

## **An Age of Fear: Progress and Innovation**

*Written by Abdelaziz Bahnasy, Phillips Academy Andover Editor  
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I want to preface this article by saying three things:

1. To the extent of my knowledge, Phillips Academy does not directly censor the student body's voice. In fact, Andover's head of school John Palfrey has spoken frequently and pressingly about the need for a diversity of voice in any intellectual space. Students are free to meet with faculty members to talk about perceived problems, and the school has a student-run newspaper that allows for the expression of ideas to one degree or another.

2. An acknowledgement of voice is tricky when the subject is not quantifiable or necessarily tangible.

3. I am working toward the potential growth of every student on campus, and my statements about entire groups of students or about certain practices on campus should be taken as such and not as individual-based comments. I perceive an extraordinary amount of beauty in a human being's inherent drive to learn, and I want this beauty to spread throughout our campus. Today is the day to start my own implementation of this mission.

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I want nothing more of Andover than to allow me to take charge of my own experience. It has fostered within me the tools to do so, but I must take the first step forward. And other students must do the same.

When I first arrived on Andover's campus several years ago, I felt like a child seeing the real world for the first time. The green fields and lawns were enormous—and the grass was perfect, the castle-esque buildings reminded me of scenes I had witnessed in films and dreams, and the people were jumping up and down in their effort to welcome me to my new home. After having spent thirteen years in one place and overcoming the pressure of going somewhere else, I was happy.

Three years have passed since that day, and the excitement of Andover has not left my grasp. There is a certain beauty in sharing my cinematic alma mater with figures like Samuel Morse, the Bushes, royalty, and Julia Álvarez, and I have built friendships with people from all over the world—or youth from every quarter, as we like to say. I have overcome intellectual and personal obstacles I did not recognize previously, I have learned to develop my own way of thinking and interaction with other people, and I have grown as a person.

And although I have evolved completely as a thinker thanks to Andover's nurturing environment, I only recently have begun to view myself as an integral part of Andover. Only recently have I begun to think I can change the status quo or improve campus life for other students. A year and a half ago, I considered myself lucky to be at Andover. I viewed myself as one normal student passing through this establishment. I failed to realize Andover is not an institution for the sake of being an institution; rather, Andover is an institution made for the students. And that objective calls for my own input, as well as for the input of all of my peers. I began to think: other students must have left some sort of mark on campus. There is no way Andover has not changed at all over the past two-and-a-half centuries. I began to think about all the leaders who have come and gone; I thought about all the young minds that developed with a similar story to my own. And yet, they all took advantage of Andover's teaching and applied it to their own lives. I realized something after observing this very stark contrast to my own first year-and-a-half on campus: I had not yet made Andover mine.

On the surface, this very simple claim seems to be negligible—or perhaps even untrue. After all, students claim pride in their school on a seemingly daily basis with bundles of apparel as well as conversations about “Andover” that result in no action or progress. However, in these scenarios, Andover remains big and all-encompassing. It maintains its legacy and seems to require its residents to consider its own terms prior to any engagement in conversation. In reality, it can feel extremely difficult to break out of a centuries-old tradition and incite enough creativity and courage to create change. And yet, students in the past have done so. Perhaps this feat is a result of a former confidence built into the acceptance letter sent to students in March. Perhaps this feat is a result of an entirely different way of life for students without access to the world outside of Andover. Perhaps, even, this feat exists as a result of a select group of intellectuals who passed through Andover at just the right time. Regardless of the causation, however, students overcame Andover's rigidity and mold and created their own ways of life. Students today can do the same.

In order to effect any sort of change, students must break Andover down into smaller aspects of life—often times pertaining to mental needs, emotional needs, and physical needs. Several students on campus already have begun to fulfill their roles as harbingers of change, the fact of which I cannot deny, including students who have sparked a need to talk about mental health, students who have called for the introduction of such a learning facility as the Makerspace, Muslim students who have called for their own fair treatment when it comes to prayer space and holiday scheduling, and the dozens of other students who appeal for huge sums of money from the Abbot Academy Association in the form of Abbot Grants. However, I argue for two alternative ways of thinking (which do not directly contrast this previous statement): (1) students should form practical, pragmatic plans to resolve an issue or to implement an idea and talk to both other students as well as the administration when presenting it; and (2) students should aim to create as large an impact on other students' learning and growth as possible when pursuing change. While certain student groups have created these practical, pragmatic plans (including the aforementioned group of Muslim students as well as several students who have worked on the creation of the Makerspace), most other students on campus lay low and follow the routine: they wake up, they go to classes, they do a sport, and they go to a club meeting or two. Once these students reach the board of a given club, they continue to fill the mold by hosting weekly

meetings with slightly different topic choices, without ever considering or imagining a bigger picture.

Now while the objective of a given club may not necessarily be to affect as many students as possible, it is a shame to think the majority of clubs at Andover (which used to be a means of growth and application in and of themselves) no longer serve a purpose but as fodder to get through the day and ultimately into a college. This system is problematic. Not only should most clubs have multi-dimensional missions (or a mission in the first place), but they should exist to encourage learning through challenge (both on the board's end (in the form of putting together and presenting ideas) as well as on the members' end (in the form of trying to understand new, real material)). And this problem exists only for a portion of the student body that participates in clubs! The remaining students prioritize their school work or athletic commitments, the practice of which often makes sense for a student who has grown up valuing study time over other forms of growth, but they do not attempt to enact change or spark progress at such a seemingly perfect school. It provides enough of a high-quality traditional form of education for them to do what they want to do, so the idea of looking for problems does not even come to mind. In fact, I imagine these particular students would think seekers of change are taking for granted everything Andover has to offer. Although I wholeheartedly disagree with this idea, I have suffered from this perspective in the past, and it continues to pop up sporadically when I question why I do what I do. After all, Andover often times seems perfect: a high school with a three-story dining hall and vending machines placed conveniently around every corner (in addition to the active minds and hearts of the students and faculty members, of course). It seems almost annoying to try to look for something to change. But I want to fight against this idea because of the concept I brought up previously: Andover belongs to its students. Students are not here to accept historical standards; rather, they are here to improve those standards in whatever way possible. While many people may not think so, this purpose is our duty as part of Andover's legacy. The administration says it all the time: students deserve to speak their mind. Students have a voice. Students should not tailor their needs based on the school's current resources and status; rather, students should aim to apply their mentality of wanting to make the world a better place to Andover itself. Improvement does not come about by accepting the status quo, and I cannot be satisfied until every student considers his or her goal and desired impact on the world before leaving Andover.

I would be happy if other students were willing to view student-sparked progress as an application of learning for one reason: we as students might not have a chance to apply our learning or growth to real life until later on. Andover serves as the perfect platform for experimentation by a young mind and significant change and impact created by a single student. While Andover is full of political conversation every few months, and while political conversation and debate do to an extent test the parameters of one's way of thought, the necessary application of learning to produce change does not always fall into place or see its light of day. I am not necessarily saying a student should create a problem in an effort to solve it, but I am calling for the onset and generation of creativity.

Difficulty comes to exist, however, when the frame of thought for progress is limited by rigid parameters. These parameters may not be intentional; rather, they are set in stone as a result of

the prioritization of ideas and funds by the administration and thereby the growing student body. While Andover's administration in particular does do a good job of working toward positive mobility when it comes to such topics as student health (with the exception of the occasional response to students who struggle with mental health issues, though the school is working on it) and larger-picture benefits like new facilities, so much more potential progress exists in the minds of students who have not yet inherited these priorities. What, then, can the administration do to free itself of its perhaps unintentional restriction on students? A few things include: (1) vocalize any change in policy with a full explanation of the change — again something Andover has worked on recently; (2) vocalize any potential change in policy with reasoning and allow students to contribute to the reasoning; (3) invite students (beyond the small student council) to participate in conversation with the faculty at least twice a month; and (4) reward the creation of ideas for change reasoned by students. Andover has tampered with each of the aforementioned suggestions to a very small degree and without consistency. Every isolated case of a school-wide e-mail or a student congress or a Hackathon does its job well, but the results seem never to come to practical and visible fruition. Andover's day-by-day culture does not nurture a student's voice in the realm of change and progress, and so the administration must work on creating an environment that prioritizes and empowers the ideas of every individual student with as much attention as possible.

To students, I urge you to try to think outside of Andover's established parameters for ideas. I urge you to consider the kind of mark you want to leave on the world. While the political sphere of conversation and action should not by any means be the only body in which students can operate, I urge you to resolve problems like the overshadowing of certain political beliefs by hosting campus-wide debates and forums that do more than simply inform people of the current state of affairs within our nation (and especially within our "bubble"). I urge you to resolve issues like the tangible, negative manifestation of prejudice of all sorts by hosting a similar debate to the one mentioned above and being intellectually and emotionally stable and curious enough — while maintaining enough of an open mind to switch sides entirely — to acknowledge somebody else's argument and pry into that person's reasoning before explaining your own side of the argument. And then I urge you to create a plan the administration can use to fix the problem. I urge you to create a strategy that will tackle hunger in nearby areas, and I urge you to use Andover's name to allow you to do as much as you can outside of Andover. I urge you to apply your skills to the crisis in Syria by organizing fundraisers and writing petitions, using Andover's name to meet with and talk to people who will allow you to create change. At the same time, I urge you to think outside of politics and global affairs. I urge you to look at what makes people happy and what makes people sad, and then I urge you to develop something to spark those emotions. I urge you to read stories of heroes of the past and decide for yourself to out-do those heroes. I urge you to do what you want to do and break out of this mold -- a mold somebody created for somebody else -- and write music or create art that will convey your message. I urge you to consider the needs of the students and faculty members around you, and I urge you to speak up if you want to try something new. I urge you to be the epitome of learning and growth, and I urge you to apply that learning and growth as soon as you can.

To everybody else, I urge you never to forget the power of intentional creativity as a force combined with pragmatic thinking. Recognize and acknowledge your seemingly inherent

parameters, and try as hard as you can to break out of them. Although the journey may be difficult, the world yearns for your effort, and you are not far from the start of this mission and thereby success.

Of course, a struggle to push outside of this “box” is the key to leaving any sort of mark; otherwise, the world already would be in its most perfect condition. And while Andover in its current state is comfortable for a lot of people, I urge you to consider the potential improvement of life for other students with change. Perhaps even small and seemingly indirect changes such as a change in schedule, a change in structure during the weekends, or a change in club meetings could completely alter a student’s lifestyle and happiness on campus. At the end of the day, sheer student-run innovation of any sort can allow the school to take a step forward.

I recall Immanuel Kant’s writing on originality as a form of genius when I consider our needs as the world’s next generation of leaders and pioneers, and I feel a need to urge and encourage such originality in a situation in which many students already have accepted Andover as perfect and in need of maintenance rather than progress. Millions of people throughout history accepted the world as perfect until a few individual voices thought the world could be just a little bit better with a slight change. An accumulation of this slight change has brought us to where we are today. If we want to change the world, a need for effort and drive starts now. This message is a call for change in any sort of way, as long as the facilitation of such change comes from the students. After all, students are not at school to fulfill a mold; rather, a school exists to fulfill the student’s needs. Now is the time to express those needs as we embark on a journey for peace, for progress, and for prosperity.