

Q: What are the impacts of the college application process on students?

Kayla Vallecillo

Humanities

Ms. Small

10 October 2023

A Preparatory Paradox: How the Pursuit For Success Leads to Stress and Dissatisfaction

In the depths of the crisp fall air lies an underlying stress surrounding every high school in America: students scramble to perfect SAT scores, request recommendation letters, tour schools, and formulate their perfect college applications. Yet in the pursuit of being the “perfect applicant” to the world’s top schools, mental health and self-value are depleted, college admissions becoming more of a gate than a door to promising academic futures. College admissions are high-stakes, as they can determine where the next chapter of a students’ life will be. In addition to this, college admissions has sharply increased in competitiveness in recent years—the fear of rejection after a years-long effort to succeed growing stronger – and applicant mental health deteriorating along with it. The pursuit for elite education drives the formulation of college applicants into hierarchical categories of academic and economic value, with reliance on acceptance and societal stigmas destroying students’ perceptions of self-value and withstanding mental wellness.

Part I: A Balancing Act

With statistic-based admissions, the lifestyle to become the “perfect” applicant compounds pressure on students and forces students to develop dependencies on result-based events to determine self-worth. In the pursuit for elite higher education, many high school students exhaust countless hours perfecting their academic portfolio – GPA’s, SAT scores, and

class rankings defining their success. Apart from academic standings, the pressure arises in being well-rounded, with expectations to succeed academically being shifted to gaining community service hours, holding leadership positions in extracurricular activities, exercising financial and career independence through real-world opportunities, pursuing passion projects, and maintaining personal health meanwhile. While degradation to students' mental health can be explicitly identified through student opinion and narrative, the exhausting preparation for elite education may hold benefits and applications in creating successful learning environments. Through confronting and overcoming the challenges being propelled at students, they sharpen skills in time management and character development as well as the resiliency heavily exercised in life beyond academics: "Universities want well-rounded students, sure, but they are essentially curating a well-rounded class and campus and experience; think of each student making up a part of a greater whole" (Kalita). Colleges aren't intentionally destroying students' mental health. The college admissions process fundamentally aims to create effective and growing learning environments, students being perceived as participants rather than victims in the admissions system. Despite the perceived benefits of a challenging rise in pressure as the college admissions landscape becomes steeper, the societal narrative that institutional admission signals a students' level of success and value is detrimental to student mental health, and wrongly informs personal perceptions of self-worth in academic settings. So often, "...we are led to believe that it is impossible to be admitted to college and that success in life is a zero-sum game that is largely dependent on being admitted to one of these institutions" (Barnard). The perception that success, whether personal or financial, is dependent upon one's location of education is outdated and untrue, as success cannot be solely defined by one's academic or economic success in a modern world. This societal perception and infatuation with academic statistics limits students to flawed

measures of effort and ability. In 2021, 42% of high school students felt sad or hopeless for at least two weeks, this persistent feeling affecting their everyday functioning. It is undeniable that stress to perform statistically places dangerous pressures on students. These percentages are visible, shocking, and alarming, and yet societal narratives normalize stress and harmful emotions, mental health at risk being perceived as an example of well-intentioned pursuits for academic success. With statistics-based admissions, many valuable and applicable skills are being suppressed beneath a perception of value definition in academics as well as the formulation of “perfect” applicants. This system fails to recognize the positive impacts of creative thinking, abstract problem solving, artistic expression, and social abilities that remain underrepresented in college admissions decisions.

Part II: The College Admissions Monopoly

As the college admissions process becomes increasingly selective, companies and organizations profit at the expense of students’ anxieties about college admissions and establish barriers that prevent students from lower-income backgrounds from acquiring elite education. While academic institutions aim to produce an environment that generates changemakers and successful members of society, financial and economic success also remain major priorities in a university’s agenda. Higher education is far from free; and with both tuition and college application rates rising, universities, organizations and corporations have raced to obtain the lucrative profits involved with the admissions process. One of the most prominent organizations gaining profit at the expense of anxious college applicants is the College Board, an organization that prides itself on being a nonprofit while, “...in 2020, the College Board made a whopping \$1.2 billion.” (Bansal). Through standardized testing fees and score sends, the College Board has consistently and increasingly profited at the expense of students, with hundreds to thousands of

dollars being spent on meeting college application requirements and expectations. In addition to the College Board, colleges add to the increasing difficulty in navigating the college admissions landscape: “Every year the stakes become higher, and acceptances become even more difficult to obtain. This is in part due to applications increasing each year as well as colleges attempting to boost their rankings by appearing more selective” (Bansal). In the pursuit for institutional profits, increased investment and higher prominence, universities have deliberately lowered acceptance rates to brighten their façades, making admission to universities harder for students. While both colleges and “nonprofit” organizations have made the admissions process a high profit-yielding industry, “Many companies have taken advantage of students’ stress and anxiety over college acceptance” (Bansal). From private tutoring programs to college counselors and test prep classes, students are being promised higher chances of admission to elite universities, in exchange for personal and financial investment. The college admissions landscape has become increasingly harder to navigate, with low-income students facing financial barriers that prevent them from accessing the resources often utilized by higher-income families to increase their perceived personal and academic value. To access expensive tutoring, test prep, and college readiness resources has become a matter of luck and inheritance, with inequalities reducing the lottery-like chances of admissions to students of lower economic statuses. The inequity currently governing the functions of the college admissions process are providing additional stress to students lacking access to college counselors, supportive community members, or professional connections, barriers within the admissions system advancing the deterioration of mental health in college applicants. Not only are applicants expected to stand out and exceed academically and in most facets of life, but they are also expected to navigate, or rather climb, the cliff that leaves low-income and underresourced students scraping for opportunity for admission at highly

praised academic institutions. The correlation between economic standing and students' perceived academic value has created an inequitable admissions system, a factor that has increased the destruction of students' mental health and fair self-perception.

Part III: Rejection Perceptions

The detrimentality of college rejection on mental health and students' perceptions of self-value is propagated through social media as well as amplified through societal expectations to omit rejections from the truths of our paths. Through a brief search through Google, the search terms "college admissions" will lead any viewer through a field of college admission reaction videos, with high-achieving students sharing their unrealistic acceptances to the world's top universities. Yet apart from students' choice to highlight admissions results, social media facilitates the propagation of unrealistic college admissions standards, with rejection often omitted from the media that much of the younger generations consume. Mark R. Leary, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University says, "Social media and societal norms often tell us that we should conceal rejections and any negative situations, leading to the false belief that there's something wrong with you because you are rejected" (Braff). Rejection, to many applicants, can be a saddening experience, self-value both as a student and a person being questioned. Although rejection is systematically impossible to remove if society hopes to maintain valuable and prestigious higher education, rejection can often be an experience that allows students and academics to develop and grow. Dr. Barbara Sarnecka, professor of cognitive sciences and associate dean of graduate studies and research at the University of California, Irvine, says, "By sharing our rejections with the group and even celebrating milestones like 100 rejections, we counteract the sense of shame and isolation that early-career academics often have"(Braff). Rejection parties, or celebrations of rejection from academic institutions or

achievements, have popularized as a way to celebrate resilience, perseverance, and a development of character through the hardships of an academic career. At times, rejection can be incredibly beneficial for students, hardships catalyzing the pursuit of personal success. Between the realm of the fear of rejection and reliance on acceptance there lives a significant divergence, with the issue and danger of destruction of perceptions of self-value stemming from a reliance on acceptance to determine personal perceptions of success and value. Rejection can be detrimental for students, but it can also provide students with the foundations of a fuel for success. Therefore, the central issue remaining in the modern college admissions system lies the reliance on acceptance as a marker of self-value, an ongoing stigma around rejection being distributed through social media and societal norms.

In the current college admissions system, formulation of “perfect” applicant identities, a monopoly battling students from various economic backgrounds, and the reliance on acceptance amplified in modern media contributes to the depletion of mental health among students and applicants seeking higher education. While many believe that rejection and a college admissions landscape that has been increasingly difficult to navigate is an unavoidable factor of life, I challenge students and academic institutions to consider the effect of systematic structures and current levels of media literacy in their pursuit for mutual academic success.

Works Cited

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