
A Case for Boarding Schools and Leadership

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Students given the chance to figure out decision-making processes under pressure, but in a safe environment

While in college, I was part of a wonderful rowing team comprised of a great number of friends and teammates. During my senior year my roommate was elected as the team's captain—a role that would eventually involve me at various points throughout the season. Responsibilities were delegated to me and I enjoyed earning the trust of my friend and the respect of my teammates. I thoroughly enjoyed the year and I learned an enormous amount about the benefits and pitfalls of leading a group of people committed to the same vision.

Since that pivotal year, I have taken a keen interest in how future leaders are made and developed in the United States. With the US mired in a recession and global issues demanding our attention, there exists a clear call for leadership. I hear complaints from older generations and mine that the work ethic and leadership abilities are somehow lost on this current generation of teenagers and college students. Aren't schools providing the necessary foundation for tomorrow's future leaders? I would argue that the culture of working hard and being a leader is very much alive and that these latent qualities in the younger generation are simply waiting to be developed. Boarding schools are providing opportunities to develop young men and women into leaders. The potential to lead awaits every individual who attends a boarding school and whether it is in a formal or informal role, the result is always the same—the ability to test oneself, accept responsibility for one's actions and subsequent outcomes, and see if he or she is capable of making a difference. The beauty of leadership is that not everyone should do it, but that anyone can.

When freshmen arrive in the fall at various boarding schools throughout the US, residential leaders (proctors, prefects, hall monitors, and the like), composed usually of junior and seniors who have been selected by their school to represent the best ideals of the institution, meet and greet the newest members of the community. As a new student's first introduction to the school's leader-

ship, imagine what a powerful incentive it is for new students to begin thinking about their own potential as a leader. Freshmen also see their peers investing in the residential life of the community. One might argue that the privileges granted to these upperclassmen would be their primary reason for choosing the position, but I would counter that gaining privileges occurs only when certain responsibilities are met. Juniors and seniors picked for these positions learned during their first couple of years at the school how to complete their academic work, thrive in a residential environment, and understand what it means to be part of a school community. Therein lies the distinction between folks who learn how to lead and acquire the work ethic versus those who do not. I have seen students demand privileges before they have learned how to be accountable at school; they do not grasp the lessons being taught to them on a daily basis. Those students who learn to lead easily gain privileges because they have shown the faculty that they can work hard, be a good follower, and most importantly, take responsibility for themselves and others.

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Outside the resident halls, boarding schools are full of opportunities to lead one's peers. Many institutions have a student government elected by the student body. At one school, six representatives are elected for a variety of positions for each class (president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, and two representatives). Everyone who decides to run for a position must give a speech to the assembled class and provide reasons why they should be elected amongst the candidates. The system is not merely a popularity contest as each class officer is elected for a one-year term. If the officer does not follow through on his/her promises or is seen as ineffective, then someone takes his/her place the following year. Again, a leader being held accountable in this day and age is an important distinction that young leaders learn in boarding schools. Once chosen, the officers must meet with other members from the other classes to form the student government. Attendance is taken each week and issues are discussed that reflect the interests of a diverse school population. Teenagers quickly learn that fixes are not always easy, but change is possible through a responsible system of government.

While some students might not be interested in the political underpinnings of a campus, leadership positions exist on plenty of teams throughout a school. The captain selection process varies (from election by the team, coaches selection, to a combination of both), but this select group possesses the ability to lead by example during workouts, speak to teammates about various issues during a game or practice, and represent the schools ideals; all values that we would expect any good leader to have today. Captains spend a great deal of their time in direct contact with their charges as most teams meet six days a week and spend on average two hours a day together. Watching someone lead while playing an activity they love can be a powerful motivator for the team, but also teaches everyone that following is also an important skill to develop. Athletics teaches organization, motivation, passion, and the essence of how to operate and belong to a group.

What if someone is not interested in the dorm or sports? Many schools provide peer-mentoring groups. These students, trained by school psychologists and psychiatrists, act as frontline troops to help gauge the mental and social health of a community. Their responsibilities include helping their peers deal with the daily tribulations of being an adolescent in a residential environment. Roommate issues, friends, family, school, adolescence, love and likes are all topics for discussion amongst peer counselors. How amazing for a fourteen-year old from across the country to be counseled by someone just a few years older? These mentors provide their perspective on the ins and outs of a school life, and

let adults in the community know when serious issues arise that range beyond normal teenage angst. If it seems like a tremendous responsibility, it is, but their position is conducted with the help of trained adults and allows teenagers the chance to learn about themselves and their peer group. Mentoring is a powerful experience and helps to create empathetic leaders capable of understanding the needs and wants of a community.

What if someone is not interested in a formal position? This is the beauty about boarding schools and the opportunity it affords students from any age the ability to take on the informal roles of leadership. As a dormitory parent, I have personally witnessed young men and women rise to the occasion and help another student in the dorm through a kind word, help with homework, or simply being a friend. The number of occurrences is too numerous to mention, but it happens on an informal basis, with nothing but the fact that they are a peer who attends a school with the same name. While the lessons vary depending on the situation, the everyday kid has a chance to make a difference and learn about him or herself in the process

As a rowing coach, I have seen the value of those teenagers who do not become captains. I have watched young boys and girls figure out the value of hard work and discipline, and become a leader on the team by simply leading the pack and putting in the extra repetitions at the end of each exercise. Two years ago, I watched a rower take over the packing of the trailer (loading nine very expensive crew shells) each and every week during the ten-week spring season. His teammates were in awe of him and they turned to him more than they turned to the coaches to find out what needed to be done next. The mark of a leader was never more apparent than in this particular individual, and the following season he was elected as captain.

One might argue that leaders will always rise to the top, but, while there is some truth to this statement, one can never question the opportunities that students have at a boarding school to make a difference and become a leader. Those with the ability are given chances to figure out their decision-making processes under pressure, but in a safe environment where the consequences of such decisions will not be catastrophic. To watch as a teenager gains confidence in himself or herself as they bring about a significant change in others is a wonder to behold. Encouragement of these values is essential at every level of a boarding school and the creation of a new generation of leaders. I am assured that this next generation of leaders possesses the values of hard work and responsibility, and can ultimately lead our communities in the future.

