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An Open Letter to the Class of 2013

Center for Public Service
Gettysburg College

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An Open Letter to the Class of 2013

Abstract

Upon graduation I will have received no honors. After four years of college, thirty-seven courses, ten labs, two sets of major requirements and several almost complete minors, I have won the ultimate consolation prize: a diploma. I know that not everyone has the privilege of going to college and I also know that those who start college do not always make it to the end, some not even through the first week. However, in the world of academia, students are pushed to strive for the best grades. Even at Gettysburg College where global awareness, critical thinking and an integration of co-curricular achievements are valued, we are still encouraged to execute a specific formula of education. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, college graduation, education, academic achievements, academic honors

Disciplines

Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Education | Educational Leadership | Educational Sociology | Higher Education | Leadership Studies | Liberal Studies | School Psychology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CLASS OF 2013

May 15, 2013

Upon graduation I will have received no honors. After four years of college, thirty-seven courses, ten labs, two sets of major requirements and several almost complete minors, I have won the ultimate consolation prize: a diploma. I know that not everyone has the privilege of going to college and I also know that those who start college do not always make it to the end, some not even through the first week. However, in the world of academia, students are pushed to strive for the best grades. Even at Gettysburg College where global awareness, critical thinking and an integration of co-curricular achievements are valued, we are still encouraged to execute a specific formula of education.

I had a similar revelation when graduating high school. On graduation day, I finished in the top five of my class, played on three varsity sports teams, was a thespian, competed in marching band, and received a Gold Award in Girl Scouts. Yet I remember thinking that everything I had worked for was a joke. I knew how to do one thing and one thing only: listen to directions.

We are taught to *obey, not to think*.

I did not want to ascribe to that form of education anymore and thought that I would be able to break away from it when I went to college. But just like I tell prospective students on tours, college courses pick up where you leave off in high school. Essentially, college has become an extension of high school, now that so many well-paid jobs require at least a bachelor's degree.

I did not do well my first semester of college. The highest grade I received was a B and I was in danger of losing my academic scholarship. I was essentially punished for my refusal to do menial tasks that were equivalent to coloring in the states in the first grade. The colors never taught me anything and I still do not know all of the state capitals.

I remember telling myself that I would just have to try harder the following semester and really try to get those A's. My plan was not flawed in the least, and in the end I made it onto the Dean's List... but that was only after I dropped my multivariable calculus course after the first exam because I had only received a B on it. As a high



schooler it was easier to tell myself to just do better next time. In college, when I felt weak and vulnerable, it was easier just to give up. And why do so many students give up? The answer is actually quite simple: that grade will hurt their entire grade point average.

I spent a lot of time mastering the art of how to do well in certain courses and with certain professors. The eyes of underclassmen light up with hunger for honor cords and academic recognition. We share stories of how to write essays for certain professors and which professors teach from the textbooks versus power points. We let our younger friends know what to focus on and what to forget. Friends have even told me that they received an A in a course because of the advice I gave them about how to write the most sophomoric essay in order to receive a good grade.

While my peers had existential crisis over an essay they just had to do well on, I floated on by. But then, my existential crisis began while I was supposed to be finishing my senior thesis. I sat on my bedroom floor convincing myself that I was better than the “numbers” and “letters” that describe my academic achievements.

And that’s just it: we are more than a number or a letter. Education is more than a graduation gown, an honor cord, a certificate or a diploma.

Be happy that you chose a liberal arts education, where learning and the real world are meant to be integrated. Think about all the times that you stood up for yourself while listening and understanding other people’s points of view. Feel good about going to every class after Springfest, remembering the right notebook, and returning a library book on time. Remember when you took a risk, thought outside the box, failed at something, articulated a controversial point or challenged patriarchy. Consider the legacy you’ll be leaving behind.

A college education isn’t just about memorizing facts and learning the names of theorists we will probably never use. It’s about believing in yourself and feeling fulfilled by all your achievements, not just the ones with grades attached. It’s about defining success for yourself and not letting someone else define it for you.

Graduating is not the end of our education. It’s the beginning. We have a choice to make. We will spend the rest of our lives *obeying* or will we practice *thinking*?

When we graduate on May 19th, try not to harbor resentment or compare yourself to others. Count ALL your achievements as you watch others shake JMR’s hand. Smile when you cross that stage and do not crumble under the weight of all the amazing little things you have done.

Anonymous Contributor

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