

Gifted students are not “cookie cutter”, nor should be the advice we give them

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I am privileged to be an adult that many of my students keep in touch with after they graduate. As such, I have the opportunity to have great reflective conversations with them over coffee or lunch when they're back in town for a break during college.

I recently had very interesting conversations with four of my most special former high school students. All four were/are top students, highly accomplished in many extra curricular activities, and highly motivated to “do it right” and be successful. All had different views about the same subject and I found that to be important enough to blog about. Without any prompting, in each conversation the topic came up about what a student should focus on in high school. For their privacy, I'll use initials instead of their real names.

The students

K was a straight A student who was accepted at Stanford (the school she had always wanted to go to), but chose to go to another university that gave her a full scholarship, a guarantee of many links for connections with alumnae and internship opportunities, and an opportunity to do something slightly unpredictable. In high school, K was a perfectionist, who wouldn't accept anything but the best from her performance and her accomplishments. She was a student body officer every year, and made many positive changes in our school. She would end the day tallying up all the things that she didn't do the way she wished she had, as opposed to tallying up all the many things she accomplished. She had a “never let up” attitude.

M was a straight A student, and a master debate champion. He grew up wanting nothing but an acceptance letter from Harvard, but his senior year he found that Yale offered a combined program that he just couldn't resist. He was accepted by Yale, and took it by storm. He collected many awards during his tenure there, and traveled to many countries racking up awards for Yale in debate. He said that he wished he didn't have to graduate this year, as there was so much left that he wanted to learn. He loved being surrounded by intelligent people, and having intelligent conversations with absolutely any one of the students there. He graduated with honors, and accepted a coveted job that was sought after by hundreds of other Ivy graduates.

F was also a top student, and will most be remembered at our school for his contributions in music, whether accompanying others at talent shows, performing with the jazz band, being an anchor in the Honors Quartet, or playing multiple instruments in the orchestra. While music would be a natural post secondary path for him to follow, he wants to nurture his academic talents and stay in-state to go to CU Boulder this year. The thought of leaving the connections he has made during high school, caused him undue anxiety. He feels anchored staying in his hometown, and moving away would cause him too much emotional strain.

E was another straight A student who will be attending Stanford. She was involved in environmental issues, band, swimming, and leadership activities. E managed to make everything she did look easy, and sought relationships with friends in all the areas she was involved in. She was the kind of student that met others at their level, and always looked for the best in people. She was well liked, and being a drum major her last two years was the highlight of her high school experience.

Did they do it right?

I asked them all to reflect upon how they handled their high school experience and what, if anything, they wish they had done differently.

K: feels she was focusing on the wrong thing in high school. She was all about grades, which caused her to miss out on deeper connections she could have had with people. While she was highly thought of by everyone, students and teachers alike, the connections were more surface because that's all she had time for. She feels she should have spent less time on worrying about her grades, and more time nurturing relationships with people. She would encourage high school students to find a healthier balance of this than she had. She's making up for that in college, she says, and encouraging current high school students to reflect on that for themselves too.

M: feels that students should work as hard as possible in high school in order to have more opportunities available to them when they graduate. He feels that it really makes a difference what college you go to, because that will dictate what job you are eventually offered, and what your future life will be like. He says he doesn't regret all the sleepless nights of studying, all the times he didn't engage in social activities with friends, all the times he was wrought with anxiety over doing the perfect job on an essay, a test, a presentation, a debate. He says that his current job offer was well worth all the things he missed out on while in high school. Basically, he feels that because he never eased up on himself, he stood out from other students, and that allowed him to pass many others up, and stand apart from them when it came time to apply to colleges.

F: struggled with existential depression in high school. While he poured himself in to music and remained a top student, he wasn't sure what the meaning of any of it was. He was seeking a higher ground, and feels he never found it. When he graduated he was left feeling disconnected, lost, and depressed. His overwhelming feeling is that material success and academic performance have no bearing on people's happiness. "What really matters is how you treat other people, how you act in the face of adversity, and how you find fulfillment, whatever it is." He feels that grades are a false misconception that sends students in a direction that is fraught with deception and emptiness. He feels that students don't connect enough with each other, because they are seeking stimulation and satisfaction through grades.

E: made sure to carefully consider everything she did before she took it on in high school. She would ask herself what her reason was for wanting to do it, and if it agreed with her values and had meaning, she pursued it was a passion. Her rationale for taking something on was not "because it will look good on my transcript", but because it was something she loved. Her only regrets in high school are that there were more hours in the day, because she would have loved to have made even more connections with people, because there were so many people she realized she never got to talk to. In a high school of 2,000, that's quite a noble longing.

Advice is not a "one size fits all"

My conversations with these students all took place this summer within weeks of each other. Getting to know them as I did over several years, I totally get where they, individually, are coming from. But where does that leave me when I am trying to guide and advise gifted students about what they should be focusing on while in

high school? Should it be grades? Connections? The search for meaning in their lives? Many students' "take aways" come after they graduate, as they're looking back at their high school experience.

I'm puzzled as to the best over-all advice I can offer for the incoming, anxious freshman, or the sophomore who is struggling with whether or not to take all advanced classes to the exclusion of other outside or extracurricular interests, or the parent who comes to the sobering realization that her child is more interested in "being social" than in turning in school work.

Our gifted students are not "cookie cutter", nor should the advice we give them be standard and "one size fits all". There is not one profile of a gifted student. It's of utmost importance that we "meet them where they are" and help them to make sense of the high school experience for what it is: their high school experience.

I always strive to personalize and individualize my advice and guidance as much as possible. I don't think we should shove any student in to a mold of what a gifted student "should" be pursuing. It's been a long time since we were teenagers. We should encourage each student to focus on what they believe is important to them. Not to their parents. Not to their teachers. Not to their friends. We need to encourage students to learn to become more self aware and to learn what they need in order to live a meaningful and purposeful life. Not surprisingly, it will be different for each of them. Let's help them to find success wherever their talents lie. Let's honor that. Let's be the kind of adults that validate what they believe to be true for themselves, and help them nurture it, without pushing our agenda on them. Let's help them to feel good about themselves while we guide them on their individual journeys.