

Public Perceptions of Academic Pressure and the Balance Between Achievement and Well-Being in Education

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ABSTRACT

This study derived its inspiration from Tim Donahue's *The New York Times* essay entitled "High Schoolers Have to Do Less So They Can Do Better" (September 7, 2024). Donahue's essay is important because it touches on the challenges High School students encounter in order to enter what society deems as "good colleges." Donahue states that the university or college admissions process is psychologically and physically draining on students and distracts them from genuine learning. Learning becomes a secondary process subordinated to achieving a symbolic status of attending a revered college or university. Reader reactions to Mr. Donahue's essay enhanced the relevance of the issue under consideration. Various parents, teachers and former students, based on their very own experiences, identified both problems and solutions in the comments section regarding the intense college admissions process. While some commenters noted how the existing system impacts students' psychological and intellectual health, others identified the root cause in society's narrow conception of success centered on external factors. Using the responses made to Mr. Donahue's piece at *The New York Times* as data, the primary objective of the study has been to critically examine the public's views on the pressures students face during the processes of making it to a "good school." Upon reviewing these comments, in this study, by way of thematic analysis, an attempt is made to highlight common themes, and, on the basis of the present author's personal experience, make modest recommendations to lessen the burden carried by students during college admission process.

Introduction

This study derived its inspiration from Tim Donahue's *New York Times* essay entitled "High Schoolers Have to Do Less So They Can Do Better" (September 7, 2024). Donahue's essay is important because it touches on the challenges High School students, like me, encounter in order to enter what society deems as "good colleges." Donahue states that the university or college admissions process is psychologically and physically draining on students and distracts them from genuine learning. Rather than concentrating on skills and knowledge, students frequently put emphasis on grades, extracurricular activities, and leadership positions to distinguish their applications. This pressure restricts student-time within certain zones, limiting students' real interests meanwhile hindering enjoyment of learning. Learning becomes a secondary process subordinated to achieving a symbolic status of attending a revered college or university.

Mr. Donahue was right on the point. Reader reactions to Mr. Donahue's essay enhanced the relevance of the issue under consideration even more. Various parents, teachers and former students, based on their very own experiences, identified both problems and solutions in the comments section regarding the intense college admissions process. While some commenters noted how the existing system impacts students' psychological and intellectual health, others identified the root cause in society's narrow conception of success centered on external factors.

This research examines these responses. The primary objective of the study is to critically examine the public's views on the pressures students face during the processes of making it to a "good school." Upon reviewing these comments, in this study, by way of thematic analysis, an attempt is made to highlight common themes, and, on the

basis of the present author's personal experience, make modest recommendations. Before we proceed to other aspects of the study, a brief note on the nature of Mr. Donahue's essay is orderly.

The Essay

Mr. Donahue essay in *The New York Times* article "High Schoolers Have to Do Less So They Can Do Better," is centered on six points. Firstly, Donahue notes the pervasiveness of grade inflation in High Schools throughout the country. Under this condition high grades are given so frequently that being valedictorian no longer seems like an additional special accomplishment. The title has increasingly become meaningless since many students are named valedictorians. Next, the essay demonstrates the pressure students feel to succeed in academics, athletics, clubs and personal life. Students are always busy and receive little rest as a result losing much time for deep learning.

Thirdly, Donahue stated that schools are much less about "deep learning" and much more about speed and quantity. For instance, the National Council of Teachers of English is suggesting students read pop culture materials rather than classic literature, and SAT reading through passages are getting shorter and less inventive making in-depth reading practically impossible. Fourth, Donahue says understanding and personal growth that call for time and focus are expected to happen within a short period of time. Students are not given the appropriate advice to pause and think. Instead they are forced to race through numerous tasks just to check items in a long list.

Fifthly, parents, kids, schools and teachers hear mixed messages. Each group comprehends what student achievement is differently and thus is engaged in at times contradictory goals. Sixth, more complicated by the very existence of conflicting perception is the fact that extracurricular activities meant to help students unwind and develop new hobbies impact students differently. Today students generally involved in these activities to reinforce their college applications are going through a difficult road that increases stress experienced by these students to a higher level. And lastly, Donahue rightly states that schools must create a lesser amount of academic and extracurricular demands on students. Concentrating on quality over quantity, according to him, might help students perform much better and lead healthier lives.

Research Questions

This study is based on the following two research questions: The questions are intended to provide a broader understanding of public perception on systemic pressures, society's expectations, mental health effects, educational goals in relation to college admissions process. The questions are:

1. How does the public view how parents' and society's expectations influence how students handle academics and extracurriculars?
2. From the perspective of parents and teachers, what are the impacts of the college admissions process on the mental and intellectual well-being of students?

Before we answer these questions based on the available data, let's see what researchers have said about the subject.

Literature Review

In order to have a better understanding of the issues under consideration and in order to put the study within the appropriate intellectual context, in this section an attempt is made to discuss relevant topics and themes highlighted by previous researchers. Accordingly, the topics reviewed include academic pressure, public perceptions of productivity, success in education, and cultural and socioeconomic influences on educational experiences. Let's consider each at a time.

Academic Pressure and Student Well-Being

A sizable body of literature links academic pressure to student wellbeing. Research indicates that chronic levels of academic stress could result in burnout, anxiety, and depression of students (Putwain, 2007). Luthar and Becker (2002) reported greater rates of mental health issues among high achiever schools than those in much less academically demanding settings, indicating the possible risks of high pressure. Alternatively, people who favor academic rigor point out challenging curricula as a path to student success, critical thinking, and resilience, an important factor that plays a critical role later in life. Duckworth et al (1995), accordingly, described “grit” as the ability to persist and overcome obstacles in the very long haul in order to attain long lasting success.

Cultural Narratives of Success and Productivity

Success is usually linked to individual accomplishments such as an impressive grade or test score as recognition for hard work in Western societies (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999). This perspective of success (at times referred to as the “achievement ideology” [Willis, 1977]) pushes students toward monotonous activities despite poor emotional and mental health outcomes. Some critics point out this narrow vision of success misses other components of personal growth including creativity and affective health. For instance, Noddings (2003) believes that education should be more balanced. From this perspective, as students are urged to “do more” to achieve “much more,” it is legitimate to ask whether grades and test scores serve as the best measures to gauge student real potential or skills for life.

Parental and Societal Expectations

Research indicates that parent attitudes toward school are associated with student opinions of education. Grolnick & Ryan (1989) found that children of parents with high academic standards experience stress. But they also discovered that when parents offer emotional support along with high expectations, students report less mental stress and also see challenges as opportunities to further develop in school. This important finding demonstrates the role of active parents in student life. Parents with appropriate resources and proper parenting skills play an important role in the intellectual as well as emotional well-being of their children. Unfortunately, the vice versa is true with students whose parents are constrained by time, parenting skills, and relevant resources.

Social Economic and Class Dynamics in Academic Pressure

A student’s family income could also influence their academic pressure. Research indicates that students from much more affluent families generally have much more resources to accomplish desired academic goals. Resources such as individual tutors, attending advanced classes, and extracurricular activities do help students making their college application look attractive (Reardon, 2011). These students might encounter increased academic pressure because of additional opportunities but are better ready to handle it because of the resources that are readily available to them. Conversely, students coming from lower-income families encounter academic strain. Studies do show that low-income students have fewer mental health facilities available to them to handle academic stress even when they have the passion to succeed intellectually (McLoyd, 1998).

Data and Methods

Data for this research come out of the diverse commentary readers offered as a response to Tim Donahue’s essay. These comments provide a rare window into the way the public views the pressures and struggles high school students encounter during the college admission processes. In these short commentaries, readers provided a total of 720

responses. The commentaries represent diverse viewpoints from students, educators, parents, along with various other stakeholders within the educational system. Some comments consist of personal anecdotes about the lives of those directly affected by the admissions “rat race.” Others provided critiques, insights, and suggestions for reform. Together, these comments give abundant qualitative information recoding the complexity and nuance of public sentiment on the topic. Yet despite the significance of these comments for capturing a good understanding of public perception on the issue, the utilization of such data isn’t without limitations. Thus, it is worth noting these limitations along with the benefits of using commentaries to newspaper articles as data.

Benefits and Limitations

Three benefits can be delineated. First, reader comments provide researchers with diverse perspectives on real life. The multi-varied comments stated in the newspaper provide insights not readily available in more formal studies. Relatedly, since the comments are usually informal, they allow researchers to intimate themselves with people’s genuine feelings that may not be found through prescribed interviews or survey formats. Lastly, using existing comments avoids having to locate and interview participants. In addition to the utilization of resources during the data collection process, the readily available comments enable the researcher to be engaged in fast analysis of massive amounts of data.

Yet there are three limitations that cannot be overlooked despite the advantages stated above. The most visible and noteworthy limitation is that researchers seldom know a lot about commenters’ backgrounds including their age range, gender, education or income. Occasionally, commentators provide information related to demographic information. Secondly, not everybody comments, therefore the ones that do might have strong views or individual experience in the topic. This can result in bias in the data, supplying over-representations of some ideas at the expense of others. Lastly, online comments are anonymous. Thus, some commentators have the leeway to exaggerate or offer extreme viewpoints in order to emphasize their points. The opportunity to gently challenge these respondents is missing. As a result, at times it is very hard to distinguish between comments that are sincere and those that are less sincere.

Data Analysis

In this study, the method utilized is the method of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is data analysis process that evaluates or reports on main themes or patterns (Braun, V., & Clarke, V., 2006). The method was selected because it helps researchers understand detailed complicated views in few themes that capture the main features in the data. In this study, thematic analysis is useful for examining the pressures and expectations of admission into elite colleges as understood by the public. The interpretation of the data is carried out in a two-step process. The steps include coding and thematic identification.

Coding and Theme Identification

The first step in the data analysis was reading through responses several times to understand the content better and take the first step in the identification of key patterns. Then an open coding procedure was followed, that is, marking parts of the text with key ideas or repeated topics. For instance, comments about balancing extracurriculars with advanced classes were considered “academic pressure” and mental health problems considered “mental burnout.” After that associated codes were placed under bigger categories which formed primary themes. For instance, codes such as academic burnout, anxiety, and mental fatigue were combined into the theme “Impacts on Student Mental Health.” In the second step, similar codes were put together to create categories. As a result, four themes emerged from the responses.

Findings

After thematic analysis was done four themes emerged. They include institutional pressures; expectations from parents and society; impacts on mental health; & criticisms of educational priorities. We'll examine each of them individually. These themes do address the two research questions under consideration. Whereas the themes "institutional pressures" and "expectations from parents and society" provide answer to the first question (How does the public view how parents' and society's expectations influence how students handle academics and extracurriculars?), the themes "impacts on mental health" and "criticisms of educational priorities" deal with the second question (From the perspective of parents and teachers, what are the impacts of the college admissions process on the mental and intellectual well-being of students?)

Institutional Pressures

Respondents note that elite college admissions are more competitive and add stress to candidates. Highly selective schools expect excellence in all areas, both in academic and extra-curricular activities. This, as one commentator put it, means that students are required almost perfectly to balance between "multiple AP classes, sports and internships at the cost of meaningful learning engagement." Along this line, respondents note that some policies of these schools leave students with very few options. One parent complained that "Harvard banning early decision applications forced my kid to attend just one college." This response shows a contradiction in the college admission process: Though colleges encourage mental health, their policies can add stress by requiring students to make everything count toward one outcome only. Such requirements make elite colleges both gatekeepers of opportunity and causes of student stress.

Expectations of Parents and Society

Parents whose views are shaped by societal expectations could add pressure unintentionally to the already difficult process of applying to selected colleges and universities. Getting into a top college as one of the marks of ultimate achievement is among the cultural expectations that spurs some parents to encourage their children into stiff competition. From this vantage point, as one respondent stated, "It's not enough for students being fantastic in one area anymore, they must be in every manner well-rounded." Many respondents admit that this sort of hard to achieve societal demand for excellence in academics, sports, music and community service is often exhausting and puts achieving above personal interest. Some parents thus wrongly equate success with just external recognition at the expense of student "well-being and individual interests." Others oppose the grueling task. One parent, for example, said they "opted from the college admissions' 'arms race' to safeguard their child's mental health" and instead applied to less competitive schools.

Impacts Upon Student Mental Health

A psychological health toll of college admissions was a recurring theme as were burnout, anxiety, and exhaustion. As one professor described it, some students show up to college already exhausted: "They're burned out when they get here [that is, to a college or university]. They have spent their high school years attempting to become perfect in every respect." The pressure to keep top academic and extracurricular records generally leads to students sacrificing personal time and rest. Some parents described their children's anxiety in high stakes environments where they worry about failure continuously. One parent said, "My son wound up in high school constantly concerned about missing in some area or another and having anxiety attacks." These quotes demonstrate just how focusing on achievements alone could stunt students' ability to handle stress and keep balanced, healthy learning.

Critiques of Educational Priorities

Respondents noted that current educational priorities emphasize on measurable accomplishments overtake the intellectual curiosity and undermine the “deep learning” processes students should experience at high schools. Some parents directly attacked curricula that favor pop culture over classic texts. In their view such actions compromise academic rigor. To emphasize on this point, a retired professor insisted that the emphasis must be on “teaching great books” and “allowing students to interact in the content instead of on test scores.” Similarly, another educator observed that “curriculums are more about pop culture and electronic mediums than about in-depth learning and critical thinking.” These critiques reflect a desire to have an approach to education which values genuine engagement and intellectual growth over competition and superficial accomplishments that could have a long-range harmful impact on society.

Conclusion

This study shows that college admissions processes affect students in a number of ways. The competition for acceptance to top colleges can lead students to burnout and seriously compromise their intellectual and emotional well-being. This demands a change in educational values and admissions models that place students’ personal growth and mental health before their conventional academic success. One parent said, “We want an educational system which values students’ wellbeing as much as their achievements.” Lastly, balanced education prepares high school kids for academic and life success.

Recommendations

This study clearly shows that students pass through a difficult process in order to get into their dream college or university. In order to lessen the burdens involved in the process, there are some steps that could be taken to help students feel more supported. The following steps, I believe, could ease the stresses students encounter during the admission process. They include:

1. Colleges need to develop admissions models that put emphasis on individual growth, resilience, and individual passions. These models should include ways that allow students to extricate themselves from assumptions and goals that are hard to attain. Students must be treated as evolving individuals constrained by a variety of social factors including their personal desires and goals.
2. High schools should provide mental health services and student guidance toward manageable academic loads instead of indirectly suggesting intricate schedules that are seemingly taken to mean the best road to academic success.
3. The societal concept of success must remodel. The focus must be on meaningful education that emphasizes on a healthy university acceptance process. Shifting these priorities can support student participation in a balanced activity that contributes to both high school and beyond the education system.

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