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Education and the seven rules

By Ron Kitchens
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I had the opportunity last week to address a group of students from Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo College and Kalamazoo Valley Community College who are participating in the Monroe Brown Internship Program.

As I welcomed each of these future leaders to "my house," our offices at Southwest Michigan First, I found myself being a bit overwhelmed at the opportunities that each of these kids has in front of them. Because of the generosity of the Monroe Brown Foundation, each of these dynamic young people will not only receive a tremendous internship at one of our region's companies, but also a college scholarship.

I had some great conversations that evening with most of these young people. The one that stands out though was not the one that thanked me for the free food or for helping the Monroe Brown Foundation. It was the young lady who asked, "Other than education, what else should I do to succeed?"

At that moment, I did not have a good answer for that great question. But after a little retrospect and asking some of my mentors that very same question, I think I have an answer for her now.

Education is, without a doubt, the great economic leveler; but education is not the only key to the future. I believe there are seven additional factors to your success:

1. Above all be true to yourself. That little voice in the back of your head is usually correct. Listen to it. Do what makes you proud of yourself.
2. Give back. Repay the gifts you have been given for your entire life. You do not have to be able to afford to feed 1,000 people to have an impact -- just ask the child who is not hungry because of the one meal you paid for. However you choose to use your blessings, make it a habit.
3. Never aspire for average. Average is the best of the worst. You were not put on this planet to be in the bottom 50 percent. Find your talents and build upon them for success.
4. Never quit learning and reading. Ignorance is your enemy. Futurist Tom Peters states that, "just a few years ago, one-third of everything you knew was obsolete in seven years. Now that number is down to 18 months." If Tom is correct, and I believe he is, your future is highly dependent on your commitment to lifelong learning.
5. Surround yourself with people who make you better. I am blessed to work for one of the finest board of directors in the nation, but most people do not have this advantage. So

go out and find your own board of directors. Find those people who understand you, your challenges and your opportunities and who can help coach you to success.

6. Bad things will happen -- be prepared. Keep your financial and personal affairs in order to allow you to sustain yourself financially and emotionally when the ill winds blow.

7. Give thanks for your blessings every day. As you have been told your entire life, you are what you eat. It is also true that you become what you value. It is important that each day you live to evaluate that day's blessings and use this evaluation to set the course for the next day.

These factors to your success are seemingly simple, yet can be easily forgotten or taken for granted. Don't. The most successful individuals I know in their respective professions follow them.

Conrad Anker, adventurer and mountain climber, is one of these individuals. Conrad starts each day by reading a daily devotional and a daily quote by the Dalai Lama. He uses this daily ritual to reflect on how to approach the day with kindness and remind him of what is important in his life. Next, he conquers the nearest tall peak or steep cliff, advocates recycling to make the world a better place for all or does what he does best -- shares his inspiring views on life with audiences around the globe.

So whether you intend to be an engineer, research scientist, elementary school teacher or adventurer, remember education and these seven rules and you will be able to reach the top of any mountain you encounter.

Ron Kitchens, www.RonKitchens.com, is CEO of Southwest Michigan First and the general partner of the Southwest Michigan First Life Science Fund. He is the author of the soon-to-be-released book "Community Capitalism" and a frequent speaker on economic growth.

Read "The Community Capitalist," the new blog from Ron Kitchens and Southwest Michigan First, at www.mlive.com/businessreview/western.