



On Tuesday, September 5, 2023, Boston University Academy Head of School Chris Kolovos welcomed students, faculty, and staff back to school with opening remarks on the topic of civil discourse. Read the full text of his remarks below.

"On Grades and Mindsets"

Good morning. It is lovely to see you all today. On behalf of the faculty and staff, welcome to this 31st year of BU Academy.

A special welcome to our new students. You are impressive individuals, but what binds you together is your curiosity and your kindness. That is also what connects you to all of us. You make us better, and we are so glad you are here.

An extra special welcome to the class of 2024. You have earned a reputation – a good one – for being cohesive and inclusive. That was on full display at the senior retreat, where I watched your friend groups mix and morph over the course of one meal. You have also earned a reputation for being engaged and for trying to make this school better; we will all see evidence of that today from two of our Student Council leaders. You all are one of the reasons I'm so optimistic about this year, it is going to be a great one.

In just a few moments, you will hear from Anais, our Student Council president. But first, I'll offer some thoughts as I do at the start of every year.

My topic today is a rather serious one. I am going to talk today about the pressure that some of you feel to achieve academically – the oftentimes unhealthy focus on grades. Now, I am not saying that this is a BUA-only phenomenon or that this concern applies to all of you all of the time. Certainly not. In many ways, we are beautifully counterculture. So many of you exhibit a deep, abiding love for learning; curiosity is a thread that runs through this community, often overcoming a hyper-focus on grades.

But we are not immune to this phenomenon. It is something I worry about. The good news is that there is something we can do about it. Some of you will resist what I have to say. At your age, frankly, I might have too. Still, I wish somebody had said it when I was in your position, and I hope I would have listened.

Learning as Play

After that dour note, I'll begin with something happier. At home right now, I have a front row seat to how babies and toddlers learn. Those of you with young siblings and cousins know this too. Maggie and Penny, our twins, are nine-months old. They are learning how to walk. Right now they are at the stage where they crawl over to the couch, pull themselves up to stand, and then

almost immediately land really hard on their backsides. My wife and I talk about lining the house with pillows and bubble wrap. But the girls just laugh hysterically and try again.

Our son Charlie, is three-years old. He's a verbal little guy; we have lots of fun conversations. But neither of us taught him how to talk. He learned by trying and by messing up over and over again. Over time, "ut" became "up." Where are them?" became "Where are they?" "Mys" is becoming "mine" (although I have to say I don't blame him for that one; "mys" makes so much more sense when you think about "ours" and "yours" and "his" and "hers").

Young kids are amazing. They're just not afraid to make mistakes. They don't see mistakes as failures. They don't say, "I'm so embarrassed about my grammar." They don't say, "You know, walking is overrated. I'm not really a walking person. I'm just gonna crawl." For them, learning is play.

So What Changes?

And then somewhere along the line things change, and not in a good way. Learning stops feeling like play and feels more like work. Learning becomes stressful and can provoke anxiety. Schools have a lot to do with that. This is not your fault. Particularly when we start giving grades, students can fixate on those measures – fixate on those grades, scores, and honors.

I started down this path early. I remember – and this is family lore – that I cried in the first grade when I received an A-. In the second grade, I remember the name of the student who beat me at a multiplication contest. I remember in the seventh grade, when I started at private school, the string of B's and C's on my report card – grades I had never seen before; I remember feeling like an imposter in those moments. And, for some reason, I kept all of my report cards and standardized test score reports in a little treasure box in my parents' closet.

The research shows that this is not healthy. This anxious hyper focus on grades leads to really pernicious outcomes. It squashes curiosity. It discourages risk-taking. It discourages asking for help when you need it. It actually makes your performance worse. It can have negative mental health outcomes, especially when you are measuring your self-worth by letters on a report card.

It can even lead someone to put their character at risk by cheating. A fellow Head of School shared a particularly sad example. She told me that one of her students cheated on a placement test. Mind you, there are no reportable grades on a placement test. Cheating on a placement test actually makes it harder for a student to succeed. When she asked the student why, the student said, "I wanted to do well."

The question is, why does this happen? How do we go from happy, mistake-making, giggling toddlers to people who worry so much about outcomes, even for deeply curious and strong students like you? There are certainly external factors, and I do not want to downplay those: college, parents, and society more broadly. I will address those. But I suspect that the biggest driver for many of us is internal.

Grades and Growth Mindsets

I would like to tell you a story about a friend of mine from college who was a star in high school. She went to a school very much like this one, was at the top of her class, and went to a name-brand college. And she loved math. In her freshman year of college, she earned an A in multi-variable calculus and differential equations in the first semester and then an A- in linear algebra in the second semester. That course was hard for her, but rather than being proud of her A-, she took it as a sign that she had reached her math limit. She never took a math course again. She decided to major in environmental science – a field aligned with her passion and where she thought she would be able to do some good in the world. In her sophomore year, she earned a B in a course in her major. Not used to seeing that grade, she took it as a sign that she would struggle and switched majors to safer ground.

Like so many strong students, she learned the lesson early in life that she was smart – good at school. That was part of her identity. She received a lot of praise for that. She was really proud of it. The string of A's she received along the way was evidence that she was smart and good at school.

And that's just the problem. If an A means that you are smart or good at something, what does it B mean? What does an A- mean? Lower grades must mean that you are *not* smart, *not* good at something, and that you have maxed your ability. You should not take the next challenge because you might fail and expose your weakness, with consequences for your identity and your self worth.

What she was exhibiting was a clear example of what is called a fixed mindset. The research here is fascinating. One of the leading thinkers in this area is Dr. Carol Dweck at Stanford. Her work describes two categories of people. In one category are people with what's called a fixed mindset, who tend to believe that traits are fixed and stable over time – things like your intelligence and mathematical ability. Those do not fundamentally change; you are born with them. By contrast, people with a growth mindset think very differently. They view traits as changeable over time. You can get smarter and more skilled through effort.

What is fascinating about the research is not the categorization; it is the outcomes. The research shows that people with a fixed mindset, controlling for all other factors, tend to perform worse than people with a growth mindset. Those with a growth mindset tend to perform better. For example, researchers tracked students with growth and fixed mindsets over time in math and found that students with a growth mindset ended up in higher levels of math years afterwards as they progressed through their education.

It might seem surprising that the way we think about learning impacts how well we do. But consider feedback and how we respond to mistakes. In response to a low grade, people with a fixed mindset often look around to see who did worse than they did and then feel a little better about themselves. They stick to areas where they can really excel and put their effort there. If

you have a growth mindset, what do you do with a mistake? They are not scared of the result, but see it as a chance to learn. They ask for help. They try harder and see what their effort can accomplish – just like every toddler.

Retraining our Brains

Here's the good news: we can control our mindset. We can develop a growth mindset and we can change the way we think about grades.

We are working on this as a school. Last summer, the faculty summer read was a book called *Grading for Equity*. Since then, we have been talking a great deal about our grading practices, our grading policies, what we want grades to mean, and how we telegraph that.

Classically, grades have been seen as sorting mechanisms. We reject that. We have no honors and non-honors tracks to sort you into. We have no class rank. We do not grade on a curve.

The purpose of grades, for us, is not to tell you if you are good at Latin or whether you are better at math than the student sitting next to you. It is to answer one simple question: can you do the things we're asking you to do right now? Can you do all of them? Can you do some of them? How well can you do them? A grade is a diagnostic snapshot at a moment in time to tell you whether your effort is producing the results you are hoping for. And it is a guide to where you might want to work harder and ask for help.

Now, this does not mean you should not care about your grades. Of course you should – but not as a confirmation of some fixed ability or some innate skill. Take a grade as feedback. “Is what I'm doing for homework working? Where do I need to improve?” I also do not mean to suggest that talent does not matter. We all have natural strengths – of course we do. But we can all improve, and grades can help us do that if framed the right way.

This is perhaps the only time this year I will make a sports reference. It's a story about Michael Jordan, who was, as some of you know, cut from his varsity basketball team as a sophomore in high school. He was placed on the JV team to develop. Worse yet, when he looked at the varsity roster, he saw the name of one of his classmates – another sophomore. Jordan's reaction famously was that he simply was not as good as the other players at that moment. Notice how different that is than “I'm not a good basketball player.” He also has said that getting cut was the best thing that could have happened to him because it led him to respond with effort. Effort and a growth mindset became lifelong habits for Michael Jordan, helping him become arguably the most dominant basketball player in history.

College Myths

Some of you are likely thinking, “Come on Mr. Kolovos. There's an enormous pachyderm standing in the corner: college. Colleges care about our grades. They are not looking at our

effort. They don't care how hard we try. They are just looking at the scores and the letters. Of course we're gonna stress about it."

True. You're right. Colleges have become very selective, especially the places you all tend to want to go. Selectivity rates have plummeted as applications have increased. 8% admission rates are 92% rejection rates.

Scores and grades are important factors in college admissions, but I'll suggest that they should not cause the distress that they do. There are four myths I want to unpack for you briefly.

One myth is that stressing about grades leads to better outcomes. That's nonsense. Stress makes outcomes worse. Anybody who has ever had a moment of test anxiety knows this. What helps is being open to feedback, learning, and bouncing back; that actually produces higher outcomes and the transcripts you may want.

Myth number two: we at BUA are competing against one another for a limited number of slots at these selective schools, and so small differences in GPAs matter. Nonsense. I can tell you that in one year, Brand X college admitted four or five BUA students. In the very next year, they admitted zero. They do not have a quota. If they want you – if they see something in you that they really like – they will admit you. They do not care about how many of you are applying to their school.

Myth number three: all colleges care about is grades and scores. I've talked to about three dozen deans of admission at the most highly selective colleges and universities in the country and I have asked them about how they read your applications. They turn away hundreds of valedictorians with perfect grades every year. What they are really looking for is a combination of students who can do the work at the college level, who are on fire with curiosity, and who have shown an inclination to connect that curiosity with something that matters – showing the promise to have an impact on their world. You all are in an almost unique position to do those things, and that is why they tell me that they love reading your applications.

The most pernicious college myth, though, is that going to the most selective college you can is a predictor of success and happiness. The research does not support that. What does matter is what you do when you are there. Who are the professors you meet? Who are your friends? What research do you engage in? What classes do you take? And I'll tell you that after a while nobody cares where you went to college. It is often the most insecure adults who remind you of where they went to college later in life. Pick a place you love and a program you connect with.

Parents

Some of you may have noticed that I have not talked much about another important piece here: parents. You might say, "Come on Mr. Kolovos, you're ignoring my parents, who really want me to excel. I have to get the grades." For some of you, that parental pressure may be explicit. For others, likely for many of you, I'm guessing that the pressure is implicit or internalized. Even if

your parents tell you to just do your best, you might feel some pressure to live up to the standard they set when they were in school. Or maybe, like my parents, yours did not go to college, but you feel the pressure to establish the family and do as well as you can on your family's behalf.

I have two things I'd like you to think about when it comes to parents. One, if your parents seem anxious about your grades, scores, and college, have some empathy. It often comes from a desire to give you a happy life. They are just not sure how to do that. Here's why.

A psychologist I deeply admire shared the following thought experiment. Think about a time ten generations ago and what our lives looked like. It would have been fairly easy for parents to ensure your success because the future was much more predictable. You would likely live in the same village or town that your parents lived in. You would likely marry somebody from that village, and perhaps the marriage would be arranged. If your parents made fishing nets, you would have been very likely to learn that trade at their feet and take over the business.

Now, who knows where you are going to live? It could be anywhere around the world. You might meet your partner online. Your job could be anything; it might not even be invented yet. Your family cannot prepare you for that. And that's unnerving for parents. What they are trying to do is give you all the advantages they can in that great cloud of uncertainty. They sometimes see grades and college as something they can control in order for you to be happy.

Deep down, they just want you to be happy. I know this because I have asked them. I talked to the parents of about fifty incoming ninth graders during the month of August and asked them what their hopes are for you. Not a single person mentioned grades. Not a single person mentioned a college list or a career. What they said was that they want you to stay curious, find great friends, find great mentors, be challenged, grow, and be happy.

So, one piece of homework for all of you. When you go home tonight to your parents, to your guardians, to your family, ask them what their hopes are for you at BUA and what they hope for you beyond this place. Listen with an open heart. Tell them about your hopes. And then give them a hug and tell them you love them.

I wish you all a great year. Thank you very much.