About Pressures on Affluent Students Related to University Admission

> Note: Jacqueline Nguyen, an undergraduate working with our Center at UCLA, indicated an interest in exploring this topic. Incorporating available literature, she prepared a paper conveying her personal perspectives. The following resource draws on that paper and weaves in the Center's perspective.*

Society benefits greatly from its institutions of higher education. Moreover, for many individuals a university education is key to securing a range of personal benefits. At the same time, the goal of attaining entrance to such institutions has increased pressures and amplified stress on students preparing for admission.

While the following discussion has relevance for all who want a higher education, the specific focus here is on those from affluent communities. This population subgroup generally is viewed as "the cream of the crop" (e.g., ideal, ambitious students who strive to make the honor roll, participate in various extracurricular activities, and who plan to go to prestigious universities and on to financially rewarding jobs). Moreover, given their resources and support networks, it often is assumed that the problems with schooling pressures that they face are trivial. However, research findings challenge this view. Children and adolescents from affluent families clearly can suffer from a myriad of problems: anxiety, chronic stress, depression, addiction, eating disorders, and more. Contributing to such problems are excessive pressures to succeed at school and attain admission to elite universities (see reference list).

This resource notes major examples of factors that contribute to the pressures on affluent children to succeed academically, with apparent consequences for their mental health and well-being. Additionally, it highlights some fundamental implications for schools.

Expectations for the Privileged

Privilege and affluence often are accompanied by relentless pressure to succeed, compete, and achieve. Affluent parents have been cited as a major source of the stress their children experience. Commonly noted is that upper-class parents place a high value on themselves and their families based on surrounding community norms and the validation of their peers. Research has suggested that this can lead to high expectations and strivings for "perfection" and that this can have a negative impact on interpersonal relationships (e.g., attachment, intimacy) and mental health.

> Randall (2012) used a three-factor model for perfectionism ("self-oriented, other-oriented, socially prescribed") to examine the role of perceived parental pressure on adolescent distress. The findings suggest that contextual, peer enforced perfectionism caused the parents to develop an other-oriented agenda calling for everything and everyone in their lives to be "perfect."
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> In a comparison of high- and low-income families, Luthar and Latendresse (2005) found that students from high-income families experienced substantially higher parental expectations. Additionally, the researchers measured the children's feelings of isolation from their parents and found correlations to both stress and substance abuse.

Perceived Parental Pressure to Achieve

Multiple studies cite perceived parental pressure as a main contributor to the intense achievement pressure students in affluent communities experience. Findings indicate that children from affluent families feel that their parents overemphasize achievement and that the main way to please their family is by living up to expectations for academic and extracurricular success.

Randall (2012) reported that perceived parental pressure had a "robust and consistent" positive correlation with "adolescent report of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and (low) life satisfaction." Leonard, Gwadz, et al. (2015) found agreement across students, teachers, and an expert panel that stress related to academic achievement originated from high parental expectations. Students indicated that their parents not only held unrealistic expectations, they also did little to address the daily stress resulting from those expectations. Luthar and Latendresse (2005) reported that students begin viewing academic failures as personal failures, skewing their perception of self-worth.

Pressure to Attend Prestigious Universities

The culture of affluence emphasizes the importance of admission into a prestigious, elite university. Redding (2010) notes that acceptance into a prestigious university has become another trophy for affluent families to showcase and suggests concern about this is a major source of pressure and anxiety for both parents and children.

Redding also emphasizes that the problem is compounded by supply and demand considerations. While the demand for spots at prestigious universities has increased, admission spots have not kept pace. Consequently, affluent families are experiencing a highly competitive and stressful admission process; this has exacerbated the pressure on students to pursue various strategies to enhance their applications – some appropriate, some inappropriate – all adding layers of stress.

Over-scheduling

As the college admissions process becomes more competitive, high grades and SAT scores are no longer enough to guarantee acceptance. Therefore, many students feel they must seek out and excel in "extracurricular" undertakings in order to increase their chances for admission at elite institutions. Thus, on top of spending hours on school work, they commit to participating in a variety of time-consuming activities. From a stress perspective, Redding (2015) describes this as over-scheduling. Studies are finding that student stress and anxiety are positively correlated with the number of hours spent on extracurricular activities (Luthar et al., 2006; Melman, Little, and Akin-Little, 2007).

> Note: Besides the added pressure, students often pursue extracurricular activities they don't personally value. Their motivation is mainly extrinsic ("Will this increase my chances of getting in?")

Students attend school for at least 8-10 hours a day, participate in extracurricular activities, attend 5 to 6 classes, and have hours of homework. Concern about all this is reflected in popular media discussions, such as those noting: "Teens More Stressed-Out than Adults" http://www.nbcnews.com/health/kids-health/teens-more-stressed-out-adults-survey-shows-n26921 and "Are we stressing out our kids?" http://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/stressed-out-kids/ .

From the latter:

> *Highly selective colleges have become even more selective. As the college admissions process becomes more demanding — more admissions tests, more rigorous classes, more applications, more college tours — the stress on students increases.*

About Chronic Student Stressors

Chronic stress is associated with mental health problems (e.g., excessive anxiety, depression, suicide). Stress is a physiological reaction to an outside stimulus that we perceive as challenging and perhaps threatening. While some stress facilitates performance, the amount of stress that many students experience daily can be debilitating. At school, students are constantly faced with stressful situations (e.g., difficult material, tests, evaluations and grading). This arouses their sympathetic nervous system and causes the release of cortisol. Cortisol is a steroid hormone that has been called the "stress" hormone. Students who experience chronic stress have elevated amounts of cortisol. Among the negative physical consequences associated with elevated levels of cortisol are weight gain, immune system suppression, and gastrointestinal problems.

Then there are the mental health and substance abuse problems. Recent studies have measured the amount of stress that students now endure. For example, one survey of students from a number of high schools found that half reported being chronically stressed, and 26% indicated symptoms of clinical depression (Leonard, Gawdz, et al, 2015). A study by Luthar and D'Avanzo (1999) compared substance use and delinquency rates between high income suburban youths to inner cities youths. They found that affluent youth had higher substance use along with reporting "significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression."

Exams are widely cited as a main contributor to student distress; 76-77% of high school students surveyed reported that altering exam interventions reduced the amount of stress they experienced. Homework is another major stressor. A study by Galloway, Conner, and Pope (2013) sampled several thousand high school students from high performing schools and found 56% cited homework as a primary stressor (consuming, on average, more than 3 hours a night). Students reported feeling overwhelmed by homework demands and reported that it compromised the amount of sleep they obtained. (A majority of students averaged less than 7 hours of a sleep per night.) High amounts of stress coupled with lack of sleep are well-established as common impediments to school success.

Internal and external pressures to succeed are associated with negative coping strategies. In their study, Galloway, Conner, and Pope (2013) found that over two-thirds of the students reported relying on substance use (e.g., alcohol, marijuana) as a major way to relax or gain emotional control. At the college level, prescription drugs such as Adderall are in vogue (Varga, 2012).

> Note: Ironically, despite efforts to convey the image of a "perfect" family, lowered levels of intimacy and abbreviated family-time are not uncommon among families involved in careers that demand long hours and trips away from home. Some families even have one parent working abroad. Under such conditions, parental guidance and supports may be insufficient and youngsters may become isolated from their parents both emotionally and physically.

Implications for Schools

While the focus here has been on enhancing understanding of the academic pressures on affluent students, the implications for schools involve mitigating excessive stressors for all students. This requires a system of interventions that promote healthy development, prevent problems, respond quickly when problems arise so that they don't get worse, and play a major role in helping any student who has a severe/chronic disorder (e.g., see Adelman & Taylor, 2006; 2010; 2017).

From a psychological perspective, examples of what schools can do include minimizing threats to and maximizing strategies that enhance feelings of (a) competence, (b) self-determination, and (c)

connections to significant others. Key in all this is a well-developed system of student and learning supports that helps personalize instruction and provides special assistance (including accommodations) as needed. Such a system not only can establish a better instructional fit, it provides student and learning supports when needed. And it enhances *appropriate* home involvement and engagement in the student's schooling.

Many specific strategies have been proposed. Examples include enhancing staff and parent understanding of the downside of excessive pressures to achieve and teaching them ways to counter the negative effects that stem from such pressure, teaching students social and emotional coping strategies, changing school schedules and ensuring more "downtime" for students, making homework demands less stressful, adding more tutorial time and advisory periods, staggering and addressing excessive assignments and exams, enhancing supports for transitions, establishing peer mentors/counselors, increasing special assistance to address specific student and family problems that arise.

Concluding Comments

All students are anxious at times; some more than others; some pervasively and chronically. When it comes to learning and performance at school, a degree of anxiety can be facilitative; excessive anxiety can be disruptive. When anxiety is disruptive, it is associated with a host of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional problems. And the evidence is clear: excessive pressure to achieve can take its toll on the mental and physical well-being of any student.

Over the long-run, the need at a school is to transform student and learning supports by developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of interventions that address barriers to learning and teaching, enhance protective buffers, and promote social and emotional development. By doing so, schools can not only foster student and staff resilience, they can also reduce the number of students in need of special assistance.

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Sources for Resources

For more specific recommendations of what schools might do to minimize disruptive anxiety, see the resources listed on our Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on:

>*Anxiety* -- http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/anxiety.htm

Also see internet resources such as

>InformED's *Why you need to manage student stress and 20 ways to do it.*
By Julie Nedeen (2013). http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/why-you-needto-manage-student-stress-and-20-ways-to-do-it/