

Are the Best Minds of a Generation Being Destroyed by Madness?

By Scott White

What's going on here? I have more students than ever suffering from anxiety, depression, anorexia and panic attacks, particularly among the highest achieving students. A student once told me she loved to read, but with five AP courses, sport practices, SAT prep and community service, she had little time to do it. An article by James Fallows in the *Atlantic Monthly* quoted one student saying: "Very few students get enough sleep. They get either too much or not enough exercise. We don't go for moderation—you can't, because the hype is so high" (2001, 46). Are we damaging the best and the brightest of our nation's youth, perhaps permanently and unnecessarily?



Scott White has been a counselor at Montclair High School (NJ) for the past eleven years. Previously, he held counseling and admission positions at Montclair Kimberley Academy (NJ), McBurney School (NY), Bard College (NY) and Oakwood School (NY). He is a graduate of Swarthmore College (PA) and the Harvard Graduate School of Education (MA). He has regularly published and led panels on such topics as ethics in college admission and disclosure issues.

The common thread among these students at my school, and I suspect at many high schools across the country, is the obsessive desire to obtain admission to the most elite colleges. Denise Clark Pope has aptly noted that for students, "future success is more important than present happiness" (2001, 155). These students, our future leaders and thinkers, are not happy and are not healthy. And things are only getting worse. Psychologist David Elkind agrees. "The truth is," he says, "advantaged children are less well off today than they were a couple of decades ago" (1981, xiii).

What drives these students is the perceived need to do whatever it takes to get into a “good” or “great” college. Students and parents walk into my office wanting to know the “secret” that will make the difference between acceptance and denial. If it’s a game, they want to know the rules. Bruce Poch, dean of admissions at Pomona College claims that “things have gotten worse and more game-like, although the strategic approach seems particularly acute in upper and middle class families and schools.”

They perceive that there is a flow chart, an instruction sheet on what they need to do, and all will be okay. It is difficult to let them know, usually in some indirect way, that it is more of function of who they are, rather than what they do that matters most in this process. By the time they meet with me late in their junior year, most of what matters in college admission has already occurred. Colleges want students who have shown long-term, in-depth interest and true talent in extracurricular activities. Spending next summer on an Indian reservation will not accomplish that for you. They want students who have shined academically throughout high school. Those few B’s and, God forbid, C’s, do matter.

The sad truth is that the best most students can do is not screw things up. They take that killer schedule and get impressive grades in their senior year, but their application file will be read and rated before those senior grades ever come in. Sure, it’s great if a student can write that rare “knock your socks off” essay. When I asked a University of Chicago admission counselor to read an essay from a student who was applying to (and was later admitted to) Harvard, he described it as “serviceable.” In most cases, that is all that is necessary. A strong argument can be made that things like the personal essay and the interview are largely in place to give students some illusion that they have some control in the process.

“The way I stressed the importance of the essay while recruiting was frankly disingenuous,” notes Rachel Toor in *Admissions Confidential*. “By the time they were hearing me talk, there was little they could do to bolster their candidacies and, in reality, the only part of the process in which they had complete control was their essays. So I made them think it was an important thing for them to work on if only to help them feel that they weren’t helpless” (2001, 107–108).

Certainly, students are acting as if they have no control. Much of the behavior I am seeing in students is quite similar to the phenomenon Martin Seligman describes in his book, *Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death*, during the early 1990s. In it he describes studies he and others have done where a lack of perceived control results in hopelessness and helplessness. “The kind of behavior I am seeing in my “best” students leads me to believe that the term “learned helplessness,” coined by Seligman, accurately describes the wrenching experience that students, and in many cases, parents, are going through. “It seems like a judgment of not just your child,” comments one parent, “but of your parenting, all your hopes” (as quoted in Roiphe 2001, 5)

The Admission Process

Why did this happen? Who is responsible for it? What impact will it have on the future well being of these students?

Certainly there has been a dramatic change in the last 25 years in the perception of college admission in our society. Where there were once one or two books on the how-tos of college admission, now there are whole sections in bookstores. Rarely would you see articles in major publications on the college admission process—now they regularly make the front page of the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. Clearly there has been a societal momentum in this direction for a number of years and it has now taken on a life of its own.

Much of what feeds this frenzy, though, is a lack of coherence in the college admission process. Few colleges accurately and effectively communicate how they choose their students and, more importantly, why they have the policies and procedures that are in place.

“Colleges do not want any rules,” notes independent counselor Tedd Kelly, “except those that protect the elite institutions and work to keep it that way, since they can keep control away from the students and families.” Most colleges have rating systems for applicants, but few make them public. Perhaps this is out of fear that there will be even a greater perception that there is a game to be beat. But just as likely, they may not be proud of what these rating systems might show.

For one, the system is inherently unfair and not student centered.

“I am continually frustrated by the vague and misleading statistics that colleges report,” states Bridget McHugh, counselor at Fairfield High School in Connecticut, “as if it were a mystery to them as to which students might get in.”

There is a lot of talk about college admission offices working to find the best match between each student and each college and university. To be fair, this is true to a great extent. I do believe that the brightest and most talented students end up at the most selective universities and that most students do go to colleges where they are challenged appropriately. It is little secret, though, that the final outcome as to whether a student is admitted or denied has as much to do with institutional priorities as it has to do with the academic strengths of the students admitted.

We are provided with information on average SAT I and II scores and class rank of admitted and enrolled students and we often believe that they have some meaning (i.e., that about half of students who are admitted fall above and about half fall below that number—median figures would actually show this, but are rarely provided). Yet we know that there are a significant number of students who skew these statistics. Most highly selective colleges give preference to students who are recruited athletes, underrepresented minority students (usually African American and Hispanic) and “legacy” students whose parents went to the college. Michelle Hernandez, in *A is for Admissions*, notes that at Dartmouth, 17 percent of the freshman class is made up of recruited athletes and 12 percent are underrepresented minority students and, at Yale, legacies make up 15 percent of the student body. At the most selective colleges, according to Hernandez, only 60 percent of the spaces in a freshman class are left for students with no admission “hook.”

Some colleges treat students whose parents went to graduate school as legacies. Others give preference to students whose grandparents or siblings attended the institution. Most colleges seek to enroll the children of their professors and almost every college seeks famous students or the children of famous people. One highly selective university went so far as to use the term “non-special interest” applicant in their admission literature. Another institution has a huge number of “dean’s admits,” who are frequently prospective students recommended by the development office as having a connection to a potential or actual donor.



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The truth is that these special cases are not mere exceptions, but may make up as much as half of the enrolled student body. And it is also true that there is a benefit to having these students on campus. Having a diverse student body makes the campus experience richer. Certainly one need only to look at Boston College's selectivity after Doug Flutie's Hail Mary pass or Georgetown's admission statistics following the Patrick Ewing era to see the connection between athletics and prestige of an institution. Furthermore, taking steps to keep alumni and donors happy contributes to the financial health of an institution, allowing it to keep costs down, offer better financial aid, improve facilities and hire the best faculty.

But, it is equally true that many students who are in these groups have standardized test scores and class rankings that are well below the mean of other accepted students. It is necessary for colleges to accurately give statistical analysis of the admitted and enrolled students who are not part of what they designate as special cases.

What's Best for Students?

One of the most intractable problems in college admission is that there is not a clear congruence between what is best for students and what is most desirable in terms of college admission. Here, there has to be some sharing of blame between parents and students who obsessively do what they perceive is necessary to gain admission to the most selective colleges and admission professionals who give into this by raising the bar higher and higher. Take the example of the rigor of the student's senior year schedule. I was admitted (25 years ago) to all the colleges I applied to, three of which are generally considered among the most selective, with a schedule consisting of AP physics, AP calculus, electives in English and history and no foreign language. If a student comes to me suggesting a schedule like this, I inform them that they will likely be out of the running for the most selective colleges. I'll go out on a limb here, but I think it is unhealthy for students to take AP courses in five or six subjects in their senior year.

"One thing that has become clear," notes Poch, "at many colleges there is a growing concern about students with significant problems that spill out into all kinds of destructive forms, from alcohol and drug related problems to eating disorders to clinical depression. How much of this is a result of crushing pressure and painfully high expectations, I don't know."

A frequent question I hear from students and parents at highly selective college admission presentations is "should I (or my child) take tougher courses and get B's or get A's in a weaker schedule." The answer is almost universally the same: "to get in, you should get A's in the toughest schedule." College admission books "explain that if kids are to have any chance at a top college, they must pursue the most rigorous curriculum available to them," according to counselor Caitlin Flanagan in her article, "Confessions of a Prep School Counselor." Flanagan argues that it is true that students should take the most difficult courses in preparation for applying to elite institutions, but: "It is also true that such a curriculum is going to crush a lot of kids. A regimen of brutal academic hazing may be appropriate in some disciplines for medical student or Ph.D. candidates, but it is not appropriate for fifteen-year-olds" (2001, 55).

There is also a conflict between what parents may want (i.e., well-rounded children) and the goal of those making college admission decisions: well-rounded classes. What many good parents want for their children is for them to be emotionally healthy, have a variety of interests and friends and that they are happy. Sure, we'd like our kids to be really good at something, especially when we are talking with other parents at cocktail parties, but this isn't the highest priority. In the admission world, it is truly valued that students have one talent and interest that stands out. A few maxims in college admission: "we want well-rounded classes, not well-rounded students" and "the students who get admitted here are not just talented, but distinguished." Both, I believe, are true at the most selective colleges. Fred Hargadon, dean of admissions at

Princeton, recently noted that plenty of students at Princeton displayed an unusual degree of excellence in even more than one area. The bar was notched up for all students that day.

Author and former admission officer at Duke University, Rachel Toor also acknowledges that many students applying to college excel in many areas: “what’s hard is that there are so many applicants and they all look so much alike” (2001). Anne Roiphe, a reporter for the *New York Observer*, has commented similarly on the uniformity of many college applicants: “children are too young to be distinguishable” (2001). As early as 1981, David Elkind critiqued the trend to overwhelm children with responsibility in his book *The Hurried Child, Growing Up Too Fast, Too Soon*. He wrote:

Hurrying children into adulthood violates the sanctity of life by giving one period priority over another. But if we really value human life, we will value each period equally and give unto each stage of life what is appropriate to that stage. (202)

College admission personnel need to acknowledge, consider, and act upon the awesome degree of control they have over the nation’s youth seeking to be admitted into college. A huge number of students will do anything they think will help them get into college. If suddenly the main criterion for admission was perceived to be large biceps, these students would spend every waking hour doing arm curls. There are few students who are acting spontaneously and naturally. At an increasingly earlier age, there is calculated behavior to beat the college admission game. It is not all bad. There is a perception out there that it is necessary to do community service to get into college, so hospitals are flush with candy strippers and food banks are full of volunteers seeking to pad their résumés. But is that what community service is about? Isn’t the goal of having students volunteer lessened when it is done with such a self-conscious aim? And doesn’t this minimize the impact of the service students have always done which is truly genuine?



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A Few Modest Suggestions

Maybe we have gone too far and cannot go back. We can't erase the national obsession with college admission. Like when a relationship ends and the couple unsuccessfully tries to be friends, it is often impossible to regain an innocence of the past. Yet there are things that the college admission community can do to ameliorate the negative effects of the process on our nation's youth.

College lists, like those published by *US News and World Report*, flourish because of the lack of clear alternatives for accurate and reliable information. Many colleges seek to be all things to all students and to encourage as many students, even clearly unrealistic candidates, to apply. It is a laudable goal to find that "diamond in the rough," but not at the expense of the scores of students whose hopes are dashed unnecessarily. Colleges need to provide a breakdown of admitted and enrolled students by the measures they themselves use. Statistics of admitted students, who do not fit into a special category such as legacy or athlete, should be provided.

There are a few college policies, which if enacted more widely, would improve the lot of the nation's students. For students, early decision, rather than helping improve the match between students and colleges, has become a way of alleviating suffering. Northwestern University makes only two decisions on early decision: accept or deny. The most common practice of deferring early decision applicants prevents students from realistically going about the business of applying to appropriate colleges.

"I cannot for the life of me see why admission people don't simply deny kids they don't take early decision," notes counselor Dodge Johnson. He continues:

No testicular fortitude, maybe. Hedge bets, avoid dealing with folks who don't like the decision. But I have terrible time convincing kids to let go of an impossible dream and focus on something more realistic. And frankly, I wish they would all do what Syracuse does—no wait list. Administering a college is *not* like administering a corporation, any more than administering a church or family is like administering a corporation. Sales and marketing techniques applied to colleges have mostly served to homogenize how colleges describe themselves and colleges increasingly describe the students they want rather than those they work best with.

Though I appreciate the goals of things like online applications and the Common Application, which reduce the difficulty of applying to college, I believe University of Chicago's difficult and erudite application questions discourage unrealistic and inappropriate students from applying. There should be some standards for the rigors of a senior year schedule. Taking four courses in the major subjects at the school's highest level should be communicated as sufficient for admission and boosting a schedule to 5 AP or IB courses should not be given extra weight in the admission process. William Fitzsimmons offers this possible solution: "colleges can help themselves as well as their prospective students by declaring (and demonstrating) that they are not judged simply by the number of AP and other advanced credits amassed at the end of the senior year" (2001, 5). Students should be discouraged from taking too many standardized tests by providing alternative measures of aptitude as Hamilton College has done.

There also has to be a dramatic change in the way advantaged parents are raising their children. They must let children be children.

"Sports, music, dance and other recreational activities used to provide a welcome break," notes Fitzsimmons. "No more...In high school, SAT prep has become a way of life. The problem can often be well meaning, but misguided parents who try to mold their children into an image of success they value; and their children, being moldable as they are, often get on board and go along with the program before they have the capacity to make such a choice for themselves" (2001, 2, 8).

Flanagan describes a kind of "fetishistic sense of power being able to associate your child with one of these (elite) schools' parents" (2001, 53). She continues to say that these parents "who had always been lovely and appreciative would become irritable and demanding once I was helping them all select a college" (2001, 58).

In his article "The Early Decision Racket," James Fallows, national correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly*, points out: "The wonder is that getting through the admission gate at a name brand college should have come to seem the fundamental point of middle-class child rearing" (2001, 49).

It is difficult to avoid the frenzy, particularly considering the media attention on the subject. Flanagan describes what she calls “admission porn” in the form of how-to college guides that “add to the impression that kids are not merely applying to college but are in fact involved in a drama of almost life-and-death consequence. The teenagers described in such books have transferred the most profound and elemental of adolescent emotions—romantic attraction—onto the most unromantic of pursuits—college selection” (2001, 55).

College counselor Martha Philips-Patrick recognizes that the most competitive students are not healthy or happy.” She calls the college admission process an “induced problem...a parental problem, the result of a perverse value system that promotes form over substance and self over all else.”

College counselors want what is best for the individual student. Unfortunately, there is no quick remedy for the intense anxiety facing students and parents in the college admission process. Marc James of Charles Wright Academy suggests a first step to solving the problem. “My short answer” he says, “is to stand in favor of urging students and parents to do what is healthy and what is true to the core values and inspirations of the individual.” Nancy Scarci of the Roosevelt School proposes another apt recommendation—we need “to educate families that no college is a silver bullet that will ensure fame, fortune and happiness.”

Clearly, something needs to be done to abate the highly competitive nature of college admission, or at least make students and parents aware that which college a student attends does not guarantee a happy or prosperous future. High schools need to stop measuring their success only by the number of admissions into the most selective colleges. Parents need to stop living vicariously through their children by pushing them too early and too hard to focus on the college process. The media needs to focus more on the college experience for students than on the admission process. College admission officers, as they expect of their applicants, need to define and distinguish themselves and their admission processes. And students need to look for colleges that are the best match for them rather than merely the most selective college to which they can gain admission.



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