

Learn lessons from the real world

FIFTEEN years ago this month, I walked across the stage at Edwards County High School and out the doors forever. High school was great, but I couldn't wait to begin college. A new start, new friends, new life. Independence. I had no idea how little I knew, nor how much I'd learn.

May is a month of endings and new beginnings. Graduations are often a celebration of an accomplishment — a task completed, a job well done.

The truth is, they're also a beginning. Ending one phase of your life means the inevitable start of another. Thoughts shift to college, or to the beginning of a long-studied-for career.

My original plan, when I headed off to the University of Illinois, was to become a small-town doctor. Those who didn't know me back then are often surprised by that information, in part because I don't do math. In truth, it was Chem 101 that did me in. Eight years of that? No, thank you!

Instead, I discovered an entire career field in agricultural communications that, prior to college, I didn't even know existed. My life changed when I met a man named Jim Evans and sat in his office as he described the jobs ag communicators do — writing ads for John Deere, publicizing commodity groups, broadcasting farm news or even writing for *Prairie Farmer*. Funny how that one



My Generation
By HOLLY SPANGLER

turned out.

I learned a whole lot when I graduated, both from high school and from college. And it was with that thought in mind that I polled friends and colleagues, asking: What do you wish you'd known when you graduated? Here's what they had to say:

■ Life after college won't be as easy as you think. Pressure comes not from a big test but from finances, work and family obligations. Real life isn't easier or harder than college, it's just different.

■ If you were smart in high school, so what? When you land at a major university, everyone was smart in high school. Learn how to study, and do it quickly.

■ Those teachers you disliked so much in high school? The ones who made you write horrible term papers and actually gave you a hard test without telling you everything that would be on it first — and then refused to let the whole class re-take it? Those are the teachers who have truly prepared you for college.

■ When someone writes in your year-

book that you should "never change," don't buy it. College will change you. If it doesn't, you didn't get your money's worth. Your horizons will be broadened and so will your view of the world.

Of course, your core beliefs and faith shouldn't waver but if you don't become "more," then you missed the point of a higher education.

■ Choose your friends carefully. Hang on tightly to the good ones. I met some of my best friends in college, people who would help shape my character and remain close friends even today. You don't know how much you'll miss them until you don't see them everyday.

■ Reputation matters. College is a time to spread your wings and try new experiences, but remember that what you do reflects on who you are. And if you're in agriculture, you're likely going to see and work with some of your college peers well after graduation. Ag is still a small world.

■ Education doesn't always happen in a classroom, and grades aren't everything. That's not an excuse to fail, but a little perspective is useful when you're freaking out about that D you got on your political science test.

■ Don't worry about whether your first

job is the perfect one. Just get a job and learn how to work and how to have a successful career. Don't panic. Good people find good jobs.

■ Find someone to teach you about insurance, retirement savings and benefits. You have no idea how much those topics will consume your thoughts in the real world.

■ What you learn may wind up useful in ways you'd never dreamed of.

A colleague who now handles communication for a U.S. congressman says this about his college coursework: "I wish I'd known that the C I got in Chemistry 101 was no big deal because what I really needed to know was how to mix formula in a bottle or measure 5 ml of children's ibuprofen. Or that my messy ag mechanization grade wasn't a tragedy as long as I knew how to put together a crib. Or that every liberal theory of economics I learned in ag econ 100 was wrong but would become law 13 years later."

■ Comments? E-mail hspangler@farmprogress.com.

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