

# Mission Is Everything

*The most celebrated word has been “every.” The most polarizing? “College.”*

By JEREMY CHIAPPETTA

**W**HEN I RECENTLY DECIDED to step down from leading Blackstone Valley Prep, an organization I cofounded and helped develop over 13 years, I was flooded with emotion. BVP is a highly acclaimed and intentionally diverse K–12 public charter-school network in Rhode Island that serves more than 2,200 students. To help process my thoughts and feelings about leaving, I turned to journaling, which helped shape an open letter to my school community.

Many people reached out to me about this letter and my upcoming departure. Several of them asked me to expand on a particular paragraph—my musings on mission:

Mission is everything. BVP needs to better articulate its mission to ensure that families know what they are signing up for and that BVP is delivering on the promise of that mission. BVP’s current mission is focused on college success, in large part because of a founding belief that college readiness is truly a path to accessing the American dream. Many people in the BVP community, however, want something else entirely. While that may be perfectly fine, BVP’s efforts should be to either find them a school that offers what it is that they are actually seeking, or BVP should revisit its mission and reinvent itself accordingly.

The importance of articulating a clear and ambitious mission seems obvious. Mission statements set the foundation for strategic plans and help guide the work of the staff. In a healthy organization, every employee should be able to look at their daily work and know that their time was spent in direct support of the mission.

The mission at Blackstone Valley Prep has been the same since 2010: *to prepare every scholar for success in college and the world beyond.* Each year since, I have led professional-development workshops with incoming staff where we reflect deeply on our mission statement. We discuss the words and phrases that resonate the most and the elements that might ring hollow to some. By the end of the session, everyone is expected to be able to recite the mission and be ready to explain it in their own words.

Over the years, every word in our mission statement has been affirmed by some and challenged by others. I have observed that the most celebrated word has been “every,” while the most polarizing word has been “college.”

I understand both sentiments. “Every” epitomizes aspiration. The idea that a school would aim to serve “almost every” or just

“some” students is the antithesis of what we, as educators, are called to do. I cannot imagine walking into a classroom and celebrating a teacher who was doing an excellent job with “most” of the students while ignoring others. Even so, “every” has its detractors. Should every school seek to excel at teaching every field of study? Is every school equipped to serve every type of learner? If one school does not have the expertise or resources to serve a certain population, but another school nearby has both, why not match the learner with the better-equipped school? Are these not the very reasons that different types of schools exist?



*Blackstone Valley Prep cofounder Jeremy Chiappetta, right, with a student*

BRIDGET GADOURY

(Think Career and Technical Education schools or those that specialize in serving students with severe disabilities.)

“College” is also aspirational. The data on lifetime outcomes are clear: college graduates, on average, earn more, are more engaged in society, and live longer than those without postsecondary degrees. One of my greatest motivations in joining BVP was to address the not-so-soft “bigotry of low expectations” displayed by too many schools that counsel young people, especially low-income and BIPOC students, away from college.

My heart sinks whenever friends and colleagues recount that they told their own guidance counselors they wanted to attend a particular highly selective college only to be redirected to a less-distinguished institution. I myself had such an experience with a college counselor—I shared that I wanted to go to Prestigious University and was instead

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