

## Schooled for Scandal

Written by Jenni Person, BT Contributor  
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### No one can buy you a real education

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ver the past couple of months, the buzz in the atmosphere around me has been distinctly college-related. And not because my kid is about to be a rising high school junior exploring her next move. My social media, news feeds, and e-mail inbox have been popping with academic and alumni remorse and discourse in relation to the recent news about a leading progressive college, Hampshire College, hitting a wall.

And then the college admissions “scandal” broke, in which wealthy, influential, and celebrity parents paid for all sorts of ways to get their kids into colleges. However scandalous it seemed, this is how the world has worked for generations. Also this is helicopter parenting on steroids, and as such is completely consistent with much of my generation of fellow parents and of that immediately before ours.

So I’m not sure why this was a surprise to anyone. Even as a (not proud) product of a certain level of privilege myself, I am well aware that privilege begets privilege even indirectly, no surprise there.

What surprised me was that anyone was surprised. What disappointed me was not the deceit that left so many aghast, but the sad truth that certain kinds of institutions remain -- and perhaps have increased -- as prime status symbols in our culture.

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So now my head is spinning with the collision of both situations: the challenges faced by institutions rooted in progressive pedagogy, and the misappropriation of college -- what should be higher learning -- solely for social status. My thoughts at this moment have settled into my gleanings of these two quotes:

“They’re hardworking conformists,” a reference to students at these status-centric institutions, from the *Time* article “There’s a Larger Lie Beyond the College Admissions Bribery Case,” by Bryan Caplan, about Operation Varsity Blues, the media-friendly title appointed to the scandal.

The goal of college admission is no longer “where can I feel at home academically and learn what and how I want to learn?” but rather, “what do I have to do/say/repeat to get an A, meet the right people, flaunt the right alma mater, and land the right corporate job?”

And the point that parents in guiding their kids toward college are “looking for a more direct link between college and career,” from a *New York Times* article, “Alternative Colleges and Their ‘Radical, Communal Ideas’ Fight for a Future,” by Anemona Hartocollis about the enrollment challenges at Hampshire College, Goddard College, Bennington College, and other institutions within the progressive education movement. In looking for that “direct link,” there’s a dismissal of our kids’ curiosity and independent identity.

First, learning should be about thinking, not about making money, which comes with knowing how to think.

Second, one of the saddest things about both situations is the status of the Ivy League and such prestigious institutions. I’ve always believed, seriously since high school, that these schools are empty calories, big fancy desserts with fancy designer fondant exteriors. With all due respect to friends and family who attended, attend, will attend, and/or are on the faculty and staff of these institutions, there is *so much* more to education.

It’s not a secret that I am a proponent and product of progressive education, a choice I made at 16 after getting a taste of Bennington College during its former high school summer program. A terrible, “failing,” and utterly bored student in any school I attended, I surprised myself that summer by falling in love with learning.

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It was the fire under my ass needed to get me through the mind-numbing, soul-stripping rote requirements of high school and off to college, where my own ideas and responses were acceptable locations for inquiry. It was where experiential learning was paramount, and for me that resonated -- learning through my being, landing it in my cells, in the blood running through my veins, and propelling me into and preparing me for life beyond school.

This is progressive education. And this should be more broadly elevated in our culture, rather than always defaulting to the blind adoration of the Harvards and Dukes and Stanfords in our midst. I know I am not alone in imagining a world in which more of our population receives a progressive education, learns how to think critically in ways multidimensional and multidisciplinary, and grounded and compassionate. Process versus product: what a world this could be.

In that spirit I heartily encourage parents to promote the alternatives. Education is a broad spectrum, as are learning styles. Just as we should be up in arms, in revolution, about our kids being taught what to know for tests -- whether to get high scores on state exams or to place into the "right" private school -- instead of to think critically, we should aim to shift away from the cultural norm of "conforming" and of status.

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