



We often hear about the interconnectedness of the world we live in, but in all honesty, it is usually difficult to see past the confines of the smaller communities we live in and feel a part of. We see and feel the results of competition with our immediate neighbors and classmates; we only hear about the global scale of competition when we turn on our TVs at night. But whether we feel the immediacy of it or not, the truth is that today's markets are global and people compete more freely than ever before to buy and sell goods and services at the most competitive prices possible. As the barriers to competition are reduced, the strongest competitors naturally rise to the top.

On one level, the film "Two Million Minutes" shows that the perspectives of the American, Indian, and Chinese students are, in fact, remarkably similar. All of these students are calculating their odds of success and determining the course of action most likely to bring about their desired results. None of them seems particularly cognizant of the global scale of the competition in which he or she is involved. But when pulled outside of my own everyday world for just a few minutes and given a chance to consider the message of the film, it seems clear to me that: (1) There is, indeed, a global dimension to the lives that all of us are leading; and (2) The Indian and Chinese students are working much harder to achieve their future goals than I am to achieve mine. When I listen to their stories, I have to acknowledge what former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich observed: "The people who are potentially losing their competitive edge are Americans."

The stories of the Americans who find it so easy to achieve their goals, in many ways, at least, have a ring with which I am quite familiar. So far, I seem to be on a course that should lead to acceptance into a respectable college here in America. Why should I care about how hard it is to get into an engineering school in India or China? After all, I don't live there. The reality, however, is that, while many of us take for granted that with good grades and SAT scores we can attend fine universities, we are only postponing the day when we will actually compete with our cohorts in other countries in an international marketplace. Inevitably, the day will come when the hard work of our international neighbors will result in our losing the competitive advantage that Secretary Reich spoke of.

I feel ashamed when I hear how hard the Chinese and Indian students are working to achieve their goals while we Americans seem so complacent about our own futures. I do not doubt, for example,

that Neil is a genuinely talented and gifted student to have received a full scholarship to attend Purdue University. But, given the low level of overall competition here in America, it seems that his achievement might have come relatively easily. Rohit's failure, on the other hand, to get into IIT (the school that Bill Gates considers the finest engineering school in the world) seems sadly unfair given his talent and level of commitment. Perhaps, the Indian and Chinese students would find the SAT exam on which Neil performed so brilliantly to be embarrassingly easy.

I wish I could say that the Americans live more "balanced" lives, to use Brittany's expression. But the film does not seem to indicate that the Indian or Chinese students were unhappy or unfulfilled—just that they had a different sense of balance. I certainly would not presume to tell those students that they are working too hard or that they would be happier if they slowed their pace down a little bit. At the same time, I feel uncomfortable with the notion that the young people of today's world are destined to grow up to be mere competitors. While there is no denying the truth of the statement, it sounds so bleak and pessimistic. To listen to the American experts interviewed in the film, you would think that there was no room for friendly relations in the future—only cutthroat one-upmanship.

This essay's theme of how best to use 14,000 minutes has a particular appeal to me. Last year, I played a small role in my school's production of the Broadway musical *Rent*. The first line in the musical's main theme song, "Seasons of Love," refers to the 525,600 minutes that all of us have in a given year. The song suggests that we could measure that time "in daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee, in inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife." But the message of the musical is, of course, that a life spent in striving to make the most of human relationships is a life well spent. I like that message, and I believe that the same can be said about any length of time—whether it be 14,000 minutes or 525,600. The point of the expression is that, in either case, we need to be aware of the ticking of the clock; that time is precious and that we have to make the best use of it.

Rather than think solely in terms of the competition upon which the film seems to place so much emphasis, I would prefer to concentrate on using the 14,000 minutes of a trip to China to forge strong relationships with my peers. I want to know why the Chinese and Indian students feel compelled to work so hard. I want to show them how much I respect their efforts and let them know that I am eager

to learn from them. The trip that I took to Europe last year with EF Educational Tours was easily one of the greatest experiences of my life, but this trip to China offers something particularly unique—the chance to interact with a completely different set of peers. If chosen, I would have the opportunity to learn alongside students in the host country as well as Indian students and other students from America. I would love to be a part of such an incredible learning experience.

I have always had a knack for making friends quickly and creating long-lasting relationships. Moreover, I have also been good at keeping my friends connected with each other. Not only have I maintained close contact with the friends I have made from other countries; I have been successful at keeping groups of people interconnected. My friends usually depend on me to keep communication alive between and amongst members of our group. With 14,000 minutes, I would concentrate not only on building friendships with other individuals, but also on forging group ties that would keep us all interconnected for years to come. If chosen to go on the trip, this is the area in which I would most like to take initiative. I think that this experience in particular could lead to my developing even stronger leadership skills.

As for critical thinking skills, it is impossible to anticipate the exact nature of the interaction that I might have with my counterparts, but I expect that I would have to consider points of view that are unlike my own. I do not feel threatened by that prospect, however, and I look forward to dealing with it. To begin with, I would refrain from defending American ideals if they seemed to be in conflict with those of the Indian and Chinese students. I would try instead to find the logic in their ways of thinking. As I have already mentioned, it seems that all of the students interviewed in the film have more in common with each other than the filmmakers might have intended for us to think. We are all trying to succeed in our own social contexts. Therefore, my job would be to apply my critical thinking skills to understanding the nature of those differing contexts.

I am not sure what cultural differences I would encounter meeting Chinese and Indian students. Would we have different ways of greeting each other? Would we shake hands? Bow? Hug? Face-to-face encounters would give all of us a chance to develop greater communication skills. I am sure that we would quickly get past the awkwardness of any superficial cultural differences and find points in

common that we share as students. Discussions about the things that matter to us as young people concerned about our future prospects would also help us improve these skills. Taking responsibility for remaining connected and using our experiences in our future lives would naturally bring out qualities of leadership. In short, I feel that any serious student given the opportunity to take this trip would benefit in all the ways suggested by the essay question. I feel that the most important point for me to stress, therefore, is just how seriously I would take the opportunity.

As for how this trip might affect my future, I would say the sky is the limit. Inspired from learning alongside Chinese, Indian, and fellow American students, I might decide to study international relations and enter the diplomatic corps. Then again, I am equally excited about music, having played violin since I was three years old. The story of the Chinese girl who failed to get into Yale University had a real impact on me. Depending on whom I would meet and the encounters that I would have, I might become inspired to look for opportunities to perform music with people from around the world. On the other hand, I might decide to become a teacher and share what I learn from my experiences with fellow Americans or even travel abroad to teach students in other countries.

I hope that the judges of this essay competition are not only looking for students with specific plans for the future because I do not believe that life has to be planned in such detail. Some people succeed in following a predetermined blueprint for the future, but I would rather assimilate my experiences and let them lead me in new directions. While it is impossible for me to make any specific predictions about the future, I can say with confidence that I know I would become a better person if I were given this chance and that I would approach this opportunity with a combination of excitement, seriousness, and a great sense of responsibility.

The clock has been ticking for about eight hours (540 minutes) since I started this essay. Just thinking about it has caused me to feel really pumped up. Next on my list of things to do is to start studying as much as I can about modern society in China and India. I am really looking forward to the opportunity to use 14,000 minutes on this incredible journey!