



## **ZERO**

### ***Preview***

Bright and capable, the author of this essay followed the popular crowd—right into a career as a shopping-cart attendant at a giant warehouse store. There he ran into a glimpse of his past and had an unsettling vision of his future.



## ZERO

*Paul Logan*

*Three F's and two I's.*

My first semester grades hit me like a kick in the stomach. The *F's* were for classes where my work was poor. The *I's* were “incompletes” —for courses in which I never finished my assignments. They eventually became *F's* too.

I crumpled the report card and shoved it deep in a trash can. I can't say I was surprised. A zero grade point average was what I deserved, no question about it. But seeing my name in print on the worst possible report card still hurt. It also lit a spark in me, one that changed my life.

I was nineteen when I bombed out my first year of college. I hadn't always been a poor student. During elementary and middle school, I was consistently at the top of my class. But when I transferred into a huge regional high school, everything changed. I started "underachieving." Guidance counselors, teachers, and members of my family noticed. "You have potential," they'd say when they heard of my mediocre performance. "You just don't apply yourself."

They didn't understand. The truth was I *did* apply myself—just not to academics. As a shy, acne-prone teenager thrown into an enormous and unfamiliar high school, grades were not my priority; survival was. During my freshman year, I was constantly hassled and teased by a group of older guys at my school. They shoved and threatened me on the bus, teased me in the halls, and mocked me during lunchtime. *Nerd. Geek. Loser.* These insults were fired at me like bullets. Sometimes they

came with fists. I got scared.

This fear transformed me. Constantly stressed and distracted, I stopped worrying about classes. Too embarrassed to admit to teachers or my family what was happening, I quietly dropped from an A student in 8th grade to C student just a year later. My definition of success changed just as dramatically. To me, a good day at school was no longer about doing well in class. It was simply about getting home without being hassled. To achieve this goal, I learned to blend in to the crowd—to look, talk, and act like the popular kids. First, I changed my clothes and hairstyle. Then I started behaving differently, hanging out with new “friends” and teasing the few kids who fit in worse than me. By the end of my freshman year, I escaped being at the bottom of the social ladder, but I also gave up on being a good student.

Instead, my focus was on following the crowd and being a social success. In 10th grade, I got a job at a nearby mall, so I could buy what seemed important: name-brand clothes, expensive sneakers, the latest CD’s, and movie tickets—things I thought I needed to be popular. So what if my grades tumbled because I neglected my studies? At least no one was laughing at me anymore. By 11th

grade, a new girlfriend and my used car were what I cared most about. Classes were a meaningless activity I endured weekdays. Senior year was more of the same, though I took the SAT and applied to a few colleges—because classmates were doing it. Despite my mediocre grades, I managed to get accepted. The following September, thanks to my family's savings, I followed the crowd and floated straight to college.

That's when I started to sink. Years of putting social time and my job ahead of school left me without study habits to deal with college work. Years of coasting in class left me unready for assignments that required effort and time management skills. Years of following others left me unequipped to make smart choices about my education. In addition to lacking skills, I also lacked motivation. College felt as meaningless to me as high school. Though I'd gotten accepted at a four-year university, nothing pushed me to succeed there. I arrived on campus in September without skills, goals, and a plan. I figured I could continue doing what I had done for years: coasting. It was a recipe for disaster.

My first week on campus, I coasted through freshman orientation, skipping activities because I didn't take them seriously. My

second week, I attended a few parties, got home late, and overslept, missing a bunch of classes. No big deal, I thought. I'd just float by and hand in my homework late. But I quickly discovered, unlike high school, catching up was difficult in college. Readings in my English and History classes wore longer and more complicated than I was used to—too difficult for me to skim. Writing assignments were more numerous and required more time than I'd expected. Unaccustomed to the workload, I started cutting “easy” classes to complete overdue assignments from other courses. This strategy made me fall further behind, which, in turn, made it even more difficult to motivate myself to attend class.

*Why bother if you're already behind?* I thought.

Deadlines passed and work kept piling up, and I began to realize I was over my head. Halfway through the semester, I stopped going to classes regularly, hoping instead that I could score well on final exams to offset my missing assignments. But without attending class and taking notes, there was no way I could adequately prepare for tests. While coasting worked in high school, it didn't work in college. By the end of ten weeks, I knew I was done. No longer able to float, I'd sunk.

My family was stunned and disappointed at my failure. I was, too, though the lesson hadn't yet fully sunk in.

That happened a few months later when I was working at a large warehouse store called Sam's Club—the one place near home that would hire an unskilled college dropout in the middle of winter. My job was to retrieve shopping carts from the store's massive parking lot and stack them in rows for customers. Days and nights, I trudged across the dismal asphalt, collecting carts and cleaning up piles of garbage and soiled diapers shoppers left behind. On this March afternoon, it was raw and stormy, and I was wearing a used yellow Sam's Club raincoat that made me stink of sweat and vinyl. My hair was dripping, and my shoes squished like soaked sponges with each step.

The store was crowded with shoppers, and I'd just shoved a heavy train of carts next to the front door when a cluster of young people walked out. I recognized them immediately: four popular classmates who'd gone to my high school. They were giggling about something—a sound that brought me back to the time, years earlier, when I feared being laughed at by my peers. My face began to burn.

“Oh my God, it's *Paul*,” said one of them. They all looked at me. I felt trapped.

“What are *you* doing here?” said Ken, a guy who’d been in my English class in 10th grade. He glanced at my rain-soaked jacket.

“Working,” I said. There was an awkward silence. I had spent years trying to fit in with people like them, and now I only wanted to get away. “What about you?” I asked, hoping to change the subject.

“We’re home for spring break,” Ken replied.

The burning on my face suddenly grew hotter. They were already finishing their first year of college, and I was pushing carts in the rain—pushing carts for them.

“*Paul, we need more carts in here! Hurry up!!!*” my supervisor yelled from inside the store.

My former classmates looked uncomfortable and embarrassed. I could see the questions in their eyes. *What happened to you? Weren’t you in college too?* I felt as if my first semester grade point average was written across my face and they were reading it.

*Zero point zero.*

I nodded a quick goodbye and turned away. My eyes stung as the truth of my mistakes poured down on me like the rain. I had allowed myself to become what my grade point average said: a failure—a dropout without a



plan, a goal, or a real future. A zero. Coasting wasn't going to carry me any further. Neither would the CD's, the parties, or the brand name sneakers I'd so valued in high school. By pursuing them and nothing else, I'd closed doors in my life. If I kept following the same path, I could spend years struggling in that dreary parking lot or some other menial job while my peers moved forward. I wanted to do more with my life than push shopping carts.

The spark which ignited at the sight of my report card erupted into a burning flame in my chest. Watching my friends drive off that afternoon, one thing was suddenly clear to me: it was time to get serious and take control of my life. College could help me do that, I realized. It could be a lifeline; I just had to grab it—no more coasting.

The following fall, with money saved from working nine months in the parking lot, I paid for classes at a local community college. This time, I attended every orientation activity—and I took notes. Learning from past mistakes, I also bought a calendar and jotted down each assignment, so I could see deadlines well in advance and plan accordingly. Instead of skipping classes for social time, I arranged social events after class with peers who seemed serious about their work. No longer a follower, I

became a study group leader! This actually helped me become a popular student—the thing I had chased for so long in high school.

I am not going to say it was easy. After long days on the job, I spent longer nights at home doing my coursework. It took months of practice for me to learn the skills I'd missed in high school: how to take good notes, how to take tests, how to write an effective essay, and how to get help when I needed it. But gradually I learned.

Throughout my second attempt at college, I sat beside many students who reminded me of myself during my first semester. I recognized them right away—students who seemed distracted or apathetic in class or who were frequently absent. They usually disappeared after a few weeks. Some were dealing with full lives that made it difficult to focus on their courses. Others, especially the ones straight out of high school, were coasting, unsure of why they were there or what they were doing. For these students, college is especially tough.

To thrive in college, you have to want to be there, and you have to be ready to focus on work. Some people aren't ready. They're likely to fail, just as I did. But even failure, as painful as it is, doesn't have to be an ending. It can be a learning experience—one that builds

strength and gives direction. It can also serve as a wake-up call that turns a floating student into a serious one. It can even light a spark that sets the stage for future success. Take it from me, a former zero, who graduated from community college with a perfect 4.0 grade point average!