

Antonella Blanco, WV – 2017

The variety of definitions that categorize success allows us to thrive in an assortment of occupations. If there was a sole pathway to success, we wouldn't have the diversity of our workforce, a global market, and personal endeavors as people. However, a career in public policy, or public service requires a specific set of personal characteristics that are found in all which make the decision to serve - regardless of how personalities may differ from servant to servant.

Before becoming a psychology professor, Angela Duckworth worked as a secondary school instructor, where she was able to closely examine the qualities that sifted successful students from lesser-achieving students. The fact is: students who pushed themselves did better, and students who didn't, performed worse. After becoming an associate professor at Penn, she continued to research this idea. She coined the term "grit," or sticking with things over the very long term until you master them. She says the gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. The breakdown of grit is described as the necessary quality to be successful in the challenging and many times destructive world of public policy. Grit is almost required in order to stand firmly atop of our values, and to push our voice throughout the void we are at many times lost in. I hold the study of grit close to my heart, as it germinated from my beloved alma mater -- the United States Military Academy at West Point. Grit is a mastery of intelligence distribution - as, for a very long time, intelligence was determined to be the key to success, but leaves for many unexplained circumstances (i.e. a smart student who doesn't apply themselves). Grit is a proficiency in problem-solving, stress management, and talent application. Grit isn't necessarily a substitute for discipline or intelligence - both very important qualities to be successful in the world of public service and public policy - rather, it's the ability to critically think at an advanced level.

Once entering the Mayflower Grand Ballroom on the first day of Washington Week, one can immediately note the sudden shift in the atmosphere; a change of gears that would inspire even broken machinery. The students in the room are brilliant, vibrant, talkative, excited, and – almost – annoyingly in-your-face. They are delegates for the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) and the future of the world. The hope that every delegate carries in their aura is what makes the Senate Youth Program such an amazing experience, not only for the delegates, but all who witness the grace of their experience.

During Washington Week, I learned that USSYP delegates always have a point to prove and a destination to their thoughts. Nothing that escapes their lips is meaningless or unfounded. Even when they listen to extraordinary speakers like Senator Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, and Israeli Ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer, their skills are honed and polished. The students exemplify what it means to be gritty. They are broken down, and with the same bricks that are thrown at them they build a fortress; towering cities over those too small to look past their looks, their background, or their labels. The delegates I had the privilege of sharing a week with in our nation's capital rejuvenated me, and once more gave me a new perspective of my generation. They listened to speakers of their opposition – my favorite being Cory Booker's powerful "on-the-run" speech – that resonated with all, even though not everyone aligned fundamentally with him. I primarily enjoyed watching the delegates' expressions with every speaker's unique delivery – Senator Wicker's use of props and Chief Justice Roberts' quiet wisdom – and as an honorable mention, the delegates' grace and humor when handling the very extended round of applause in wait for Secretary Tillerson.

I did not become too taken away by the experiences, however – even though they were quite incredible – because I wanted to better know those around me. I would not get a chance to drink tea with the president, or have a long conversation with the vice chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but I could learn and absorb knowledge from the people experiencing this amazing week with me. My fellow delegates exemplify what it means to make a difference. They are not only smart and innovative, but they are tough, resilient, dedicated, and willing. In this world, it is not enough to be smart in order to make a difference. Smart, talented, and fit are merely what I like to call "resume adjectives." These are terms that look fantastic on paper. Doctor Duckworth's study on USMA determined that a new cadet's grit was the best predictor of success during Beast Barracks -- the cadet version of Army Basic Training. Grit matters more than intelligence, leadership capability, or physical fitness. West Point is recognized and honored on a worldly stance for producing exceptional human beings in the three aspects of the existential triangle - Mind, Body, and Spirit - that are also prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for 318 million of their closest friends and family. The last part doesn't require you to be smart. It requires you to be gritty. Just like making a difference doesn't require you to be smart, funny, pretty, or fit, or any of those adjectives. It requires you to be so much more: caring, dedicated, willing, resilient, perseverant, and generous. It requires the grit found in every delegate, Military Mentor, Hearst Foundations staff member, and Hearst family member. My fellow delegates – the people I am so honored to call friends – exemplify grit, and they exemplify what it means to serve others without reservation and without hesitation; and they exemplify everything about this country that I am prepared to sacrifice for, and everything that I am mighty proud to make the ultimate sacrifice for. I can assure myself and those around me of that promise; because of my fellow delegates, any sacrifice or effort made to help push them along is worth it; because they are beyond grit.