

'Most Likely to Succeed'

CHAPTER 1

Our Education DNA

We worship at the altar of academic credentials. We live in a society obsessed with people's degrees. Do they have their high school diploma? What were their SAT scores? How many AP courses did they take, and how many 5's did they get on the AP exams? Did they earn a college or advanced degree? How exclusive was the college they attended? What was their GPA? How about their GMAT scores? We ask these questions as if the answers provide critical insight into a person's intrinsic value. We also spend increasing amounts of time and money to obtain these credentials, whether in the form of rising K-12 costs, college tuition levels, time spent in school, amount of homework, tutoring fees, number of standardized tests, or the booming test prep industry.

But something is seriously amiss. Despite our enormous investment in education, the majority of our students lack the skills necessary to get a good job, be an informed citizen, or—in some way that defies crisp definition—be a good and happy person.

The data are alarming. A recent Gallup poll found that just 11 percent of business leaders think colleges satisfactorily prepare students for success in the workplace.¹ Even more alarming, of recent college graduates, over half are either unemployed or holding a job any high school grad could fill. Yet, despite this glaring mismatch, some 94 percent of U.S. adults still believe a college degree is critically important to career prospects. Our beliefs haven't yet caught up with the reality of the world we live in.

We also count on our education system to prepare our youth to be

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responsible, informed citizens. Sadly, we're failing at this objective as well. A recent poll by Just Facts, a nonprofit research and educational institute, concluded that even our most engaged voters are uninformed.² Of twenty questions (involving things like government spending, income distribution, and climate change), the majority of "engaged voters"—people who actually vote most of the time—managed to correctly answer just 20 percent of the questions. And the most recent Civics Assessment conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed that twelfth graders' civics knowledge and skills actually declined between 1998 and 2010.³ We live in a country where young adults know and care more about Beyoncé than Boehner. More about LeBron James's contract size than the cost of the Iraq War. More about *Duck Dynasty* than our national debt.

When we ask parents what they most want for their children, they answer, almost without exception, "I just want my child to be happy." Yet the way parents and schools work with kids is, in too many cases, completely counterproductive. We test our kids on criteria that have very little to do with life skills, and tell most of them that they're not cutting it. We tell our kids that they will be abject failures without a high school diploma, but fail to provide them with relevant or engaging challenges during their four years in high school. We engrain in kids that the key to success in life is getting into a great college, but then parents are amazed when their child feels completely inadequate after a few rejection letters. Look no further than teen suicide rates. Since 1950, college-age suicides in the United States have doubled, while high school-age suicides have tripled.⁴

We live in an innovation economy. In this new world, the skills necessary to do well professionally have converged with the skills needed to be an effective citizen. Fifty years ago, before the Internet, it made sense for schools to teach kids "just facts." But in today's world, there is no longer a competitive advantage in knowing more than the person next to you because knowledge has become a commodity available to all with the swipe of a finger. Now, adults need to be able to ask great questions, critically analyze information, form independent opinions, collaborate, and communicate effectively. These are the skills essential for both career and citizenship.

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Yet developing these is precisely where our schools fall so short. As we churn out millions of kids each year from an education system that teaches and tests them on narrow aspects of content retention that any smartphone can handle, we set them up for failure, unhappiness, and social discontent. We are, in every important sense, educating our way to national demise.

A Whirlwind Tour of the Entire History of Education

To understand the growing divide between credentials and competence, we need to go back in time. Way back. Back to before the printing press was invented. Before the wheel. All the way back to cavemen. This brief history will help explain exactly why credentials—not competence—hold the upper hand in today's society.

From their earliest origins, humans invented, learned, and adapted. And then shared their know-how. In a primitive version of cave-schooling, cave parents would pass important discoveries about survival on to their children—effective ways to work together to hunt for food, to defend against approaching threats, or to deal with harsh winters. Cave parents also taught their children how to get along with others in their family or clan. As basic as it sounds, cave people understood the core purpose of education: teach the next generation the lessons needed to survive and thrive.

As civilization advanced, a set of specialized tradesmen and craftsmen emerged: farmers, blacksmiths, cobblers, seamstresses. Concurrently, an effective form of education developed: the apprenticeship model. Aspiring artisans learned by studying under the tutelage of a master. They learned by doing. They remained in apprentice mode until achieving mastery. For thousands of years, apprenticeships formed the educational backbone of society's primitive economy, enabling essential skills to be passed down from generation to generation.

As society evolved from roving packs of savages to more hierarchical structures, an elite ruling class emerged alongside a class of artisans