
Film Review

Race to Nowhere: The Dark Side of America's Achievement Culture

Produced and Co-directed by Vicki Abeles (2010)

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Review

In 85 minutes Vicki Abeles, producer and co-director of *Race to Nowhere*, presents personal vignettes that form a montage of parents pressuring their adolescent children to achieve academically and the tragic consequences of failure to meet their rising expectations. The end of the film provides a coherent summation of what communities need to do to reduce the stress levels placed on children by parents. If it takes a whole village to raise a child, then according to the thesis of the film, it requires the entire community to monitor and adjust their expectations of attending college, establishing a career, and living the good life. The bell-shaped curve of intelligence suggests only two percent of students can achieve straight A grades and score in the 98th percentile on the SAT/ACT. The fictional Lake Wobegon platitude of every child being above average in school has become a painful milestone leading to higher rates of stress,



depression and alienation. A majority of middle-class above-average children cannot become the geniuses parents imagine they are without suffering abysmal personal failure, as the film shows.

The quality of life in the United States has plateaued, and many communities have experienced an economic decline. College-educated parents no longer feel that they can easily bestow a natural inheritance of their privilege on their children. Five factors threaten the parents' confidence about their children's future. First, the US



students' academic achievement is challenged by the international educational attainment levels in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) displayed by K-12 students in China, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, and other rising digital economies. Second, SAT/ACT scores achieved by Asian-Americans students have surpassed those of White majority students in all levels of measurement. Third, the declining quality of

public education is coupled with the increased costs of attending a prestigious and reputable private university. Fourth, the shrinking career field is generating more low-paying, benefit-reduced, dead-end careers. Fifth, a school culture in which students, teachers, and administrators are pressured and rewarded to raise test scores based on the Common Core of State Standards (CCSS) often results in cheating, stress, depression, burnout, and suicide.

In this competitive educational environment, the US Department of Education adds more pressure by offering billions of dollars in funding to those school districts that are the most successful in the Race to the Top (RTT) initiative. The title of the film, *Race to Nowhere*, is scornful of a series of hurdles that schools must leap over to get Federal RTT funding. The film is dedicated to a 13-year-old student who committed suicide, allegedly because she got an F grade on one math test. Is this a price parents are willing to pay for raising what they imagine is the best and the brightest child?

The documentary provides a thoughtful mix of personal stories about stressed-out students and their distraught parents, balanced by expert opinions from school administrators, counselors, teachers, and developmental psychologists. The pressure on students is more than maintaining A grades and earning college credits in AP classes and perfect SAT/ACT scores. The social milieu is a potpourri of rising expectations



for adolescents to be exemplary in academics, sports, community service, fine arts, social life, and their personal appearance. Doing okay is not an acceptable standard; students are expected to be doing great in every endeavor and category.

Developmental psychologists, school counselors, and university professors coalesce in the opinion that too many children are being robbed of their childhood. As one expert stated, “These over-scheduled and exhausted children should sue the adults for stealing their childhood.” There is no joy in a life subsumed in long school days, extra-curricular activities, after-school tutoring and evenings filled with five hours of homework. Children and adolescents who need 9 to 11 hours of sleep are getting six hours of rest. Prolonged sleep deprivation contributes to stress, depression, anorexia, and substance abuse. The misuse of drugs does not result from children’s recreational use. The dependency involves stimulants to keep energy levels artificially high and then tranquilizers to lower concentration after the school test or standardized assessment has been completed.

The academic goal of these frenetic activities is to be admitted to the most prestigious university possible. In 1944 the *Serviceman’s Readjustment Act*, also known as the GI Bill, made attending college possible for 15 million WWII veterans. The Baby Boomers, their children, and subsequent generations enjoyed the good life. Parents who struggled to complete high school realized the dream of their children graduating from college. The proliferation of colleges coincided with the lowering of academic standards, later known as grade inflation. In 1900 there were 1,000 colleges in the United States; in 1950 there were 2,000; in 1980 there were 3,000 and in 2012 the number grew to 6,900. With the expansion of community colleges, online universities, and MOOCs (massive open online courses), access to a tertiary degree or certificate is accessible to most high school graduates.

One salient point of the film is that students are conditioned by parents, peers, teachers, admission counselors, and the media to attend the best college, not the campus which is the best fit. This, in part, explains why 50 percent of mainstream college freshmen have to take remedial classes in math, writing, and reading, and many drop out within two years. Being admitted to one of the top 100 universities is a driving force in the movie. Parents will make any sacrifice, including the health and happiness of their child, in order to be socially affirmed by peers for their success in supporting the race to nowhere.



Conclusion

One section of the lyrics in the film’s music track says, “*When I was a child, everybody smiled—nobody knows me at all,*” which is part of the generational dilemma. What are some of the ways to curtail the race to nowhere, and who is responsible for ameliorating the situation? Vicki Abeles and her husband Douglas, who is an MD in sports medicine, are following the advice they proffer to others. Academic demands were harming their three children, but no longer. The film conveys the message that people will need to work together to correct the situation. Students need to talk to adults

about their feelings. Parents have to reduce performance pressure; allow time for family events, more rest, and recreation; and advocate a college or career that is the right fit, not the right ranking. Teachers should assign less homework and maintain a classroom that promotes informal assessments and group work. School administrators have to adopt Pestalozzi's model of educating the whole child—head, heart, and hand. Medical and psychological professionals must advocate for healthier lifestyles that balance, academics, sports, fine arts, social life, and relaxing as a family. The two percent of students with Plato's souls of gold can compete for the highest levels of academic achievement in his idealistic *Republic*. The students with souls of silver should compete for the highest levels of happiness and self-fulfillment.

The documentary *Race to Nowhere* earns a 9 on a scale of 10 in terms of expressing social conditions, engaging dialogue, promoting self-reflection, transformational education, excellence in cinematography, pacing, sound, music, and editing. A DVD of the film with materials is available for approximately \$30 at <http://www.racetonowhere.com/store-home>.

Note

This PG13-rated documentary is in English with Spanish & Mandarin subtitles (<http://www.racetonowhere.com/>).

Website Resources

Bell Curve Distribution

<http://www.mathsisfun.com/data/standard-normal-distribution.html>

TIMSS & PIRLS Results 2011

<http://timss.bc.edu/>

SAT Scores 2012

<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=171>

Common Core of State Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

Race to the Top Fund

<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>

Students Abusing Adderall

<http://www.elementsbehavioralhealth.com/drug-abuse-addiction/student-adderall-abuse/>

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944

http://www.gibill.va.gov/benefits/history_timeline/

US Post-Secondary Accredited Colleges and Certified Programs
<http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/GetDownloadFile.aspx>

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi
<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-pest.htm>

Plato's Republic Book III
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.4.iii.html>