

The Danger of Telling Poor Kids That College Is the Key to Social Mobility

By Andrew Simmons



Matt Rourke/AP Images

A 12th-grader wrote a college admissions essay about wanting to pursue a career in oceanography. Let's call her Isabella. A few months ago, we edited it in my classroom during lunch. The writing was good, but plenty of 17-year-olds fantasize about swimming with whales. Her essay was distinctive for another reason: Her career goals were not the highlight of the essay. They were just a means of framing her statement of purpose, something surprisingly few personal statements actually get around to making.

The essay's core concerned the rhetoric that educators had used to motivate her and her peers—other minority students from low-income communities. She'd been encouraged to think of college foremost as a path to socioeconomic mobility. Since elementary school, teachers had rhapsodized about the opportunities that four years of higher education could unlock. Administrators had rattled off statistics about the gulf in earnings between college graduates and those with only high-school diplomas. She'd been told to think about her family, their hopes for her, what they hadn't had and what she could have

if she remained diligent. She'd been promised that good grades and a ticket to a good college would lead to a good job, one that would guarantee her financial independence and enable her to give back to those hard-working people who had placed their faith in her.

Thankfully, Isabella decried this characterization as shortsighted and simplistic. My guess is that only students like her ever have to hear it.

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The black and Latino kids I teach live in Inglewood and West Adams in Los Angeles. Their parents are house-cleaners, truck drivers, and non-union carpenters. When administrators, counselors, and teachers repeat again and again that a college degree will alleviate economic hardship, they don't mean to suggest that there is no other point to higher education. Yet by focusing on this one potential benefit, educators risk distracting them from the others, emphasizing the value of the fruits of their academic labor and skipping past the importance of the labor itself. The message is that intellectual curiosity plays second fiddle to financial security.

While Isabella's essay acknowledged her lack of economic advantages and portrayed with sensitivity her parents' struggles, she was eager to focus first on nurturing her intellectual passion. She detailed how her curiosity about sea urchins and other marine life had led to a passion she wants to sustain through college and a subsequent career. College will ferry her to her intellectual destiny, not a financial windfall. She'll make her life's work what she wants to do, not just what she is able to do.

My students are understandably preoccupied with money. They don't have the privilege to not worry about it. They fantasize about what their future wealth will permit them to enjoy. They dream about specific models of cars in certain colors and gargantuan houses in particular neighborhoods and opulent meals at their favorite restaurants any time they wish. Many swoon over the East Coast liberal arts colleges they visit on the special trips that my school is thoughtful enough to arrange. Colleges like Swarthmore and Haverford fly students like Isabella out during college applications season. A few are accepted but most attend state schools, which, especially in California, can provide excellent educational opportunities. The irony, though, is that many of these students aspire to go to a liberal-arts school but don't necessarily understand its significance. They're drawn to sleepy quads, weathered brick, and cascading ivy, but they are resolutely pre-professional in spirit.

In contrast, at the private school I attended for the last two years of high school, my classmates thought about what they wanted to learn in college, not only what they wanted to become. Some knew medical or law school loomed in the future, but they thought about the work in a different way. My privileged

classmates enjoyed money, from what I could tell. A few reveled in their cars and clothes, but most appeared to take it for granted. They didn't talk about it. Instead, a future doctor talked about working at the CDC to fight public health epidemics. A future lawyer envisioned starting a defense firm to provide a service to the hometown community. Most of us wanted to do something special.

My students' fantasies of the actual work they'd do in a well-paid professional capacity are vague by comparison—practicing law without knowing the difference between civil and criminal litigation or how to prepare for law school, doing business without an understanding of the nuts and bolts of entrepreneurship. While the vagueness stems from the lack of models in their communities, it also comes from the lack of imagination with which mentors have addressed their professed college plans. Students hear that being a doctor is great because doctors can make money, enjoy respect, and have a great life. They don't hear that being a doctor is great because doctors possess the expertise to do great things.

The rhetoric echoes the oft-cited work of Jean Anyon, an education researcher who died in September. Studying elementary schools, Anyon looked at how schools can condition kids for positions in life. She saw that schools teaching the children of affluent families prepared those kids to take on leadership roles and nurtured their capacity for confident self-expression and argument. Schools teaching children from low-income families focused on keeping students busy and managing behavior. A middle-class school deemphasized individual expression and in-depth analysis and rewarded the dutiful completion of specified rote tasks. In each case, according to Anyon, a "hidden curriculum" has prepared students for a future role in society. Some students learn to take orders and others learn to chart a course of action and delegate responsibility. School can either perpetuate inequity through social reproduction or have a transformative effect and help students transcend it.

The rhetoric Isabella has heard about the purpose of college has a hidden message as well. When school environments casually yet consistently deemphasize the intellectual benefits of higher education, students become less imaginative about their futures. According to ACT's College Choice Report from November 2013, [32 percent of students](#) pick a college major that doesn't really interest them. The same study suggests that students are less likely to graduate when they do this. As high school educators know, good students have less trouble getting into selective schools than they do graduating from them – especially first-generation minority college students like Isabella and her classmates.

College should be "sold" to all students as an opportunity to experience an intellectual awakening. All students should learn that privilege is connected to the pursuit of passions. People are privileged to follow their hearts in life, to spend their time crafting an identity instead of simply surviving. Access to higher education means that your values and interests can govern your choices. It makes sense that privileged 18-year-olds who have already learned that lesson gravitate to liberal-arts colleges. I would prefer not to live in a country in which rhetoric about the purpose of college urges kids from privileged backgrounds to be innovators and creators while the poor kids who do very well in school are taught to be educated, capable employees. Isabella figured it out on her own – much as she's managed to ace her classes without academic help outside of school. To achieve this goal more broadly, though, we need to proactively teach our most marginalized students that honing an intellectually curious frame of mind is as essential to leading an invigorating working life as ambition and work ethic.

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