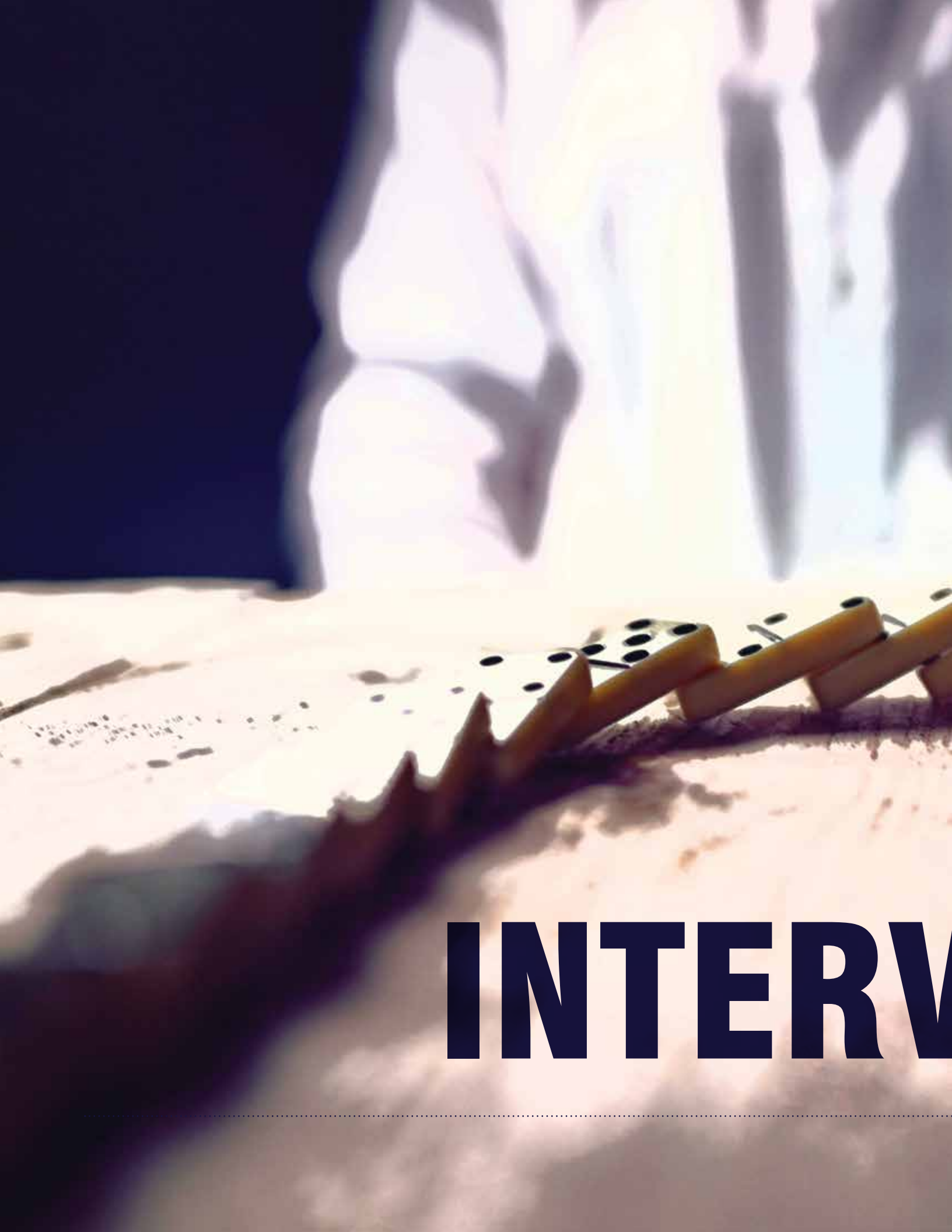

INTERV

Relieving Achievement Pressure

VENTIONS

By Mary Stegmeir

The problem isn't a new one, but as any admission professional will tell you, it's one of the field's most vexing.

Applicants from high-performing high schools routinely enter the college admission process overscheduled and overwhelmed. Stress and sleep-deprivation have reached epidemic proportions at competitive high schools, while rates of depression and anxiety among US teens and young adults have skyrocketed.

For this generation of students, the stakes have never seemed higher when it comes to college admission—leading more and more young adults to prep for higher education in ways that are both unhealthy and unsustainable.

The issue is tricky to address, especially for professionals committed to helping students aim high. Indeed, counselors helped lead the push in the 1990s and 2000s to increase rigorous course options and extracurricular activities for students. And, overall, young people have benefited from the expanded opportunities created to help them learn, lead, and serve their communities.

But in recent years, the expanded opportunities that have come to define many high-performing schools are now key components in the toxic culture of over-achievement. Rather than giving their students a leg up, an emerging body of evidence shows that hyper-competitive and overly demanding high school experiences can take the joy out of learning, undermine mental health, and leave teens less prepared to make the most of their college years.

"The obsession on the part of some students to excel, to load themselves up with very challenging courses, to go to college over the summer while they are still in high school—all to get into the best college that they can get into—is unhealthy," said Robert Massa, senior vice president for enrollment & institutional planning at Drew University (NJ).

Brain scans show that teens have much less activity in their frontal lobe than adults, making it harder for them to control their emotions and solve problems. And Piaget's theory of cognitive development suggests that some students simply aren't ready for the demands of college-level courses as teens.

"Anything in moderation is fine. But this is not moderation."

To be sure: The college admission process isn't the only factor driving the pervasive pressure to perform felt by some students. It may not even be the biggest culprit. But counselors on both sides of the desk agree that increased competition to attend the nation's most selective colleges and universities is reshaping the adolescent experience for many college-bound youths.

During his senior year of high school, Andrew Mallett served as class president, played three varsity sports, and maintained high grades in a schedule packed with honors and Advanced Placement courses. "It felt like a burden, almost," he recalled. "You're not doing it because you want to, but doing it because everyone around you—the parents, the teachers—are telling you that that's what you need to do to get into college."

Mallett, now a sophomore at Lehigh University (PA), ended up graduating with honors, but the relentless schedule took its toll.

"You go straight to practice from school and get home late," Mallett recalled. "You have dinner and then you're starting your homework around 7 or 8 o'clock. You're getting little sleep and the stress starts to eat away at you. You start to lose confidence in yourself."

It's not surprising that achievement can come with a hefty emotional price tag for students, experts say.

Many teens simply aren't developmentally ready to shoulder intense schedules and academic course loads, according to clinical psychologist

David L. Gleason, author of *At What Cost? Defending Adolescent Development in Fiercely Competitive Schools*.

"We have put the educational cart before the developmental horse and, in so doing, have lost sight of key aspects of our most important responsibility: to foster our teenagers' healthy growth and development, which includes their sound and balanced educations," Gleason wrote in his 2017 book.

SOUNDING THE ALARM

Brain scans show that teens have much less activity in their frontal lobe than adults, making it harder for them to control their emotions and solve problems. And Piaget's theory of cognitive development suggests that some students simply aren't ready for the demands of college-level courses as teens.

"We're taking adolescents and pounding them with materials that they may not be neurologically capable of handling academically," said Jodi Rosenshein Atkin, an independent college admission consultant who is also trained as a developmental psychologist. "We're condemning them to try to do things that their brains are not capable of."

Yet students and parents are often hesitant to take their foot off the gas, fearing repercussions in the college admission process. Never mind that colleges, on average, accept roughly two-thirds of their applicants, according to NACAC data. A new narrative—one that designates perfection as a prerequisite for admission—is increasingly driving the way students select classes and schedule their time out of school. And the messages colleges send to prospective teens can inadvertently add fuel to the fire.

"I cannot recall a single (college) that doesn't say somewhere in their materials: We would like to see that a student has challenged themselves and taken the most challenging curriculum available to them," said Atkin, who is based in Rochester, New York. Stories about adolescent entrepreneurs, cancer researchers, or Broadway performers raise the bar even higher, leading teens to believe they "have to develop a résumé and a biography that rivals that of a Fortune 500 CEO," she added.

But students who are fixated on grades, test scores, and performance can find themselves in a lose-lose situation. Not only do they put their mental and physical health at risk, they often fail to develop the skills needed to successfully navigate life after high school.

"It turns out, if you're so focused on just doing what you need to do, you're missing out on really important developmental milestones as an adolescent," said Denise Pope, a senior lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. When basic chores, independence, and self-care

take a back seat to achievement, students can find it difficult to develop appropriate resilience and coping skills, she noted.

Roughly a decade ago, Pope helped form Challenge Success—a nonprofit organization focused on promoting student well-being and academic engagement. With more and more students setting their sights on highly selective colleges, the negative side effects of achievement culture have become more visible and a growing number of communities are sounding the alarm bell.

"I used to have to go into schools and kind of convince people this is a problem; you're going to have a crisis," said Pope. "Now we have schools coming to us."

Rising rates of teenage anxiety and depression helped prompt the shift. Although pinpointing the causes behind such increases is never easy, new research shows that stress—such as that experienced by students at hyper-competitive schools—can play a role.

A 2015 study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* found endemic levels of chronic stress among high-achieving students engaged in the college admission process. Researchers surveyed 128 juniors from two selective private high schools. Roughly half of all respondents said they felt a great deal of stress every day and just over a quarter of students reported depression symptom at clinically significant levels. Rates of substance use were one to two times greater than the national average.

School counselors are also pushing for changes, including altering school schedules and providing healthy outlets, like yoga classes, to help students manage their stress and develop healthy habits.

Because of the study's small size, its results cannot be generalized to describe the climate of all private or high-performing secondary schools. But many counselors and independent educational consultants report seeing unprecedented levels of stress among the students they serve, with anxiety over college admission cropping up earlier and earlier.

At the same time, families continue to seek out both public and private high-performing schools specifically because of the rigorous courses and plentiful extracurriculars they offer.

ENCOURAGING BALANCE

Sleep deprivation. Hours of homework. Bouts of anxiety and depression. Does that sound like the best years of anyone's life?

Yet an increasing number of high schoolers report feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the classes and extracurricular activities they pursue in hopes of strengthening their college applications.

"We're allowing college admission to drive so many decisions, to drive what our kids do at all hours of the day," said Brennan Barnard, director of college counseling and outreach at The Derryfield School (NH). "And as parents and schools, we're not drawing a line saying: You shouldn't do this all and you don't have to."

Here are four ways counselors can help students take a more balanced approach to the college admission process.

Push for school-based reforms. Block schedules, later school start times, and homework policies that minimize busy work can help dial down student stress without sacrificing academic rigor.

"I think we really need to look at what we're asking them to do every day," Barnard said. "Are we really preparing them for what they're going to see in college? Or are we just creating a situation where it's a grind?"

Encourage early reflection. A student's high school résumé should reflect their interests and talents. Encouraging students to explore their interests early on can discourage teens from haphazardly loading up on courses and activities to impress colleges.

At Adlai E. Stevenson High School (IL), counselors meet with freshmen following their first semester.

"We ask them to think about what they liked and what went well, whether that's a class, an activity, or even something outside of school," said counselor Daniel Miller. "Then we help them find ways they can continue that interest and identify action steps moving forward. It's not about throwing college in their face—it's about encouraging them to seek out those things that are fun or meaningful to them."

Don't rush college discussions. "There's been a mantra for a while that the sooner you start planning for college, the better," said Mike Dunn, director of college counseling at AIM Academy (PA). "I think that's true for parents who are planning financially for college. But developmentally, not every student is ready to start thinking about an absolute future when they are 14 or 15 years old."

Instead of early college visits, Dunn encourages students to uncover what they interested in and develop an "internal motivation to do academic work."

"The purpose shouldn't be: I want to build my college résumé," Dunn said.

Use data to dispel myths. Much of college admission mania is driven by fear. Sharing the facts can make it easier for students and parents to embrace balance.

"The average four-year college in America accepts 60-some odd percent (of applicants)," said Jodi Rosenshein Atkin, an independent college admission consultant based in Rochester, New York. "I tell my students, if you're not chasing Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Yale—if we look at places that are better fits—then there's a really solid chance that you're going to get into school somewhere and you don't have to have 12 APs to do it."

It's a delicate situation, admits Drew University's Massa. "You can take two individuals doing exactly the same thing—one loves it and thrives on it; one is doing it only because they think they have to. It's the latter that I'm concerned about."

RECALIBRATING THE PROCESS

Counselors on both sides of the desk share those worries—and they're taking steps to help their students manage stress and embrace a healthier path through adolescence.

A growing number of admission professionals are discussing new ways to evaluate prospective students. Massa himself is co-founder of the Institute on Character and Admission, which seeks to elevate non-cognitive, character-related attributes in the admission process. He's also involved with the Turning the Tide initiative. That effort, spearheaded by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, seeks to transform the college admission process, in part by relieving "excessive achievement pressure."

"But here's the rub, if we—meaning college admission offices—say we're concerned about non-cognitive factors, we need to behave that way," said Massa, who previously worked in admission at Dickinson College (PA) and Johns Hopkins University (MD). "We can't have the smallest difference in a student's academic profile become a reason to deny or put on a wait list. We have to find ways to recalibrate the process."

School counselors are also pushing for changes, including altering school schedules and providing healthy outlets, like yoga classes, to help students manage their stress and develop healthy habits. And like their colleagues on the college-side, counselors are having tough conversations—in this case, with the students and families they serve.

When rising seniors at Adlai E. Stevenson High School in suburban Chicago meet with counselor Daniel Miller, he starts the conversation with a few simple questions: "Why these classes? What's the bigger purpose? What's the bigger picture?"

Ninety-eight percent of the school's students go on to attend college, so teens seek out rigorous curriculum and activities to help them prepare. The school offers nearly 30 AP courses, and it's not unusual for students to have taken 10 or more AP classes by the end of their junior year.

But Miller and his colleagues tell students: "If you're taking these classes just because you think a college wants you to take them, we're not a huge fan of it. We want you to take a class you like, a class that could help you balance out your day."

There is no magic formula for admission to the most selective colleges, Miller informs his rising seniors. It's much better to bet on yourself—follow your interests, do what makes you happy, and the rest will fall into place.

"Sometimes you get to see a sort of 'ah-ha' moment happen for students," said Miller. He keeps a copy of his school's course catalogue close at hand to remind students of the variety of electives—from gourmet foods to fashion design—that are available alongside the school's advanced curriculum. "We tell them we want them to be happy and we hope that continues into their college and then adult life," he said.

Those types of interventions are most likely to be successful when paired with school-wide initiatives that promote balance, counselors say. Staff at Adlai E. Stevenson High School, for instance, recently did away with the school's "300 Club," which previously extended membership to students who completed 300 hours of community service.

"We didn't want students to be logging all these hours just for the recognition they would get at graduation," Miller said. "We wanted them to focus on the quality of those experiences, not the quantity. We wanted to shift the culture."

Bringing in speakers or recent grads to act as "myth busters" can also offer perspective to stressed-out high schoolers, said Lehigh University's Andrew Mallett. As a teen, he believed the college admission process—for better or worse—was destined to leave a mark on his life. Where he got in, he believed, would determine his success.

Now on "the other side," he knows it's not true. It isn't about where you go to college, Mallett said. It's about what you do with your time there.

Unlike in high school—when he felt like he was ticking off items on a "college checklist"—Mallett now invests his time in activities and courses that he truly enjoys. The accounting major works as a campus tour guide, plays club lacrosse, and tutors local elementary school students.

"College isn't about (name) recognition—that's the advice I give to students," Mallett said. "It's what you make of the education. That's the whole point of school."

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