Leaving “School” Out of High School

The Winding Road to Academic Excellence

BY NIKI LEFEBVRE

Our training shoes quietly slapped the rubbery surface of the track as we barreled down the final stretch. One by one we crossed the line and doubled over, desperate to catch our breath. Despite the burning in my lungs from the cold autumn air, I felt great. I had been in college for only a few weeks and was keeping pace with some of the older, veteran runners. Unfortunately, off the track, in the classroom, I wasn’t even keeping up with the other freshmen. After practice that night, despite the chill in the air, I took the longest possible route back to my dorm, dreading the research paper and the mountain of books and journal articles and notes and outlines that had littered my desk for weeks. I was just beginning my first semester of college and already knew I was unprepared.

“How did you do it in high school?” asked my roommate, a graduate of a New Mexico prep school. How did I do it in high school? I didn’t. In my public high school, a small school in rural Massachusetts, I was a conscientious student with a straight-A average. But I never had to write a 12-page research paper. In fact, in high school I spent a lot more time on the track and engaged in other pursuits than I did studying. I was captain of the varsity cross-country and track teams, a class officer, president of the National Honor Society. I volunteered at a local women’s shelter, represented the student body on the town school committee, worked at a craft store. I was a Girl Scout.

School was something else. Even in my Advanced Placement courses I did not have to write research papers. My classes rarely required me to fit even an hour of homework into my afternoon schedule, and doing homework on the weekends was an anomaly at best. As I tried to settle in at college, I began to realize that high school had involved very little school. None of my assignments ever required much time or effort, nor did “big” assignments occur frequently enough that I had to pare back my long list of after-school activities. Far more often than not, a 45-minute study period provided me with sufficient time to complete the day’s assignments satisfactorily.

No Records, No Goals

At my first high-school track practice, the coach gave everyone a list of school records. He challenged us to break them throughout the season. I had six classes on my first day of high school and didn’t receive one list of records to break, standards to meet, or goals to achieve.

That’s why college was a shock. My high-school transcript may have been filled with As, but I quickly learned that an A in college cost much more. The five-paragraph essays, multiple-choice exams, and short homework assignments required by my high school didn’t fill my pockets with much college currency. And I wasn’t alone in being so broke.

According to a recent survey conducted by the Indiana University High School Survey for Student Engagement, the majority of high-school students spend three hours or less on homework each week, and the majority of those students reported earning As and Bs. Only 22 percent of the 1.2 million high-school graduates who took the ACT Assessment in 2004 achieved scores that would deem them ready for college in English, math, or science.

When did school get pushed out of high school? Most students will do what is expected of them, but so often more is expected on the athletic fields, in after-school clubs and jobs, in volunteer organizations, and in social circles than in the classroom. School must be more of a priority in high school if students are to succeed in college and beyond.

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