**Striving for Excellence** (A blog entry by Professor Jeffery Haugaard, Founding Director of the Honors College at the University at Albany, July 2008)

Hello all.

I have been thinking a lot about striving for excellence lately, and worry that I do not see as much of it around as I would like. The more I thought about this, however, the more confused my thoughts became (this happens to me frequently: initial thinking about something seems straightforward, but the more I think about it the more complex the issue becomes and the less certain my thinking about it becomes - but that is an issue for another day). So, I am writing with some of these thoughts, which, as you will see, are not all that straightforward. Perhaps I can have a dialog about striving for excellence with some of you.

Before you consider tossing this note aside, I want to assure you that I am not going to dole out a pile of easy-to-say statements that you have heard many times already, such as you should strive for excellence in everything that you do. Given my definition of striving for excellence, this is an impossible goal. Also, I am not going to try to convince all of you that you should all strive for excellence in your academic work. I will, however, try to argue that you should strive for excellence in some part of your life.

Before anyone can discuss a concept, it needs to be defined clearly. The definition does not need to be agreed upon by everyone in the discussion, but the definition needs to be clear and unambiguous so that each person knows what is being discussed. So, I need to define striving for excellence before I can begin to discuss it.

That said, I have found it impossible to define striving for excellence clearly and unambiguously. I have struggled with the definition a lot, and the best I can do is: striving for excellence is putting everything you can into an activity (to a reasonable limit - an issue discussed below). So, if I am striving for excellence as a chef, I focus on doing everything I can to create and present a flawless meal. I do not take short cuts. If I am tired, I do not let my fatigue convince me to avoid a small component of my meal preparation, even if that small component would not be noticed by those around me. I do not let others distract me while I am preparing a meal and I do not let others impose values on me that precludes me from doing everything I can while preparing a meal (e.g., "it’s silly to spend so much time on that;" "you have to relax more").

As you can probably tell from the previous paragraph, a critical part of my definition of striving for excellence is that is a process, not an outcome. It is the way that someone labors at something–it is not the outcome of those labors.

An important consequence of defining striving for excellence as a process is that it is difficult for each of us to determine when we are striving for excellence. This is because
knowing when we are putting everything into an activity is hard. Consequently, we often resort to using the outcome of our actions to determine whether we strived for excellence: If I receive all As, excellence has been achieved; it has not been achieved if I receive other grades. However, basing an assessment of striving for excellence on outcomes is problematic for several reasons. First, it does not take individual differences in abilities into account. For example, I know from talking with many of you that you achieved many As in high school without putting everything you had into a course (or, sometimes, even very much). Clearly this would not be striving for excellence. Second, it does not take experience into account. A beginning dancer who is striving for excellence may appear less talented than an experienced dancer who is loafing. Finally, observing outcomes does not allow for a consideration of many issues that may inhibit or facilitate a person’s performance. For example, using grades as an indicator of striving for excellence in academics may provide misleading information about a student struggling with depression or another student struggling with symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder from an assault experienced a year before. The symptoms of these disorders may inhibit the performance, and thus lower the grades, of these students, even if both are striving for excellence in academics.

To recap, I define striving for excellence as putting everything you can into an activity, and I argue that it is the process of putting everything you can into an activity, not the outcome of the activity, that determines whether striving for excellence has occurred. How then, you might ask, do I know when I have "put everything I have into an activity?"

As I have thought about this, it has become clear to me that the process of putting everything you have into something can be divided into two processes - one is qualitative and one is quantitative. The qualitative one involves how you go about striving (what one does as a chef, student, or athlete when striving for excellence). The quantitative one is how long one does this.

There is a paradoxical nature to assessing both the qualitative and quantitative parts of striving for excellence. For the qualitative piece, it can be more difficult to describe what one is doing when one is striving for excellence. For example, describing how one focuses on cooking or studying or practicing free throws can be difficult. However, it is easy, once we know what each qualitative piece is for us, to assess whether we have done it. The paradoxical part of the quantitative piece is that we can describe it easily - in minutes or hours or days. But, it can be very difficult to assess how many minutes or hours or days we should work on a task to consider that we are striving for excellence.

Returning to the chef, it may be relatively easy for him to assess whether he had strived for excellence in the qualitative parts of cooking during a shift. Did he focus, avoid short cuts, do all the little things that maybe others would not even notice, etc? When you are writing a paper, it may be possible to assess relatively easily whether you are striving for excellence qualitatively: have you written it early enough so that you have time to
review drafts, have you focused while writing or was your attention drawn to other things, did you read those final three articles or did you just figure that you could get along without them, etc. etc.?

The chef, however, has it easier in his assessment of the quantity of his cooking. He received a certain number of orders during a shift, and when he was done with them, he was done.

However, how does one assess the quantitative process of striving for excellence when it comes to activities that are less constrained by time? For example, how does one assess the quantitative process of striving for excellence in academic performance? One could always study a bit more, do another practice problem, or search for another journal article. And it is not only in academics that assessing the quantitative part of effort is difficult. Athletes who are striving for excellence could always swim one more practice lap or shoot another dozen balls at a lacrosse or field-hockey goal. Parents who are striving for excellence could always read one more "how to parent" book, take their children to another culturally enriching activity, or work a bit longer to enhance their child’s cognitive or physical abilities.

Even more problematic is that an excessive quantity of striving can result in untoward consequences. A student who studies too much can ignore other important developmental tasks (e.g., developing physically and socially) or may burn out on a subject that once held great delight for her. An athlete striving to gain or lose weight because it is perceived that doing so will result in better performance may experience significant health problems at a certain weight. Parents who monitor the academic, social, and physical development of their children too much may have children unable to cope with some important developmental milestones (e.g., moving to college).

So, it seems to me that it is impossible to create rules or expectations for the assessing the quantitative aspects of whether one is "putting everything that one can" into an activity. Consequently, after all this, I think that I have come to the point of having to say "you know when you are striving for excellence when you are." This seems inadequate, but I think that it is best I can do. You know when you have studied (a) enough and (b) in a manner that constitutes striving for excellence in that subject. Yes, you could always study another half hour, and doing so might result in your getting another question correct on an exam, but, as just noted, there is no end to this. I think that if you are willing to assess for yourself if you are striving for excellence in an area - giving it all that you can give - you can assess it accurately. Granted, this is much more difficult than simply assigning a time limit and using that as a benchmark for how you are doing (e.g., I will study math one hour each night), but we are talking about excellence here - so one has to expect that it will be more difficult to assess and one has to be willing to live with the ambiguity and uncertainty of assessing striving for excellence if one is going to venture in this direction.
So, after all that introduction, I would like to say that I believe that each of you should be striving for excellence in at least one part of your life. I believe that we should all experience the process of doing the best we can in something. None of us can fully appreciate the power that we have as individuals until we are willing to put everything that we have into some activity. It is easy to avoid learning about one’s power (and, at the same time, the limits of one’s power—maybe this is what frightens most people off) by never striving for excellence. But, I believe that doing this limits each of us unnecessarily. We avoid learning about our limits by never seeing what they are, but at the same time we are not able to learn about our power. I think that the tradeoff is a bad deal.

You cannot simply strive for excellence once (e.g., the second semester of your 7th grade year) and then say that you have done that. This is because the cognitive, social, and emotional development that we all experience across our life span changes the ways in which we experience excellence at different points in our lives. So, learning about your power by achieving excellence in the 7th grade does not tell you much about your potential power in the 14th grade. Striving for excellence is a process that you must pursue repeatedly through your life (maybe not continuously, but at least periodically).

My sense is that each of us needs to choose the area(s) in which we are going to strive for excellence. What each of chooses will reflect our values at that point in time, and thinking about our choices and the values that support them may even help us learn about the values that are important to us at that point. In addition, it is much harder to strive for excellence in an area dictated by someone else - after all, it is you doing the striving so you should strive in the directions you want.

As you begin college, an obvious area in which you could strive for excellence is your academic work - maybe by striving for excellence in one or two of your courses initially. However, striving for excellence does not have to be limited to your academic work (or, for that matter, may not even involve your academic work). Striving for excellence in playing the French horn involves just as much striving, dedication, and self-exploration as does striving for excellence in computer science. Striving for excellence while tutoring an illiterate adult is the same process as striving for excellence in writing poetry. Striving for excellence in religious observation is the same process as striving for excellence in understanding macroeconomics. Certainly there are different external benefits to striving for excellence in one thing instead of another, but the rewards of the striving are the same no matter what direction the striving takes.

Can you strive for excellence in doing nothing? I do not think so, but I must admit that I am not completely sure about this. (The husband of the director of a community kitchen at which I used to volunteer began the "International Organization of Leisurely Persons," and he was excellent in his pursuit of leisure.) I distinguish "doing nothing" from activities such as meditating or relaxing, as meditating and relaxing involve doing
something. My sense is that "striving for excellence in doing nothing" is an oxymoron, as striving requires action while doing nothing prohibits action. Striving for excellence in hanging out? To the extent that hanging out means, at its foundation, doing nothing, then my response would be "no." To the extent that hanging out involves some type of striving, perhaps it could be (although I am skeptical that hanging out involves any striving).

Striving for excellence in drinking? This is more complex than one might imagine. I have a friend in AA. For him, striving for excellence in drinking is not drinking—one day at a time. I know how much energy this takes for him (less now that 10 years ago, but still some). Striving for excellence in drinking might involve never getting intoxicated while drinking socially with others. Maybe. However, if striving for excellence in drinking involves drinking lots and lots, no. This is harmful, probably after the first drink, for all of us. My sense is that striving for excellence does not involve engaging in behaviors that are inherently harmful.

So this is what I hope happens:

- each of you decides that you are going to strive for excellence in one or more parts of your life (the initial commitment)
- you then consider carefully and choose this area (or these areas) (a deeper commitment)
- you then think about what you need to do to strive for excellence in this area or these areas - this may involve discussions with others (I would enjoy talking with you about this, but others may be more appropriate)
- you start, recognizing that you will falter along the way several times (everyone does) but that the key is to continue striving even after an experience of faltering
- I hope that some of you will share your experiences in striving for excellence with me.

I would also enjoy talking with you, face-to-face or over e-mail, to hear your thoughts on all of this.

onward and upward,