



Article from

Actuary of the Future

May 2018

Issue 42

Graduating as an ASA

By John Miller

I don't consider myself to be a particularly great student. Entering college, I recognized that I had serious problems with my work ethic. I was often engaged and interested in my classes in high school, but I struggled to complete even the most basic homework assignments from my math and calculus classes.

While I was somewhat confident in my ability to study math and actuarial science, I was also quite nervous to take Calc III at 8 a.m. in my very first semester as a college student. I told my roommate, Sihan, who was in the class with me, that he would have to help ensure that I would commit to completing my math homework. When I started my first assignment, I remember completing just two problems before experiencing a strong urge to stop and resume later—a symptom of the procrastination problems that had plagued me in high school. I started to give myself a PEZ candy as a reward for each problem I completed, desperate to condition myself with positive reinforcement.

Just two weeks into my first semester, I was biking to dinner with a friend and attempted a wheelie. The attempt was a disaster, and the doctor told me I would not be able to write with my right arm for 13 weeks. At this point, I was wondering whether I should drop out of school. After all, I had enough trouble completing my work when I could use my right hand. Instead, I refused to let my injury stop me, and I became determined not only to become proficient with my left hand, but also to fix my work-ethic issues.

I took copious notes with my left hand in classes that didn't require note-taking, and I initially spent three times longer to complete my math homework. The hard work paid off, and I was happy to enter my second semester with a 3.95 grade point average and a much stronger work ethic.

I planned to take my first actuarial exam in May at the end of my freshman year. While studying for it, I remembered that the first actuarial student I ever met told me it took him six attempts to pass the P (Probability) exam, which helped me take things seriously. After I passed exam P, I decided that I would want to pass exam FM (Financial Mathematics) before the start of the school year to maximize my chances of getting an internship in the summer of my sophomore year.



Unfortunately, my old habits resurfaced after I spent a month in France and returned with little time left to study. I would complete two problems, then stand up from my work space and walk around and wander into another room. It was unconscious, but I soon recognized I would have no chance of passing the FM exam if this habit persisted. Understanding my own weaknesses, I put a chair on either side of my work space to make the process of standing up and walking away more difficult. As I would subconsciously consider standing up, I would also subconsciously notice the chairs blocking my movement and continue to work. By simply fixing my unconscious tendencies, I greatly improved my studying efficiency to make it through the manual in 10 days and pass the exam.

I've always tried to be honest with myself about my weaknesses and flaws, as I believe self-awareness can allow you to overcome many self-imposed roadblocks and barriers that would prevent you from realizing your potential. My limited time in college pushed me to recognize that every moment is a development opportunity. I considered organizational skills to be one of my major weaknesses, so I pushed myself to gain a club position that would require me to improve. I sought the corporate liaison role for our actuarial science club, a position that required frequent correspondence with more than 35 employers in planning the annual actuarial career fair.

While I still do not consider organization to be a strength of mine, I have made great strides in continuing to improve this skill every day. My hope is that I can eventually claim organization as a strength because, although it is not something that comes naturally to me, it is a fairly important skill for an actuary in the corporate world.

Through my work on my two major weaknesses entering college, I have turned time management into a significant strength. Here are a few strategies that have been instrumental in passing all of my Associate of the Society of Actuaries (ASA)

requirements and balancing my three majors with multiple job and club responsibilities:

- **Studying material before going to bed significantly increases retention.** I recommend that you research this psychological phenomenon for yourself with a simple Google search.
- **Take breaks and plan strategically.** Similar to other muscles, the brain unfortunately has limited endurance. So, space out your work—if you need to study for two hours and also take a shower, then take the shower between the hours of study to optimize your studying efficiency.
- **Ask questions and be genuinely interested in what you're doing.** While teachers across the world have certainly become annoyed by the question “Why is this important?” I believe that understanding the why leads to greater engagement, energy and passion. Let your curiosity

fuel your learning, and try to look at a topic from a variety of perspectives. This strategy will make studying and working much easier and more enjoyable.

Finally, figure out what your weaknesses are and work on improving them. One way to help ensure you aren't blindsided by your faults is by being receptive to criticism. If your peers know you appreciate feedback and won't be offended, they will be much more willing to help you by offering you that necessary critique.

Fellow actuary, never stop learning and always seek improvement. ■



John Miller is a senior at Penn State who will be graduating with three majors and an ASA. He is winner of the 2017 Actuary of Tomorrow Scholarship. He can be reached at miller.johnziv@gmail.com.



Listen at Your Own Risk

The SOA's new podcast series explores thought-provoking, forward-thinking topics across the spectrum of risk and actuarial practice. Listen as host Andy Ferris, FSA, FCA, MAAA, leads his guests through lively discussions on the latest actuarial trends and challenges.

Listen
at your
own risk



Visit SOA.org/Listen to start listening.

