You Take the High Road; I’ll Take the Low Road
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I was an average high school student. My father had died when I was ten, and my mother, sister, and I didn’t have the most money in the world. We weren’t poor, but we certainly were not rich. I didn’t get the best grades, or the worst. My freshman year I took the average schedule of classes, English I, Spanish I, Typing, Algebra I, Biology I, and Physical Education. I followed that year up with my sophomore year of English II, Geometry, Physical Education, and History. It was at the end of my sophomore year that I took the detour.

The vocational department at the school worked very hard to promote their programs to me through speaking in classes, flyers, morning announcements, and mailing a brochure to my home. Some vocational programs had specific standards and even “auditions” to get into the program. They mentioned standards they had set as they presented an image of challenge, knowledge, and sacrifice for those who entered one of their programs. At the end of their promotion, they mentioned one last sacrifice. This was the hardest to swallow. They presented to us a chart depicting a road that came to a point; we had to choose one that veered to the left or one that veered to the right. There were no other side streets, just the two options. To enter any of the programs, I would have to choose the road to the right. This was the road to vocational programs and at the end of the road were jobs, preparation for the real world, life long skills, and future opportunities. At the end of the road to the left, the “college prep” road, there was more school, a longer wait for earning money, and a longer wait for entering the real world. That is how it was presented. We were also told that in choosing the vocational road, we could still take college preparatory classes.

I chose the vocational road because more school and a delay in earning money were the last two obstacles I wanted. Plus, I felt after the presentations that I could still be prepared for college by taking some college preparatory classes, more English, Math, and Science. It was after this decision that I auditioned for the broadcast arts vocational program. I met the high school English prerequisites and was accepted into the program. The curriculum taught me the ins and outs of radio and television broadcasting. My junior year, I attended regular classes in the morning for three periods and then spent the next seven periods in the Broadcast Arts class. We began learning about radio stations, mixer boards, annunciation, technical aspects of radio, and audio production. Later in the year we began learning the basics of television broadcasting. My senior year, we focused more on the television broadcasting, performing news shows each day from the school’s announcements. In this class, we spent the first eight periods of the day in the vocational program and the last two in regular classes. We made music videos, mock television commercials, interviews, and even went out of town for a week to do an actual production of a conference in Kentucky.

I couldn’t wait to get out into the real world with all of these skills and begin my job in radio or television. At the end of my senior year, we began putting a resume together that the vocational department called a career passport. This was my ticket to a job, success, wealth, and popularity. All I had to do was interview at the radio or television station of my choice, hand them the passport, and wait for my high-paying, successful career to begin. It didn’t get any better than that, or so I thought.

I figured that with this passport and all of the training I had received, I could
go anywhere I wanted to live and get a high paying job in radio or television. I decided to move to Atlantic Beach, North Carolina, right out of high school. "With my passport, why not live somewhere tropical and exciting and accept a job offer there," I thought to myself. So off I went. I applied at every television and radio station in the area. Only one returned my phone call. I went to that station for an interview and got a job, but not the wonderful high-paying job I expected. It wasn't even full time. Over time I worked very hard to get my pay raised from the minimum wage I started at, but never made more than $7 per hour before the station was sold and I was laid off. Jobless, I moved back to Ohio to try my luck closer to home. I again applied at every radio and television station in the area and again received one phone call. I interviewed and was offered another part time job, but I declined realizing that my vocational education and my passport were getting me nowhere. I worked odd jobs for about five years after that, none of which were related to radio or television broadcasting.

Finally, I realized what I needed to do — go to college. I took the placement test at Kent State University's Stark Campus. The English skills that I had continued throughout the broadcast arts vocational program helped me to get higher scores on the English portion, but I scored low in all other sections of the exam. These scores necessitated my repeating courses taken in high school as well as taking new classes I needed to be prepared for college.

Between the time I took that exam and started college, I had time to reflect on the choices I had made my sophomore year in high school. I began to wonder how I could have been so blind towards taking the road to college. I thought about my training, my classes, and the long road that followed. It took a while, but it all came to me one afternoon while I was choosing classes for my first semester of college.

While I was taking vocational education, college prep students were taking their fourth year of a foreign language. While I was taking public speaking, college prep students were taking English IV. When college prep students were in Calculus and Trigonometry, I was placed in a study hall. While I was operating a camera for commencement, college prep students crossed the stage having completed chemistry. When the college prep students went to halls they rented and country clubs after graduation for a party, I went to my grandparents' house. I was not alone. I found myself in the company of other students like me throughout my vocational education. Out of the eight other students in my Broadcast Arts class, only one student went home to a mother and father at the end of the school day; he was African American. None of us lived in the newer housing developments where the higher-class students lived.

I didn't have a chance to make it to college. If I did, it was slim. The armed guards of segregation based on social and financial class set up an impassible roadblock. "Join a vocational program," they told me. "You can still take some college preparatory classes." The key word that did not stick out then was "some." "Some" is nowhere near what is needed to give someone a fighting chance at a decent continuing education. Instead, the school day for vocational students is consumed by preparation for a job, which will never let them get to the social and financial status, that high schools don't want them to reach. Vocational programs were created to have a place to segregate lower class students from upper class students, so as not to interrupt the upper class journey to wealth and success.

High schools have a way of subconsciously separating those students they feel should go to college from the ones they feel should not. This separation takes place each time a student presents a free lunch pass. It takes place when students cannot attend field trips. It takes place when the clothing students wear is not up to socially acceptable standards. It takes place when students cannot afford to pay library fines or buy school supplies. Even more importantly, this separation happens each time a parent donates large sums of money to schools and athletic programs so as to separate themselves from the riff raff. It takes place when a student's last name doesn't match the name given to an athletic complex, library, or other school structure. For families in the upper class, a large enough donation is equivalent to educational insurance guaranteeing an education better than that of students without enough money to make it to college.

High schools separate the students who they feel should further their education from the ones who they feel should join the lower ranks of blue-collar workers. They do this based on social class, income, and family situations. It is those students who have parents in influential community roles based on financial support that are kept on the road to further education. It is those students who have a "functional family structure" based on income that is not only
encouraged to go to college, but are given the proper guidance along the way. The students who do not have a stable family structure based on financial stability are steered towards blue-collar training. Those who do not enter the vocational blue-collar trap are left on the side of the road to fend for themselves, only to get hit by a busload of students coming from "Upper-Class High." It is inevitable that in the end, the traffic cops of high school dictatorship will send students down the road that is chosen for them, no matter how much the choice seems to be left up to the lower class students. This leaves only the feeling of taking the right path in their minds, almost as to silence them forever of the great injustice that occurs before their very being.

When all is said and done, and the opportunity for clear, uninhibited reflection is possible, the light will come on. The light will come on and it will shine brightly on a sign that says to all who see it, no matter how determined upper class citizens do not want it to be seen, high school vocational programs detour lower class students from going on to college.