Final written exam: **25%**

**General grading standards:**

- A range grades are given for truly outstanding written work that not only meets the basic requirements of the given assignment but also demonstrates exceptional insight, clarity, and depth of thought. For instance, an A-range paper will not simply forward a coherent argument, but also anticipate and attempt to answer likely objections to the argument,
and/or acknowledge points at which one’s argument might be vulnerable. Such papers will also be very well-organized and well-written, and gracefully presented.

- B range grades are given for good and very good written work which amply meets all the basic requirements of the given assignment and reflects substantial effort and engagement with the material. Such work is generally well-written and well-organized, shows good understanding of the course material, and avoids major substantive or logical errors. *B is a good grade for any 5 assignment in this course, and B+ is a very good grade.*

- C range grades are given for work which attempts to fulfill the requirements of the assignment but which falls short in some substantial way, with respect to organization, writing quality, understanding of the material, or argumentative logic.

- D and F grades are reserved for work which comes nowhere close to meeting the requirements of the assignment.

**General Course Policies**

1. Arrive at 5:55 pm. every class so we can start promptly at 6:00 p.m. The doors will close at 6 p.m. and anyone arriving after that out will be marked tardy. So will anyone falling asleep during class. Two tardies will be counted as one absence.
2. Get enough sleep before you come, and eat before you come.
3. Coffee, water, juice or soda in class are okay, but food is not.
4. Go to the bathroom before class. Do not interrupt class by doing so. We will take a short break from 8:10 to 8:15 every class period.
5. No electronic devices in use in class. All cell phones and laptops must be completely powered off and stored away prior to entering the classroom.
6. Bring your book to class every time.
7. In some class sessions, we may watch documentary excerpts related to the reading of up to 30 minutes. Students are expected to watch attentively and take notes on these occasions.

8. **All students must attend professor’s office hours at least once prior to fall break.**
   (Why? Read the Frank Bruni article attached to the end of this syllabus.)

**How and Why to READ for this Class**

Reading must be the fundamental default activity of all college students. When you are not doing anything else, you should be reading. This class will require that you do a lot of reading.

We live in a culture that has devalued deep reading and thinking. Why then read books, as opposed to just a series of short articles or excerpts? Because books are still the best technology we have for allowing a sophisticated train of thought—or body of knowledge—to be communicated from one human mind to another. A book allows the author to explore an event, person, or question in sustained depth, to present a sustained argument supported by evidence, to make connections between different events or phenomena, or to explore all sides of a disputed question thoroughly. Or a book may simply expand or stimulate our imaginations, our moral consciences, our sense of what is possible in human life. To read an interesting, important, or imagination-expanding book is one of life’s great pleasures—but it is a pleasure it takes effort to
cultivate. Think of reading a book as engaging your mind with someone else’s mind in an extended, in-depth conversation. If your reading takes the form of a thoughtful, internal conversation with the author, when it comes time to write your papers—your actual chance to “talk back” to the author and his or her ideas—you won’t be struggling to generate material from scratch; instead you will simply be transcribing and refining the conversation you’ve already had in your brain. Good writing is fundamentally a result of good thinking, and good thinking comes about via the practice and habit of being in conversation with good thinkers—such as the authors we will be reading this semester.

But how then to read thoughtfully? First, cut out the distractions. Turn off social media, the Internet, and anything else that might tempt you to turn your mind away from what you are reading. Find a quiet space where you can concentrate fully on the text. Second, set yourself an attainable goal for how long you will concentrate fully on reading the text. Whether it’s thirty minutes, an hour, or two hours, set a goal, and stick to that goal, with the aim of increasing it over time. If you can learn how to sit in the library or somewhere for three consecutive hours, reading for 45-50 minutes at a time, then taking 10-15 minute breaks each hour, you will over the course of the week get a lot done—and more importantly, have a lot of fruitful conversations with great thinkers and writers. Third, take notes as you go—either in the text margins, or in a notebook. This is helpful in keeping track of the author’s train of thought, and will help you remember arguments and key points when you go back to review or re-read. Fourth, when you are done reading a section, write down a few key points the author made, or alternatively some questions you have about the author’s arguments. Fifth, as you are reading, think not just about the face value arguments of the text, but also about the author’s intended audience and purpose. Why and for whom was this book written? Being able to answer that question often is very helpful in understanding the text as a whole. Sixth—and this is the most advanced skill, and one that will take time to master—think critically about what you are reading. Even the most brilliant texts, texts that have impeccable internal logic and that will make you smarter simply by reading them, have limitations of perspective and purpose. What does a text written about politics in the mid-20th century have to say of enduring significance for us, today? That’s a question that ultimately we as students must think through for ourselves.
COURSE OF STUDY

WEEK ONE

August 28. Politics and Political Traditions

Readings distributed via email and Blackboard. Note special Tuesday meeting

- Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” (1918)
- Thad Williamson, “Political Traditions: Conservatism, Liberalism and Civic Republicanism” (2010)
- Constitution of the United States of America (1787)
- Cass Sunstein, Impeachment: A Citizen’s Guide (Chapters 1-4)

WEEK TWO

September 5. Politics Today: The Obama Presidency, I

- Ben Rhodes, The World as It Is, Parts I and II (pp. xi- 206).

WEEK THREE

September 12. Politics Today: The Obama Presidency, II

- Ben Rhodes, The World as It Is, Parts III and IV (pp. 209-422.)

Special Class Time: 7 pm to 9:45 p.m.

Class will attend Mayor LeVar M. Stoney lecture from 7 pm to 8:30 p.m, at Camp Concert Hall. Class will discuss Stoney lecture and remainder of Rhodes book from 8:45 to 9:45 p.m. following lecture and reception.

WEEK FOUR


- William Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940, Chapters 1-6 (pp. 1-142.)

WEEK FIVE


- William Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940, Chapters 7-11, 14 (pp. 143-252, 326-348).
WEEK SIX

Sunday September 30: CLASS FILM NIGHT “Advise and Consent.” Dinner will be provided. 7:30 p.m., Jepson Hall 102.

WEEK SEVEN

October 3. Cold War and Civil Rights Politics: LBJ in Congress

- Harry McPherson, A Political Education, Chapters 1-6 (pp. 3-181)

WEEK EIGHT

October 10. Cold War and Civil Rights Politics: LBJ as President

- Harry McPherson, A Political Education, Chapters 9-12 and Epilogue (pp. 245-455). Recommended: 1988 Postscript (pp. 457-485.)

WEEK NINE

October 17. Struggling to Govern, From Nixon to Obama: The View from Washington, I

- Chris Whipple, The Gatekeepers: How the White House Chiefs of Staff Define Every Presidency (Introduction and Chapters 1-5, pp. 1-159)

WEEK TEN

October 24. Struggling to Govern, From Nixon to Obama: The View from Washington, II

- Chris Whipple, The Gatekeepers: How the White House Chiefs of Staff Define Every Presidency (Chapters 6-10, pp. 160-316)

WEEK ELEVEN

October 31. Democratic Decay and the Making of Trump: The Unwinding

- George Packer, The Great Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America (pages to be assigned by character; everyone will read approximately 60% of the book)

- Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” Perspectives on Politics, September 2014. (To be distributed as PDF)

WEEK TWELVE

November 6. Mid-term Election Class Watch Party, 8 pm to 9 pm, Jepson Hall

November 7. The Trump Presidency

- Sunstein, Impeachment, Chapters 5-10 (pp. 64-174)
- James Comey, A Higher Loyalty, Chapters 10-14 (pp. 158-274)
• Additional Readings TBA
• Discussion of November 6 mid-term elections

WEEK THIRTEEN

November 14. Local Politics and Democratic Leadership: Philadelphia Story, I

- William Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, complete (pp. 3-92)
- Buzz Bissinger, *A Prayer for the City* (pp. 3-197)

WEEK FOURTEEN

November 28. Local Politics and Democratic Leadership: Philadelphia Story, II

- Michael Nutter, *Mayor: The Best Job in America*, complete (pp. 1-167)

WEEK FIFTEEN

December 4: REQUIRED SPECIAL EVENT: Blanche Wiesen Cook lecture on Eleanor Roosevelt, 4:30 p.m., Jepson Alumni Center

December 5. Community Wealth Building as Local and National Strategy for Democratic Renewal

- Thad Williamson, various writings on Richmond and community wealth building TBA
- Melody C. Barnes and Thad Williamson, articles/chapter drafts on community wealth building TBA

FINAL EXAM: Friday December 14, 7 p.m. Exam Review session TBA.
Awarding of Credit
To be successful in this course, a student should expect to devote 10-14 hours each week, including class time and time spent on course-related activities.

registrar.richmond.edu/services/policies/academic-credit.html

Disability Accommodations
Students with a Disability Accommodation Notice should contact their instructors as early in the semester as possible to discuss arrangements for completing course assignments and exams.

disability.richmond.edu/

Honor System
The Jepson School supports the provisions of the Honor System. The shortened version of the honor pledge is: “I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.”

studentdevelopment.richmond.edu/student-handbook/honor/the-honor-code.html

Religious Observance
Students should notify their instructors within the first two weeks of classes if they will need accommodations for religious observance.

registrar.richmond.edu/planning/religiousobs.html

*updated 8/10/2016
Additional Academic Resources

If you experience difficulties in this course, do not hesitate to consult with me. There are also other resources that can support you in your efforts to meet course requirements.

Academic Skills Center (http://asc.richmond.edu, 289-8626 or 289-8956): Assists students in assessing their academic strengths and weaknesses; honing their academic skills through teaching effective test preparation, critical reading and thinking, information conceptualization, concentration, and related techniques; working on specific subject areas (e.g., calculus, chemistry, accounting, etc.); and encouraging campus and community involvement. Hours at the Center are:

   Sunday through Wednesday 3:00-9:00 p.m. and Thursday 3:00-7:00 p.m. On-call tutors are also available.

Career Services (http://careerservices.richmond.edu/ or 289-8547): Can assist you in exploring your interests and abilities, choosing a major or course of study, connecting with internships and jobs, and investigating graduate and professional school options. We encourage you to schedule an appointment with a career advisor early in your time at UR.

Counseling and Psychological Services (http://wellness.richmond.edu/offices/caps/ or 289-8119): Assists currently enrolled, full-time, degree-seeking students in improving their mental health and well-being, and in handling challenges that may impede their growth and development. Services include short-term counseling and psychotherapy, crisis intervention, psychiatric consultation, and related services.

Speech Center (http://speech.richmond.edu or 289-6409): Assists with preparation and practice in the pursuit of excellence in public expression. Recording, playback, coaching and critique sessions offered by teams of student consultants trained to assist in developing ideas, arranging key points for more effective organization, improving style and delivery, and handling multimedia aids for individual and group presentations.

Writing Center (http://writing.richmond.edu or 289-8263): Assists writers at all levels of experience, across all majors.
We overwhelm teenagers with advice about choosing a college. Go big. Go small. Put prestige above cost. Do the opposite.

We inundate them with tips for getting in. Spend summers this way. Write essays that way. Play a niche sport. Play an obscure instrument.

And then? We go mum, mustering less urgency and fewer words for the subject of actually navigating the crucial college years to best effect. It's strange. And it's stupid, because how a student goes to school matters much, much more than where.

So for several years -- during visits to campuses, interviews with experts on higher education and interactions with recent graduates -- I've been gathering wisdom along those lines.

My interest isn't which types of programs at which kinds of institutions yield the surest employment and highest salaries. That information is already out there and always changing. I also worry that it casts college as purely vocational and plants the false notion that, at the age of 18, you know yourself well enough to plot out the entirety of your professional life.

My focus is on optimal ways to socialize, to prioritize, to pick up skills integral to any career and to open up exciting opportunities both en route to a degree and after you've acquired it. Not nearly enough of the roughly 20 million Americans who are beginning or resuming college over the coming weeks pause, in their trepidation and exhilaration, to think about that.

Many don't have the luxury: College for them is a slapdash scramble to grab credits as they can while working a demanding job, caring for family members or both. More than a third of the students enrolled in higher education in this country attend two-year institutions. Those at four-year institutions often don't participate in the romantic ideal of nurturing dormitories and verdant quadrangles. They live with parents. They pray for parking.

But others do have the freedom to tailor their time. They just neglect to take advantage of it. My friend Eric Johnson, who provides guidance to underprivileged students at my alma mater, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, put it to me this way: "The more you regard college as a credentialing exercise, the less likely you are to get the benefits."

Johnson is as thoughtful and insightful about higher education as just about anyone I've come across. The wisest students, he said, "move into a peer relationship with the institution rather than a consumer relationship with it." They seize leadership roles. They serve as research assistants.

And they build social capital, realizing that above all else, they're in college "to widen the circle of human beings who know you and care about you," he said. That's perfectly put.
Many students, nervous about a new environment, follow friends from high school or people whose demographic backgrounds match their own into homogeneous cocoons. That can indeed provide solace and support. But it's also a wasted opportunity -- educationally, morally, strategically. Diversity opens you to an array and wealth of ideas, and being comfortable with it is an asset in just about any workplace or career. You can decide to establish that comfort in college.

But perhaps the most important relationships to invest in are those with members of the school's faculty. Most students don't fully get that. They're not very good at identifying the professors worth knowing -- the ones who aren't such academic rock stars that they're inaccessible, the ones with a track record of serious mentoring -- and then getting to know them well.

As part of my research, I collected surveys from about 30 recipients of the prestigious Mitchell scholarship, a rough analogue of the Rhodes that sends 12 recent American college graduates every year to universities in Ireland to pursue master's degrees. (I was on the panel of judges who selected the winners from 2015 through 2017.) I asked them to reflect on college and to rank, in order of importance, such activities and dynamics as coursework, travel abroad, internships, relationships with classmates, involvement in campus groups and reading done apart from any class obligation.

Relationships with faculty members was also an option, and it was the clear winner, placed near the top by almost all of the scholars and at the top by many, including Azza Cohen, a documentary filmmaker who graduated from Princeton in 2016. To explain that ranking, she directed me to a 2014 essay of hers for The Daily Princetonian that was titled "Empty Chairs." It charted her realization and regret that she and so many classmates skipped professors' office hours and didn't avail themselves of invaluable conversations and counsel. "In the routine rush to finish our assignments, sometimes the breadth of the surrounding intellectual force field slips our minds," she wrote. She was then a sophomore, and she mended her ways.

Reading her essay, I was reminded of an interview I did several years ago with Condoleezza Rice, the former secretary of state, about her days at the University of Denver. She said she liked to sign up for the front end of office hours, because she wanted to catch professors when they weren't feeling depleted and watching the clock. She read up on professors beforehand and, if their written work was accessible, familiarized herself with it, so she could make mention of it. That flattered them and pegged her as a serious, considerate person.

Taking that too far, of course, could be repulsively obsequious. The correct calibration is everything. And it's worth acing, because a professor or administrator who takes a genuine interest in you can be a bridge to other influential people inside and outside the school, to limited-space seminars, to special collaborations, to exclusive summer programs, to competitive internships, to graduate work and more.

Damian Walker saw that at U.N.C.-Chapel Hill, from which he graduated last spring. "The most influential thing I did here was find mentors," he told me. And he found them largely by opening up to them.

Walker attended U.N.C.-Chapel Hill as a Carolina Covenant scholar, which means that his family was poor enough for him to qualify for full financial aid. He told me that early on he went to an open campus discussion about police violence against minorities. Several faculty members were also there, and he approached Judith Cone, the vice chancellor for innovation, entrepreneurship and economic development.
"I didn't know who she was," he recalled. "Short lady. I shared my story about how police shootings affected my life, my family. She gave me her business card and said, 'Follow up.' I still have that business card to this day." He went to see her in her office and kept going to see her in her office, and with the encouragement and help of her and other faculty members, he cobbled together the money to go to an educational conference in Massachusetts, to meet with entrepreneurs in New York City and to spend the summer between his junior and senior years interning for a company in China. He's about to head back to China to teach English for a while. He's well on his way to fluency in Mandarin, which he thinks will give him a definite edge in any future business career.

Walker is an example of what a mammoth study by Gallup, Purdue University and the Strada Education Network has found. Previously known as the Gallup-Purdue Index and now called the Strada-Gallup Alumni Survey, it has questioned about 100,000 American college graduates of all ages about their college experiences, looking for connections between how they spent their time in college and how fulfilled they say they are now.

The study has not found that attending a private college or a highly selective one foretells greater satisfaction. Instead, the game changers include establishing a deep connection with a mentor, taking on a sustained academic project and playing a significant part in a campus organization. What all of these reflect are engagement and commitment, which I’ve come to think of as overlapping muscles that college can and must be used to build. They're part of an assertive rather than a passive disposition, and they're key to professional success.

I'm not saying that this is a cinch, nor am I ignoring the demons in the way. Anxiety and depression are legion on campuses today, holes that too many students fall into and never crawl out of. More than ever, students should be on the lookout for them and take the necessary steps to mitigate them.

Be careful, especially at the beginning of college, about spending too much time alone. Isolation can become its own bad habit, and prying eyes can be the best insurance policy against destructive behavior. Regulate time on social media, where discourse can be barbed and peers curate honeyed alter egos that stoke insecurity in those looking at them. Don't drink too much and don't shortchange sleep, as prosaic as that sounds. And work out in some way.

"We know that exercise is very, very important," said Jan Collins-Eaglin, the associate dean for wellness at Pomona College in Southern California. "It will calm you down." She noted, too, that many schools have invested in their mental health services but that many students hesitate to use them. "Seeking help is not taboo," she said. "If you get over that, you are one step ahead of the game."

One crossroads that students often get needlessly worked up about is choosing a major. It's less make-or-break than you think. I hear that from a majority of thriving college graduates, and the professors I speak with strongly caution students against wedding themselves to a single field of study before being exposed to several of them. College's greatest gifts can be an introduction to a passion you didn't previously have and a pivot into an occupation you never before envisioned.

"You have to ask yourself what lies closest to your heart," said Jim Gates, a renowned theoretical physicist at Brown University who previously taught at the University of Maryland and M.I.T. "If you are fortunate enough to find something that you're totally obsessed with, you're likely to work very hard at it. If you're a human being of average
intelligence and you work very hard at something, you're likely to become very good at it. And if you become very good at it, people are likely to notice." That means they're likely to employ and reward you as well.

Regardless of major, there are skills to insist on acquiring because they transcend any particular career. Communication -- clear writing, cogent speaking -- is one of them, and many different courses can hone it.

Another of those skills, frequently overlooked, is storytelling. It's different from communication: a next step. Every successful pitch for a new policy, new product or new company is essentially a story, with a shape and logic intended to stir its audience. So is every successful job interview. The best moment in a workplace meeting belongs to the colleague who tells the best story. So take a course in Greek mythology, British literature, political rhetoric or anything else that exposes you to the structure of narrative and the art of persuasion.

I asked Mitchell scholars if there was a department or discipline that they wished they had paid more heed. Science majors mentioned humanities. Humanities majors mentioned computer science and statistics. In retrospect, if not in real time, intellectually curious people appreciate and want the benefits of balance. So incorporate it, to some degree, in your college years.

Several Mitchell scholars also fretted that they'd lost out on some of what college had to offer by sticking to predetermined scripts, sweating perfection and avoiding risks. That dovetailed with a concern that many professors articulate to me -- that students aren't learning to stumble and to right themselves, which they can do in college with lower stakes than later on.

One of those scholars, Aaron Kurman, who graduated from the University of Virginia in 2005 and now works as a human rights lawyer in Israel, copped to all of that and more, writing: "I didn't learn how to fail. I didn't learn how resilient I was. I didn't learn to distinguish between what was truly important to me and what I was doing because I thought it was important in others' eyes. I didn't learn how freeing it is to pursue what drives you even when others whose opinions you deeply value don't understand or support it. I didn't learn the value of doing something truly open-ended, where you don't already know at the outset what you are going to do next." All of that came later. But it could have come in college -- at least the beginnings of it.

Something else that can come in college is an enormously expanded self-knowledge that translates into a hugely improved design for living. But that hinges on an adventurous spirit, especially outside the classroom.

"The mistake is to confuse career success, financial success and reputation with happiness," said Andrew Delbanco, a Columbia University professor who is the president of the Teagle Foundation, which promotes liberal arts education, and the author of the 2012 book "College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be." Delbanco added that an important component of real contentment is figuring out what lights your emotional and intellectual fires, not necessarily for the purpose of a job but for the purpose of reflections and pastimes that fill in all those hours away from work.

Is it poetry? Music? Sport? Those and more are abundant on college campuses. "You're trying to shape a life that leads you to a happy place," Delbanco said. Let college do precisely that.

I invite you to follow me on Twitter (@FrankBruni).