

# Go Ahead, Drop My Course

Chambliss, Daniel F . Wall Street Journal , Eastern edition; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]03 Feb 2020: A.19.

[ProQuest document link](#)

---

## FULL TEXT

The best teaching advice I ever received came from a world-class swimming coach. It was 30 years ago. I was head coach of a local swim team and was working with a 12-year-old girl who had enormous talent, beautiful technique and a gift for moving effortlessly through the water. I was pushing her hard to make the Eastern U.S. championships, but she didn't seem to care. I used every trick I knew. Nothing would make her really try.

So I called my friend Larry Liebowitz, a wonderful coach I knew from my sociological research on Olympic gold medalists. I explained my problem and waited for his sympathy and suggestions. Larry surprised me. "Dan," he said, "you want this more than she does." I frowned, and realized he was right. Then he added the kicker: "You've got to realize, there's nothing morally wrong with not wanting to swim."

That stopped me dead in my tracks. I had always assumed that swimming wasn't only important to me but uniquely valuable to anyone who hopped in the pool. Surely Larry felt the same way. Swimming had changed my own life for the better, and I wanted the kids on my team to get that benefit as well. Swimming was, I thought, universally good for people. They should want to do it. But Larry reminded me it's only a sport, and its value depended on the individual.

Here's a transformative message for coaches, parents and teachers: There's nothing morally wrong with not wanting to work hard at something – even school. Or not caring about formal education. In fact, there's nothing morally wrong with not liking school at all. Lots of people don't like sociology (the subject I teach). Lot of people don't want to go to college. They get through life just fine. And, yes, they're perfectly good human beings.

Larry changed the way I think about education. It isn't the only worthwhile thing for young people to be doing. When students come to me at midterm looking to drop my course, they're typically embarrassed. They stammer out some apologies about how they really do like the course, they think I'm great, but they've taken on too much. Since hearing Larry's wisdom, I gently cut them off and sign the drop slip right away. Then, if they care to talk, I'm delighted to listen to their thoughts about the course, me or their other priorities in life.

I love sociology, and I believe in its value, just as I deeply believe in the value of liberal arts education. But when students don't like sociology, I let them know that I'm not insulted. You can't force motivation on a person; that door is locked from the inside. Students aren't disrespecting me by not wanting to take my course. Nor are they passing judgment on my field or my college.

We should know by now that students have other things going on in their lives besides school. For some, it may simply be the wrong time to focus on education. More than that, we should know that when we respect students' choices, they are more likely to respect ours, and they may better respect the ideas we want to share with them. But whether they do or don't is their choice.

There's nothing morally wrong with not wanting to swim. And that's fine.

—

Mr. Chambliss is a sociology professor at Hamilton College and a co-author of "How College Works."

(See related letters: "Letters to the Editor: Dropping Classes for Cause or for Slacking" – WSJ Feb. 11, 2020)

Credit: By Daniel F. Chambliss

## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Students; Sociology; Swimming; Education
<b>Location:</b>	United States--US
<b>Company / organization:</b>	Name: Hamilton College; NAICS: 611310
<b>Publication title:</b>	Wall Street Journal, Eastern edition; New York, N.Y.
<b>First page:</b>	A.19
<b>Publication year:</b>	2020
<b>Publication date:</b>	Feb 3, 2020
<b>Publisher:</b>	Dow Jones & Company Inc
<b>Place of publication:</b>	New York, N.Y.
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, New York, N.Y.
<b>Publication subject:</b>	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
<b>ISSN:</b>	00999660
<b>Source type:</b>	Newspapers
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	Commentary, Opinions
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	2350000065
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="https://cod.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2350000065?accountid=10202">https://cod.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2350000065?accountid=10202</a>
<b>Copyright:</b>	Copyright 2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
<b>Last updated:</b>	2020-02-10
<b>Database:</b>	ProQuest One Academic

Database copyright © 2020 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)