

Can One Get a Ph.D. With a 78 IQ?

Graduation time is upon us again. On campuses across our nation proud parents, wives, sweethearts, and relatives are gathering to see their person receive his or her document. It is a time for optimism, because a long hard road, strewn with tests, term papers, projects, and tuition fees is now behind. This graduation time it is my turn to walk across the stage and receive the coveted Ph.D. degree. The conclusion of this part of my academic life is also a time for reflection. How I arrived at this point in my life is clear to me but the answer to the question "why" leaves me as puzzled as Faust. Faust could call upon Mephistopheles; unfortunately I do not have such contacts. I shall therefore just have to reflect upon the events that have influenced my academic life.

Several years after World War II my parents and I arrived on these shores. We chose to make a large mid-western city our home because it was an industrial center and that represented employment opportunities. I was fourteen years old at that time and had completed one year of high school in Switzerland. Since my English vocabulary did not go much beyond "Hershey Bar", and "chewing gum", and a few un-mentionable terms picked up from G.I.'s, I was put into a special class to learn English. My classmates were also recent arrivals in America and from morning until dismissal time we learned English.

In this intensive English program I soon learned enough English to get around. After six months in this intensive English class I could ask for directions, make minor purchases, and inquire about the location of the nearest toilette. With this mastery of the English language behind me the school authorities thought that I was ready to join the mainstream of American high school population. My teacher notified me that tomorrow I would have to report to the main office of the Board of Education. The next morning, via bus, I went downtown to that big gray building. In my hand I clutched a note which indicated the name of the man I had to see and the number of his office. Once in his office the gentleman took me by the hand and led me to another room. There he handed me a test booklet, an answer sheet, and a special pencil. He showed me that the little areas on the answer sheet represent the multiple choice answers and that I should fully darken the desired area on the answer sheet. With that he left the room. I proceeded to take the examination. The first few questions were quite basic and I could easily select the correct answer. Gradually they became more difficult. After number six I could not even read the question anymore. I could recognize a preposition here, an article there, and once in a while there appeared even a familiar noun. Unable to read the questions or the multiple choice answers, I became quite frustrated and proceeded to blacken the little spaces on the answer sheet, not according to correctness, but in order to form an interesting pattern. I distributed my markings evenly among the five possible choices so as not to favor one particular column. After the allotted time the gentleman returned, took away the exam and sent me on my way. I had no idea what the test was about or what it was supposed to indicate. Furthermore my European training has taught me never to question the authority of public officials.

A few days after taking this exam I was told to report to the high school in my neighborhood. As a result of the aforementioned test my I.Q. was listed as 78. My parents and I were unaware of what this 78 meant. My parents were awe struck with anything concerning America. Was it not America that liberated Europe from the scourge of Hitler? Was this not the Promised Land where one could earn a respectable living? To my parents America could do no wrong. Many years after this took place I asked some colleagues who are members of the Department of Psychology what a person with a 78 I.Q. is like. They told me that such an individual is a moron, docile and friendly, and that he can be permitted to live among "normal" society.

Dutifully I reported to the new high school and spent my first hour there in the office of the guidance counselor. He spoke with me for quite a while and since he seemed like a friendly individual I sat there patiently although I understood only a fraction of what he said. I understood that he was afraid that due to my low ability I could become a burden to this country, and therefore he assigned me to the auto shop. Learning something about cars could help me earn a living. My next stop was the auto shop. There I was given a pair of coveralls and thus looked like everyone else in the shop. I was, however, not given any tools because the teacher was afraid that with a 78 I.Q. I could hurt someone or even myself. Therefore I was delegated to the car wash section of the shop. Every time a soapy car passed my station it was my duty to point the water hose in the direction of the soapy car. Although I mastered this intricate maneuver rather quickly it remained my only task in the auto shop. I spent three years pointing my trusty hose in the direction of the soaped up cars. Only the mornings were reserved for this part of my education. In the afternoon I was enrolled in the "academic" courses. These consisted of History, English, and Science.

Discipline was a major problem in this vocationally oriented high school. For the teachers, I represented a pleasant addition to their classes. I was well behaved and although I did not understand much that was going on in these classes, I was passed on from class to class due to my good behavior. The classes were large and the teachers had their hands full with disciplinary problems. That did not mean that I did not learn a great deal; what I learned, will therefore pronounce "th" as "s" or "d". The word "the" would be either "se" or "de". My pronunciation was never corrected by anyone; therefore, I made no effort to improve it. The words "mother" and "father" sounded like "mudder" and "fudder". One day during a lull of soapy cars I was resting on a work bench. A student came rushing into the shop and asked me where Santorelli and Giacomini were. These two fellows had just stepped out of the shop. I therefore pointed to the door and said: "There they go!" This sounded like: "dere dei go". The fellow asking about Santorelli and Giacomini was also of Italian extraction and he understood my utterings as, "They're dago". Although that word was unknown to me at that time I received the worst beating of my life. At the time I did not know why the fists rained down upon me, but I soon learned, and made a concerted effort to improve my pronunciation. For the first time I made a concerted effort to pattern my pronunciation as closely as possible to that of a native speaker. Although the lesson was painful, it taught me well.

During my first year in high school I got a job in a restaurant. I worked evenings, weekends, and during vacation time. My limited knowledge of the English language was no handicap. My employer would simply point to the floor or to the dishes. The international index finger language would tell me that it was either time to grab the mop or do the dishes. As my knowledge of English increased I was trained to do skilled jobs and was given a considerable amount of responsibility. My employer was a kind and considerate individual. He withheld some of my pay from me and invested it in insurance policies for me. I worked in that restaurant during my three years of high school. After graduating from high school, with a degree in auto shop, specializing in rinsing off soapy cars, I had fully intended to continue working in that restaurant. My employer, however, had different plans. He took me aside and in a paternal manner tried to tell me about the value of education. He pointed out that there is only one time in my life that I could go to college. I was reluctant to give up a well-paying job for a situation that would cost me money. My employer sensed this and he threatened to fire me if I did not make an attempt at higher education. Thus the decision was made.

Now came the choice of which university to attend. I had to enroll in a state university because they had to accept me if I had graduated from one of this state's high schools. I decided to attend the second largest state university. It wasn't the great faculty or areas of specialization that attracted me. As with most Europeans,

soccer was a passion with me. Any school that so prominently displayed its soccer team in the school's bulletin must be good.

I can still recall how proud my parents were when I received the automatic letter of acceptance from the university. Attendance at a German university is limited to a very small, select, intellectual elite. As far as my parents were concerned their son now belonged to this group. Again America could do no wrong. I did not have the heart to enlighten my parents. When it came time for me to leave for the university my mother kissed me good-bye and my father, beaming with pride, gave me an extra five dollars of his hard earned money. With their blessings and prayers, and a degree in auto shop I jumped into my car and drove to the southern part of the state where the university was located.

It was there at the university that I began to blossom intellectually. It was concerned faculty members and interested fraternity brothers who helped me set my sights upon lasting goals. College life also had its disappointments. Students who entered with a poor record in English had to take a course entitled "dummy" English. One had to achieve a grade of "C" or better to get out of this course. It took me two semesters to achieve this. My English was by now quite good, but my sentence structure was still German. When using the present perfect tense I would place the verb at the end of the clause, as is customary in German. If a sentence contained a conjunction which happened to be a subordinating conjunction in German, then the dependent word order would prevail. I can still recall getting back an English theme with the Professor's notation: "Your style is hopelessly crude". The only thing that really bothered me was the word "hopelessly". Success on the soccer field came easy, academic success came painfully hard, but it came. My difficulties with the English language soon ceased. I realized that, as soon as I developed enough confidence to call up a coed and ask her for a date.

The four years of undergraduate school passed rather quickly. On a warm day in June I dressed in the customary black gown and went up on stage to receive my degree.

Shortly after graduation I met a young lady who became my partner in life. Together we struggled through my Master program and then the Doctoral program. At times the odds of success seemed not to be in my favor, but an understanding wife can balance the odds in one's favor. Together we achieved the certificate which bears my name.

Currently I am concluding my tenth year as a Professor. Looking back at my education can lead to a lot of speculations. What would have happened if I had known what an I.Q. of 78 meant? What would have become of me had I not come into contact with those people who have influenced my life? Perhaps I would be a tycoon with a series of automatic car wash stations instead of trying to exist on a professor's meager salary.

What have I learned from all this? For one thing I have learned to appreciate my students as individuals, to devote extra time to those students who are struggling in my discipline, and to have compassion for the weaker student. Every time I face a class I say to myself: "Perhaps there is a refugee from the auto shop among them".

Herbert Hochhauser
Class of 1955