

by Greg McCandless

# A Letter of Apology Nearly 50 Years in the Making: How We've Failed to Solve the Cultural Bind of the American Male

Response to “The Cultural Bind of the American Male” on page 12

Dear Mr. Chenoweth,  
Hello. My name is Greg McCandless and you don't know me. Nevertheless, I owe you an apology. In fact, not just I but we owe you an apology. We are your 21st Century counterparts. Some of us should be very familiar to you—the overworked dean of admission, the harried and underpaid high school counselor, the emphatically optimistic green admission counselor. Others of us will seem quiet foreign. The entrepreneurial independent counselor, the dogged community-based organization executive director and the seemingly ever-present marketing consultant. We owe you an apology because we have failed you. More importantly, we have failed your boys.

They have asked that I write to you because I spend a lot of time talking about under-achieving boys as you did. I call them my “Holden Caulfields,” a literary reference that should not be lost on you. In my previous life, I worked for a small science and engineering school and this is where I encountered my first cohort of Holdens. The funny, peculiar, brilliant, and disorganized boys who made you want to soak up every word of their application—except for that pesky transcript. The ones who preferred cracking the iPhone code (don't ask) to cracking books and actually studying for tomorrow's test, those were my boys. I fought for them in committee, just as you fought for yours all those years ago.

And now I try and fight for them too as a high school counselor. Yet I sit and stare at the huge pile of well-thought out, smart and insightful college essays my female students have written and compare it against the cache of emails (again, don't ask) waiting to be sent to Johnny, Jimmy and Bill reminding



them for the umpteenth time that they really should schedule a meeting with me sometime soon. I wonder if I'm fighting a losing battle. Believe me, the boys will get their essays done, and they'll be just as wondrous and rewarding as their female counterparts, but the effort to get them there will be mighty. For our failure is not for lack of fighting. Everyday I watch my colleagues fight for the boys. We're really good at fighting; we just aren't so good at fighting back. Or maybe it is that we don't know how.

You see, Mr. Chenoweth, not a whole lot has changed in terms of how we educate boys since you were thinking about these issues more than 40 years ago. You insightfully point out that, “We are creatures of convention, but it is time for unconventional thinking,” and sadly, I still make the same plea. Ask a ninth-grade girl how the first dance of the school year went and she will astutely recount the most minor of details, while still able to identify social nuances without even knowing it. Ask the same question of one of my freshman boy advisees and he might not even remember girls were there, but sure is disappointed that they don't serve food like

they used to at the middle school dances. Then 36 months later, we expect the tortoise and the hare to have caught up to one another in the Great Maturity Race, as we will judge them equally in the college admission game. It is in these times that I am most reminded that physical age is just a number, but emotional age is so much more complex.

We're so bad at fighting back against this, that we've actually made it worse. We have accelerated a college search and application process that has not removed the margin for error; it has quite simply blown it off the map. As some colleges now make up half their class with early applicants, fast apps actually celebrate the absence of the personal statement, and as admission deadlines seem to creep earlier and earlier into the fall months, we sacrifice the gift of time. Boys need time. And don't even ask how we serve our underrepresented students where, nearly 50 years beyond the civil rights movement we are still a nation where less than half of our African-American boys graduate from high school. We are well-intentioned, but oftentimes ill-equipped. It is going to take real bravery on the part of the gatekeepers and decision-makers in our profession to stand up and say, “Enough is enough, this is not working!” We all want it, we just haven't figured out how to do it.

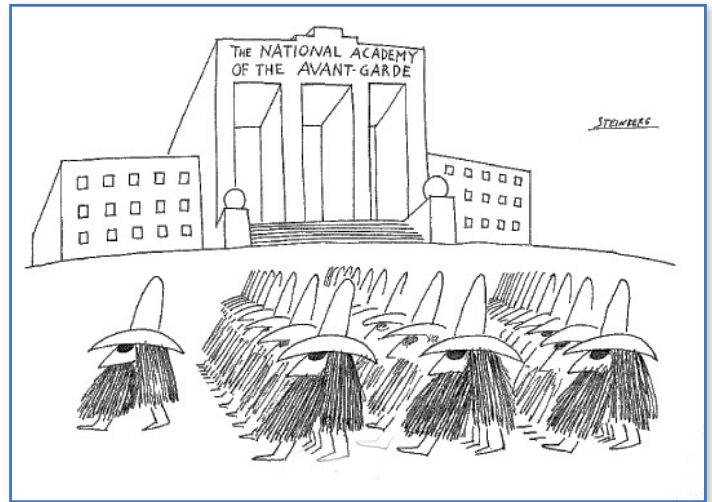
While I offer my sincerest apologies for this somewhat downbeat letter, I would like to leave you with some words of hope as well. While we might not have fixed the problems you so masterfully illuminated, we are still talking about them and the issue does not go ignored. More and more I find students exploring the idea of a gap-year program and/or college deferment as they decide to venture out into the world

and grow up a little more before embarking on their postsecondary educational years. Even those Holden Caulfields who don't make those choices eventually grow up and find their own successes in this world. Some of them find themselves in education. Some of them eventually end up writing letters of apology such as these. The fight will go on, Mr. Chenoweth. I promise you that.

Best, Greg McCandless



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