

SHOULD ALL DARTMOUTH GRADS ASPIRE TO BE DOCTORS, LAWYERS, I-BANKERS OR CONSULTANTS?

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A former Associate Director in Career Services swore that he had a magical chair in his office which instantly transformed students into would-be investment bankers or consultants. Both the chair and the Associate Director are now long gone but the alchemy remains: before our eyes, former pre-meds metamorphose into would-be lawyers and would-be consultants begin career counseling with the disclaimer, "I'm not really interested in finance so what can you tell me about consulting?"

Much as many students are convinced that, on behalf of Dartmouth, Career Services has a mission to reduce the vast constellation of careers to a few occupations that shine brightly in the night sky, dulling by comparison any lesser lights, the truth of the matter is that larger societal forces are at work to determine occupational luminaries.

In a recent article in *The Weekly Standard* (12/23/02), journalist David Brooks pointed to the meritocratic system itself as the culprit. After visiting several elite schools, including Dartmouth, he wrote: "The system says that Harvard, Yale, Princeton and a handful of other schools are the definition of success." Suggesting that the students he met had never thought about how they wanted to spend their lives, Brooks continued: "The system had encouraged them to get into an Ivy League school, and they had done that.... Then the system encouraged them to get into a top law, medical or business school, so they were headed for that." Brooks noted, too, that students felt compelled to "do summer internships at investment banks and consulting groups because the system subtly encourages that kind of ascent-oriented summer job".

So who makes up this all-powerful 'system' which elevates certain choices of schools, majors and careers, inevitably conferring 'also-ran' status upon others? Each and everyone of us, I would argue, reinforces this system every time we react with unfettered glee to one set of choices (read: law, medicine, finance or consulting) and ill-concealed contempt to other choices (read, all too often, everything else). One recent alum illustrated how the system plays out when he addressed an audience at a program aptly entitled, "Whose Life To Live". He recounted being asked by other alums, "So, do you plan to go on to law or business school?" When he responded, "No, I actually have an acceptance to a graduate program in Education," the silence was deafening. Implicit in their response was: "You could be doing so much more with your Dartmouth degree." And, the unspoken corollary, "You should be doing so much more".

Personally, while I credit journalists like Brooks with astutely sizing up the problem: "This meritocratic system punishes eccentricity.... It encourages prudential thinking, and a professional mindset in areas where serendipity and curiosity should rule," I strongly take issue with his solution which is to better "describe to students how various successful people got where they are" and better introduce students "to the vast array of unusual jobs that actually exist".

Much as I recognize and espouse the value of showcasing success stories, students don't lack for information or role models. They lack the time or interest in charting paths for themselves. They lack the financial resources or willingness to take risks. And they lack the patience to "pay their dues" in professions which cling to that model, having just paid their dues for the better part of 22 years. What is needed are not more images of "roads less traveled by" but more attention paid by employers to the factors which make roads well traveled by: prestige, accessibility, mental challenges, variety, an escape

clause after 2-3 years, meaningful projects with a beginning and an end, advancement opportunities, and, yes, a decent salary.

What is needed are more social entrepreneurs like Wendy Kopp, who founded Teach for America. Her ultimate legacy may be her understanding that, if teaching opportunities are placed on a pedestal and recruited for in the same way as investment banking and consulting, with an expectation that the commitment isn't indefinite, students will and have responded in droves. If more not-for-profit organizations promoted and structured their entry-level opportunities to take full advantage of the skill sets developed at schools like Dartmouth, then their ranks would swell with eager applicants.

Should *all* Dartmouth graduates aspire to be doctors, lawyers, investment bankers or consultants? Of course not. They should not be blinded by the occupational luminaries to the seemingly endless possibilities for work that stretch far beyond the horizon. Students would do well to heed the words of another noted journalist, David Halberstam, who counseled graduates at Commencement in 1996 to take a leap of faith off the graduation podium: "If you want to be a botanist, poet, actor, teacher or nurse, if that is what your heart tells you to do, do not go to law school or some other graduate school on the theory that it is a great ticket, and that it will get you to a higher level in the society, that you'll make some money for a while, and then you can go on and do the things that you really wanted to do in the first place. It doesn't work that way." Author Margaret Young adds: "The way it actually works is the reverse. You must first be who you really are, then do what you need to do in order to have what you want."