

---

# The Path to Becoming a Professor Begins Early with Achievable Goals

**Date :** April 17, 2020

*Kenneth A., 16, is a junior at Bemidji High School in Bemidji, Minnesota, U.S., and is also taking classes at Bemidji State University. In our student essay of the week, Kenneth writes about his journey to spread knowledge to the world, one goal at a time.*

I had a problem in the fall of 2019. In the past year I had read more than 200 books and had become fascinated with personal growth and learning about the world. Reading transformed me and inspired me to want to contribute my own share to the world's knowledge. Many of the authors I respected most were professors, and I wanted to follow in their footsteps. But I had no clue how to get there.

My father is a commercial fisherman in Alaska and my mother prepares taxes for companies. They couldn't help me. However, unlike them in their youth, I had access to the internet. I decided that I would start my search in a familiar place: reddit. Reddit offers thousands of communities discussing different topics, and I found one just suited for my questions called r/AskAcademia. On that subreddit, I found several threads asking how to become a professor. I decided to dig in and see if I could find practical advice for following my new passion.

I found what I was looking for from the people on reddit who had posted the highest quality comments to other users' questions. One reddit user was especially helpful, writing nearly 15 pages of material. I even talked on the phone with this user for more than an hour, conducting an interview of sorts. I made sure to clarify every little bit of information I was unsure about, and it paid dividends. I had truly struck gold with this wealth of information! I had it all in front of me, but I lacked a roadmap helping me to get where I wanted to go.

I needed actionable steps; steps that would help me see progress in real time. To solve this problem, I created a goal hierarchy.

Angela Duckworth, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, is a big champion of goal hierarchies. In her book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, she writes that the most effective way to discover your top-level priority in life is by organizing your goals into a hierarchy. I learned from her that hard work is the deciding factor in regard to your success. Grit can be taught, as Duckworth identifies, and one way to improve your grit is to make a goal hierarchy.

“When you take personal responsibility, your motivation and work ethic increase to levels that you didn't even know were possible.” — Kenneth A., Minnesota High School Student

Goal hierarchies start with your top goal (for me, becoming a professor), and continually break them down into parts that contribute to achieving them. This process eventually leads down to actions that you can do right away. This process may sound like a waste of time, but its benefits have not only improved my progress towards a professorship, but also my mental health.

For example, I figured out that research experience is crucial for getting into a top graduate school. So I took that step. I am currently researching how memories are stored in the mind and how they can conflict with one another with my mentor, Dr. Travis Ricks at Bemidji State University. I also realized that getting into the best undergraduate institution I could with a full tuition scholarship would save me financial stress and provide the best path to a professorship, so I set out to master the SAT test. I went through every practice test out there and ended up getting a perfect score. I wasn't just

doing this for my family. I did it for me. When you take personal responsibility, your motivation and work ethic increase to levels that you didn't even know were possible.

By using a goal hierarchy, I was able to gain three major benefits:

**Progressing toward my top goals.** Before I created a goal hierarchy, I did not know if I was making progress toward my ultimate goal. And I hate stagnation. With my goal hierarchy, however, I can see where my time spent today leads me in the future. Furthermore, I chose to color code the bottom nodes of my goal hierarchy by their ability to be completed at this very moment. Green means it is a future goal. Yellow is a task which I can do right now. Blue is something I've already accomplished. If I am feeling down, I can pull up my goal hierarchy and hone in on the yellow tasks, taking action in areas that will improve my future self and boost my morale in the present.

**Less mental clutter.** Life is just too complicated, especially in the internet age. Grades, extracurriculars, social media, college applications . . . the list goes on. For me, it was my future. All the things I wanted to do were in one gigantic mess in my head. My goal hierarchy allowed me to think more clearly throughout my day. Beforehand, I was always afraid that I would lose some crucial piece of information, crippling my plan. When I was able to map out my long-term plans into a hierarchy, I was able to give that information a place to live and free up space for mental growth.

**A practical look ahead.** We all worry about how to get to our future goals. There seems to be such a wide gap between us as teenagers and the career workplace, and it strikes fear in us to measure that gap. Everyone tells us these days to follow our passion, but it's hard to know how to even get there. We can start taking meaningful steps toward what we eventually want to achieve.

Doesn't this goal hierarchy lock me into a set future? I have found that it doesn't. I have switched from interests in genetics to history to cognitive psychology, and almost every single goal I have accomplished with the help of my goal hierarchy has contributed to all of them. The small, actionable steps you take right now can open you up to a world of opportunities – leading to your ultimate goal. They give you what scholar Nassim Nicholas Taleb calls optionality, a readiness to take advantage of the opportunities that life offers you.

Considering I didn't know much about becoming a professor just last year, I've come a long way. I am pretty confident that I will achieve my top goal and end up at a research university, studying the human mind. How do we store memories? Can they be modeled in a simple way? Can we model the mind in a computer? What then happens to humans? The research possibilities are endless.