

George W. Hinckley III

Providing Solutions

George Hinckley III was smart, but growing up he didn't take academics very seriously. Neither of his parents had gone to college, and only his mother had finished high school. Among George and his three brothers—one older and two younger—he was the only one of the four who pursued higher education. But that might never have come to pass if he hadn't first joined the United States Marine Corps.

Throughout high school, George maintained a "C" average. He was careful never to dip into the failing range, but he hardly tried to do his best. As his years in high school ended, he wasn't sure what he wanted to do next. But he knew he wasn't ready for college. So instead, he met with a Marine recruiter. While there, he noticed a picture on the recruiter's wall of several Marines in full dress uniform. Something about the picture spoke to George. "I didn't just like the uniform; I also liked the demeanor, the bearing, and everything about them," he reflects. The Marine recruiter was also impressive. "There tends to be something more there, with Marines, and that's what I thought I was seeing. And after 20 years, I believe that that something really was there, that I saw something special."

Before he knew it, he enlisted in the Marine Corps with a guarantee that they would send him through avionics training. He'd once hoped to attend the Air Force Academy, but his eyesight disqualified him. So the avionics career that the Marines offered seemed like the next best thing. At first, things went very well. At boot camp George stood out for his impressive marksmanship skills at the range, and for his overall physical fitness.

After a day spent outside shooting in the cold, however, George began to come down with something. A couple of days later during mess

duty the head cook at the Mess Hall sent him back to the barracks because George was coughing all over the food. Over the next few days, George spit up mucus all night and struggled to keep up with his duties. In the military, there's a stigma associated with illness and injury and so, like many of his fellow recruits, George tried to push through.

Finally, he went to the drill instructor to explain that he was wasn't well but instead, passed out in the middle of his explanation. When he awoke, he learned his diagnosis: severe pneumonia. The doctors told him that without medical treatment he may have died in another day or two. George spent the next three weeks in the Beaufort Naval Hospital. By the time he was released from the hospital, he couldn't rejoin his original platoon because it had moved on in the training cycle while he was hospitalized. "The one thing you never want to do in boot camp, is to drop from one platoon and join another because joining a new platoon is hell," explains George. The drill instructors harassed the hell out of him, joked about his pneumonia while blowing smoke in his face, and had him running wind sprints to regain some of his compromised lung capacity.

Still, despite the rough treatment, George soon distinguished himself again. In fact, the Senior Drill instructor called him into his office one afternoon to tell George that if he had been an original member of their platoon, then he'd have been designated both the Honor Man and the High Shooter – two distinguished honors awarded at the end of boot camp. Unfortunately, because he wasn't an original member of the platoon, he wasn't eligible.

Fortunately, his shooting skills weren't the only thing the military saw in George. When he expressed an interest in becoming an officer, his



Marine Corps career counselor encouraged him. "They had something called the BOOST program where if you weren't in a good enough place academically, then they'd work with you to get you ready for officer training. But when I went to ask about that program, the counselor looked at my transcript and told me that I was actually overqualified. So the counselor then said, 'Let's go ahead and put your officer training package together.' As it happens, twenty-two were selected for officer training that year, and I was among them." After considering several schools, George applied to and was accepted by the University of Missouri, where he later received a Bachelor of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering.

Generations of the Hinckley family served in the armed forces, to include his father and all three of his brothers. Not one, however, had risen to officer rank since his great grandfather. George knew that his parents, particularly his father, were proud of him. And it was his father who kept him on track after a particularly challenging summer spent at the Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Marine Corps Base Quantico. While there, George began to have doubts about continuing in the program after watching a good friend—someone who he considered quite smart and competent—fail to meet the academic expectations of the program, and then leave it. "That was one of several occasions when my dad drove all the way from Massachusetts to Missouri to encourage me." George's dad said to him, "What are you doing? You need to get your head back in the game and finish this. You have opportunities that I didn't have." For George, that encouragement was a major turning point.

Perhaps it was because of the instrumental role the U.S. Marine Corps played in getting George a higher education that he ended up doing the work he does today. Today, George is the CEO of Crossroads Innovation Group (Crossroads), a business he founded along with two partners last year. Crossroads is so named to invoke the spirit of Marine Corps Base Quantico, which has long been considered the "crossroads" of the Marine Corps. Decisions made at Quantico impact Marines around the globe, hence the name. With the establishment of Crossroads, George created a platform upon which he might pursue and fulfill opportunities he felt were being missed in the military training process, ideas which he had been exploring over many years working with the

armed forces both as an active duty Marine and as a private sector member of the defense establishment.

Crossroads' mission is simple: to work with military and educational institutions to make it possible for servicemen to receive educational credit for the military training they undertake. In many cases, the training they've received for their role within the military tracks closely with courses offered by colleges and universities. In those cases, Crossroads works to bring the military training establishment and select colleges together to examine the intersections between their curricula, as well as assessing how much credit a service member would be able to receive at each select school for the training he or she has already completed.

The first seeds for the idea were planted when George was introduced to Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) during the course of his independent consulting in 2011. NOVA, as it is commonly known, is a Designated Center of Academic Excellence for Cyber Education, a subject which is critical for all branches of the military. George decided to put two and two together and approached the Marine Corps with the following proposal: what if the Marines and NOVA worked together to map the Marines' training courses already offered to NOVA's curricula, and then put in place a process by which Marines could receive academic credit for their training?

"When we evaluated the learning objectives and content that the Marines were teaching, it mapped to two three-credit courses that NOVA was teaching," explained George. "That's when we decided to take a deeper dive. The Marines looked through the NOVA course catalog and identified courses that they thought might map to their program of instruction."

This was the first step toward creating the program called "MOS to degree" – MOS stands for Military Occupational Specialty which is essentially the job role and responsibilities of an individual Marine. For instance, George's MOS at one time was "Avionics Technician". A MOS provides an entire career path for a Marine. Next, Paula Worthington at NOVA spent five months identifying which MOSs received training that could map to courses offered at NOVA. Ultimately, she came up with eight MOSs that can qualify for anywhere from six to twenty-six

academic credits in the Information Systems Technology department.

"Roughly three thousand Marines annually complete MOS related programs of instruction, and now, any of them can apply to NOVA and be eligible to receive credit for their prior learning," says George proudly. "Recently, fifteen Marines at Quantico attended NOVA for thirty-one more credits to add to the twenty-six they already have. So by the middle of spring semester in 2020, those young Marines will come out of NOVA with fifty-seven credits toward a sixty-seven-credit data engineering degree. All the general education stuff is on them to actually finish the degree up. But getting them to fifty-seven is absolutely transformational. That's why I'm so passionate about this."

The feedback so far has been fantastic. George recently received an email from a Marine General who affirmed that credentialing the Marines' training has begun a sea change for the Department of Defense. "She also reached out to thank me because they're accustomed to vendors knocking on their door and selling them things," notes George. "They're not used to people providing solutions. So they really appreciated that. That's what we do."

Despite the great work Crossroads is already doing, the business is technically in its infancy, and George has his sites set much higher. The partnership between NOVA and the Marines is going very well, but what about the other branches of the military? What about other colleges and universities across the country? This successful model could easily be applied to thousands of courses of study, and George has already begun working with George Mason University to put together a project focused on cyber security.

"The Marines asked NOVA if they could scale and they said they could by accommodating another twenty-five students," notes George. "But we're thinking in terms of thousands and thousands of people. So that's one of the things we're focusing on now. How do we scale content to a broader enterprise? We're developing a platform to make that possible."

George has certainly come a long way from his blue-collar childhood in the Boston, Massachusetts area. He was born in the rough part of town in Brockton. It was there as a young boy that he began to get into trouble doing things like

playing on the railroad tracks and accepting dares to steal cigarettes from the local convenience store. Eventually, his parents decided that Brockton wasn't the right place to raise their four sons; so they moved the Hinckley family to the quieter, smaller town of Whitman when George was six.

George's mother stayed home to do the tough work of raising four boys while George's father worked as a mason and bricklayer. He was a man who worked with his hands and relished seeing the final product of his labor. He'd learned his craft from an Italian immigrant who knew the business well, and his work was widely admired. As George grew older, he often helped his Dad build chimneys and lay bricks with the other workers.

In Whitman, George began to get involved in more wholesome activities. He developed a passion for football, basketball, and baseball. He even became the Captain of his pee-wee football team in eighth grade. However, by the time he hit high school, he had begun to enjoy the sport less and less. "I was a running back but our team was undefeated because our defensive line was just monstrous," George remembers. Every practice was brutal. I'd come home with both my forearms bleeding. So I eventually convinced myself that I didn't want to do that anymore."

Instead, George got involved in motorcycle racing. He notes that his father was a "gearhead" and encouraged him in the sport. "My dad was a hardass, but he was a real soft boiled egg kind of guy. You know, the one who is tough on the outside but has a huge heart," smiles George. "If you had an interest and you were committed to that interest, he would do his best to help you be successful." To this day, George still considers his first motorcycle racing trophy—a second place finish—to be a prize possession. "My father told me, 'When you win on that motorcycle, we'll get you more competitive equipment'" recalls George. "And shortly after that, I won my first race, he bought me a new high-performance motorcycle, and I won six straight races!"

Eventually, his father sold the motorcycles when George tired of racing and took more of an interest in girls. "Dad wasn't going to leave expensive equipment lying around when no one was using it," laughs George. "He taught me that if you're going to do something, commit to it and do it well." If I was really trying, he was supportive. When I wasn't, he wasn't nearly as

supportive!”

Chasing girls did have one positive side effect for George. He ended up taking typing classes for the purpose of meeting girls. But those lessons ended up being instrumental in pushing him into Signals Intelligence as his military career progressed. George was first stationed in Hawaii, “a tough assignment,” he says with a smile. He would later be sent to Taiwan, Okinawa, and the Mediterranean during the fighting in Beirut. After that, George attended the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School for graduate work.

Coincidentally, one of his fellow classmates in that program was a Marine Captain by the name of Gordon Steele, who had been in Lebanon at the same time as George. Not only that, but George’s ship had provided naval gunfire support to Gordon’s men when they were under attack in 1984. Their reunion in 1988 at Quantico led to an amazing friendship that continues to this day. Gordon was even the best man at George’s wedding to his wife, Julie, with whom he has been married for twenty-five years.

Julie has been a constant source of support since they met working on a project together. “I’ve learned a lot about myself since I met Julie,” admits George. “She’s a superb coach and a superb teacher, and she’s become my sounding board. Now I bounce things off of her because she gives great, pragmatic advice. She’s been a great balance for me over the years. She’s been amazing. I wouldn’t be the same person without her.”

After leaving the Marines in 1992 with over two decades of service behind him, George headed to a company that produced and sold satellite communications systems. Within a year, he was the supervisor of his group. From there, he moved over to a smaller company in 1996 and rose to the level of Vice President before departing in 2005.

Finally, George took a position with a business called MTCSC, where he developed advanced capabilities for tactical systems. The business, founded in 2000, grew from a tiny fifteen employee organization to over three-hundred-fifty by the time it was sold ten years later. After the sale, George toughed it out for about seven months but found that working for a \$3 billion business

didn’t really fit his independent style.

It was then, in 2011, that George began consulting, and it was through this work that he fatefully came into contact with the Northern Virginia Community College. The rest, as they say, is history.

It’s no surprise that, when it comes to leadership, George emphasizes being a mentor. “A big part of leadership is developing future leaders,” he affirms. “Helping them identify what they’re good at and supporting their development is crucial for a leader. It’s important for young people to find their way. That’s why I’m passionate about the work I do with the Marine Corps; none of them know me, but they’re going to benefit from what we did.”

To young people themselves, George advises hard work and integrity. “I believe you will be successful if you put your heart and soul into what you believe in and into where your strengths can take you,” he instructs. “In many instances, you may not end up where you thought you’d be; and that’s okay as long as you have the courage to keep moving forward. There are only a couple things you take with you – your credibility and your integrity. You can lose those quickly. If you want people to talk about you in a good way and to have respect for you, work hard to keep your credibility and integrity. That’s important.”

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President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon’s Blog](#).