

Effects of the College Admission Process on Adolescent Development

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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.

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).