

Students and Motivation

What is the purpose of high school? It's an interesting question to consider. Of course, everyone knows that the purpose of high school and indeed of any school is to learn. Right? If you ask the average student, the purpose of high school is to get good grades so you can get into college. Is this right? More importantly, is this a good perspective for students to take?

Let's examine the first question. Is the ultimate goal of high school to get into college? In theory, no. High school is intended to begin to develop a student's mind and expose them to new ideas and fields of study during a critical point in their lives. However, as college and the pursuit of higher education has become more prevalent in modern society, as the demand for skilled workers and innovators rises because of increased automation in the workforce, high schools have begun to conform to this shift. Many high schools nowadays advertise themselves as college preparatory schools where students learn the skills they need to succeed in college. In reality, many of these schools are more focused on helping students get into college rather than helping them when they are in college.

AP courses are an example of this. They are intended to be college level courses that expose high schoolers to the difficulty and rigor of a college course. However, colleges vary so much in instructive style and content that AP courses are rarely an accurate representation of college classes. They also terminate with an exam that is intended to measure students mastery of the material. This is a flaw in these courses because it leads to the course becoming a test prep crash course rather than an actual class. Thus, AP courses are more like an additional flare to spice up your college application. When students take these courses, which most are encouraged to do, it reinforces the message that the ultimate goal of school is to get into college.

Who can really blame students for believing this is the case? It doesn't help that parents get caught up in the frenzy, and start telling their children that if they don't do well in school they won't get into a good college. This happens because the importance of college has spread outside of the realm of academia and pervades all aspects of American society. You see it in movies, T.V. shows, and books. Colleges even advertise on billboards or online, and when parents see all this they, wanting their children to be happy and successful in life, relay the information to their children. Thus, there is no escape from the looming specter of college. Inside or outside of school students internalize this, and, thus, their primary goal becomes getting into college.

Now, is this message good for students? On the surface, it doesn't seem bad. It's good that students are being motivated to do well to school. But, the problem isn't achieving this outcome of good grades. It's the process and motivation that leads to those results. School is meant to inspire a love of learning within students and that is what then leads to good grades, but this conflicts with the concept that you need to get those good grades so you can get into college. This is because extrinsic rewards decrease intrinsic motivation. In this case, the extrinsic reward is getting good grades and getting into college, and the intrinsic motion is a desire to learn about and understand the world.

Students these days are only concerned with getting good grades and getting into college rather than actually learning or understanding the material. This isn't so much a problem for students who typically do very well in school, but it is a great detriment to students who are having less success. If these students aren't seeing the results of the work they put in and they lack intrinsic motivation, they begin to despair. This creates a vicious cycle. If they get bad grades they will try less in school, and if they try less it will lead to them getting worse grades.

Eventually, some of these students will simply stop doing their work. They will begin to skip school or drop out entirely. A similar process can be seen in students when they feel they don't want to go to college, or that they can't go to college, or that they are not smart enough or good enough to go to college because if they no longer have this overarching goal they have no reason to work hard in school or even stay in school.

Even for those students who do get into college, they face a crisis. They have accomplished their long sought after goal of getting into college, but what's next? Without any intrinsic motivations, many freshman are left lost and aimless because they have nothing to strive for anymore, and so they need to spend more time finding themselves. Some people may argue that this is a good thing, you are supposed to find yourself in college. But, this isn't some happy sort of exploration that comes with new opportunity, it's more like when child gets lost in a departments store. They just stand rigid with fear because they have no idea what to do in the situation.

High school needs to change. Students need to regain their intrinsic motivation to learn because it is vital to their success in all facets of life. High school needs to become a place where a student's natural curiosity about the world is allowed to expand and drive them towards their own goals rather than all being forced to go towards the same one of getting into a "good" college.