



Eduardo Padrón

UPFRONT

“WHAT WOULD YOU ATTEMPT TO DO IF YOU KNEW you could not fail?” Intriguing notion, isn't it? It was just a question on a greeting card, but it spoke to something more meaningful. We have grown up in a competitive society, and while some growl back at the pressures, others are paralyzed

by the threat of failure. In a rather indiscriminate fashion, our culture is littered with messages of modern day virtue—strength, toughness, good looks, brains and cool—the necessary requisites to “play the game” successfully, to win. “Others need not apply” might be a reasonable inference.

“What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?” is an unfettered invitation to explore possibility, one's very own possibilities. In the world of education, the launching pad for big ideas and outsized dreams, we should ask ourselves if this ethos is at work. If not, should it be?

Our school systems are presently knee-deep in testing students, and the undercurrent of pass-fail is palpable. A lot is riding on the results, from federal funding to college entrance. And our most esteemed institutions of higher education are turning away very good students like never before, making “survival of the fittest” very much in vogue.

But competition isn't the villain. In American society competition is a viable and respected partner in an enviable collaboration. Competition drives our economic system just as opportunity and equity fortify our social and political order. The marriage has worked, albeit with constant adjustment and compromise, for more than two hundred years. Society offers challenge as it provides support to ensure a fair chance to compete.

Educators are certainly not in the business of harboring students from the rigor that learning demands. But the challenge of education, one that affects every corner of society, is not to pluck out the

most talented in a competitive winnowing process. Like the greater society, only more so, education aims to challenge, raise expectations and impose rigor as it creates a guided, supportive environment. Do all this and you extend the net to include not only the most gifted in the front row, but also those deemed least likely to succeed.



THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATION IS TO REACH YOUTHS WHO APPEAR LEAST LIKELY TO SUCCEED AND SHAPE THEM INTO CONTRIBUTORS

We tend to doubt that this grand result is possible. The statistics are sobering: Only 70 percent of all students in public high schools graduate, and that number is far lower in troubled urban systems with large pools of poor and minority students. Of those who do graduate to comprise the country's under-graduate population, nearly half require remedial study in basic skills, with the percentage again higher in poor urban schools. And the more developmental study required, the lower the probability of success in college.

The cards are stacked but the evidence of breakthrough achievement is growing steadily. Consider the California high school spearheaded by a handful of UC-San Diego scholars who still believed in the mission of public education. They gave birth, right on their campus, to a high school that is the only public school in America that admits only the children of

low-income parents who did not graduate from college. They purposely stacked the deck, and set out to foil the dealer.

They challenged and they nurtured. Every student, from day one, was required to take several Advanced Placement (AP) courses—the elixir for college admissions officers—in order to graduate. The school founders committed to provide good teaching and the extra support necessary to ready their students for college. It's working. Despite an ironclad history of poor performance on standardized tests for low-income students, every single student in the recent graduating class passed at least one AP test.

These examples frequent the public school landscape. Higher education institutions, particularly community colleges in urban locales, are also collaborating with public school systems in aligning curriculum and awakening students to the responsibilities of college life. And underneath the academic skill-building in these projects, a different undercurrent of possibility is being infused: “Why not you? Why not you as a college graduate?”

That opening phrase is, indeed, much more than greeting card fodder. It's the required approach to strip away years of “I can't” or “I don't care” or “I'm afraid I'll fail.” Beneath these layers are intelligent, creative individuals who can succeed, representing legions of contributors that American society cannot afford to lose.

Competition in our global society is inevitable. But before the race is run, the novice is put to the test under the watchful eye of coach and mentor. Call it the intern stage for adulthood. This is the serious and necessary business of American education today, to ready the next generation—each one of them—and help them believe they cannot fail. **H**

Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón is president of Miami Dade College, the largest institution of higher education in the nation.