In 1934, a young woman named Sara Pollard applied to Vassar College. In those days, parents were asked to fill out a questionnaire, and Sara’s father described her, truthfully, as “more a follower type than a leader.” The school accepted Sara, explaining that it had enough leaders.

It’s hard to imagine this happening today. No father in his right mind would admit that his child was a natural follower; few colleges would welcome one with open arms. Today we prize leadership skills above all, and nowhere more than in college. As Penny Bach Evins, the head of St. Paul’s School for Girls, an independent school in Maryland, told me, “It seems as if higher ed. is looking for alphas, but the doers and thinkers in our schools are not always in front leading.”

If college admissions offices show us whom and what we value, then we seem to think that the ideal society is composed of Type A’s. This is perhaps unsurprising, even if these examples come from highly competitive institutions. It’s part of the American DNA to celebrate those who rise above the crowd. And in recent decades, the meteoric path to leadership of youthful garage- and dorm-dwellers, from Steve Jobs to Mark Zuckerberg, has made king of the hill status seem possible for every 19-year-old. So now we have high school students vying to be president of as many clubs as they can. It’s no longer enough to be a member of the student council; now you have to run the school.

Our elite schools overemphasize leadership partly because they’re preparing students for the corporate world, and they assume that this is what businesses need. But a discipline in organizational psychology, called “followership,” is gaining in popularity. Robert Kelley, a professor of management and organizational behavior, defined the term in a 1988 Harvard Business Review article, in which he listed the qualities of a good follower, including being committed to “a purpose, principle or person outside themselves” and being “courageous, honest and credible.” It’s an idea that the military has long taught.

Recently, other business thinkers have taken up this mantle. Some focus on the “romance of leadership” theory, which causes us to inaccurately attribute all of an organization’s success and failure to its leader, ignoring its legions of followers. Adam Grant, who has written several books on what drives people to succeed, says that the most frequent question he gets from readers is how to contribute when they’re not in charge but have a suggestion and want to be heard. “These are not questions asked by leaders,” he told me. “They’re fundamental questions of followership.”

Perhaps the biggest disservice done by the outsize glorification of “leadership skills” is to the practice of leadership itself — it hollows it out, it empties it of meaning. It attracts those who are motivated by the spotlight rather than by the ideas and people they serve. It teaches students to be a leader for the sake of being in charge, rather than in the name of a cause or idea they care about deeply. The difference between the two states of mind is profound. The latter belongs to transformative leaders like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi.

What if we said to college students that the qualities we’re looking for are not leadership skills, but excellence, passion and a desire to contribute beyond the self? If we seek a society of caring, creative and committed people, and leaders who feel called to service rather than to stature, then we need to do a better job of making that clear.