

Excellence  
January 31, 2020

Dear USAPCS family,

We are now almost through Week 2, and as promised, you have seen a few things happen recently that may be different from your old schools. How many of you had teachers who sat with you at meals, and then worked alongside you, doing dishes and sweeping the floors, in the kitchen after? How many of you were able to write animals on the board and compare them to your teachers?

Though these are probably new, I'm not trying to make us a different school just for the sake of being different - like everything that happens here, there is a reason for these new ways of doing things. I want to break down some of the barriers that you are used to between teachers and students. I want us to be a community that has fun together when the moment is right, and I want you to know that your teachers care about you as people, not just as students, and that means getting to know you on a personal level, outside of the classroom. I also want you to feel comfortable here, to feel like this is a home in some ways, and this community is a family.

After two weeks, I feel like we've started to do this. Look at the change in the dining hall from last week to this week, for example. Last week it was quiet, how it's now noisy with chatting and laughter. This is exactly what I hoped would happen, and I hope it continues.

Now that we're feeling more comfortable and getting better about laughing with one another, however, I want you to also think about what it means to be serious. I'm worried that, as we feel more relaxed around each other, some of your standards will start to slip. Some of them already have. I walked into a few of the boys' rooms yesterday and was disappointed to see a few shirts that weren't folded, beds that were made but not made well. From talking with the Junior Faculty, I know the same was true of some of the girls' rooms. I've seen a few students coming a minute or two late to classes, or not doing their work duties properly. I've heard students being loud between 10:30-11:00pm on their way back to prep, waking up those who have already left and gone to sleep. I'm worried about a few times in which I've seen students not take seriously the instructions given to them by a Junior Faculty member.

These things are disappointing - they're unacceptable, honestly. And today's letter is a reminder of the standards that we have for you, and that you should have for yourself.

These standards go back to what I said in my first letter - that we would trust you, so long as you promised, in exchange, to work your hardest and be the best version of yourself that you could.

Think about it this way. Everything that we do here, we should do with excellence. When you're studying, you should be fully focused on the material you are learning - trying to understand it instead of just answering the questions, doing independent research on ideas that interest you, doing even more than was assigned or leaving time to self-study after the homework is finished. When you're in chess club, I want you fully focused on mastering the moves, anticipating what your opponent is thinking, not just hanging out on the benches and chatting with your friends without a care for your standard of play.

And if, like tonight, we're having fun together playing a trivia game, then we should be fully present and focused on that as well - not necessarily to compete, but to enjoy. In the same way that I don't want you to be half joking around while you're supposed to be studying, when we do decide as a community that we are going to relax and have fun together, like tonight, then I don't want you to be half studying either. I want you to be present and be your best in everything that you are doing.

In some people, and some activities, I see the beginnings of excellence already. For example, watch how Matthew, Olive and Tatenda G are always the last to leave kitchen duty after doing more work than anyone else. Here you will see the beginnings of excellence - something that is created by high standards, not just by talent. I expect excellence of you, and you should expect it of yourself. And I expect it not only in your studies, but also in what you do outside of your studies.

There is a connection between excellence and our Quaker practices, which I'll talk more about in next week's letter, along with some advice on how you can put yourself in a mindset of excellence. But for now, let this be a warning that our standards need to get better, and our discipline stronger.

Finally, on a personal note, you should realize by now that you will see both sides from me. At times I will be very serious, and I'll push you so far that you will want to give up in frustration. I'll remind you when you're not doing your best, and you'll see that few things make me more upset than wasted potential. And other times I'll be lighter, joking, not serious - here to support you as a friend. As you get to know me more, you'll know when to expect each one.

Keep excellence in your mind from now on, and especially this coming week. Continue to show the fun, lighter sides of yourself and continue to make this place a home. But do it while rededicating yourself to all of the little habits and behaviors that create excellence - to being on time, to working with full focus, to committing yourself to your work program and your club and your studies with equal dedication.

When you answer 'Present' to the roll call on Monday morning, and every morning thereafter, I expect that you will be fully present, in mind and body, prepared for excellence.

Have a good weekend.

Sincerely,  
James