

# Opinion: Time to ease pressure on overachievers for college admissions?

By Rick Montgomery and Joe Robertson, Kansas City Star on 02.16.16

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Wilson Liang, 17, poses for a portrait at Galileo High School in San Francisco, California, Dec. 18, 2009. Applicants face one of the toughest years ever to gain admission to U.S. public colleges and universities as schools grapple with deep budget cuts and record numbers of applications. Photo: AP/Russel A. Daniels

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The elites of higher education now seem on the same page with a broad swath of Americans concerned about a generation driven to achieve.

They're saying: Our cultural quest to construct super-accomplished, resume-armed, Ivy League-bound teens is doing this nation no good and perhaps damaging millions of its kids.

Some students have mixed feelings about that assessment.

Many are lauding academia's stated wish to ease pressure on youngsters who feel they must earn near-perfect test scores to attain a bright future. Others wonder how colleges can measure the attributes they say they're seeking — "character," "passion" and such.

From Harvard University came a report this month that framed new criteria for the most selective colleges to consider when weighing the types of applicants they should select.

Look for “caring” and “ethical.” Rank the quality of their achievements over the quantity. Enroll young people focused on pursuing a genuine passion rather than just those determined to compile a list of far-flung activities.

Consider less decorated high-schoolers who have committed time to a sick relative or juggled jobs to help their families. Fixate less on those spending their formative years consumed by a perceived need to massage college entrance test marks or amass extracurricular endeavors, the report advised.

The findings and recommendations of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, titled “Turning the Tide,” drew the endorsement of more than 50 U.S. colleges and universities, prep schools, mental health groups and think tanks.

It also stirred skepticism among critics of the college admissions process.

“Giving students a high-minded outline for becoming better applicants doesn’t change the underlying problem,” wrote Sara Harberson, founder of a website called Admissions Revolution, in The Huffington Post. “Institutional biases continue to corrupt a process that should be pure and noble.”

And what’s the thinking of local students indoctrinated in a culture of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses, test preparation and ferocious competition to be noticed by the prestige institutions?

This gentler, passion-fed approach sounds good, say top high school seniors who have been through the enrollment wringer.

In fact, admissions counselors they visited at plum universities along the way had already urged them to “be yourself, pursue your passion, don’t just pad your resumes.”

But it’s hard to trust them. In this kind of race, it’s hard to ease off the gas pedal.

“You don’t really know what’s in their heads,” Blue Valley Northwest High School senior Suruchi Ramanujan said about those deciders of who gets in and who doesn’t.

“Yeah, sure,” said classmate Claudia Chen. “‘Be yourself’ — as long as your self likes this and this and this and this.”

They laugh about it now. They feel lucky. Ramanujan has been accepted to Harvard and Chen to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And they made it while being themselves, mostly.

They both, however, added AP history to their class schedules on top of all their high-level math and science, though their enthusiasm for history was, well, scant.

## **More Balanced, Less Frazzled**

In recent years, college admissions directors nationwide have joined a growing chorus calling for “holistic” evaluations of applicants, especially at the most pricey and ultraselective schools.

Hundreds of colleges have made optional the submission of ACT and SAT college entrance exam scores. Many now require that applicants write personal essays to reveal what their GPAs do not.

The Harvard report sets forth many objectives.

One is to reduce stresses on teenagers who plow into more advanced courses than they need. Another is to diversify the student body at prestigious colleges. A third is to provide opportunities and hope to young scholars who might not apply to such places because their high school scores aren't stellar.

And finally, admissions criteria should aim to help young people become more generous and "caring of others."

High school students "often perceive colleges as simply valuing their achievements, not their responsibility for others and their communities," said the report co-authored by the education school's Richard Weissbourd and Lloyd Thacker, executive director of the Education Conservancy. "While some colleges have diligently sought to convey to applicants the importance of concern for others and the common good, many other colleges have not."

Searching for more balanced and less frazzled college prospects isn't an entirely new mission among elite schools. But Harvard's critique, coming during the season when applications spike, signals that admissions offices are serious about leveling the playing field between manic achievers and the best of the rest, said Stuart Schmill, dean of admissions at MIT.

"There's become a bit of a mismatch between what we really expect out of students and what they think we expect," said Schmill, one of the report's dozens of endorsers.

"The academics still need to be strong," he said, but many high school students might boost their chances by drilling into a favorite field of study rather than spreading themselves thin with a multitude of honors courses and activities.

But wait — weren't we all told something different?

What happened to the litany about top grades, school involvement and nose-to-the-homework being so critical to youth success and a prosperous career?

"If you're asking if colleges and educators bear some responsibility for this dysfunctional system we've got, oh yeah, I completely agree," said Michael Beseda, vice president for enrollment at Willamette University, another endorser of the Harvard report.

The dysfunction to which he refers has allowed privileged kids with the best resources to pack the halls of exclusive institutions. Rather than narrowing the gap between the haves and have-nots, "higher education has become an engine of greater inequality," Beseda said.

Super-selective schools have come under the harshest criticism — not only for steering the luckiest youths into the best-paying jobs, but also for promoting achievement and hoop-jumping over contentment and kindness.

The 2014 book “Excellent Sheep,” by former Yale University professor William Deresiewicz, skewered the Ivy League with accounts of students battling depression, eating disorders and thoughts of suicide.

David Cantwell, a counselor at Kansas City’s public Lincoln College Preparatory Academy, said Harvard’s assessment and the tide of endorsements reflect worries about a generation that elite schools helped create.

“I think they’ve discovered a void in the quality of the population they’ve attracted, being so test-centered,” he said.

## **What Students See**

Some students do see wisdom in the idea.

By casting a wider net to snare the right freshmen, prestigious schools might lift those who don’t have all of the resources for extra tutoring and test-prep books, some said.

David Lietjauw, a senior at Olathe North High School, knows the strain of limited family resources as he tries to take his engineering dreams to Rice University, or Washington University, or maybe Princeton.

“You hear about how you can pay someone to write your essays or get them edited,” he said.

And when he worried about his prep for the ACT, his mother suggested they could hire a tutor.

“But we looked on the Internet and, yeah, we couldn’t afford a tutor.”

So he loaded up with library books. And he spent much of his family’s vacation last year slipping into hotel lobbies with his laptop, writing and polishing essay after essay.

“That some may have the money” for editors and tutors “is creating more of a divide,” he said. “It feels like it’s rigged.”

Even as it goes now, at universities where the successful enrollments can be as low as 5 percent of all applicants, the odds seem as much outlandish as arbitrary, students said.

Rockhurst High School senior Daniel Henry considers himself fortunate, having been accepted at Stanford University. But he thinks of a close friend who missed out on getting into his choice university.

“He is the hardest worker, the most selfless person you’d ever meet,” Henry said, but when it came to his college application, “I think he was too humble.”

“It’s tough,” Henry said. “Admission is a crapshoot. You’re competing with an immense group of people.”

Talking about the laurels and services they achieved in high school is embarrassing to most of these students, who really want to retain their humility. So here are, without attaching them to specific students, some of the many items that made their various applications, many of these feats duplicated among the students:

Student council president. Founder of an anti-drug campaign. Debate club. Forensics. Young business entrepreneur. Founder of computer code writing class for girls. Tutor of classmates in 3-D printer programming. Volleyball. Baseball. Football. Track. Piano. Choir. Congressional Award medalist. Robotics team. Founder of tennis tournament for cystic fibrosis. Perfect ACT score. President of the Math and Science Honors Society. Science Olympiad. Newspaper editor.

This is only a partial list.

“I’m only in four,” Olathe North senior Alisha Gupta said, somewhat sheepishly, of her participation in organizations. “I know it sounds like a lot,” she added for those who don’t know just how intense this college game can be. She is aiming her political science and law school aspirations at the University of Chicago, Brown University and Georgetown.

“You struggle with it,” she said. “Am I doing this (club or service) because it will look good on my transcript? Or am I trying to do something that I like?”

“Everyone wants to be the person who does everything, but it’s impossible,” said Jared Gillen, a senior at the Barstow School. He is headed for Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.

But “you wonder,” he said. “Did I do enough? Regret creeps into your mind. I don’t know if it is possible to ease up.”

The difference in getting a college choice and coming up short “is so subtle,” Barstow senior Shanley Lenart said. “What if you got one more point on the ACT? What if you got one more A?”

Lenart has been accepted at Carnegie Mellon University as a chemical engineering student, but she had talked herself through the real possibility that her top choices might not happen.

“I had to lose some of the high school experience,” she said, meaning the social gatherings missed, the Saturday nights given to studies. “One of the scary parts are the questions: Will the work pay off?”

She had to banish the thought that if she missed out on Carnegie Mellon, how would she “prove what a good student I am? I had to convince myself that the name of the school didn’t matter.”

Chen at Blue Valley Northwest, only half as a joke, had put a photo of an MIT rejection letter as her phone background, to prepare for the worst.

That anxiety is not going to go away, regardless of whatever changes elite universities make to their admission process, said Olathe North senior Disha Dasgupta.

Managing the kind of stress she endured in gaining acceptance to the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena will still weigh on students.

“The intensity is as much as you make it,” she said. “You can keep putting things on your transcript, but you can never predict what colleges want.”

## **A Complex Problem**

Last week, about 150 people crowded into an auditorium at the Kansas City Public Library for a screening of “Race to Nowhere,” a documentary about American pupils succumbing to the pressures of academic overachievement.

Some educators blamed parents for expecting too much and overloading their kids’ schedules.

Some parents blamed educators for assigning homework that kept students up past midnight.

Some kids blamed high schools for standardized testing that required memorization they couldn’t retain.

A complex problem for sure, it all leads to students cheating on their assignments, illegally popping attention deficit disorder pills, even cutting themselves, noted the 2010 film produced by Vicki Abeles, an advocate of education reform.

At a panel discussion after the show, moderator R. Crosby Kemper III, the library system’s executive director, questioned whether society is becoming too “anti-homework” and sympathetic of youngsters who resist rigorous study. Christine Taylor-Butler, an author of children’s books and former interviewer for MIT admissions, urged more college preparation, especially in urban schools serving low-income students.

For those teens, a university scholarship might be a ticket out of poverty.

Several of the panelists observed that most of the families featured in the documentary appeared to be well-to-do — able to afford tutoring, test preparation seminars and music lessons. The film made little mention of the spiraling cost of higher education adding to stress levels.

At Lincoln Prep, senior Phillip Nguyen encounters that constant barrier of affordability just to get into the college preparation game.

“There are application fees, standardized test fees,” he said. “You have to pay to send ACT scores to a lot of schools. It costs just to be considered.”

He works part time as a barista, and he’s making his bid for Ivy League schools from Kansas City’s Northeast neighborhood. Not a privileged world.

Whether or not more colleges start practicing what Harvard is now preaching, some local students wonder if anything will make their paths less strenuous.

“The high reputations of these schools,” said Lincoln schoolmate Diana Gonzalez, are “enough to make you freak out. ...

“If I don’t have everything they’re asking for, I hope the other things about me come into play.”

## Quiz

- 1 Read the following sentence from the article.

*Fixate less on those spending their formative years consumed by a perceived need to massage college entrance test marks or amass extracurricular endeavors, the report advised.*

Which sentence below uses "massage" in the same way?

- (A) The store massages its regular customers with gifts and private sales.
  - (B) She massaged her leg until the numbness dissipated.
  - (C) Advertisements can massage a product's effectiveness to attract more sales.
  - (D) After speaking on the phone and jotting down notes on paper, he relayed the massage to his wife.
- 2 What purpose is served by including quotes of students applying to college?
- (A) The quotes give insight into the stress that is experienced by students who have felt the effects of an achievement-driven admissions process.
  - (B) The quotes describe the students' perspective on what increases the probability of being accepted into a college of your choice.
  - (C) The quotes explain the relationship between test scores, extracurricular activities and college admittance rate.
  - (D) The quotes describe and compares the high school experience of different students to show how hard they work.

- 3 Read the sentence from the article.

*Last week, about 150 people crowded into an auditorium at the Kansas City Public Library for a screening of "Race to Nowhere," a documentary about American pupils succumbing to the pressures of academic overachievement.*

What does the verb "succumbing" convey in this sentence?

- (A) a sense of hope that academic systems will be changed
- (B) a sense of tragedy regarding the effects of pressure
- (C) a sense that academic pressure is a natural part of school
- (D) a sense that American students are very weak

- 4 Why does the author choose to include the following paragraph in the section "A Complex Problem"?

*Whether or not more colleges start practicing what Harvard is now preaching, some local students wonder if anything will make their paths less strenuous.*

- (A) to show that there is an issue with college admissions focused on ACT and SAT scores
- (B) to highlight the relationship between Ivy League schools such as Harvard and the strain of applying to college
- (C) to emphasize that fewer students will begin applying to college
- (D) to demonstrate that students feel difficult college admissions is an institutionalized process

## Answer Key

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