

## **In Praise of the Average Student**

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Tony Taylor returned to his college classes last Monday and, if all goes as planned, he'll graduate in the spring. It's been a challenging road for Taylor, 21, who carries a full load of 12 credits, works 38 hours a week and pulls in a solid B grade-point-average.

The childhood model-turned-athlete and actor at Tartan High School in Oakdale hopes to pursue an advanced degree in theater arts, with an eye on Hollywood. I have no doubt we'll write about him if he gets there. Today I'm writing about him for a different reason.

I was proud to see the University of Minnesota, Carleton, Macalester and St. Olaf colleges receive high rankings in U.S. News & World Report's "America's Best Colleges," published last week. But I can't help also feeling a little queasy about all of it: The rankings, the frenzy around International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, the parental high-fives when our children head off to the nation's elite schools.

Yes, we should celebrate their successes. But not at the expense of the huge swath of young adults heading quietly to two-year community colleges and solid, lesser-known four-year institutions. Not by shoving their efforts, dreams and contributions under the radar.

In fact, less than 1 percent of high school seniors head off to Ivy League schools such as Harvard, Yale and Princeton; a small percentage more attend other elite schools.

Many more attend four-year state schools, but nearly half (47 percent) of undergraduates attend community colleges, according to the American Association of Community Colleges.

Many are first-generation college students who see community college as a stepping-stone to a four-year institution. Thirty-five percent are students of color.

It's community colleges that produce 59 percent of new nurses and nearly 80 percent of our firefighters, law enforcement officers and EMTs. And, interestingly, it's community colleges admitting a growing number of students with sterling high school résumés who want to avoid skyrocketing tuitions at bigger state schools, or who value small class sizes and teachers who really know them.

Others find in them a second chance to get it right.

Taylor struggled academically in high school and had "no ambition at all" to attend college. After a few false starts at other institutions, and nudging by his parents, Randy and Kathy, he found his way to Century College, a two-year community and technical college in White Bear Lake that caters to 12,000 students annually, said spokeswoman Nancy Livingston.

His grades, he said, are better than they've ever been. He's seriously limiting his former priority -- aka a social life -- to hunker down with school and work. So, I asked him: Do you ever tire of hearing about the fancy schools, or the drama played out by a tiny number of your peers devastated when they didn't get into, say, Carnegie Mellon or Northwestern?

"It does get bothersome," Taylor said. "People say, 'Oh, Century? High School Part Two?' But it's cheaper and closer to me," Taylor said. "Why waste all my money at a university when I don't even know what I want to do yet?"

The price of privilege

Madeline Levine is equally bothered by the fanfare created around "a tiny group of exceptional academic students."

"We are so disproportionately focused on these kids. Everybody acts as if this is the norm," says Levine, a San Francisco-based clinical psychologist and author of "The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids" (Harper, \$14).

"We have an incredibly narrow vision of success," Levine said, "and because of that, kids can't thrive."

Levine speaks from personal experience. Her two oldest sons "graduated with all kinds of cords and ribbons on them." But it is her third son, a B student, who has a delightfully eclectic group of friends, who plays lacrosse, "and takes his grandmother with Alzheimer's to lunch every week."

It's young adults like him, she said, "who are going to build our bridges and hospitals, and maintain our cars. But we have a blind spot to them. We don't encourage them. One school counselor told a kid, 'You're a dime a dozen.' Kids like that are *not* a dime a dozen!"

Levine is putting her money where her mouth is. Next month, she'll help to launch [Challengesuccess.org](http://Challengesuccess.org), a Stanford University-based nonprofit project whose mission is to expand the definition of success in our children.

"There are many paths to success after high school," Levine said. "There are many, many excellent colleges, all with different attributes and personalities, and none is right for everyone." The goal, she said, is to help our children find the right fit, whether it's an Ivy or junior college, a gap year, travel program or trade school.

Educators are catching on, she said. She knows of a few elite universities that have begun accepting a small number of students who excel in nontraditional areas such as creativity, adaptability or collaboration, "the very skills that businesses are saying will be absolutely mandatory in the future."

More important, parents are catching on. "I've traveled the whole country and what is absolutely predictable is everybody talking about their high-achieving children," she said. "They ask, 'Are five APs (advanced placements) enough?' Then, at the book signings, everybody whispers: 'What do you think about community college for my other kid?'"

Absolutely, she tells them. Now go to the head of the class.

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## **Madeline Levine's tips for redefining success**

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### **MADELINE LEVINE'S TIPS FOR REDEFINING SUCCESS**

- Consider the qualities that you hope your children have when they leave the nest. Resist parent peer pressure and trust your gut.
- Maintain playtime, downtime and family time. Avoid overscheduling.
- Love your children unconditionally. Make sure they know that they are loved for who they are, not only for how well they perform.
- Encourage appropriate risk-taking and let kids make mistakes. When possible, let kids play and work on their own.

- Set limits on TV, screen-based games, instant messages and computer use. An hour or less per day is a good starting point.
- Ease performance pressure. Instead of "How did you do on the test?" ask "How did the day go?"
- Debunk college myths. Make sure your children understand that there are many paths to success after high school.

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