

Stressed for Success: Hypercompetition in Academia

5.6/5.0 GPA, an internship at a Silicon Valley tech company, the president of four clubs, a passion project, the captain of a varsity sport, multiple awards and honors, a completed STEM project by November, and nine hours of sleep every night. The “perfect” resumé for a high school senior: flawless and identical to thousands worldwide. It seems that the number of accomplished students who vie for the chance for a spot at a top college or university increases exponentially every year, but why? The answer is a heightened sense of competition. This is reflected in all aspects of the admissions process and has become deeply rooted in the system itself. It is most drastically shown for the top post-secondary schools, one example being Cornell’s acceptance rate dropping 9.67% from 2014-2024 (“Ivy League Admission Statistics for the Class of 2014”). Although competition can motivate students to excel, the hypercompetitive nature of today’s college admissions process undermines genuine student achievement and amplifies problematic trends within academia instead.

The increase in competition within the college admissions process is a direct byproduct of actions students are forced to take in attempts to market themselves to post-secondary education admissions officers. The discrepancy between secondary schools harms the admissions process as pure academia becomes increasingly diluted. With the influx of grade inflation, there is increased pressure to stand out against a crowded applicant pool through other measures, such as extracurricular activities. The current admissions process prioritizes activities deemed valuable by college admission officers, leading high schools to push students to abandon genuine interests in favor of more ‘prestigious’ pursuits. Writer for *Inside Higher Ed*, William Hurst reflects, “A critical mass of some of the country’s most talented and diligent students

systematically sell themselves short, turning away from their academic work in favor of all and sundry extracurricular activities. Many are intensely stressed and consumed by those pursuits, such that they appear to have substantially less time for rest and leisure than their counterparts did two decades ago, even as they spend much less time in the library or laboratory” (Hurst). The pressure of building an impressive resumé leads to extracurricular overextension as students sacrifice depth of participation over quantity. With this development, it will be natural to move towards generations of students who seem well-rounded on paper yet are not able to truly engage with their interests. This encouragement for more prestigious extracurriculars also often comes at the expense of opportunities that promote personal growth and nurture an authentic love for learning. Furthermore, this system disadvantages students who choose extracurriculars that lean into their passions over extracurriculars that may seem more illustrious, especially if their passions are time-costly. An alum of an intrinsically rewarding but time-intensive program, FIRST Robotics Competition, shares, “The understanding I think most people in my FRC team agree upon is that if you’re doing FRC to get into top-tier colleges, it’s a massive waste of time” (Lee). The current college admissions process is skewed against students who have fewer activities due to spending time and effort on passion-led projects. Students cannot focus on themselves, instead, they must compete to collect as many accolades as possible to create an appealing resumé. By promoting a system where individuality is punished, hypercompetition encourages depthless activities and thought, thereby harming academia.

As higher education became more valued, negative trends in academia began proliferating such as commitment methods like the Early Decision allowing colleges and universities to manipulate their statistics, thereby fostering a false sense of elitism. This heightens competition for admittance, ultimately becoming an institutional competition for

dominance. The Early Decision (ED) process is a college admission option that allows students to apply to a school with faster results, usually with a higher acceptance rate. However, this option is binding, meaning the student must attend the institution following acceptance. By securing students' admissions early in the college admittance process, institutions can inflate their selectivity rates, which in turn raises their perceived prestige (Christie). Prestige in the context of college admissions can be defined as an individual's desire for a school that is seen as superior due to its perceived quality of education, career opportunities, and social status. The greater the desire, the greater the prestige of a school. Oftentimes, a higher perceived prestige coincides with a lower yield rate. As Bauld, writer for the magazine of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, states, "The more schools a student applies to, the lower a college's yield rate—the percent of students who choose to enroll after being offered admission. Yield is an important statistic for admission departments. While many schools are seemingly becoming more and more selective, it's partly driven by the fact that it's getting harder for admissions officers to predict where students are actually going to go" (Bauld). This leads institutions, concerned about their yield rates, to feel the need to employ strategies such as waitlisting or encouraging early decision commitments to ensure higher yields. With each school implementing and promoting commitment methods such as the Early Decision, the college admissions process has become less of a search for compatibility and instead a method to keep or boost an institution's elite status. This perpetuates a cycle devaluing academic achievement as students become no more than a statistic. Education has become a system driven by metrics rather than quality pedagogy.

While some argue that competition can be seen as a motivator for students, it ultimately brings more harm than good as students prioritize outperforming others over personal growth.

Advocates for competition believe that the desire to stand out in a competitive environment often encourages individuals to set goals, develop problem-solving skills, and hone their skills (The Learning Lab). By implementing competition early in a controlled environment like school, students are being prepared for situations they will encounter later in life. However, the negative effects of competition within academia far outweigh the positive. Competition inherently holds a ranking system—there has to be a winner and there has to be a loser. As such, the concept of collaboration decreases, and superficial achievement increases. In an article from *Teachwire*, Cath Bishop, an Olympic athlete and alumnus of the University of Reading, shares her perspective on competition in education and life overall: “Focusing on coming to the top, being the best and superior to those around you actually demotivates more than it motivates[...]These narrowly defined conceptions of talent also leave behind a vast and untapped pool of diverse thought and potential among students that could be of huge benefit to employers and wider society” (Bishop). This dynamic where students compete against each other to determine the best of a category or class not only leads to an ideology of prioritizing titles but also limits individual student growth. Students become preoccupied with meeting benchmarks for the top 1% rather than pursuing personal interests. The individually competitive nature of education has seeped into the college admissions process, leading to an emphasis on prestige, thereby limiting academia as a whole.

The hypercompetitive nature of college admissions has changed education to become more focused on perceived prestige and superficial accomplishments as opposed to an authentic love for learning. Hypercompetition ultimately fosters an environment where students prioritize outperforming others over personal growth. The continuation of such a system will, and is already, harming society as a whole as individual thought is lost under the pressure of

conforming for admittance to an institution that is considered superior to another. The loss of academia looms over our horizon.

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