GPA: Number or Identity?

Tracy Akers
ON CAMPUS

GPA: Number or Identity?
BY TRACY AKERS

Forum Magazine explores the implications and importance of college GPA as students move on to job searches, graduate school applications, and beyond...
From the very beginning, one's age has been an indicator of where one is in life, what one might be experiencing, or what one still has to look forward to.

For most of us at Richmond, the numbers 19, 20, 21...they sound familiar, right?

What about 2.3? 3.5? 4.0?

We walked through those doors back to high school freshman year, knowing that, when our four years were up, we would be going to college—or maybe we wouldn't. When schoolwork became overwhelming, we let numbers begin to define us, more than they ever had before.

You need this SAT score to get into this college.
You need this GPA.
You need this many hours of community service.

We began our journey as a number among a lot of other numbers. The only way to stand out was to have the best number. But college GPA—where do we find ourselves here? We have forgotten most of those high school numbers. Maybe we show off one or two, but most are shoved in a drawer or under the bed.

"But the truth of the matter is, those countless hours spent slaving over your textbooks may not matter when it comes to the real job market."

-Artonique Nelson, USA Today

How much does college GPA matter when it comes to scoring our dream jobs, entering grad school, and/or sending resumes to employers? Will it soon be forgotten, or is it one of the final numbers we have to show for ourselves before we enter the 'real world'?

Scott Allison, a professor of psychology at UR, believes in the importance of college GPAs when it comes to a student's admission into graduate school.

"I can't speak for other fields, but in psychology, GPA does matter. A high GPA is essential for admission into graduate programs, and employers expect to see an applicant's GPA on his or her resume."

If it were not for his high undergraduate GPA, Allison wouldn't have gotten into the graduate school program of his choice. However, he mentions that students need to keep a level head—a balance between being overly obsessed about GPA and not caring at all. "Some degree of stress is natural and normal, but students with abnormally high stress should (a) seek help from CAPS, our student counseling center, (b) consider a less competitive major, and/or (c) remember that grades are important but not as important as enjoying a balanced life."

Not only does a high GPA play a pertinent role in the field of psychology, but GPA also influences the success of a student after they leave their undergraduate experience behind—no matter the major or field of study. Junior Amelia Mitrotz, a double major in leadership studies and anthropology, holds her GPA in high esteem, knowing that it is an indication of her hard work. "Keeping up my GPA is really important to me at Richmond. I think that ultimately GPA is a reflection of how well one does in school and how seriously they take their commitments. As a humanities major, I think the better that my GPA is, the more employers will see that I know how to use my skills and that I have learned how to think critically."

Mitrotz realizes that keeping a high GPA will not only benefit her in the long run when applying to graduate school programs or looking good to future employers "but it opens up a lot of opportunities on campus for entrance into honor societies. Ultimately, it comes down to [that] it looks good on a resume." In the end, a high GPA leads to many of the extracurricular activities and leadership positions on your resume. Employers will always appreciate a candidate that can excel in academics while also excelling as a team member or a leader.

Outside of the humanities, GPA can certainly make or break you in the medical or scientific world. "I'm planning on going to physical therapy school," said junior Jordan Shapiro, a biology major. "Until I go interview at the schools I'm applying to, all they really know about me is my GPA, and what is in my letters of recommendation."

"USA Today" published an article in March of 2014, informing readers about "4 reasons why your GPA won't matter once you graduate." Reporter Artonique Nelson writes, "You stayed up all night studying for finals, and even skipped that toga party to review flashcards for your philosophy class. But the truth of the matter is, those countless hours spent slaving over your textbooks may not matter when it comes to the real job market." Nelson then goes on to list and expand upon the top four reasons why GPA after graduation is practically null in void:

1. **GRADE INFLATION.** Nelson explains that "According to a recent study by the Teachers College Record, 43 percent of letter grades given are A's. So while you may think that having a 4.0 cumulative GPA puts you in the top 2 percent of all college grads, you may actually only be in the top 43 percent." It is not uncommon for college professors to award their students with higher grades because they realize it affects their students' ability to get an internship or a job after they graduate.

2. **ACCESS TO OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPTS** is limited and slows the hiring process for employers. Some employers might not ask for your official transcripts because often they are a hassle to get a hold of, or do not arrive before their deadline to hire.

3. **JOB EXPERIENCE COMES FIRST.** Employers want people who are capable of excelling at their work without having someone constantly monitoring their progress. They want someone who has previous experience in the business or the field. This can make the difference between your 2.3 and your internship at a consulting firm and your competition's 3.7 and a summer spent on the beach.

4. **YOUR NETWORK IS MOST IMPORTANT.** Knowing the right people is what gets most people their first job, or jump start into the real world. You might not have a 4.0, but you did make friends with an editor from Time Inc. at that Richmond alumni dinner last year.

Nelson does a good job of calming our anxieties about the importance of GPA, helping us realize that there are other factors that determine our success. The reality though, is that the links between GPA and our success is a constant balancing act. GPA matters when we apply to jobs or grad schools, but it is not the only thing that defines who we are.

To achieve your dreams, you need a GPA that proves that you are willing to work hard, a GPA that proves you're willing to put yourself on the line for a future that is important to you and soon arriving.

To those who think that GPA is not worth a darn thing, you might want to think again.

For those who think that your GPA will forever make or break you, maybe you should think again, too.