

Merit Matters in Your Legal Career, but It's Not Everything

12/07/23



In an article for the American Bar Association's Student Lawyer magazine, partner Temidayo Aganga-Williams shared advice for navigating the myth of meritocracy and recognizing the role fortune plays in finding success.

We've all had advantages, disadvantages, lucky breaks, and hard knocks. It's what we do with them that counts.

As students, we're taught about the benefits of hard work. We hear that the most successful are often the smartest. We're told that achievement comes to those who deserve it—whether because of their sacrifice or skill.

In short, we often hear that we live in a meritocracy, a world where people get ahead based on their accomplishments rather than things outside their control. But that's simply not true.

At least, it's not the whole truth.

Hard Work Doesn't Equal Success

Do not get me wrong. Hard work is important, especially as a lawyer. Being a practicing lawyer is a privilege that gives you as much as you give it. However, professional success doesn't directly correlate with ability or effort. It's often more complicated than that, and learning that reality and how to navigate it will only help you prepare for the highs and lows that await all of us in our careers.

This sentiment is not all that surprising. There are success stories we know aren't directly connected to merit—a job obtained through a familial connection, for example, or the path that an exorbitantly expensive grade school can place a student on for life. Even for the student with the high SAT score, there were often pricey SAT prep courses, private admissions counselors, and private dance and music lessons to bolster a resume.

Most of us have also witnessed someone who seems to fail up or catch every lucky break. We've also seen more nefarious climbs to the top, of which there's perhaps no better example than the so-called Varsity Blues scandal, where lies and bribes opened the doors to some of the nation's top universities.

Finally, many of us have also felt overlooked for opportunities we prepared for and earnestly believed we deserved.

3 Helpful Takeaways about Merit

In my own career, I've seen many of these factors at play. Importantly, as people advance, each success becomes part of a narrative of meritocracy—"Here's how I worked hard," "Here's how I outperformed my adversaries," "Here's how my accomplishments are my own doing."

But again, this isn't my whole truth. My truth is as complicated as everyone else's truth. I've sacrificed for my career, but I've also caught lucky breaks. I've been both diligent and fortunate. There was hard work, and there were helping hands.

Here's what I suggest you take away from the idea that we don't live in meritocracy.

Embrace the Idea That We Don't Live in a Meritocracy

First, embrace it. This lesson isn't meant to suggest you're not worthy of your accomplishments but instead to encourage you to recognize that you can control only what you can and that many blessings and burdens were decided for us and not by us. You work hard with all your skills, and the rest will be what it will be. I find that not limiting but instead freeing.

Increase Your Generosity and Grace to Yourself and Others

Second, let your acknowledgment of the role of fortune in both successes and failures increase your generosity and grace to both you and others. Meritocracy is the most self-aggrandizing of principles. It turns every win into personal virtue and worth. But it's essential to know that life may give you many victories that could have easily gone the other way. Remember this when you look upon those who didn't catch the same breaks.

Give Back to Those Who Come after You

Lastly, let it guide your moral compass as a lawyer. The luckier I've felt in my career, the more I've felt the duty to give back. For everything you get, the more you can give to those who come after you, whether mentoring younger lawyers or law students or using your legal skills for the public interest.

Because we don't live in a meritocracy, you're more empowered than ever to change the world around you. We all got to where we are because of others.

©2023 by the American Bar Association. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved. This information or any portion thereof may not be copied or disseminated in any form or by any means or stored in an electronic database or retrieval system without the express written consent of the American Bar Association.

Attorney

- Temidayo Aganga-Williams