

The stress over getting accepted

Business



High School is an odd thing, because it's where you realize that adulthood is just a step away. For me, towards the end of my freshman year, things are starting to pick up the pace.

It may be just that with everything I have going on in my life, from my upcoming play for my theater class and the end of my first track season, but I've noticed that ever since seventh grade, the speed at which my education is going is gaining speed. This could be attributed to the realization that we don't have much time left as kids, but I attribute it to another, more specific end game. College. It seems like everything now is centered on getting into college. Some of the kids that I go to school with rarely choose classes based on wanting to challenge themselves, but more on wanting to have the class on a transcript when they present it to a college or university for inspection.

It makes high school seem like a competition, with everyone competing for the few spots in a selective college, like Harvard or Yale. It's always a question of, "What can I do to get myself above the people sitting next to me?" This is unhealthy, because this type of competitiveness makes high school even more stressful than it should be, and it's not like high schoolers are perfect human beings who treat each other with kindness and fairness every moment of the day. On top of everything that they deal with, that added pressure of getting into a top university can really weigh on someone, and make them start to crack. This is why we all need to calm down.

I spoke with an admissions officer at an elite liberal arts college recently, and she told me what I'd been expecting to hear: That the selective colleges and universities have become more selective in recent years. However, she also

explained that across the board, colleges in general are not. She told me that, “ Only 13% of colleges accept 50% or less of those who apply.” So it isn’t like every school is tremendously hard to get into, and it would take a massive amount of new applicants for it to become harder to get into any college. By her estimates, 30, 000 more applicants could apply before the system would become completely overwhelmed, and there would simply not be enough spots left in any college in the country.

“ We could have 10, 000 more students, and it would still be manageable.”

So what’s causing this stress, when there are enough spots for everyone?

The admissions officer cites the allure of going to a “ name-brand school,” which makes a lot of sense. Everyone has heard of Harvard, for example, but many students may not have heard of College of the Atlantic, which, according to The Princeton Review’s Best 381 Colleges and Universities 2017 Edition, has only 400 applicants a year, with an acceptance rate of 76%, and an education rating of 94, along with a campus rating of 95. For comparison, Harvard, which has an acceptance rate of just 6%, has an education rating of 87 and a campus rating of just 74. So the College of the Atlantic is better rated on both education and student life, yet has only 400 students who apply every year, whereas Harvard has 37, 000 hopefuls applying.

This all brings up the question, “ Does going to a well-known school matter that much?” According to an article in the Washington Post, no. Citing Frank Bruni, who authored the book *Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be*, “ among the American-born chief executives of the top 100 companies in the Fortune 500, just about 30 went to an Ivy League school or equally selective college.” So only 30% went to an elite school, and all of these people are extremely

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successful. And in researchers Stacy Berg Dale and Alan B. Krueger's paper Estimating the Payoff to Attending a More Selective College: An Application of Selection on Observables and Unobservables, they write, " We find that students who attended more selective colleges do not earn more than other students who were accepted and rejected by comparable schools but attended less selective colleges.

" So if you end up attending a less selective university than Yale or Princeton, don't worry. But all of this brings up the question, " If going to college matters more than where you go, then why are high school kids so stressed about this?" From what I've gathered after talking with some of my fellow students, there seems to be this idea of a type of application that colleges want: They want good grades, good test scores, and lots of extracurriculars. As far as the grades component is concerned, this could be due in part to the common conception of having to take the most challenging classes. " There is an overemphasis on the APs and IBs," the admissions officer said, referring to Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses. These classes are advanced, and can inflate your GPA, which is a draw for some students. Some may be pushing themselves into these classes when they aren't good enough students, which leads to poor grades in these classes and increased stress.

It simply isn't healthy for students to be pushing themselves beyond their limits, which is what seems to be happening. And when extracurriculars are brought up, kids may be pushing themselves into doing activities that they may absolutely hate. I can say from experience that doing a sport like track, with practices everyday after school, is hard. Working a crew for a school

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musical is hard. But I actually like doing these. If you didn't want to take part in these activities, having to do these would be absolute hell.

For example, if I was pushed into doing basketball and the geology club, I would be miserable, since neither of these interests me. I'm lucky to go to a school that offers these challenging courses and extracurriculars, and I do plan to take advantage of my opportunities by taking these classes and participating in activities. On the other hand, there are lots of other schools that do not. Some students may not have the chance to take these advanced classes, or participate in these opportunities. However, the admissions officers take that into account.

“ A student living in your town is not going to have the same opportunities as someone living on the southside of Chicago,” she explained to me. She also noted how each school's reputation plays a factor. “ It's my job to know my territory that I'm scouting kids from. For example, your speech and debate program is well known, and they spend a lot of time doing that. So if they're the president of the debate team, then that might be a bigger factor than if they're the president of a much smaller club.” There also shouldn't be such a huge focus on getting a 4.

0. When I asked the admissions officer if getting one or two B's was a deal breaker, she shook her head vigorously. “ No, those are not deal breakers. One B is nothing.” There are deal breakers, but they are what you might fairly expect: Fs, poor grades with no reason (getting mono your sophomore year is a valid excuse, blowing off a final is not), poor class ranking, or, in

some cases, concern over the student's personality. " I have had counselors email me saying, ' This student is unsafe,'" the admissions officer told me.

Another big part of the application is the essay. But contrary to what some may think, a great essay will not save an unqualified applicant from rejection. Essays can't compensate for poor grades. " A perfect, " this-gets-you-into-college" essay simply does not exist," the admissions officer told me. For example, this past spring, a student was accepted to Stanford University after writing #BlackLivesMatter on his essay 100 times. News outlets declared that this was what got him accepted.

" That is not what happened," she tells me. " They sat around talking about this, and I guarantee you, someone said, ' I love this' and someone else said, ' I hate this'. So then they went to look at everything else." My research showed that the student, Ziad Ahmed of New Jersey, founded a social justice advocacy organization as a freshman in high school, interned for presidential candidate Martin O'Malley, and was named one of the " 15 young prodigies who are already changing the world" by Business Insider, so Ahmed was clearly already someone who had a strong application. The admissions officer also mentioned that the essay shouldn't reek of parents. " I want the student to sound 17, not like a 45 year old mother of two.

" As I've written this, I've realized that this entire application process seems completely overblown. Getting into college should be something to be focused on, but shouldn't be causing massive stress. I'm not saying I'm completely innocent here; my dream school is still Stanford, which currently has an acceptance rate of 5%. But I'm also trying to look at to other options,

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and consider whether other schools would suit me better. Because in the end, it doesn't matter where you go to college as much as you may think, and the application should reflect you and your interests, not the facade you think will get you into your dream school.

“ We're really looking to see who we think will be successful in our classes, and who will do well here,” I was told. So everybody, calm down.