

# THE PERFECT TEN

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TEN STUDENTS, TEN MINDSETS, ONE NEW  
DEFINITION OF PERFECTION

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*This book is dedicated to my wife, Anala, who relentlessly challenges every doubt I have about myself and encourages me to live up to my potential (and beyond) every day. I also dedicate this book to our sons, Asher and Arin, who blow me away with their perfectly unique traits and characteristics. I live in constant excitement and amazement of the way they grow into their own personalities. I hope they, like the incredible students in this book, continue to develop into their own selves unapologetically.*

*Lastly, I dedicate this book to the thousands of students who have touched my life and changed my perception of the perfect student. The ingenuity that all of you have shown me has made me a better teacher, and more importantly, a better man. May this book serve as a reminder that your voice and your experience can leave a positive mark on the world and on everybody you interact with, including your parents, your teachers, and most importantly, yourselves!*

## CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	vii
1. Shattering the Perfect Lens	1
2. Learn how to Hustle with Rakhee	7
3. Learn how to be Yourself with Dominick	17
4. Learn how to be Mentally Tough with Hilary	27
5. Learn how to be Optimistic with Camilo	37
6. Learn how to be Resilient with Hanna	47
7. Learn how to be Patient with Justin	57
8. Learn how to be Kind with Emily	67
9. Learn how to be Confident with Braden	77
10. Learn how to be Responsible with Vic	87
11. Learn how to Build a Strong Work Ethic with Zain	97
12. The Unmentioned Perfect Students	107
13. The Perfect Eleven	113
<i>About the Author</i>	119

## INTRODUCTION

Hello, I am Dr. Kevin Leichtman, a former college failout. Not the introduction you were expecting? Good! I plan to take you on a trip outside of your comfort zone throughout this book as we explore the idea of the “perfect student.”

I always had an idea of what the perfect student was. A bitter idea, because it was the opposite of me. I was a classic underachiever, barely graduating from high school. After a couple of mediocre years of work, I dropped out of my first college and transferred to my second, which I would fail out of in less than a year.

Throughout my academic journey, I wanted to be a perfect student. It just didn't fit me or feel right to even try. Deep down, I felt potential and a desire to be a success in school, but it couldn't seem to put that desire into practice. It was time for me to reflect. Maybe I got my definition of the perfect student wrong? The definition I imagined went something like this:

*The perfect student has an unparalleled work ethic. They show up every day and complete all of their work on time, or even better yet, early. Note-taking is easy for them and they can obtain high scores on tests without even studying. Their grades are a point of pride and sound like the Fonz when he enters a room: “AAAAA.” The perfect student makes sure to be involved in every sport and every club on*

*campus. They rack up wins in the yearbook superlative section and are loved by all. They never get in arguments with their friends or have any type of drama. An army of family and friends are constantly by their side, supporting their success and cheering for all of their numerous achievements. They have at least one full trophy case in their house.*

The more I allowed that definition to sink in, the more alienating it became for me. I couldn't live up to those ideals, so I moved rapidly away from them. After a largely negative experience with education, I was granted a third chance for a college degree at a small college -- on academic probation. I knew I would have to change my definition of perfect because there was no room for error. One low grade, and I would be gone.

Three years later, I received a bachelor's degree while celebrating my first time on the dean's list. I followed that success with a "perfect" 4.0 GPA throughout my master's degree. The final touches to my academic career included the completion of a Ph.D. program and publications to add to my name.

What was the difference? How did I go from a 2.0 high school student to a 4.0 graduate-level student? The classes were certainly more demanding and complex. My ability or potential didn't change. The answer begins with my definition of perfection.

I had to change what perfect meant. It was on me to shatter the view I created of the perfect student so I could create my own identity. The biggest thing missing from my definition was me! How could I be a perfect student if I built the model around other people?

My journey through education took years and thousands of failures, but a new idea of perfection led to a new mindset. I believed that I could live up to my potential and quickly found myself living above the potential I thought I had.

When my career shifted to education, I was given the opportunity to see a wide range of students. Some of them stood out, not because they were perfect students, but because they had created their own identity in

academics. They had claimed their own version of perfect, and they lived it.

I also was given a front-row seat to a massive issue in education. Many of the teachers, administrators, and support staff seemed to have a similar view of the “perfect student” as I did a long time ago. I watched as students were overlooked by an education system that either didn’t value the traits these wonderful kids possessed or didn’t value the way those traits looked within these young men and women. Students who I felt were high performing and full of potential would be brought up in the teacher’s lounge as “the bad kids to watch out for.” I couldn’t understand how these amazing contributors to my class could be such terrible students in the eyes of others. As I challenged them and reflected on their reasoning, I realized that the root of the problem rested in the idea of perfection. These young scholars did not look, sound, or act like the perfect students from the perspective of traditional educators stuck in an antiquated educational system. It became clear that advocating for my students would mean challenging expectations and helping educators to redefine the “perfect student.”

This book features ten students. All of them were successful in school. All of them faced adversity from many sources. Each of them is incredibly unique. The common factor that brought them all to these pages is their phenomenal mindset. They each had certain traits and characteristics that stood out and carried them to success. Their potential expanded daily because of the self-motivation, drive, and determination they showed. To me, they were the perfect students.

## **Perfection**

Let’s be clear. We are here to break the stereotype of “perfection.” Whether you are a student struggling to find your place in school, a parent wondering if your children are on the right track, or an educator who wants to bring out the best in your kids, it is time to confront and challenge the idea of perfect. This is your first step.

Write down your definition of the perfect student. Be as vivid and detailed as you possibly can be. What does the perfect student look like?

How do they act? What are their distinguishing characteristics? What is their personality like? Don't leave any stones unturned, and don't fall into the temptation of writing what you think you are supposed to write. Put in words whatever is on your mind!

I hereby give you permission to write in this book! If you think that writing in a book is not perfect student behavior, feel free to grab a post-it note and stick it in here.

My definition of the perfect student is:



Do you have a clear picture? Can you see the perfect student? Excellent! Now step two is to confront every aspect of what you wrote with honesty and a sincere desire to grow. Now, it is time to meet the Perfect Ten. As you read each chapter, make a note. Do these students fit your definition? Do their values match what you would expect?

These students have generously given us their stories and experiences so we can use them. Compare your (or your child's, or your students') journeys with theirs. Look at how they utilized their mindset to become their own version of a perfect student. Observe the success they brought about from their failures. Then, apply it!

Before I introduce you to my team of superheroes, it is necessary to dig deeper into the idea of perfection and how it relates to mindset. There are dangerous implications to a traditional sense of the perfect student.

## 1. SHATTERING THE PERFECT LENS

**R**esearch has shown time and time again how damaging perfectionism can be (Chang, Watkins, & Banks, 2004; Zannetti, 2013; Harari, Swider, Steed, & Breidenthal, 2018). Many do not realize how widespread the damage is. Some exhaust themselves by a drive to reach an unobtainable image of what “perfect” looks like in their head. Others, beaten by an insurmountable belief that they will never be perfect, grow to resent the characteristics they associate with perfection. Perfectionism adds to the expectations people have of themselves as well as how they view the expectations that others place on them. With no room for error, all fall short.

Perfection may hit hardest in grade school. Young men and women are encountering their own self-image and building the foundation of the mindset they will take with them to school and life. Surrounded by a box of their peers, it is nearly impossible to go through their daily life without comparing themselves to others. And what is that comparison based on? Typically, the lens of the parent, the teacher, the administrator, the school security officer, or any other adult in a power position. The “bad kids” are the ones that the adults identify as bad. The “perfect kids” are the ones that the school has determined to hold the best grades, achievements, and extracurricular awards. In other words, the adults create the scale of perfection by which all students measure themselves.

## **Narrative as a Mold-Breaker**

Consider the mold of a perfect student. How are they portrayed? From my experience, the typical narrative in stories, movies, and television shows display mostly white students from mostly rural, upper-middle-class towns, wearing varsity letter jackets and smiling with perfect, shimmering white teeth. If the show features a character that does not fit that mold, it is usually to highlight their struggle in overcoming whatever obstacle kept them from being that perfect-looking student.

The stories we consume control the perceptions we have. If our narratives continue to be steeped in a singular view of perfection, we will miss the many routes to success that may be out-of-the-box or just different-looking from the common representations of success. What's more, we tend to push our expectations of perfect onto others. If you are a teacher, parent, coach, mentor, or even an older sibling, you are likely to take your idea of perfect and place it onto the people in your charge. A one size fits all narrative of success cannot cut it.

This book was written with the intention of disrupting the prevailing views of what a perfect student is. The ten students chosen for this book would not meet the typical portrayal of perfect. They come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, with a wide array of goals and ideals. Success meant different things to each of them, and the path to all of their achievements was littered with doubt from traditional adults who felt that they did not match up to how a student should act. The shared experiences of these ten brave students were courageously given to help us question everything we know about perfection.

The voices of my perfect ten students have traditionally been left out in favor of the more media-friendly caricatures of the top students. Yet all of their stories are amazing tales of empowerment. They come from all walks of life and represent a variety of races, religions, nationalities, economic statuses, and other identifying characteristics. Each of them found a unique way to persevere, creating an individual story worth sharing. The uniqueness I saw in each of them was attributed to their mindset.

## **Mindset as a Lens to View Perfection**

Mindset made the difference for these ten students, as it has for many of my students. Everything was different about these students, from their goals to their life circumstances to the opportunities available to them. Yet all of them became overachievers and rose above whatever expectations were placed on them. For each, they had mastered an element of their mindset and leveraged it to enhance their success inside and outside of the classroom.

Too often, mindset is an underrated factor when considering a student's approach to school. It is more likely to hear about grades, test performances, and attendance rates than it is to hear about the confidence, motivation, or resilience that a student shows. If the adults of a school are setting the tone for how students measure their perfection, mindset goes missing from the list. Schools fall victim to making the non-important things important and allowing the most important, foundational-building pieces to be forgotten.

It is time to bring mindset to the forefront of the conversations surrounding perfection and what it means to be a good student. Every student featured in this book displayed an impressive mindset that created openings for their success. While they were all well-rounded in many ways, each student will highlight one aspect of their mindset that stood out. This was done to show a narrative of empowerment and how each of these aspects of mindset can change the course of a person's life.

## **What's the Matter?**

Teachers, parents, community leaders, mentors, students, and many others play a role in the development of each individual's identity. The way we identify a perfect student, the way we view mindset, the skills and abilities we prioritize as most important, matter. Your definition of perfection will influence those who look up to you, as well as yourself. There is an incredible price on the line of ignoring narratives that stand out or sound different. That price comes at the cost of identity.

Throughout the world, many students have the capability to contribute something amazing to the world. Yet, many of them do not reach their full potential. A large contributor to that is how they were described and understood by people they looked up to. If their greatest strength did not matter to their teachers, parents, or role models, then they may have given up that strength to focus on things that mattered more to someone else. When they compare their lives to their peers, they may glorify the behaviors and actions of others at the cost of downplaying their own abilities. This loss of identity can strike to the very core and hold anyone back from their full capacity.

The solution to lost identity is an infusion of narrative. It is vital for students to be able to see people who are similar to them in some way in a positive, successful light. We all want to be able to picture ourselves as a winner. Narratives of people who have already done it can help younger students to go get it done in their own, unique, perfect way.

### **Putting it in Context**

If you are an educator, this book is meant to open your eyes to what you may be missing when considering your students' strengths and weaknesses. Allow your perceptions to be challenged. Confront the ideas that pop into your head as you consider some of these students who had low GPA's and barely made it to graduation. Could you shift your mind to include them in your definition of the perfect student? Can their mindset and the challenges they overcame convince you of a new standard of student? Will you honestly consider the harm that may be caused by the definition of perfection you portray for and enforce in your students?

If you are a parent, this book is meant to help you consider your priorities. Are you emphasizing certain results, or encouraging a mindset that your child will need as they grow and enter college or the workforce? How often do you talk about wanting to see A's and B's on a report card, versus how often you talk about the process of enjoying and engaging in the opportunities to learn more and be involved in school? And more

importantly, what are you doing to foster your child's strengths as they seek and understand their identity?

If you are a student, this book is my promise to you that you can be exceptional. Soak in these success stories from ten students who were overlooked, undervalued, and left out of many conversations. Watch how they overcame anything that stood in the path they walked. Observe the way they utilized their mindset to prove anyone wrong who doubted them. Begin to locate yourself within these stories. What will your success story sound like? I cannot wait for you to build it and share it with the world. There is nothing more important than your voice. Allow these students to have a positive impact on you so that you can bring your voice to the forefront and have a positive impact on your friends, family, school, and community. I believe in you!

## 2. LEARN HOW TO HUSTLE WITH RAKHEE



“ Everything you do today determines your tomorrow.”

— RAKHEE

H-eartfelt  
U-nderstanding that  
S-uccess  
T-akes  
L-asting  
E-ffort

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**H**ustle is a difficult-to-measure quality. Yet, most of us know it when we see it. Hustle is that extraordinary ability that allows people to push past their limits. It is the drive from deep within that makes a person go the extra mile without being asked or told. Hustle is a vital piece of the Perfect Ten. For one often overlooked student, it allowed her to create a vision and speak it into existence. No matter the challenge, hustle became the foundation of her success.

### **Meet Rakhee**

Rakhee, or Rah for short, defines hustle every day. She founded 5o9am.com (@5.o9am on Instagram), where she produces her own art and fashion design. Her unique style features beautiful, custom hand-painted artwork, typically on a variety of clothing items. Her artistic style has become massively popular at a rapid pace. A high achiever, Rakhee has created a powerful influence and a positive impact very quickly, starting her brand directly after finishing high school.

Before the success of her brand, however, Rakhee was considered an “at-risk” student. Several red flags existed in the system that showed her as a danger to not graduate. For many, they saw the data on her spotty attendance, numerous tardies, and courses not passed. Looking at the numbers caused them to overlook who she was, a determined young woman with the hustle to overcome any barrier.

## Beating the Numbers

Rakhee's road to success was paved with doubters, naysayers, and a variety of setbacks. At a young age, she began elementary school while her parents were finalizing a divorce. This would send her and her two siblings to live with her father. While her academic ability was clear, she often struggled in school. Her head was in the clouds, drawing and designing in her sketchbook. When she was focused, her work was often overshadowed by her attendance record.

She was not alone in the struggle to make it through high school unscathed. She watched on as some of her friends transferred to alternative schools or left high school altogether. Other friends began to turn away from her and add gossip as fuel to the fire that was blocking her success. Every twist and turn led to more adversity.

Rakhee had always expected to graduate and make a success out of her high school career, but the numbers did not match the success she had hoped for. Entering her last year of high school, there was very little room for error. She explained,

*A lot of obstacles stood in my way during high school, a lot of people didn't like me for their own personal petty reasons so that put me in a lot of conflict and drama throughout the years, keeping a decent GPA in order to graduate, while also juggling a part-time job that was literally right after the last bell of the day. Believe it or not, the most difficult thing about high school for me was getting there on time.*

None of these issues were separate. They were a swirling vortex, weighing on her mind as she constantly went from school to job to home to help her family. Her grades slipped further behind as her work life became more hectic. She did not even have an easy route to get to school, having to rely on friends and family members for rides.

The odds were stacked against Rakhee. The further along she went in high school, the farther away her goals seemed to be. With the potential of not graduating sinking in, she had every excuse to quit. That is exactly the moment when her hustle kicked into a gear that I had never seen in

my students before. Perhaps this quote from her best explains how she was able to find success:

*“The only person who is stopping you is you.” And that quote is relevant to almost every situation in life because only you have control over your own future & life whether you want to stay stagnant or progress is entirely up to you.”*

### **Hustling for Passion**

Hustle is a trait of passion. It is not a characteristic that one wakes up with or automatically has. It is fueled by a passionate desire to achieve greatness and go beyond the expectations of the many to accomplish the results of few. People who hustle harder have a powerful reason for waking up in the morning. They know what they want out of life and are willing to whatever is necessary to even have a chance of making their dream a reality. That was the secret to Rakhee’s success.

While many of her peers were nonchalant and undetermined about their future, Rakhee had a focused mission to take her artistic talent to another level. She explained, “What I truly wanted to do was art & fashion; it pushed me to want to succeed and finish school so I can ONLY have time for the things I wanted to occupy my time with.” Her passion became the driving force for her success. As life and school became more difficult, her motivation only became more clear. She had to succeed to earn the ability to put her time and energy where she wanted to put it.

Rakhee’s senior year was not perfect. Friends continued to move into and out of her life as their priorities caused them to drift away from her. Teachers continued to doubt her ability and judge her heavily on her absence and tardy marks. Work after school presented multiple challenges. However, those issues were minor in the face of the major goals she had set for herself.

Furthermore, having a vision allowed Rakhee to use high school for the skills she needed to survive in business. She stated,

*School taught me a few things that I still use in my everyday life, like discipline and when I say that I don’t mean the teacher hitting you with*

*a ruler I mean self-discipline, putting my school and homework before any other activities I had planned. It also taught me how to be efficient with time, getting the work done before the deadline. Both self-discipline and time efficiency work hand in hand when running a business.*

Whenever people doubted her (which I saw often), they would quickly realize their mistake. Rakhee's self-discipline was incredible. With no apologies and no excuses, she would ensure that she was ten steps ahead of everybody else. She never worried about her situation and only focused on the potential she had and the elements within her control.

### **Entering Rakhee Into the Perfect Ten**

I always enjoyed Rakhee's impact as a student. She would ask intriguing questions and show a perspective that many would not consider, including me. She was not afraid to be a leader and stand out in class. While her effort was always striking, it was not the reason why I picked her for the Perfect Ten. It was because of a much more subtle but powerful moment.

On a slow day in class, I asked her about her dreams and passions. As if she had rehearsed the moment in her head, she pulled out her sketchbook. A variety of patterns, symbols, and clothing styles filled each page with care and dedication. She did not tell me that she *wanted* to be a fashion designer. She told me that she *would* be a fashion designer. It was clear to see that this was not a passing trend, but a mission that she had undertaken with the full capacity of her heart.

We had many conversations following that day, which allowed me to see her progress in decision-making. Rakhee did not have a clear route to success, and she didn't have a long list of mentors in the fashion industry to help her get started. What she had was a sense of hustle. By trial, error, and a complete lack of fear, 5o9am.com was launched. She took her future into her own hands and brought her vision to life from the ground up. Through self-discipline, a strong sense of responsibility, and a willingness to outwork anyone and everyone, she is now climbing the ranks of the art and fashion community while leaving a hugely positive influence on her following. She continues to advocate for teens and

young adults by letting them in on her journey, placing herself as a role model to many.

Rakhee became a part of my new definition of the perfect student. Seeing her name on at-risk lists made it clear to me that a perfect student does not have to have perfect grades or attendance. If I never asked her a question, I would have no idea why she missed class so often or what struggles she faced on the path to her diploma.

So what does the perfect student have? Passion! A student who has an unstoppable, unquenchable desire to achieve anything in life can surmount the loftiest obstacles in pursuit of it. Rah is my proof that a strong hustle can take a student to new heights.

### **My New Definition of the Perfect Student**

The perfect student:

- **Hustles harder than their peers because of an unyielding passion that they possess.**

### **Your New Definition of the Perfect Student**

Did this chapter impact your definition of a perfect student? How important does the characteristic of hustle rank when considering the strengths of a student? Flip back to the introduction and look over your first definition. Reflect on what you said and what you read. Is your definition firm, or is it shifting? Write down your reflections in this space, or begin revising your definition:



### **Mindset Lesson—Hustle Harder**

A true hustler knows how to leverage their intrinsic motivations. It is pretty common to hear “hustle” in terms of business, like having a side hustle, for instance. Yet attaching extrinsic motivations like money to hustle actually makes that trait weaker. A key to increasing your ability to hustle is to learn what your intrinsic motivations are. Do you want more control over your life? Do you want to have a stronger pursuit of your passions? Do you want to open up a career field or opportunity for yourself? Whatever makes you tick at the deepest levels is what needs to come out to the surface for you to hustle harder.

Rakhee was able to tap into her intrinsic motivation to increase her hustle. Her method is as follows:

*What motivates me to keep hustling isn't the money or any materialistic object, it is simply to live life on my own terms so that means I have to bust my butt every day to achieve that goal in order to make it into my reality. Before I set my mind on something and go along with it I ask God for guidance & protection over my project then the rest is up to me to stick with it and fulfill my goals & duties I set for myself.*

To increase your ability to hustle, try these steps:

1. Define your passion and make what you want clear
2. Declare your passion to the world (your family, your friends, your faith, or anyone important to you)
3. Write down the responsibilities and duties you will have to keep to succeed
4. Have a clear vision of what this success means to you
5. Put into words how hard you are willing to work to bring this success to reality

### **Overlooking the Hustler**

How do people like Rakhee remain under the radar? Students who hustle and put in extra work should stand out. This desirable quality goes unnoticed quite often, unfortunately. Hustlers are constantly work-

ing, thinking, dreaming, and acting on their dreams. This can lead to a lack of focus in the present as they constantly map out their future.

For Rakhee, many teachers assumed the worst of her. They did not see the quality of a hard-working hustler with big dreams. They saw a talkative girl who was off task. They would not hone in on her conversations, assuming that her talking in class was typical high school gossip. They did not realize that she was planning out her vision, testing marketing strategies, and bouncing branding ideas off of her friends.

Because Rakhee's hustle often went unnoticed, teachers were not able to tap into her potential and see how creative and driven she actually was. She is certainly not the only student like this. A metric ton of overlooked talent walks schools across the world because hustle does not always look studious and methodical. Students with hustle are out-of-the-box thinkers with an entrepreneurial spirit. Do not miss the hustling student by confusing them with a distracted, chatty teenager. Listen to their goals and watch their brainstorming shift into world-changing actions.

### **Make it Yours**

What are your passions? What are your hobbies? Where do you like to spend your time most? Many of us have answers ready at a moment's notice for these questions. If you don't have an answer ready, this may be your call to get outside of your comfort zone and engage more with life. Finding your passions is a key step to finding your purpose.

However, if you do have answers ready to those questions, it's time to take it to another level. Are you making the most of your passions? Are you committed to turning your passion into your life's work? Are you outworking the people around you? Are you outworking people around the world who you might not be able to see?

You can't hustle at half speed. If you want to keep up with change-makers like Rakhee, you will need to go full-throttle at every turn. Analyze your vision, be clear about what you are seeking, and then go get it!

### 3. LEARN HOW TO BE YOURSELF WITH DOMINICK



“ If you’re not a bully, you’re doing something right. You can very easily make fun of someone. A negative input for a negative output. If you can resist that, you are a good person.”

— DOMINICK



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