

What I want high school seniors to hear loud and clear, in the wake of the celebrity college cheating scandal

www.chicagotribune.com

3 mins read



Oh, grown-ups.

Where did we veer so spectacularly off-course when it comes to the entire point of college?

How did we arrive at a day when [celebrities and CEOs are being charged with bribing and cheating](#) to get their kids into elite schools?

What does it mean when 50 defendants — including actresses Felicity Huffman and [Lori Loughlin](#) (Aunt Becky from “Full House”?!) — stand accused of crimes that include bribing exam administrators to let other students take their kids’ tests, paying exam administrators to give their kids the test answers, bribing coaches to lie and label their kids athletic recruits, even if their kids never played the sport they were “recruited” to play?

And what in the world are our kids to make of all this?

Particularly the high school seniors waiting, wondering, anxiously, for the college acceptance letters that are just starting to trickle in?

That the system is rigged? That it possibly always has been?

Maybe.

I’m guessing a lot of them, though, will see something else at play.

[**READ MORE: Olivia Jade Giannulli, daughter of Lori Loughlin and Mossimo Giannulli, is living the down side of coveted 'influencer' status »**](#)

I’m guessing a lot of kids, especially high school seniors, are well aware that all too often, this culture conflates prestige and self-worth. As if one is linked to the other. As if one is predicated on the other.

I’m guessing a lot of them know their own high schools send out well-meaning emails to their well-meaning parents, coaching us on how to

help them navigate the rejection and disappointment of hearing “no” from their dream school(s).

I’m guessing a lot of them suspect their parents are the ones who’ll need help navigating the rejection and disappointment.

I wish we grown-ups did a better job of teasing apart prestige and self-worth, particularly when it comes to college.

Maybe this scandal is our moment.

I don’t mean to take anything away from a student who dreams big, who sweats the small stuff, who takes the AP classes, who studies hard and aces exams and preps like crazy to get into a dream school. An elite school.

I don’t begrudge any parents who cheer those students on, sweating and working and believing alongside them.

That’s a beautiful model.

It’s not the only model.

It feels harder and harder to help our kids understand that.

It feels harder and harder to frame college as the beginning of something, not the end result.

It feels harder and harder to help kids grasp that where they’ve been accepted doesn’t measure their human value or their human potential.

Super wealthy folks lying and scheming to get their kids into Yale and Georgetown doesn't help.

I think we need to be louder and clearer about all of this.

Here's what I want seniors, all college-minded kids, really, to hear above the white noise of college acceptance letters and a prestige/self-worth-conflating culture and Aunt Becky.

College is a feast.

You fill your mind with ideas and you just keep getting hungrier. You binge on new philosophies. You try on new personalities. You fall in love with new friends, new books, new buildings, new partners. You get your heart broken. You keep going. You grow.

You're away from your old life. Even if you don't go far, geographically, you're a world away from what mattered in high school. How you were measured in high school. Who you wanted to be in high school.

You're learning, one day at a time, what the rest of your life will call for. The stuff you learn from your major, sure. But also: Showing up prepared and on time. Living up to your word. When to say yes. When to say no. What sort of human you want to be.

College doesn't define you. College shapes you. College takes the high school you and molds it into a grown-up you. But the key component there is you. Your ideas. Your work. Your voice. You bring all of those things to college, and college helps you figure out what to do with them.

The buildings don't have to be covered in ivy. The alums don't have to include former presidents. The name doesn't have to impress your parents or your high school classmates.

I say this all not to downplay the achievements of kids who are headed to the Ivy Leagues. That's a phenomenal accomplishment worthy of much celebrating.

But it's not the only way. It's not the only path to success. It's certainly not the only path to happiness.

You can find happiness and success – not to mention brilliance and inspiration and lifelong friendships and mind-blowing authors and really good art and really bad coffee – on thousands of college campuses.

The key ingredient is you. What you bring. Who you are when you get there. Who you are when you leave. You matter most in this equation.

Don't let anyone – particularly Aunt Becky – convince you otherwise.

Join the [Heidi Stevens Balancing Act](#) Facebook group, where she hosts live chats every Wednesday at noon.

hstevens@chicagotribune.com

Twitter [@heidistevens13](#)

[**FBI accuses wealthy parents, including celebrities like Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin, in college-entrance bribery scheme »**](#)

[**Why asking your child's permission before posting his or her photo may not be enough »**](#)

[**In a cardboard vodka box, decades of letters reveal a mother's life of love and loss, joy and sorrow »**](#)

