

From: Shirzad Bozorgchami, MBA '88
To: Class of '89
Subject: Pain or pleasure at the GSB

Too many tears were shed last year at the GSB. Many of my classmates and I went through what I would now consider to have been unnecessary pain and hardship – both academically and socially. It is so easy to look back now and speak of all the things we could have and should have done differently. History has a way of repeating itself, not just because people are stubborn and slow learners, but also because people may not know history well enough. I believe one of the factors that contributed to the problems last year was that a historic perspective was not provided to us. The 2nd years only made general comments like "Don't worry, you'll make it," or "Hang in there! The Spring quarter will be a lot more fun."

I owe a great deal to the GSB community. It has challenged me and inspired me to experiment and grow beyond what I ever imagined possible. I hope I can pay back some of my dues by making life a little easier for you. This note reflects my personal thoughts, feelings and suggestions for a more fulfilling GSB life. It does not necessarily reflect the administration's views or anybody else's. Please call me at _____ if you want to discuss anything or just have a chat. Throughout the year, if you ever have a problem you don't want to discuss with classmates or the administration, please give me a call. I promise confidentiality. Even if I couldn't personally help, I could always find one of my classmates who would.

Welcome to the GSB. This will probably be the most memorable and fruitful year of your life!

ACADEMIC PRESSURE:

By now you may have discovered that the volume of work is enormous. There just isn't enough time to get all the work done. But no one said you should! Most of us come in here as perfectionists and feel very uncomfortable doing a so-so job on anything. The sooner you give up this habit, the happier you will be. You can spend your hour on carefully reading an article. Or, you can spend it on skimming five articles. Or, you can spend it on skimming three articles and getting to know a classmate a little better in the spare time. I tried all three of these methods but my own preference is for the latter.

A study of GSB graduates of about 20 years ago tried to find factors correlating with future business success (measured, arguably, in current salary). It found the factor most closely related to success to be sociability, not grades or thoroughness. My own experience has been that most of the minute details taught in GSB courses will never be used. It is the general understanding of the basic material that counts. It is therefore best to take the fullest advantage of the GSB's grade policy. To get a P, you often only need to know about half of the material covered. By focusing only on what you personally want to get out of each course, you free up time for other things. I could never understand why some people would spend hours on putting the finishing touches

on a report, when the act involved very little additional learning. Neurotic perfectionism at its worst.

If you are a true poet, you may feel that you don't have the luxury of deciding what you want and don't want to learn. You may be primarily concerned with survival and passing. I want to suggest that you do have the choice. What I saw among my own classmates and the class of '87 was that about 99% of those who didn't quit made it through. Put this in perspective. You have a higher chance of getting into a serious car accident or coming down with a serious disease in the next 2 years than you do of not making it at the GSB. I don't know if this makes you feel better or worse!

This is not to deny that you will need to work extremely hard in the next year. Most of us did. But some of us had a lot of fun working hard, some of us were miserable at it. What made the difference was our perspective. If you work hard because you have to, because you are afraid of not passing, because an ugly monster in your nightmares keeps reminding you that the world will come to an end if you don't pass, you can easily resent the experience and find it painful. But if you constantly remind yourself that passing is not the issue, that you are here because you want to learn and grow, that every minute of hard work is making you a better, tougher, and more capable person, your experiences will be much more enjoyable. I envy the experience of some of my poet classmates who were challenged the most last year. They climbed a taller mountain than the rest of us did. They learned more and grew more.

Last year I saw a lot of panicky faces and tearful eyes. These were people who lost their perspective. They forgot that the dark tunnel did have an end to it after all. Keeping the proper perspective takes a little work. I found it useful to write down my goals and what I wanted to get out of the GSB before the hard times hit. By frequently reminding myself of those goals, updating them, and keeping in mind that there was life beyond the core (believe it or not), I managed to keep a cool head in hot times.

Throughout the year be aware of "mass psychology" at the GSB. I have a lot of respect for most of my 300 classmates. But I think as a group we were often unwise and immature. Keep reminding yourself that just because everyone else is doing something, it doesn't mean it is right for you. I experimented with going against the mass psychology many times and gained more confidence at it as time went by (initially, it was scary). You don't need to be in a study group, you don't need to turn in every homework, you don't have to appear bubbly and social all the time, you don't have to interview with investment banks and consultants, you don't need to be conservative and safe in class discussions, you don't need to hide your sensitivity, confusion or vulnerability.

It is ironic how many of us come here with a strong sense of individualism and then end up conforming to the enormous pressure of group norms. I think part of it is because we respect our classmates too much to believe that as a group they could act stupid. We also respect them too much to not need their approval. One safe way to gain the group's approval, we might think, is by not breaking any of its implicit norms.

H OR P?

If you have had a solid technical or business background, you may have the luxury of choosing whether or not you want to aim for getting Hs and becoming an Arjay scholar (the top 10 percent of the class). This is ultimately an individual choice. My own view is that the cost of aiming at Hs far outweighs the benefits. You may have to study two or three times as much in some classes to move from a P to an H. Even then, you are never guaranteed an H (the good old days of knowing you were definitely the best in your class ended when you came to the GSB). The rewards of getting Hs are dubious. Neither your summer nor your first permanent employer will have any idea what your grades were. After your first job, job performance becomes a much more important criterion than your grades. Remember, at the GSB "P" stands for "Plenty good-enough."

I consider some P+s and Hs that I received in the past year to indicate a failure on my part to properly allocate my time away from course work and towards extracurricular activities. Exceptions, of course, were courses that were directly relevant to my personal interests and career goals. Extracurricular activities around here are a great learning experience because they involve getting to know your classmates outside the academic environment. You may be surprised to see the great differences between people's personalities inside and outside the classroom.

STUDY GROUPS:

You don't need to have them, unless it is required or you really need help. Even then, make sure you are not the only novice in a study group of experts. That could intimidate you into a passive role, where everyone else will do the work and learn and you will just type the reports. Avoid the other extreme too. It is more convenient, less intimidating and therefore more tempting to surround yourself with other novices—blind leading the blind.

It is helpful on the first day to have everyone in the group express their expectations and commitments. Someone going for an H could make life miserable for the other three aiming just to pass—and vice versa. Setting a rigid time frame for the group meeting is also very helpful. Activities have an amazing tendency to expand and contract themselves to fit the allocated time plus 10%.

GSB PEOPLE:

Initially, most people come in with a sense of excitement and openness. You are eager to meet everybody else and give them a chance to become friends. Soon, however, pressures start to build up. Your ego will undergo an unprecedented challenge, because for the first time in your life you are surrounded by people who are just as good if not better than you are. Rather than biting the bullet and accepting everyone as good people with equal but hopefully different talents, it becomes tempting for some people to adapt a cynical and fault-finding attitude. Joe may seem knowledgeable in finance, but his cold and arrogant manner is intolerable. Cathy's comments may appear smart, but she is selfish and sure talks too much. Bill never talks. He must be dumb or something. The list of faults and judgments can go on and on.

After a while, people gravitate towards those they are most comfortable with, typically those they are most similar to. Ironically, these are the very friends who will stimulate the least amount of learning and growth. They will only tend to reinforce who we already are. The discomfort level between the different groups will increase as time goes by. Suspicions and judgment may grow. By the end of the year you may notice a lot of people whom you talked to only in the first few weeks and then actively or mildly avoided for the rest of the year.

I was guilty of many of the same judgments. I spent most of the first two quarters with people I had conveniently judged as good and avoided the bad ones. There were several occasions in the spring quarter and this summer when I was forced to spend time with some of the people I had avoided, either by being assigned to a group with them or running into them on an interview trip. In every occasion, I quickly became ashamed of myself for the harsh judgments and found those judgments to represent more my own fears and paranoia than the other people's shortcomings. Those people have become some of my closest classmates.

We are, for the most part, a bunch of very nice people here. In spring quarter I had a visiting professor teaching the strategic management course. He had asked us to write a few things about ourselves on 3"x5" cards to help him get to know us. He came back the next time expressing surprise that most of us had written about how warm and sensitive we were but had proceeded to apologize for it by saying we were working on becoming tougher. Most of us thought we were too nice and soft to make it in the cut-throat American business arena. The professor went on to say that we shouldn't apologize for being warm and sensitive because the most successful CEOs are nice people and don't fit the business media's stereotypes. When he urged us not to change, the class of 60 burst into spontaneous applause—a very rare occurrence in the middle of a lecture. This showed how common the concern was to everyone and how relieved we were to hear we were O.K. We really are a bunch of very nice people here, only most of us are afraid to show it openly.

I strongly urge you to fight negative judgments of your classmates. Instead, try hard to make positive interpretations. If someone has been cold to you, it might be that he is an arrogant "asshole," but it may also be that his confidence is a fragile front, hiding his insecurity and intimidation by you. To be sure, the GSB has its share of bad apples, but they are definitely a minority. By actively judging people positively, you are exposing yourself to being hurt a little by a jerk. But that is a small price to pay to get to know many more wonderful people than you would otherwise take the chance on.

One other common and unfounded fear among most people is that they feel they don't quite belong to the mainstream social life of the GSB. People have very different reasons for this paranoia: I am too young and inexperienced, I am too old for this, I am a foreigner, I am from the Midwest and this is a California scene, only men seem to be running the show, these are rich kids and I am a farmer's boy, this is really a place for Ivy League investment bankers and consultants, etc. I have been shocked by hearing

some of the most seemingly "in" and socially active classmates confide in me the frustration that they feel left out.

I am puzzled by this phenomenon and have no idea why it has happened. One contributing factor to it could have been the sole media of the GSB, The Reporter. It is only natural that the dozen regular contributors to The Reporter, in terms of articles or pictures, will frequently include their own friends. So you may get about 30 or so people who appear in face or name all the time. These people may have been perceived by everyone else as "in." Everyone else felt "out."

Whatever the reasons might have been, I urge you to resist categorizing yourselves in the "out" category. There seems to be no mainstream life or group in the GSB. There are just many different groups. Some may seem more vocal or visible, but they are a small minority. If you feel comfortable with 5 or 6 people, consider yourself "in."

RECRUITING:

Again, take it easy. Everyone who wanted a summer job got one. I ended up playing picky and landing my ideal job two weeks after the school was out. (Most others had jobs long before that.) If you want a non-traditional job or one that is very different from your past experiences, you may want to prepare yourself for a lot of rejections- something that you may not necessarily be used to. Summer jobs are much harder to find than permanent jobs, due to fewer spots. If you just keep in mind that you will eventually have a job, you can take chances and experiment with the summer job search. This could be a very valuable experience for the permanent job search.

RESULTS:

It is easy to see your progress in learning new material on a daily basis. It is harder to see the more gradual internal changes in terms of your personality, confidence and attitude. These internal changes, I believe, are much more important than the specific academics you learn. Most people end up realizing how much they have changed only when they start their summer jobs. Going back to the real world is an amazing experience. We tend to forget that the GSB is a very unusual place, with extremely high standards. After a year here, these standards will become internalized in you. The real world often infested with mediocrity, will allow you to shine once again. This time much more brilliantly than ever before. It was worth all the pain, you may think. But remember, it can be as much pain and joy as you allow it to be.

October 29, 1994

UPDATE: LIFE AFTER THE GSB

I am deeply moved that this letter has become a traditional gift from the 2nd year class to the 1st years in the weekend before midterms. It has become another way for 2nd years to tell the 1st years: "You are not all alone in your doubts, anxieties, and aspirations. We are here for you. Feel free to call on us." It reflects the caring culture which attracted so many of us to the GSB in the first place.

My post GSB experiences have validated and confirmed for me many of the points made in this letter. No one has once asked me about my grades since graduation. I have only periodically consulted my accounting and finance books, when I have needed them. But I have constantly been drawing on the intra- and inter-personal lessons which I learned in interacting with my classmates and through classes like "touchy-feely," creativity, leadership, and negotiations. The more lasting impact of the GSB for me and many of my classmates, it seems, has been the soft rather than hard skills of management and the resulting relationships.

It is a given that you have the potential for world-class accomplishments (even though you may at times wonder if you were the sold admissions mistake). What vision, mission, and values your potential would best serve is something that I hope your GSB experience will help you clarify.

No one on his/her deathbed has been known to say, "I wish I had calculated a few more NPVs." Some have been known to wish they had taken a few more chances, loved a few more people, touched a few more lives, fought for a few more causes, caused a few more smiles.

Shirzad Bozorgchami