

The myth of the elite school as a head start on a fast-track career

Detlev Suderow

It is that time of year again. The annual spring ritual of elite college admission and the heartbreak of rejection. According to the numerous newspapers articles that usually get published on the is subject at this time, the acceptance rate at the Ivy League is getting lower every year and the competition for an elite school acceptance is becoming an even more prized trophy than ever before. *USA Today* recently wrote, “a college degree is touted these days as the best guarantee of a good job and financial security”. By implication, therefore, admission to the Yale’s, Brown’s , MIT’s or Stanford’s must therefore be a higher guarantee to a great job and higher income. Guess again.

Business Week often profiles an executive as part of a story on people, industries, social, or sometimes political trends. If you read these stories over a number of months for only one single piece of information, you come away with some interesting insights, if not affection for a quintessentially American social paradigm that there are second and third chances in life. There are few straight lines to success.

The fast-track career is largely a myth. The recipes for career success that often involve getting “serious” in high school as preparation for getting into the a prestigious college is often a stress mill that has few of the guarantees many people assume. Business or career success is not a guaranteed result of graduation from a prestige college or university. In fact, attending one of American’s elite colleges can be a liability in the eventual achievement of professional success.

This suggestion is heresy since it seems counterintuitive to many people. We are a meritocracy. People succeed because of hard work and competence. Hard work and intellectual brilliance are the basis for career success; unless you are born with a silver spoon in your mouth. We are a youth oriented society that values instant gratification. We love sprinters and the quick short run to victory. Looking a life and careers as a long distance run seems counter to our belief and the so frequently told stories of notable success stories of the dot.com people in their twenties and thirties.

We like to envision the ultimate American success story as wealth and fame that came to the young, and hopefully beautiful people, through a unique idea and risk taking that gave them the success that they deserve. This isn’t true for the majority of people.

For the sake of simplicity, you can define a “prestige” college or university as the first 50 ranking of the annual *US News and World Report* listing of American best colleges and universities. It is good sport to argue these rankings but they certainly get lots of press every year and influence community perception on the “best schools”. So even with all the flaws, it’s an interesting reference point.

The never ending parental ritual of cajoling their son or daughter to work harder in school so they will be able to attend a prestige college is not rooted in the reality of what contribute to the eventual achievement of a socially recognized career success. Again, for the sake of simplicity, you can define career success as those who carry executive titles and earn in the

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top 2% of incomes. Even more interesting discussion will result from the use of this variable as a measure of career success.

The unspectacular marathon runners, not the high profile short distance sprinters, largely achieve the most successful careers. This paradigm not only holds true in business careers but usually also often holds true in most personal and professional endeavors. There are very few “once in a lifetime” opportunities in careers. The eventual champions more often than not are the survivors, the “refuse to quit” pluggers, the non-entitlement workers, the people who know that “only in America” is not just a good story, but also the very essence of the American social fabric and the story du jour of many highly successful men and women in a broad range of careers.

The technology wave of the last thirty years has almost completed the democratization of the American workplace, diminished the role of union (often a necessary antidote to social elitism), minimizing inherited status and wealth and is putting a new nail in the coffin of educational elitism. The PC jocks who are surfing the seemingly never-ending waves of technology innovation and change are not your Ivy League Merit Scholars. They are often your public university graduates, or even dropout, who combined a clever idea with a hot hand to achieve extraordinary success and wealth. Their academic credential played no role in their business or their success. They were hungry, had little sense of entitlement, and played their hand with *pravado*.

Let's try the *BusinessWeek* experiment.

Working backward from the March 22, 2000 issues of *BusinessWeek*, people profiled included, David Kerans, former CEO of Xerox, who “as a youth lacked focus...he wasn't a distinguished student but won a degree in business administration in 1952 from the University of Rochester” and is now trying to reform the American educational system.

In the March 15 issues of *BusinessWeek*, Mike Ruetters, the CEO of highflying EMC, was profiled. He described as his most humbling experience flunking out of UCLA and losing a Navy scholarship. He asserts that it helped him to develop judgement and focus. Eventually, Mr. Ruetters graduated from Idaho State University.

The March 8 issues of *BusinessWeek* updates the career of Robert Lutz, former vice-chairman of Chrysler Corp. The newest entry on his resume is CEO of Exide, a \$2.4 billion battery maker. The short accompanying biography in the article states that he did not graduate from high school until age 22 but eventually received a BA from Berkeley.

To the social statistician among us who will successfully argue that such a sample of data is merely anecdotal and is not a scientific sample, I would offer the suggestion that they look at their own sample data. Some basic social anthropology research will unearth some interesting data. What is the educational background of the senior management staff of their employer? Look at the 25th reunion biography of the BMOC (or BWOC) of your high school graduation year that went on to attend the “good schools”. Or, if you can get access to this

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data, look at the 25th reunion biography of graduates of the prestige colleges and universities you or your friends attended. The data is fascinating, the turns and twists of lives and careers interesting, and the lack of direct correlation between prestige educational background and current success stunning

If you live in a suburban community that measures its educational system, and consequential the value of their real estate, by the percent of student who went on to higher education, or more importantly, by the number of student who were accepted by prestige colleges and universities, you can not escape the high pressure process of the college admissions games.

If parents pin their hopes that their children will live successful and happy lives on their ability to get into a “good” school; they might eventually be sorely disappointed and even resentful that their financial sacrifices did not achieve its desired outcomes. Yet many parents continue to follow this paradigm of “good school=good education=success=good life=happiness.”

So what about careers in the business world. One of worst habits to have in business is a sense of entitlement and (predestination). Those who enter the competition of the work place with the belief they have an edge in the game based on the reputation of the schools they attended usually are sorely disappointed. An event in the last year in Boston demonstrates this culture of educational elitism.

During a controversy on the Harvard University campus in the last year regarding the potential expulsion of another student, several students were interview by a local television news program. One particular student during the interview expressed the though that “they were the best and the brightest and that student did not belong in their community”. This comment was made with an earnest sense of stating the obvious.

Fastforwarding ten years into the future has this student getting her annual performance review from her manager. The manager worked their way up though the rank and is trying to finish their bachelor’s degree at night. The managers feel competent and rely heavily on the “gut” they developed over their career that often tells them what the best decision should be.

The manager is grateful for the good fortune they had in starting in the company while it was small and growing with the success of the enterprise. They worked hard and looked for every opportunity to improve their skills and learn from others. They liked working in groups because it felt safer than the spotlight of an individual effort. They were seen as a team player, good with people, bright but not overwhelmingly intellectual, good management material with raw potential; and above all, people liked working with him and for him.

The “student” has done much good work in the past year, especially on any formal reports and any analytical work, but does not work well in teams and seems somewhat impatient with people who do not pick up new concepts as readily as she does. Her manager complements her on her ability and effort but gives her only an average grade for her overall performance. The message is “you are very smart and do very good work but people find it hard to work with you sometime”. This student finds it painful to listen to criticism of her “teamwork” since

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her individual abilities do not seem to carry the day. Her increase is modest, her hopes for a promotion are dashed for another year, and the apparent lack of a “intellectual community” leaves her isolated and somewhat depressed.

Daniel Goldman’s “Social Intelligence” has gone a long way toward expanding our understanding of “intelligence”. In large complex organization there is also something called “organizational street smarts”, another form of intelligence, that allows you to survive and prosper in the streets of large complex organizations or the fishbowl of small organizations.

Organizational street smart is the ability to read subtle clues, adjust quickly to changing political and economic condition, to manage once individual ego in heterogeneous work teams, to influence people with disarming charm and not razor sharp intellect, to know the “street” and play the hand they were dealt. No expectations, no entitlement, no fear, just lightness on their feet and focus in their efforts. These employees are the marathon runners. They pace their efforts, break through emotional “walls”, bounce off closed doors and try other doors, climb career ladder’s one rung at a time, step down a rung or two when upward process is blocked, move the ladder, and try climbing again in another spot on the wall.

Look around you in your workplace and see who are the marathon runners and who are the sprinters. Look at the top of the pyramid and you might see that the career road it took to get there was as different as the people who occupy the space; but above all, see how many of them were fast trackers or marathon runners. In the meantime, go to the best college you can get into and your parents can afford. Don’t go into heavy debt to attend your dream school and leave with a financial debt that will take you ten years to pay off. There is no enduring skill you will pick up in college other than learning how to learn, learning how to work in groups, learning how to have fun, learning how to keep things in perspective, and knowing that there are no entitlements in life.

Don’t cry if you do not get into a “prestige” school. Start your post-high school journey off easy, pace yourself, the journey will be a marathon. The first one hundred yard is not the measurement.

Detlev Suderow was a Senior Vice President of Human Resources at a technology company outside Boston. He previously held senior human resource positions at several Fortune 100 companies. Prior to his work in the business sector, he worked as a public school guidance counselor doing college admissions work. He also taught part-time at community college at night. Mr. Suderow has bachelors and a master’s degree from two of *US News and World Report* 50 best American universities.