

Dear High-School Students,

Giving advice is a kind of cheating. It's going back to a point earlier in life and sharing what you learned about how to get through it. In effect, what we're offering are video game walkthroughs. Except the game is an open-ended RPG, so we can't tell you how the plot is going to play out. All we can give is tips and tricks on which monsters are easiest and how to recognize the caves with the treasure in them and so forth. For me, the stages after high school involved four years of college, a short career at NASA, then another short career drawing comics on the internet. I'm only 24, so I haven't gotten to any levels past that.

You've spent a dozen or so years being told your score -- being graded and measured in all sorts of ways. It's easy to make the mistake of thinking that those measurements define the shape of your life. In K-12 classes, they tell you not to misbehave or it will go on your 'permanent record', which will be sent to colleges. For the most part, there is no permanent discipline record. They tell you that your grades decide how you do in college, which decides how good a job you get. Now, in some ways, this is true. If you don't work hard in school, you're denied a huge number of interesting opportunities, and it can be very hard to make up for that. But working hard on the assignments you're handed isn't enough. There's no group of administrators who slots you into a job based on your GPA.

I got my first job at NASA because I found a flyer for an internship in a hallway at my school, one which it turned out no one else had bothered to apply for. On a trip at the end of the internship, I heard that the engineer driving the van was a young-earth creationist, so I sat up front to try to argue (politely) with him. Later, we exchanged a few emails about it, and he asked if I wanted to do some work in his robotics lab. I don't think, when he offered me the job, that he even knew what my major was, let alone my GPA, SATs, or anything like that. He just knew I was interested in the subject and had a little relevant experience. Now, I wouldn't have qualified for that first internship if my grades had been terrible. But the grades didn't give me the opportunity -- it's not your grade in an advanced class that matters, it's the people it brings into your life, the questions it gives you, the skills you pick up, the experiment you play with, the book you read, and the other random things that happen while you're trying to get through the work. Your measurements don't give you the opportunities. They just provide a backdrop to your life. The foreground, the choices and friendships and chance meetings and projects, are what build a life, and they're not something anyone will grade you on.

Oh, and don't worry if high school is rough. The coolest parts of the game are still ahead!

-- Randall Munroe

