

## High Anxiety of Getting Into College

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Alan Zale for The New York Times

Merilee Jones, admissions dean at M.I.T., speaking to guidance counselors.

A HIGH school senior was fighting back tears in her guidance counselor's office. Despite her 92 average, the girl had been rejected by her top three college choices. Another senior, already clad in a new Northwestern T-shirt, interrupted to give his counselor a thumbs-up. He was in.

And so it has gone over the last few weeks, as colleges send their decisions and counselors console, cheer up and otherwise try to help this year's seniors navigate the end of the admissions process.

"It's a bittersweet time," said Susan Buchman, a counselor at Byram Hills High School in Armonk. "You get some kids who are ecstatic because they got into their first choice school, and then there are disappointments. And you get parents who are very upset. They were hoping their kid was going to get into a certain school so that they could put the sticker on the car."

Ms. Buchman tries to explain to families that the second- or third-choice college is also a wonderful place, that the child will make friends, get a good education and life will go on. In six months, that first choice will be a vague memory.

But given all the angst surrounding college admissions, it can be a difficult message to sell. Emotions run high this season, and the anxiety level is testament to a process that many educators believe has spiraled out of control.

The frenzy over college admissions is well known. Stories abound about overstressed students who race from Japanese calligraphy classes to hockey practice to SAT tutors. Anecdotes about out-of-control parents — who write college essays, monopolize questions at college information sessions and hound their children to make every moment a résumé-building one — are plentiful.

Those aren't even the really crazy ones. One Westchester guidance counselor described a student who was applying to a college that required a graded high school paper. The child brought in an "A" essay with many enthusiastic teacher comments. The counselor took a closer look and asked why the teacher had written comments in two different inks. It turned out that the student's mother had added a few thoughts of her own.

It's easy to criticize parents for the current state of affairs, but you can also point to other culprits — the infamous college rankings, ambitious high schools, colleges that brag about all the students with perfect SAT scores whom they reject, colleges that market themselves aggressively and then proudly declare low admission rates, and a culture that values performance over character.

However you allocate the culpability, though, there is a growing sense that it's time to return some sanity to the process. Merilee Jones, dean of admissions at M.I.T., has made this her mission. Recently, she addressed 160 school counselors at a meeting of the Westchester Putnam Rockland Counseling Association in White Plains. When Bob Sweeney, a counselor at Mamaroneck High School, introduced her, he said, "You just flew into the Bermuda Triangle of stressed-out guidance counselors, overstressed kids and unrealistic parents with high expectations."

Ms. Jones laughed, but she was serious about her message to the counselors (and, at a later meeting, to parents at Byram Hills High School): she is worried about the toll the application madness takes on today's children, whom she describes as "the most anxious, sleep-deprived, steeped-in-stress, judged, tested, poorly nourished generation."

These teenagers, she said, are being raised to please adults and held to impossible standards. They are loaded down with A.P. classes and expected to participate in multiple extracurricular activities, demonstrate leadership, garner high SAT scores and, on top of that, have a "passion," a buzzword in college admissions. "It's ridiculous to expect that of them," Ms. Jones said. "Most teenagers have no passions at all, except sex."

The pressure is literally making children sick, Ms. Jones said, citing increases in everything from eating disorders to depression. Her call to arms: reel in the pressure and start changing the culture. Parents need to back off. Children need downtime. High schools need to lower the pressure. Colleges need to be straight with teenagers.

Most counselors embraced the message. Mr. Sweeney described Ms. Jones as "the voice of reason and sanity in the middle of all this craziness."

But the culture isn't going to be easy to crack. Barbara Leifer-Sarullo, director of counseling at Scarsdale High School, said that in the college competition, parents were victims as much as children.

"A few years ago, I had a parent who was outraged because I didn't tell him his kid needed a math tutor," she said. "He told me, 'Here my kid is climbing Mount Everest himself, and everyone else has a Sherpa.' He felt like he was a bad parent."

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