As you may be aware, over the past couple of years here at the high school, teachers and administrators have been constructing what is known as a vision of the graduate. It's a master list of thirty-five personal and intellectual qualities students are intended to acquire during their course of studies here. And if you read the full list, it becomes clear how challenging it will be to get one-thousand teenagers to adopt and internalize all thirty-five principles and use them consistently in their lives. And I don't know how to do it. So, I'm going to set those goals aside this afternoon and instead turn to one which is more modest and utilitarian, but one which seems to me reasonably achievable and which is this: I think high school should begin the process of preparing each student for a career they can specialize-in and find meaningful. That's all. Because I think if we managed to do that, then that, in itself, would be an accomplishment worth being proud-of.

When I was in high school, there was a kind of half-hearted attempt at this, a course called "Career Skills" or something like that, taught by the soccer coach and mostly forgettable. But I do remember one day pulling a book down from the uncrowded shelf on the side of the room and flipping through the pages. It was called the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) and I remember being confused as to why this book wasn't being treated more like some kind of Bible by everyone at the high school. Here in one place were hundreds of potential careers, each with a description of job responsibilities, workplace environment, median income, and prospective job markets, all these possible futures in which a young person could imagine themself and yet nobody ever talked about it. And all these years later, that's still true and I'm still not sure why.

So my first suggestion this afternoon is to take the spirit of the Occupational Outlook Handbook and to give it more of a directive quality. Call it the 360 Careers Project. First make that list. I recommend one hundred careers drawn from common student interests, one hundred from submitted student interests, one hundred careers with the highest demand in the next decade, and one hundred for which there is clear social, civic, or national importance. That's four hundred and a ten percent redundancy takes us down to 360. Then, for each career, do the following: convene over video conference a panel of three or four individuals who represent that career and who, by consensus of their peers, are exemplary professionals.

Hit the record button and then ask:
What exactly do all day? Are all days the same or do they vary?
What do you enjoy about the work? What aspects are disagreeable?
What skills are essential for what you do? Were they difficult to learn or to master?
Is there any room for creativity or is it pretty much cut and dried?
Is there an opportunity for continuous development, of always getting better at something?
Does the work give you a sense of meaning or purpose, of contributing to something important and larger than yourself?
What advice would you give to someone just starting in the profession?
If you could go back to the beginning yourself, what would you do differently?

I think the answers to these questions give a young person some of the most important information and guidance and wisdom they could ask for. And right now, the educational system now is just providing far too little of it.

Also, each presentation should end with this question: If you had an hour or two every day in high school to meaningfully prepare for the career you have now, what would you do with that time?

The answers to that question, perhaps obviously, suggest my second proposal this afternoon: give students that time. Stop with all of the AP classes and Honors classes and fifteen clubs every weekday and three-hour sports practices and the four hours of homework and just give students time. Give them time to seek excellence in one, single pursuit which can then serve as the doorway to a career. In my mind, that would be much more valuable than students creating a veneer of excellence in dozens of subjects, cramming their heads full of knowledge just long enough to get an A and then, after the final exam, forgetting 90% of what that A is intended to represent. That's not a very good system.

So just give students time. And maybe this takes the form of a new course at the high school, called "Specialization" or "Content Focus" or whatever you like. The name shouldn't matter much. But the class does need to be supervised and structured carefully so it doesn't collapse into a glorified study hall. Advice from other schools which have made this transition could be helpful and one likely stipulation is that it can't be open to everyone. To get in, you need to apply.

And by apply, I mean to say you have to write-out the precise, personalized curriculum you plan to follow. Will it be for a semester or the full year? Will it be one block a day or two or three? What specifically each day will you do with the time? What will you learn? What will you accomplish? What will you produce? And what resources do you need? That kind of advanced planning might be too much to ask of most high school students, but if we can get ten or fifteen willing and serious, then that's a start.

And if the trial-run is successful and students see what their peers are accomplishing in it, that could encourage more participation. And then, after a few years, if it becomes clear that colleges aren't penalizing students for choosing specialization over traditional coursework, the program might continue to grow.

After-all, put yourself in the place of an admissions officer who must choose between yet another bloated application and one from a student which is essentially saying: "Look, I haven't done everything they have. Why would I? I have my own goals. They're real and I've been working hard to achieve them. I'm applying to your school because it's one of the best places for me to continue this work. I know what resources your school has and I know how I'll use them when I arrive. I can tell you right now what I hope to accomplish and hope to contribute."

I'm not an admissions officer, but if I were, that wouldn't be a difficult choice. The first student with impeccably manicured credentials could be a perfectly fine person, but they're also perfectly uninteresting, essentially indistinguishable from thousands of other GPA-seeking-missiles whose applications I will review over the years. But there's something special about the second student, something which sets them apart and makes it clear that they're a unique human being with their own interests and talents who has clearly thought carefully about why they belong at the college I represent.

I don't say this as a way of suggesting yet another scheme for students to leverage their way into a school they would otherwise be rejected from. The obsession with selective colleges is mostly misguided in the first place and if you look at the research, you can see that for yourself. To take just one example, a few years ago, Gallup conducted a [survey](#) of 30,000 college graduates to see which college experiences led to what they call workplace engagement, which they define as: people who are able to do what they're best at, who like what they do, and who have someone who cares about their development at work.

First of all, just graduating from college doesn't cut-it. For all college graduates, the number who report positive workplace engagement is a depressing thirty-nine percent. Forty-nine percent report not being engaged and twelve percent are actively disengaged. This last group has it worse than you might even think. They are – to quote Gallup – "workers who have a miserable work experience".

That may be true you say, but surely the numbers are much better for those who graduate from elite and selective colleges and universities. After all, that's why so many of us work so hard to get into those schools. Well, I have some bad news. In this review of 30,000 graduates, for those who received their degree from one of the one hundred top-ranked colleges and universities in the country, the number who report a positive workplace engagement is forty-one percent, a paltry two percentage points above the average and sitting right on the border of statistical insignificance. Which is good evidence that the belief that getting into one of those schools is some kind of golden ticket to a life of success is really a simpleminded childhood fantasy which, if you have, I recommend you grow out of. Because not only does the Gallup research clarify what aspects of college are irrelevant, it also provides guidance about which aspects are important and which should have your attention. There are a number of these factors and you may not be surprised when I report that the majority of them are tied-to specialization.

First, students were nearly twice as likely to report positive workplace engagement if, while they were in college, they undertook at least one long-term project that required a semester or more to complete. I think that's clearly an example of specialization.

Second, students were twice as likely to report positive workplace engagement if, while they were in college, they participated in an internship or job that required them to use what they had learned in the classroom. Well, in a capitalist society, you don't obtain most meaningful jobs by simply having a broad array of general knowledge. You obtain them by having specialized skills valued in a market economy.

And third, students were more than twice as likely to report positive workplace engagement if, while in college, they had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams. This may not sound like it's related to specialization, but I think there's a good chance that it is.

The average college professor may teach between fifty and a thousand or more students every year. They cannot mentor all of them. They have grants to write, graduate students to supervise, committees to chair. There will likely be dozens of undergraduates trying to get their foot in the door with these introductory positions and how can one choose between them?

Well, let's again try some roll playing. You're a professor and you have to choose between two individuals applying for the assistantship. One has excellent SAT scores, a sparkling GPA, and recently won the state championship in lacrosse. The other has mediocre grades, no extracurriculars, but has spent the last two years seriously dedicated to the subject that you care about because they care about it too. They know all about the databases you use, the equipment you use, the software you use. They can hit the ground running and help your work immediately. There isn't going to be two weeks of hand-holding and "getting them up to speed" followed by the coin flip of "hmm, maybe this isn't for me after-all". Again, I don't know who you would choose but I think it's obvious whom I would choose. I would choose the individual who I know already can do what I need them to do. I would choose the specialist.

In conclusion, I understand that your career is not going to be your entire life. And it shouldn't be. But it will engage nearly half of it and if you want that half of your life to involve work that you find meaningful, that you value, that you are good at, and that you enjoy, I recommend you unshackle your brain from the college rankings and brand-name recognition and instead search deliberately for these three opportunities: (1) a place where you will engage in long-term projects related to the issues that you care about, (2) a place where you will participate in internships or cooperatives involving the ideas you're interested-in, and (3) a place where you will work closely under a mentor who does what you want to do with the rest of your life and who does it with excellence.

And I will remind you, there is a choice you can make that paves the way for all of these: the decision early-on to specialize. I've said that word ten times this afternoon and I will say it once more. Specialize as if your life depends upon it. Because, in a way, I think it does.