Creativity takes courage

Explore bravely

Be insatiably curious

Question everything

Live resiliently
Character Makes the Grade

IT’S THE STORY BEHIND THE GPA THAT MATTERS.

One of my biggest challenges as a college counselor is the overemphasis many students place on their GPA. To some students, GPA is the be-all and end-all—the definitive measure of their time in high school and, ultimately, their future success. This is a persistent and pernicious myth. For one thing, the GPA that appears on a student’s transcript is seldom the same number that many colleges calculate using their own measures and metrics. (I can hear some heads exploding already.) Even more important, students who place too much focus on their GPA may be missing the big picture. The ultimate question is not, “What number did you earn?” but instead, “What kind of person are you?” It’s the story behind the GPA that matters—the place where humor, dedication, and yes, resilience, carry the most weight.

At a small, independent school like Laguna, students’ overemphasis on grades is all the more prevalent—but it’s also all the more pointless. For instance, in a large public high school, GPAs can serve as a useful shorthand for determining who has earned distinction in the top 10 or 20 percent of the class. But such a distinction is far less helpful in a class of 40 or 50, one where nearly everybody takes the same college prep classes, and much of the class clusters within a few decimal places of one another. In these situations, what truly sets you apart?

Colleges expect that capable and ambitious students at schools like Laguna will be well-known to their teachers, which is why a recommendation coming from an experienced instructor—one who has seen hundreds of students come and go—can offer so much insight to college admissions personnel. How does this student stack up against other creative and capable types? What adjectives leap to mind in describing you? These are the things that really matter to college admissions teams.

Nine times out of ten, what impresses teachers most is the student who overcomes early disappointment to find success. This is why, as an English teacher, I’m suspicious of students who expect to earn A’s right out of the gate. Where’s their incentive to improve? On the other hand, nothing delights me more than students who realize that they are not meeting my standards of excellence and take the initiative to learn how to change that. I respect a student who is not above asking questions like, “How can I improve this paper? What do you mean my transitions could be more effective? How could my prose be sharper and leaner?” Those are the types of students who will succeed in college and later in life.

So, here’s the bottom line on GPA: work as hard as you can and embrace the challenges. Remember you are not just a number. It is not your GPA that will be discussed during the admissions committee meetings. Rather, it is your persistence, grit, and resilience that will give you a good chance at standing out from the crowd of competitors.