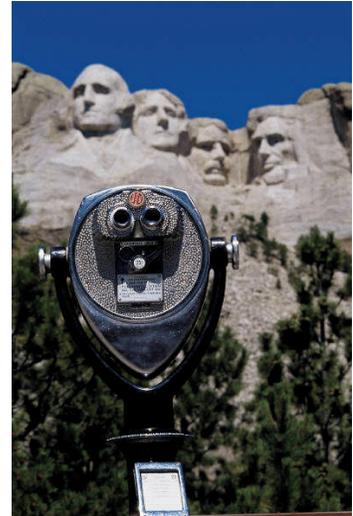


Self Fulfilling Expectations Are Truly A Matter of Choice

During a conversation with a client, I learned that his soon to be college freshman son was expected to register for only 12 hours instead of the standard 15. The university's position was that 12 hours was the expected workload because 12 hours was very difficult even for the brightest young person. As the father was also a former college student who experienced 15 to 18 hour semesters, he asked me what I thought. My reply would be to ask the following question to the university: **"If you expect my son to earn a 4 year degree in 4 years or approximately 120 hours, how can he do achieve this goal when he is only registering for 24 hours per year?"**



On the way back to my office, I was reminded of the **"self-fulfilling prophecy"** that Robert Merton identified in his 1957 work *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Merton defined this concept as **"when a false definition of the situation evokes a new behavior which makes the original false conception come true."** In simpler terms, when an expectation is set regardless whether it is factual or not factual, we as human beings will take actions consistent with that expectation.

"We will always tend to fulfill our own expectation of ourselves."
Brain Tracy

For my client, if he didn't challenge the expectation of the university, his son would be taking 6 years to complete a 4-year degree. Also, his son would then believe that 12 hours are very difficult and would take actions to support that expectation.

My thoughts then turned to a scene in G. Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* when the very wise Eliza Doolittle was explaining the self-fulfilling prophecy to the Pickering, the Professor's friend *"the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treated me as a flower girl, and always will, but I know I can be a lady to you because you always treat me as a lady, and always will."*

How often do the expectations of others and even ourselves set the stage for predicting our own future failures or future successes? *Expectations are simply our thoughts.* Through time, these self-fulfilling thoughts can eventually turn into habits of thought or what some call attitudes. Each day these attitudes can provide the momentum for us to reach higher and farther or can be 500 pound weights that drag us down into deep holes where darkness is every present.

Again, the answer is one of choice. You can choose to expect more of yourself and others or you can choose not to. For me, there is only one choice. **What is your choice?**