Ask Me Anything

These questions and answers are probably most relevant to high school students, since they asked most of the questions I am about to answer. I would like to mention while it has been a good experience reflecting on my experiences back in high school and how I have been keeping up with myself over the years, I do not think my way of doing things should be strictly imposed on yourself or others. Different people have different strengths, weaknesses, stress tolerances, and the like, and one's physical, mental, and general well-being is more important than any notion of "success."

I think the general takeaways should be how one should think about themes of motivation, committment, stress, stagnation, and efficiency, and how one can find ways to address these themes in one's life.

On Motivation and Committment

> How do you stay motivated / How did you commit to certain endeavors / How were
> you able to take 30 AP exams/ get into Harvard/ etc.?

Again, I want to emphasize that I still have a lot to improve, but I think during high school I was able to stay motivated because I was inherently curious about knowing many things well to the point

that I could share my insights by teaching these subjects to other people. For me, things worked out very well because Ac. Dec supplemented AP exams, which supplemented Quizbowl, which supplemented Science Olympiad and AMC/AIME (thereby creating a virtuous cycle). I think I was quite fortunate to realize that I learned best by synthesizing different topics of knowledge rather than focusing on one subject in particular. More importantly, I was even more fortunate to have gone to a school that enabled me to create clubs (like the American Math and Innovation Club) where I could find people with similar aspirations who were interested in further understanding. From these clubs, I discovered my passion for teaching, which only furthered my interest in pursuing all of these academic endeavors (again, the virtuous cycle).

Committment is a difficult topic. If I were to have gone into high school with the sole aim of trying to qualify to USAMO, I think I would have faced much greater "struggle" and as a result "accomplished" less. To this end, I don't think what I did in high school was as impressive as that of the many other students at Harvard who were actually able to get good at one particular thing, whether it was USAPhO Gold, USACO Gold, and all these other mental gymnastics and olympiads. I think those students demonstrate greater raw motivation and drive because they were able to figure out a singular defined arena of study and they siloed themselves to actually become an expert at it. These are the kinds of people who would cut off free time with friends to squeeze out every second to practice math or music or writing or art. The stuff of starving artists, if I could call it so, because we have to think about the diminishing returns to scale and risky payoff they had to face in order to become number 1 vs. number 2 at such a competitive level at such a young age and the fact that most people probably don't even care about the pain they went through to become a master of their craft. This to me is would be what perfect committment looks like, but it obviously comes at a cost. Being said, I think this type of committment is what I strive for as long as I am

satisfied with my current mental and physical well-being.

Ultimately the question of motivation and drive hinges on what you value in life I think. You can have all the motivation and drive in the world, but if you're working on the wrong thing (i.e. it's making you miserable and as a result you can never really get good at it), it's all wasted energy. In high school I didn't have to make that choice because I valued general learning rather than being number 1 in a math competition, but now in college, I am coming closer to the reality that I will have to eventually make a certain pivot (general learning is a luxury but is often impervious to real problems faced by real people). Additionally, in college, everybody knows a lot and everybody is driven to know more across every discipline, and it becomes pointless to distinguish yourself based on sheer motivation and drive for the sake of becoming a "generalist." I put the word "generalist" in quotes because there really is no such thing – Ken Jennings, the famous Jeopardy contestant once remarked that, "The great thing about knowing stuff is that anyone can do it." Knowing stuff is not the hard part, creating original stuff is.

A major question I face with whether to attend graduate school amounts to whether I should accept a relatively comfortable "generalist" life (working in a big tech company or a big finance company) or whether I have it in me to become a specialist (academia or startup route). Waves against the current, I question on.

Stress and Stagnation

How do you deal with stress and getting stuck?

When I am stuck, I try to find other people who are smarter than me and talk to them. Talking to people is the best way to go. If there aren't any people to talk to, then I would find some online

resources, the typical Stack Overflow and Math Exchange for its vibrant community, because once again, people are your best resources. I don't use Reddit or Twitter and I don't anticipate I will get into that anytime soon. Quora I will peruse occasionally. Much of this seems like a simple and straightforward answer because it addresses the easier task of knowing stuff rather than the harder task of creating stuff.

As stated before, creating original stuff is much harder than knowing stuff. This would be the "intuition" that kicks in during math competitions, the stuff that I felt that I lacked when it came to making it to USAMO. What works for me when tackling this originality question is to seek inspiration elsewhere, and that comes in the form of arts, humanities, and social sciences. This worked for me in high school, but it's becoming less relevant in college as disciplines become increasingly specialized and sophisticated.

I view stress as a proxy for stagnation, so I think as long as you can find a way to address stagnation, you will find a way to address stress.

Efficiency and Execution

How do you stay efficient?

Ever since I've gotten into college, I've felt myself becoming less efficient. I think this is because I didn't quite know how to use a computer. In high school, almost everything I did could be done without a computer – writing essays, bubbling test exams, practicing piano, and playing soccer. I really only needed a computer for the functionality of a typewriter.

I haven't been really efficient in college because I had to learn a totally new environment for getting stuff done, and this boiled down to hours on hours tinkering with my computer. This

experience was like memorizing the times table for the first time at age 8 or teaching myself how to write with a pencil at age 6. I think I've gotten better at using a computer, but somehow time always passes by faster and faster whenever I open my laptop. I track my time, and most of it is still spent reading emails. I don't suppose that makes me qualified to talk about efficiency. After all, does email aid in your construction and attainment of personal aspirations within life? It's a personal question with no clear answer.

The point I'm trying to illustrate here is that efficiency is a construct. A shoemaker could be the most efficient human to ever make shoes, but as soon as the environment changes and there exists new machines that produce shoes even more efficiently, much of that time spent cultivating efficiency on the shoemaker's part goes to vain. Sure, all that time learning computer science marked a period when I was inefficient, but after this period of inefficiency, the computer science I have learned now opens up new possibilities that I couldn't have otherwise achieved with just my hands alone. And it just could be the case that in the future, some new environment for work replaces the computer, at which point I become inefficient once again. As human beings, the challenge we face is learning to identify efficiency as a product of our environment. I believe how we anticipate and define what to work on amidst changing environments ends up being the most efficient thing to do at the end of the day.