

# The Four Secrets of Success



This is what I tell young people who press me for advice.

By **Nicholas Kristof**

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Whenever I visit a university, students ask for Big Advice. I protest that I don't have great secrets for life and that my own path has been serendipitous, but they suspect me of holding out.

So as we approach the holidays — a time for reflection and New Year's resolutions — let me reveal everything. I hereby share with young people the Four Secrets of Success:

**1. Take a class in economics and in statistics.** I majored in political science and later studied law, but in retrospect I would have focused on economics. Likewise, if you have to choose, **skip calculus and focus on statistics.**

Education isn't about filling a bucket but about gaining a tool belt — **and economics and statistics offer terrific tools that for the rest of your life will help you analyze problems in more rigorous ways.** I champion the humanities for the wisdom they offer, but I do believe that philosophers and playwrights should have present value and standard deviations in their citizen tool belts.

We might also have sounder policy if our leaders weren't economic illiterates. President Trump and congressional Republicans sold the 2017 tax cut on the absurd notion that it would pay for itself (instead, we're now running a \$1 trillion deficit). And it's not just Republicans: Democrats have been embracing rent control, even though basic economics show that typical rent-control schemes make housing shortages worse by increasing demand without increasing supply.

**2. Connect to a cause larger than yourself.** The worst advice people give students is to spend the first third of their lives studying, the middle third making money, and the final third giving back. That would rob you for two-thirds of your life of meaning and fulfillment.

If you dropped dead of a heart attack at 50, you'd be gnashing your teeth for all eternity.

So find some cause that gives you a sense of purpose, ideally by actually connecting you to those less fortunate. This will also lend perspective when a mean professor gives you a bad grade.

**3. Make out.** The most important decision you will make is not the university you attend, nor your major, not even your first job. It's who you marry or settle down with.

The right partner provides crucial emotional support, is likely to parent your children and comforts you when life inevitably goes wrong. A key to a successful career is a great partner. Learning to manage a relationship may take practice, so get started and cuddle!

**4. Escape your comfort zone.** Your world will be much more globalized than ours, so your education is a failure if it exposes you only to people like yourself and doesn't prepare you to engage with other cultures.

A quick quiz question: *If someone who speaks two languages is bilingual, and someone who speaks three languages is trilingual, what do you call someone who speaks no foreign language at all? Answer: An American.*

So take a semester abroad. It's ridiculous to study Spanish in a classroom when you can absorb so much more in Mexico, Bolivia or Peru. (Items 3 and 4 can be combined for maximum language acquisition.)

I sometimes subject young linguists to a three-question test: *In a given language, how do you say: A) door knob; B) clothes hanger; C) electrical outlet.* The students who ace this test are those who have actually lived abroad.

So resist the temptation to join a herd of other American students in Australia, Britain or even Italy. Try Colombia or China, Senegal or Oman, India or Ghana.

Study abroad can be expensive, so consider work and volunteer opportunities at [omprakash.org](http://omprakash.org) and [idealist.org](http://idealist.org). They also offer ideas for a gap year between high school and college, as does [GlobalCitizenYear.org](http://GlobalCitizenYear.org).

You can also enter a different world right here in the United States by volunteering in a prison or tutoring disadvantaged children in your own town. Or if you're a coastal elite, perhaps by finding a temporary job in Trump country, and if you're already happily in Trump country, find work where progressives predominate. The important thing is to encounter different cultures.

All this leads to an announcement: It's time for my annual win-a-trip contest. In 2020 as in previous years, I'll be choosing a university student (undergraduate or graduate) to travel with me on an expense-paid reporting trip to cover global poverty, health and other issues. The winner will write for The New York Times.

I'm not sure where we'll go. Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo are each possibilities, as is Bangladesh. It's also possible we'll stay here in the United States and explore the domestic side of global poverty. You can find out more at [nytimes.com/winatrip](https://nytimes.com/winatrip), and thanks in advance to the Center for Global Development for helping me pick a winner.

Apply soon. But if I'm not smart enough to choose you, then maybe you can escape your comfort zone on your own, either abroad or here in the United States. If you don't win my trip, win your own.

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