

Ability & Effort
Will Fitzhugh, *The Concord Review*
21 July 2004

Students who do good academic work in high school and who are also good athletes are often puzzled that they get so much more recognition for their sports achievements than they do for the academic work on which they may have put forward the same high level of effort.

Of course, success in academics and success in athletics may both be attributed to both genes and effort, but for some reason we in the United States have decided to celebrate athletic achievement as though it were purely the result of effort and to be much more circumspect about celebrating academic achievement in the schools, as though it were the result purely of genes (ability). Naturally, it isn't fair to praise someone for their genes!

Most Asian countries, according to Stevenson & Stigler (*The Learning Gap*) believe that effort rather than ability is most responsible for success in school, but we tend to lean the other way.

Over the last 17 years, I have published 649 history research papers by high school students from 43 states and 33 other countries (there are more than 50 examples on our website at www.tcr.org, including all of our Emerson Prize winners from the last ten years). In that time, I have heard some interesting comments from our authors. I went to visit a high school senior in Connecticut some years ago, whose essay on the Great Awakening won an Emerson Prize. She was all-state soccer in Connecticut and everyone in school knew that, but no one knew she had been published in *The Concord Review*. She went on to play on her college soccer team, at Dartmouth, but she also graduated *summa* in science and has since completed Harvard Medical School.

Another of our authors, Sophia Parker Snyder, who is a Sophomore at Harvard College now, wrote me:

“It is absolutely wonderful to know that there is someone in this world who appreciates the academic achievements of high school students. As a scholar-athlete, I am often shocked at the greater rewards I reap for my athletic achievements, regardless of the fact that these accomplishments are far less important than my intellectual ones. This approach to scholarship and athleticism seems to me completely backwards, and I am glad that you and your publication are doing something to right this wrong.”

Strong words, perhaps, but what are the consequences of the attitudes she describes? It is interesting that high school coaches often know and talk with college coaches, and that college coaches take a real interest in high school athletes, yet history teachers, for example, hear nothing from college history professors, who also take no interest in high school history students, however outstanding they may be. The irony is that the high school coach is often a history teacher and the outstanding high school athlete may be a first-rate history student as well, but they get the message from our society that what they do in athletics matters and what they do in academics does not.

This tendency to downplay good academic work naturally influences other students who might be capable of better work if they decided to put in some more effort, or even a lot more effort, but if academic work is not that important, then why should they?

The purpose of *The Concord Review* over the years has been to find exemplary academic work by high school students of history (and we have) and to distribute it as widely as possible to show teachers and other students what some kids are doing. The fine essays have come in, but the number of schools and teachers who have wanted to put good examples of history research papers before students as an incentive has been quite small so far.

Some Teaching American History programs have even decided that showing teachers fine academic work might just discourage them or their students. We would have to stop showing National Basketball Association games on television if we thought that showing them to students would make them all give up at basketball. Of course we don't have to do that, because outstanding athletic performances just make high school kids want to try harder to excel.

We need to cultivate that same confidence in our students when it comes to academics. We need to have faith that celebrating outstanding academic work and showing it to our young people will not scare them off, but will give them an incentive to put forth their very best efforts on their most important work—their school work.