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Effects of the College Admission Process on Adolescent Development

No matter on which side of the college admission desk we sit, our job title often includes “counselor,” implying that we have a working knowledge of adolescent psychology, and the biological, emotional and social factors imbedded in this period of crisis and change.

Yet often in the business—and the busy-ness—of our jobs, we lose sight of the unique needs of those we serve. If we remind ourselves of these needs, we may be able to see our work, our processes and our choices in new ways.

By definition, adolescence begins with the onset of puberty (often starting earlier now) and ends when adult responsibilities are assumed (often starting later). This is a very long period of enormous change and rapid growth, physically, socially, sexually, cognitively, emotionally, motivationally, and morally. Adolescents are moving from dependence to independence, from childhood and into adulthood, from parent-protected to self-regulated—and the college process intervenes, often for up to a year and a half, in the midst of an unfinished journey.

Erik Erikson, the seminal thinker on womb-to-tomb psychology, espoused that through adolescence, normal human growth moves through ages and stages, with certain desired psychosocial outcomes. In adolescence, he characterized the developmental task as *Identity vs. Role Confusion*. The young person asks, “Who am I?” and learns a sense of self in relationships, of fitting in individually, with a group and society, finding a place to belong and abilities to contribute to the common good.

Managing this stage requires balance and time for it to evolve. It is neither desirable to rush children into adulthood, nor to slow the pace and protect them from demands. However, this balance is often thrown out of whack by aspects of the college process. It can trigger regressions back through the previous developmental stages, thus creating its own

kind of psychosocial crisis. During this college-centered developmental crisis high school juniors or seniors:

- cannot trust that things will work out in the end
- think that the college environment cannot be counted on
- confuse “need” and “want”
- sense a loss of control because the admission decision rests in a stranger’s hand, and
- have nagging feelings of incompetence and uncertainty.

Establishing an Identity

Teens don’t think, “Who am I?” on a conscious level, yet finding the answer is one of the most critical tasks of adolescent development. Because of cognitive growth in the brain, teenagers begin to see the relationship between their current abilities and plans for future aspirations. They can figure out what they are good at and identify areas in which they are willing to strive. They integrate the opinions of influential others (e.g., parents, other adults, friends, etc.) into their preferences. The outcome is, hopefully, a young adult who has a clear sense of his or her values, beliefs, occupational goals, and relationships. Mature people with secure identities know where they do and do not fit. However, while their identities are still forming, high school seniors are forced to decide on majors—an extension of deciding on a career.

Neurobiological Factors

A teenaged brain contains an exhausting mélange of learning, stress and sex hormones and is constantly morphing. Teenagers have many unfinished connections in the cerebellum, striatum and prefrontal cortex [PFC], which will not completely connect until they are in their 20's (male brains may take longer because of the delay in sex hormone production).

One area of greatest change is the frontal lobe and the PFC, “the CEO of the Brain,” or the area of “sober-second thought.” It is responsible for organization, planning, reasoning, mood regulation, impulse control, and sensitivity to feedback. This is the last of the areas to reach development, but adults may expect more advanced PFC skills in the college process than the teenaged brain is ready for.

A college-bound Romeo or Juliet is blinded by that first flush of college passion after the “light through yonder window breaks” on some campus visit. Adults urge them to make reasoned, informed, researched decisions, and then file applications with the executive mastery of a seasoned administrative assistant. When students are disorganized, impulsive, irrational, and sensitive, we're flummoxed. This is their brain on high hopes, unable to keep up with adult values, expectations and assumptions.

One nagging question lies at their developmental center: “What if I come out of this college process a loser?” Our society fosters attitudes of competition and success. College admission has become the “College Game,” complete with “Winners” and “Losers,” those powerful measures of personal achievement, worth and merit—with halo effects on parents, schools and communities. “Who I am” gets intermingled with “Who I could/should be as determined by that college acceptance, with that ranking, in this pecking order of prestige in my particular school, family or community.”

“The Expectation Continuum”

Some of the overt or covert messages adolescents receive contribute to their disequilibria, with a growing force that can be coined “The Expectation Continuum.”

- Gee, I wish that...
- I hope that...
- I expect that...
- I demand that...

Imagine that you are someone whose opinion matters

to the teenager. Say each statement above, and finish them with the name of any desirable college acceptance. As you progress down the continuum toward increased expectations, this intensifies the emotionality, thus increasing the potential for tension and conflict, and exacerbating anxiety, stress, shame, disappointment and anger.

Pressure from Outside Forces

Adolescents are subject to the influences of a number of external forces. Think of a busybody Aunt Sadie, who is in the family's business at key moments in life's transitions: engagements, pregnancies, childbirth, and college planning. She needs to know everything. She is the expert, knows what is best for that family and argues to the point of exhaustion. To compound matters, she gossips about family business with everyone else.

“The Aunt Sadie Factor” can bring with it: unsolicited advice, loss of privacy, judgment, embarrassment, shame, second-guessing, doubt, and misinformation. This upsets or even paralyzes that same adolescent (motivated by image, approval and the avoidance of shame) with feelings of inferiority. Of course, Aunt Sadie goes beyond relatives. “She” is also the student's peers; high school administration, faculty and boards; local community standards; college rankings and guides; media; and cultural groups. (Concept created by the author).

Application Elements: How the Process Challenges Development

Grades and Extracurricular Activities: Teen Fatigue and Burnout

With the growing pressure to have a high GPA and a realm of skills, talents and interests, it is no wonder that today's teenagers are not getting enough sleep. As application enhancers (AP and honors classes, clubs, sports, community service, etc.) and the related tasks (studying, homework, meetings, practice, outings, and errands) fill up their days (not to mention those who have jobs), students routinely stay up during the week until the wee hours, and arise before the sun to catch their ride to get to school. What determines the early start time of the school day? Often it is the school bus schedules and athletics.

The brain needs sleep for healthy functioning, and for memory and learning. During the teen years, adolescents' circadian rhythms move to the “owl” cycle (no longer the “lark” cycle of young children). A teenaged brain becomes alert beginning in the late morning—the optimal time to start learning.

It is common knowledge that they need more sleep than

Adolescent Motivational Framework

Adolescents:

- are motivated by:
 - image and approval
 - avoidance of shame
- have a self-identity, self-concept and self-worth that are changing and forming
 - from internalized recordings
 - from external messages
- are influenced by an ever-expanding concentric circle of systems:
 - family
 - friends
 - school
 - community
 - media and popular culture
 - global
 - e-community/Internet
- vacillate between swings of independence and dependence from each of the above groups.

(Modeled by the author.)

children or adults because of their biological changes, and that lack of sleep creates an effect on the brain comparable to drinking alcohol. Yet society continues to ask them to achieve more. What is most often the compromise of choice? Sleep.

Personal Essay

The value of the essay in a holistic review is to reveal the applicant's personality. Yet it is also important to keep some developmental considerations in mind when evaluating these snapshots of self-disclosure.

Personal essay writing is an awkward, unpracticed skill. It is not commonly taught, and if it is, it is given short shrift. Furthermore, most teens still seek approval from others, not themselves. Students will often anthropomorphize "college," asking, "What do colleges want? What are they looking for?" (This is like asking, "What do women/men want?") It is not enough to chirp, "Just be yourself." Too often they do not know who that is; they are so busy fitting in to someone else's image. In addition, colleges want teenagers to be authentic, but also to engage in deep reflection about something quite uncomfortable—themselves—thus making them self-conscious. Students disclose their private self to an adult stranger, who will judge them... and potentially reject them and thus shame them before everyone.

Finally, teenagers particularly fear ridicule. Consider

this scenario: a student hears an admission representative flippantly say, "I am so tired of reading essays about..." [fill in the litany of hackneyed essay topics.] However, these might be very similar to the ones the teen has picked. He or she personalizes that ridicule, and is even more fearful of opening up. These essays are not for our entertainment; they reveal a young life.

Early Decision: A Rush to Judgment

When the brain is not fully-grown and the developmental tasks in progress, these short-term planners are forced into making long-term decisions about projected futures. The ED option puts the decision-making timeline on fast-forward, often well into the junior year, and the early deadline calendar can call for impulsive or strategic choosing (sometimes made in moments of fear of rejection or wait-listing) over well-considered decisions. On the other hand, the Early Action option allows for an early assessment, with a less hurried final choice.

The Testing Crunch

Comparisons are needed in selective college admission, but the developmental concerns revolving around the academic, emotional and physical tolls standardized tests create can be alarming. Despite claims that these tests are only a part of an application, a college-bound junior can spend the better part of a year preparing for and taking standardized tests. This creates a significant distraction, drawing energy away from learning. The testing timetable (state achievement exams, Advanced Placement tests, the SAT I, the SAT Subject Tests, or the ACTs) for college-bound juniors and seniors is at odds with their first priority—school.

Beyond the Numbers

Today's college admission landscape is daunting and the population of high school seniors is growing. A large spotlight shines on a relatively small group of highly-competitive colleges with very low admission rates. Their statistics are skewing the whole picture, and the adolescent mind finds it easier to pinpoint and then globalize, thinking that all colleges will be equally as inaccessible. The unfortunate truth is that adolescent concerns about image, approval, status, and shame prevent many from seeing the possibilities, when in reality, there is a college for everyone.

Adolescent students' frustration with their perceived lack of admissibility, belonging and worth is ultimately based on the loss of certainty and control in their outcomes. They try to make sense of many variables, and do not respond well in the face of uncertainty. It is often easier to wrap their minds

around a few, concrete variables in order to comprehend the whole messy picture. In the face of too many variables, they usually boil it down to three numbers: standardized test score, GPA and rank. Underdeveloped self-worth and even self-identity become fixated on these numbers.

At this time, when people are most vulnerable to judgment (in addition to knowing there will be financial stressors, family separation issues, conflict and adjustment, etc.), they are asked to put up their private credentials for strangers to judge. Judgment is inevitable, but how can we manage the effects and outcomes of those judgments on adolescent psychology in the college process?

Helping Students Navigate Adolescence

Perhaps as a profession, we find it easier to marginalize adolescents' developmental needs because we have other taskmasters at our colleges and secondary schools. It can be hard, inconvenient or even costly to ease the process for the teen. As a starting point, let's think outside the box.

Each challenge can be met with an idea, for example:

- advocating later starting times for our school days

- narrowing down or even universalizing college essay topics
- making all early applications either Rolling Admission or Single-Choice Early Action
- adding summer testing dates for SAT I/Subject Tests and ACT
- using one central application database, allowing submission of imaged transcripts and recommendations
- requiring college counseling training in the accreditation of school counselor training programs
- teaching the basics of adolescent psychology to college admission professionals
- balancing the beneficial effects of technology against the potential de-personalization the applicant.

Most importantly, let's remember these aren't numbers in a database, names in our appointment books, or yield rates. These are people—young people at a very challenging time in their lives. As a profession, we contribute so much to their futures. Let's work together to make their present a better experience in their psychological development.

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