

The Work Makes It Worthy

Last week news broke about a massive college admissions scandal. Fame and funds were used by the rich and powerful “elite” to buy admission for children to top schools across the country. Tests like the SAT and ACT were taken by “ringers” or mishandled, documents were forged, student activities and abilities were falsified, and the list goes on and on. We should all be furious about this scandal: about the message it sends our children; about the American Dream it distorts; about the slap in the face it gives to hard work and talent; and about the hope it steals.

The bigger question, however, is what do we do now? How do we continue to glorify the values of merit and perseverance as a means to advancement, when thirty-three privileged parents bought admission for their seemingly undeserving, incapable and/or disinterested kids? How do we say the system is fair, equitable, and just when it is not? How do we build aspirations, when thirty-three privileged parents took that away from those truly aspiring to do more and be more?

Clearly, we need a mindset shift. We need to address the role of education beyond high school – what is it for? What outcomes should it produce and what benefits should it provide? Are people going to college for the right reason, at the right time, and at an appropriate cost? Is a four-year college degree the only pathway to success? I ask all these questions as a college graduate with a master’s degree and doctorate. I like school. I have done a lot of school and I have done school well. As a high school principal, I pushed the four-year college experience as the next logical step, but now I wonder if that was a disservice. I wonder if I was a 17-year-old senior, graduating in 2019 and looking at my options for the future if I would still choose the path I took.

A traditional college experience is not a bad thing by any means. For many fields it is a necessary thing. Nevertheless, I fear that we (educators, parents, communities, etc.) have unintentionally made it the only thing. There are so many viable options and avenues toward a successful and sustainable future. Elite colleges are amazing and kudos to those who truly meet the rigorous demands of acceptance into those hallowed halls – I did not. What I did do, was make the most of my experience. It was mine...not my parents’; not my over-achieving brother or my Ivy League best friend’s...it was mine. That is really the question that matters – what do you bring to the experience – whatever the experience is? How did you grow and learn from the experience? What have you done with the experience?

Those involved in this horrific scandal seemed to have forgotten all of these points and focused merely on letting a choice for post-secondary education define them and their children. These experiences, regardless of what they are, cannot define you. They can shape you and mold you, they can inform and test you, they can build and break you, but they are not the definition of your worth. YOU...your work, voice, time, talentand not the name printed on the sweatshirt...are what make these experiences after high school, whatever glorious form they may take, mean something. The real win comes in not where you get the education, but in how you use it – it is the work and the application of the learning, and not the name or size of the degree, that makes it worthy.