

### Student Example 3

#### Competition vs. Competence

When it comes to the topic of competition, most of us will readily agree that between sport tournaments, academic rivalry, and extracurricular activities, competition has become an increasingly prevalent part of our education system. Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on the question of what role competition should play in our education system. Whereas some, such as Amy Chua, are convinced that competition prepares students for the real world and encourages them to push themselves to their full potential, others, such as Charles Murray, maintain that competition has gotten out of hand and has led to students wasting their time on seemingly meaningless objectives in order to remain competitive. Finding the right fit for competition is imperative not only for students and educators, who have a direct stake in the way competition affects students' learning, but also for American citizens, who must live with the societal effects of the next generation's upbringing. To better understand this debate, we will take a closer look at Chua's and Murray's arguments.

In "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom," Amy Chua says that, "The Chinese believe that the best way to protect their children is by preparing them for the future, letting them see what they're capable of, and arming them with the skills, work habits, and inner confidence that no one can ever take away." In other words, Chua believes that children should be raised with "strict" discipline. To accomplish this aim, Chua proposes a **competitive** mentality toward academics, music, and extracurricular activities. For example, Chua expects her children to **compete** for "the best grades" and for medals, which "must be gold." Chua adds that this **competitive** attitude stems from her mother's saying, "Be modest, be humble, be simple." Essentially, Chua reasons that one must always remain **competitive** enough to "come in first" in order to have something to be humble about. Overall, Chua uses her children's success as a result of this **competitive** upbringing to argue that the results of **competition** are "hard to quarrel with."

Chua seems to have good intentions when she says that children need to be raised and educated in a competitive environment in order to be prepared for an increasingly competitive world. After all, it's difficult to dispute the accomplishments of Chua's children, such as Sophia, a Suzuki violinist "child prodigy." However, in recounting those achievements, Chua relies on an either/or choice logical fallacy. By constantly contrasting Asian and Western parenting, Chua makes the reader feel as if they must choose between the Asian "tiger mom" approach that wins "gold," or the lax Western approach that allows families to "fall." In reality though, there must be a middle line, because competition ultimately means someone has to lose. Therefore, it's not possible to always "win gold." Chua's argument glosses over this fact, and its negative consequences. This all or nothing mentality disheartens children when they lose. For example, when I lost the final round of my 7<sup>th</sup> grade solo contest after months of stress and hard work, I lost confidence in my musical abilities and did something I now regret. I quit band. Looking back, I realize I wasn't content making the final round merely because I didn't "win gold." Nevertheless, my band experience does show the side of Chua's argument that is merited- that competition motivates students. I did not realize it then, but the solo contest truly motivated me to improve. I went from a mediocre player to one

who caught the judges' attention enough to be called back for the final round. I doubt I'd have been able to do that without the stimulus of competition.

In "Should the Obama Generation Drop Out?" Charles Murray argues that instead of **competing** to get into a typical "residential college," students should instead focus on "vocational training" and "certification tests." In Murray's view, this would allow "young people...to get what they want from post-secondary education without having ... to comply with the rituals for getting a bachelor's degree." Murray's argument is essentially that the majority of students **compete** to get into colleges just to remain competitive and receive unnecessary "vocational training." Murray suggests that if employers didn't stress **competition** as much as competence, it would decrease the "halo effect" of four year college degrees, and would allow only students "drawn toward academics" to attend. In other words, Murray believes that **competition** has made bachelor's degrees a "dime a dozen," and consequently, the achievement has lost much of its merit. To combat this problem, Murray hopes to undermine the notion that one needs a bachelor's degree to be competent at a job. To expand his argument, Murray compares the **competition** of college curriculums to "athletic or musical talent": something that students "at every level" should explore, but that few will have the "intellectual ability" to truly **compete** at.

The main flaw in Murray's argument is that he encourages competence over competition. If, as Murray suggests, no competition occurs, and students are instead educated in vocational schools to qualify for one job, innovation will be harder to come by. Humans naturally need external stimulants to motivate themselves, and if they are advised just to be competent, they won't challenge themselves. Additionally, Murray's narrow minded approach to education means students won't be well rounded enough to switch careers as they hone in on their interests, or adjust to an ever-changing economy. On the other hand, the part of Murray's competence over competition argument that does have value is the fact that it would reduce the "halo effect" of competition. Competition in our education system has gotten to the point where it is no longer enough to simply be average. Students are now forced to become overachievers, participating in multiple varsity sports, loads of AP classes, and numerous extracurricular activities. The more students pursue this path, the worse the "halo effect" becomes. As a student at a competitive high school, I've noticed this first hand. My sophomore year, I got a 5 on the AP European history exam, a notoriously difficult exam. This seemingly superior accomplishment didn't feel that impressive though, because the majority of my class also received 5s. It was if all my hard work wasn't recognized. Hence, encouraging less competition seems like an effective way to reduce the "halo effect" of competition.

Having now seen both the flaws and merits to Chua's and Murray's arguments, how do we find the right place for competition in our education system? How do we keep the innovation and determination that competition fosters while avoiding the discouragement, stress, and "halo effect" that comes with too much?

I believe the answer is increased competition. Humans rely on competition to progress, so we may as well embrace it. Yet, our increasingly competitive society harbors this unrealistic idea that children can be protected. The result, Chua claims, is that parents "try to reassure their children about how good they are notwithstanding a mediocre performance." Children then grow accustomed to having their talent, or lack thereof, awarded, and when the inevitable reality is thrust upon them, it's a huge astonishment. I

experienced this with my first high school English paper. When I spotted that big fat B on my paper, I was not prepared to deal with the shock that I wasn't as talented as my middle school teachers made me feel.

Of course, many will probably disagree with my assertion that it's a good idea to increase competition. Skeptics will perhaps argue that added competition will increase stress levels, dwindle confidence, and discourage students from pursuing their passions. I understand this, and that is why, unlike Chua, I believe competition must be built up slowly so that young students are not overwhelmed with the stresses of competition. Kindergarteners can still be treated with a protective mentality, but 5<sup>th</sup> graders need to understand that something in particular must be done to earn merits. Eight graders should be prepared to compete in high stakes competitions.

To maintain confidence and interests, I believe that earning a "gold medal" shouldn't be viewed as the only option. Not everyone is gifted at everything, and students must learn to accept that. Instead, students should be taught that they will turn out all right if they occasionally follow a path that won't lead to a "gold medal." This understanding will consequently decrease the "halo effect" of too much competition. To apply this philosophy to our education system, we must make fewer distinctions between those that win competitions and those that don't. I am not suggesting that we lower the prestige of winners. I am simply saying that there should be more options. This way, competent students won't feel as if they are lesser for not being competitive. For example, if a student is inadequate at volleyball, but loves it, they should be encouraged to play on a less competitive intramural team. Or if a "regular" student wants to challenge him or herself, they should be given some opportunities in the form of a challenging assignment that could possibly merit a small distinction. Taken as a whole, competition's place in the education system is one of gradual increase where competence isn't shaming.

#### Works Cited

- Chua, Amy. *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom*. New York: Penguin, 2011. Print.
- Murray, Charles. "OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS | TRANSITIONS; Should the Obama Generation Drop Out?" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 28 Dec. 2008. Web. 12 Feb. 2013.