

You belong here
March 13, 2020

Dear Students,

During Convocation each week, you often hear about the expectation that you will be leaders in Zimbabwe in the future. They say this because it is true - that is indeed our expectation - but I also understand how scary that probably sounds sometimes.

There are two things that make me nervous about such high expectations:

One is that you will grow entitled. That is, you'll forget that being a leader is something that you must earn every single day by how hard you work, by the example you set, and by how you treat others. You'll start to feel that being a leader is your rightful place, something that others owe to you.

Entitlement is something that I'll write about one day, but it isn't something that I'm worried about now - in fact, it's the opposite.

The second danger of such high expectations is that you'll feel inadequate. Like you don't belong. With the expectations high, you'll worry that if you get a bad grade, you're letting people down after they have invested a lot to help you succeed.

Or you'll wonder, with all of these great students around you who seem to be doing so well, if maybe the school was created for them and not for you.

It's this second danger that I'm writing about today.

To see how this works, let's step back for a second.

Most of you are used to being the best students, or among the best, at your old schools. For a lot of you, that has probably been true since you were very young. And when you're good at something for a long time, your identity starts to form around it. Your teachers, your parents, and your classmates all recognize you for your success, and also put more pressure on you to keep succeeding. That combination of pressure and recognition motivates you to work harder, which in turn helps you succeed even more. It's a self-reinforcing cycle, and it's probably something that many of you have experienced.

And then, one day, you have some disappointing results. You're not too worried at first - you decide to just study harder, because that has always worked for you in the past. You get up earlier, stay at prep late, and study most of the day on the weekends. But even after a couple more tests and quizzes, it doesn't feel like you're improving, and the work seems just as difficult as it was before you started working harder. It feels like that self-reinforcing cycle of success is starting to crack.

To make things worse, you look around and it seems like everyone else is a top student - which is true, since you're at a school of people who stood out at their previous schools. Suddenly, the way things were in the past few years of your life are reversed - you feel like you're struggling while others are succeeding. And if you aren't a top student anymore, then how can you define yourself? How can you fill in that part of your identity?

I'm sure some of you are feeling this way. Some of you have told me directly; some others I can tell just from talking to you, even if you don't say it in those words.

If this is how you're feeling, then I have a couple of pieces of advice:

First, you're not the only one who feels like you're struggling. That's in part why I'm writing this - because at the very least you should know that you aren't alone in feeling overwhelmed. Even when you look around and see people who are doing well, it's likely that they are finding the adjustment difficult, and probably are having to do more work or struggle more than they did in their last few years of school.

Second, this is a feeling that you should probably get used to if you want to accomplish something important in your life. Here at USAP Community School, we've brought together many smart students. It's impossible for all of them to be the best student, all at the same time. And the higher you go in life, the more you will be surrounded by people who have also accomplished a lot. It will be easier and easier to be intimidated by them. It will be tempting to measure yourself using their ruler, not yours. Don't fall into that trap. Which brings me to my third piece of advice...

Third, even though it might be discouraging to be struggling more than you are used to, this can actually be an opportunity. It's an opportunity to build an identity for yourself that isn't so influenced by your marks, and by being a top student. An opportunity to add a new dimension to your idea of who you are.

Focus on being a 'good student,' not a 'top student.' Those two things might sound similar, but they aren't. Being a top student is comparative - it always means measuring yourself against others. Being a good student is descriptive - it only includes qualities like hard work, resilience, creativity, and efficiency, and all of these are qualities that you can develop and improve at.

Better yet, try to add dimensions to your identity that have nothing to do with being student. Do the little things each day that will give you a reputation as a good friend, someone others can count on and trust. Serve others with your best ability, and when you are given a chance to lead, do it with seriousness, kindness and integrity. Make yourself known for things that are within your control, like how you treat others. As an extra benefit, these qualities will give you a sense of belonging and community much more than being a great student will.

Plus they will help you with one of the great challenges in life, which is not learning how to succeed, but figuring out what success is in the first place.

Right now, it is very clear to each of you what success and belonging look like. Study hard, get good grades, get into a good university, etc. But when you get older, it becomes much less obvious what it means to succeed or to belong. There aren't really grades to measure yourself by, or reports that help you know how you are doing.

This is especially true if you are an entrepreneur, or if you start your own organization, as I know many of you want to do. One of the hardest parts of starting your own organization is that you don't finish each day and have someone to tell you 'this is your score for today,' or 'you're the best at X, but not at Y,' or 'you did well on this, but not on that.' You have to figure all of that out for yourself.

So, take this as an opportunity to add a few more dimensions to your own identity, outside of simply being a top student. Your sense of belonging here shouldn't only be connected to your grades, but to your character, and how you are as a member of this community.

This letter is getting really long, but I only have one more point to make! It's a serious one, though, so stay with me.

You'll notice something interesting as you go through life. People who have grown up with wealth, or privilege, or advantages - most of them feel like they belong everywhere. They rarely even ask themselves the question "am I supposed to be here?" It's just something that they assume. It's what people have been telling them their whole lives - not always directly, but through the kinds of messages that aren't spoken, but are still powerful. These people feel that they belong because they've never wondered if they can afford the fees to stay in school, never been passed over for a job that they are qualified for, or had someone look at them strangely when they share their opinion. And what's more, most of the time they haven't done anything to earn that sense of belonging, it's just always been there for them.

The sad reality is that you probably won't have this experience of natural, unquestioned belonging. You will encounter people who doubt you for reasons that have nothing to do with your character. I wish it were not this way - and actually one of the reasons that I do this work as an educator is because I hope to one day see a world in which everyone belongs, based solely on "the content of their character," as MLK said. And I hope that your strength, and your intellect, and your voices, will be a big part of making this world a reality.

But until then, you are going to have to be tougher, and have thicker psychological armor. You'll need to be prepared to be slighted, or feel like you don't belong, and yet continue pressing forward anyway. But fortunately you won't have to do it alone. The reason that I want us to be such a strong community today is so that you'll have others to turn to tomorrow when you go somewhere else and feel like an outsider - others who have shared these two years with you, who understand you, and who might just be going through the same experiences that you are.

Just like others are struggling - right here, right now - to feel like they belong.

So, with all that writing behind us, here's the summary:

If you are trying to be your best self each day, if you are kind to others, if you do your part to make this a strong and healthy community, and care about being a good person and not only a good student...

...then you belong at this school.

Don't ever doubt that. Not during these last few weeks, or during the upcoming holiday, or any time after that. This school is for you, not for some fictional group of students who can somehow all be #1.

Your partner in this journey,
James