As an ethics professor my advice to parents always begins with this remarkable fable:

Imagine a racing greyhound named Cash. One warm summer evening, Cash sits outside on the front porch and discusses the future with his owner. The duo is world-famous and financially stable from the payouts of many big races. Between memories, Cash drops a bombshell and says, “I have made a decision. I have decided that I cannot race anymore. My career is finished!”

His startled owner queries, “I must not have heard you correctly Cash, are you too old to race?” “No,” Cash replies, “I still have some race left in me.” “Well, do I mistreat you?” asks the owner. “No, no, you’ve always treated me wonderfully,” answers Cash. “Then why?” wonders the owner – still in shock – “Why would you give up on our chance to be rich and famous . . .”

Cash cuts her off in mid sentence and makes a simple, yet profound statement: “After running and running and running all of these years, I finally realized that the rabbits I’ve been chasing all my life are fake and I don’t want to race anymore.”

We all chase fake rabbits in one form or another. We desire popularity and respect from our peers and we strive to possess the same amenities as our neighbors. We tell white lies to avoid telling hard truths and fake it to appear more intelligent, more attractive and more accomplished than we really are. Worst of all, we readily blame others and avoid taking responsibility for our mistakes in order to save face.

We are all human and conditioned from childhood to chase worldly success in the form of excessive wealth, popularity and recognition. Unfortunately, these “successes” rarely create the true and sustainable happiness we have always desired and we sometimes wonder where we steered off course. The great thing about life, however, is that the road to lasting, authentic success contains many on-ramps. Although we have chased fake rabbits in the past, we can move towards authentic success in a split second. The only thing missing is the motivation.

At this point, you are likely asking, “Well, chasing authentic success sounds like a good idea, but what exactly are the real rabbits I should focus on?” To me, real rabbits are the things that really matter in life such as (1) a strong moral character, (2) solid personal relationships and (3) a sense of contentment as you wake up each morning. Once we choose to chase after these things, we strive to tell the truth, desire to make better decisions and learn to take personal responsibility for our mistakes. More importantly, we experience the lasting benefits that come with authentic success. This article encourages you to walk down this path with the student in your life throughout the entire college experience. The following section discusses making excellent decisions as one of the many ways your family can begin to chase real rabbits, right now!

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1 Corey Ciocchetti is an Assistant Professor of Business Ethics & Legal Studies at the Daniels College of Business. He is also the author of Real Rabbits: Chasing An Authentic Life (2007). Please visit Corey’s website at www.coreyspeaks.com and feel free to contact him with any questions or comments and to purchase his book at cciocche@du.edu.
CHASE REAL RABBITS BY MAKING EXCELLENT DECISIONS

Bad decisions affect each of our lives regardless of age. Problematically, when a decision backfires, we pout about making a mistake and doubt our future abilities; we take two steps back for every step we move forward. Even worse, the bad decisions we all make wreak havoc in our lives and create stress that damages our bodies and minds. One way to counteract habitual bad decision-making is to make excellent decisions as often as possible.

Students, in particular, need to make better decisions and make them more consistently. This is especially true when it comes to issues that young people struggle with most often – time management, priorities and perspective. Bad decisions in these areas do not happen in isolation. There are actually many causes lurking in the background such as: (1) lack of forethought, (2) inability to analyze consequences, (3) fleeting time, (4) fear of failure and (5) peer pressure. Each of these represents a hurdle standing guard in front of the primary goal – an excellent decision.

At the college level, individual students can advance far ahead of the pack by consistently making excellent decisions in both the academic and social spheres. Excellent decisions in the academic arena include going to class – every class, every quarter – and avoiding schedules filled with “easy” courses. This process gets a bit tougher when students decide how to prepare for each class. The secret here is to study to retain information over the long haul and walk away from each course with toolbox accessible later in life. To make this happen, students should actually think about the concepts involved in each subject and read assigned materials carefully instead of skimming chapters and memorizing facts for a test. Although these types of decisions may seem like no-brainers from afar, seemingly innocuous pressures such as friends heading to the mountains on a Thursday night or the avoidance of a studious image, hover like a dark cloud above undergraduates. In the end, however, students who consistently make excellent academic decisions find themselves mentally prepared to contribute to a society that desperately needs their talents.

On the social front, things get a bit more complicated. I believe that an important part of the college experience occurs when students discover the middle ground between excessive socializing and excessive studying. Unfortunately, the vast majority of undergraduates find themselves at either end of the spectrum and nowhere near the middle. Excellent decision makers, however, learn to live a balanced life and to make decisions that help create this balance.

An example of bad decisions at the social end of the spectrum is telling. Over the past three years, I have witnessed many students who choose to party on multiple nights per week. It comes as no surprise that these same students subsequently run out of time for more important activities such as classes, team meetings and student groups. For some reason, students fail to realize that the amount of time in each day remains fixed even as they continue to add more to their plates. The result of this excessive socializing – i.e., a bad decision – causes otherwise intelligent students to neglect their sleep, health and homework and put forth lackluster efforts in their classes. This behavior is a perfect recipe for a poor grade and, more importantly, causes students to take little substantive knowledge away from important classes. This type of behavior is how bad social decisions lead directly to bad academic decisions. Students quickly find themselves caught in a difficult situation having to catch up on assignments and on rest while also neglecting friends who pressure them to socialize as usual.

My advice to escape this vicious circle is to ponder Cash’s story with the students in your lives and encourage them to make excellent decisions. The reason that parents should be involved in this process is
that young people look up to and follow the examples set by their parents. This is true regardless of whether such decisions are excellent, good, bad or even outrageous. With this in mind and as a role model, it is not a bad idea to strive and make each of your decisions excellent as well. Here are a few decision-making tools to think about before making your next important decision:

1. **SLOW THINGS DOWN** – We tend to make decisions with great haste. I understand that it is a hustle-bustle, instant messaging world out there. Unfortunately, a rush to judgment usually leads to a bad decision. A better idea is to follow the example of great athletes who excel when they are able to slow things down before swinging at a pitch or shooting a basketball. You too should slow things down and see the entire picture more clearly before you make any important decision;

2. **GATHER SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE ABOUT POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE DECISION** – Who wants to think about consequences when it is so much easier and less mind-numbing to cross our fingers and wing it? It turns out, however, that understanding what might happen after we make choices is important in making excellent decisions. Therefore, the mental energy required to think about and analyze the consequences of each important decision is well worth the effort;

3. **AVOID MAKING DECISIONS STEMMING FROM ANGER** – It is ironic that we never feel good in the long-run about the decisions we make out of anger or spite even though these same decisions seem appropriate as we make them. Instead of making a decision in an aggravated state, set aside some quiet, alone time to think and then supplement your thought process later with advice from a parent or other mentor;

4. **CONSULT YOUR MORAL COMPASS BEFORE DECIDING** – This is the most important decision-making tool of all. Your moral compass is your internal GPS – your guide to living a life filled with character. Your moral compass will point you in the right direction and, if you cannot hear it, make sure to turn off the mute button; and

5. **TAKE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR MISTAKES** – Instead of blaming others for a bad decision, own it, learn from it and then get up, shrug it off and move forward.

At the end of the day, chasing real rabbits is what really matters at all stages of a person’s life. Knowing what I know now, I would take authentic success over worldly success any day. Unfortunately for me, it took a long time to realize the difference between the two and make some substantial changes. Fortunately for you, parents are blessed with the opportunity to discuss these issues now with students who are at an age where these truths can be appreciated and make a difference. Battles for a young person’s ethical development turn favorably when parents take the time to speak sincerely with their kids about their academic progress, social experiences, moral compass and decisions. I hope that you take me up on my invitation to make excellent decisions and focus on real rabbits. In this ever-important venture I wish you the Best of Success,

*Professor C.*

Professor Corey Ciocchetti