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The College Process: Heart, Brain, Courage

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In the spring of 2012, Nightingale students put on a stirring performance of *The Wizard of Oz*. Chosen in large part to recognize our own Dorothy—beloved, retiring Head of School Dorothy Hutcheson—the play was everything that she is: bold, witty and, importantly, community-oriented. It was the rare production that had significant contributions from students in all three of Nightingale’s divisions. Admittedly, I do not love the *Wizard of Oz*. When I was young it scared me, and as I got older it bored me. I found myself moved by this production, however. In part, it was the context: the students were inspiring and the teaching was exemplary. It wasn’t just the players though. This time, for the first time, the story reached me as well. When Glinda the Good Witch turns to a seemingly hopeless Dorothy and says “every journey brings us back to where you start,” I could not help but think that somehow this is what we were after: the knowledge that we often find what we need in ourselves.

The most successful students routinely tap these internal resources. They linger with a problem, grapple with an idea, hang on to a thesis. They embrace nuance and know that growth comes via persistence. These students routinely impress and often inspire. Their resilience, optimism, curiosity and courage are precisely what my wife and I want for our three preschool-aged children. And yet despite their abundant strengths, some of these same girls can become unsure and anxious at the thought of an impending college application process.

Before the Envelope is Opened, Our Students Have Made It

At its best, the college process is an affirming one and students leave the process excited about their future and who they have become in high school. In less ideal situations, the student questions her very being, wondering aloud about the person she has become because of a choice that a college has made. As much as I can understand disappointment, and as much as I understand that in most cases that initial disappointment will dissipate when college commences, I worry when heretofore assured young women look to the future with less optimism. Their potential is diminished at least as much by their loss of confidence as by any admissions decision rendered by a committee of strangers on a distant college campus.

It is at this moment that I am most eager to tell them how much they have already made it. They are the people I want my own children to be. They can speak confidently in at least two languages; they can manipulate numbers; they can write clearly and persuasively; they can lead; they can tell a story; they can empathize; they can grapple with abstraction; they can test hypotheses; they know the benefits of community; they can see the merits of individuality.

It is easy to lose sight of these things in such an extended and trying college process. But as our girls look to various colleges to accept them, to provide them Wizard-like with a treasure they seek, we need to remind them that their heart, their brain, and their courage have been there all along.

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We Are More Than Any One Moment

It is during the college admission process that students need their parents to be at their best. We know that in times of vulnerability, change and loss, adolescents will look to their parents, gauging their every move. They will see things that may not be there and wonder about mutterings that they hear from another room. This applies to the admitted applicant as well. “Does Dad love me more because I am going to his alma mater? Does Mom respect me more because I am attending her favorite school?” As parents, the best thing we can do in times like these is to remind our children—through our words and actions—where their value lies. After many years as an educator, I’m pretty sure that value is never contained in an envelope, whether thick or thin.

One moment defines us only if we allow it to. Sensing an opportunity to make this point with a student, I recently shared a success I had enjoyed earlier in my life. The success was the culmination of years of effort and the moment of achievement was pretty terrific. Amidst the celebration, my father approached me, congratulated me, and said, “Don’t get stuck here. It is exciting, but you are more than any moment—even this one.” What a gift that was.

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