

Traditional aged students growing up through the educational process is very much on my mind this month and for good reason. My oldest daughter, Abrielle, just completed her senior year of high school. Those of you who have had a child complete high school know the feelings that I am experiencing right now - a mixture of excitement, nostalgia, sadness, and pride. Graduating high school is seen by our culture as one of the ends of childhood and the beginning of adulthood, though I'm not sure I believe that adulthood begins 100% of the time.

Recently Abrielle attended her senior prom. Prom is such an irony to me. It is a time to see your child as a grown adult, complete with a fancy dress or tux, acting refined and dignified. Then comes the after prom party which consists of pizza, games, and jumping in bouncy house. Not exactly grown up yet if you ask me, but fun and happy!

After my daughter attends NCCC she will be off to a university to complete a bachelor's degree so we have been college shopping. In another one of those ironies, on the car ride to see these other institutions where she will learn what she needs to start her professional career, she sang along to Disney songs, Hannah Montana, and the soundtrack to the movie Trolls.

I have worked with college students, both full and part-time, since I was 20 years old. I know that students mature at different rates and that they are capable of wonderful professionalism and incredible child-like behavior all in the same day much less the same week, year, or throughout their college career. Working with the young keeps you young, and just when you think you have seen it all – well, you haven't.

Many of you who are like me, about to send a student off to college or university, may be struggling with the question, "Is my child ready for college?" I can tell you that it is a difficult question to answer. But ultimately the person that really has to answer that question is the student themselves.

The higher education field has spent a lot of time looking at who is ready and who is not, trying to predict the skills needed to make it through college. Although there are many factors that play an important role in college success, the two biggest are internal to the student.

The first is an educational goal. If your student has a clear idea what they want to be when they finish college, then they are much more likely to graduate than those who still are struggling to find a career path. Most students change their major at least once, so don't panic if that happens. But sending them off with no idea at all what they want out of college can be a problem. If they don't know what they are working towards, it is harder to find the will to work in the first place. And notice I said educational goal, not athletic goal, or social goal, or anything else – they have to want what college provides – a degree or certificate, not a shot at athletic success.

The second thing that college graduates have is grit or determination. College is hard, not just the classes, but the transition to life on their own. Your student is going to fail at something. Maybe it is a test, paper, or class, or maybe it is a failed relationship or transitioning to successfully living without you. The main thing is learn from the failure, adjust, and try again. As the surfers say, "Dude, acknowledge and move on." Or as one of my daughter's road trip songs says, "If you knock, knock me over, I will get back up again." (Those are the immortal words of Princess Poppy from Trolls, if you were wondering. Wisdom is everywhere if you look for it!)

The best part of my job is to meet the students when they arrive as freshmen on campus then watch them grow as people as they continue through the process to graduation. A lot of learning takes place in the classroom but that is not the only place learning occurs on a college campus. By getting involved on campus, by meeting people with experiences or backgrounds different than your own, by having a job, an internship, or volunteering, by falling in love breaking up and falling again, all of these things help us mature and develop.

The adage that, "life is a journey, not a destination" applies here. A college degree may be the goal or destination, the top of the mountain if you will, but it is in the journey to get that goal in which we change, develop, and grow. A college degree can help provide the destination, but the student must take advantage of the journey. As the wise philosopher Hannah Montana once sang (during a college visit road trip) on the subject journeys and mountains, it "ain't about what's waiting on the other side. It's the climb." I appreciate Hannah's thoughts but not her grammar.

I've been asking myself if Abrielle has these two important ingredients for college success – an educational goal and grit. I think she does. Abrielle's educational goal is to get the education necessary to be a child life specialist. A child life specialist works with children in hospitals to normalize the environment and act as a pre-trauma counselor preparing them for some pretty scary procedures. Where did she come up with that unusual career choice?

Abrielle has had four surgeries in her childhood to remove tumors, including three brain surgeries. This started when she was diagnosed at seven. She went on to have more surgeries at 10 and 12 years old. The child life specialist she had during these frightening times really made an impression on her. Now she wants to be that person for other children.

Does she have grit? I have held her hand and watched her be calm before they have wheeled her back for surgeries that could have ended her life. I have been with her when we waited for the reports to see if a particular tumor was cancerous or not. I have seen her composure and strength through these enormous trials. Grit? I have witnessed hers firsthand, and it is amazing.

Abrielle going to college has served as a reminder to me that all of our students have a story to tell, that many have overcome a great deal in their lives on this climb so far. There are still mountains ahead of her and all our students, but the top of the mountain is not the point, as it were. It is who you become along the way.

Congratulations to all the high school graduates in our area! You did it. And to Abrielle, your Dad is so proud of you! Way to go, baby!

If you have any questions or comments about this or anything else please feel free to email me at [binbody@neosho.edu](mailto:binbody@neosho.edu).