



# verdadera

## ACADEMIC STRESS December 2011

The Verdadera staff encourages you to discuss and explore the issues and stories, as the publication aims not only to offer an outlet for expression, but to improve our lives. Keep in mind that the emotions that flow through the text and the feelings behind the words could be those of your child, your classmate, or your best friend.

### THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- Why do students feel pressured to succeed? What is success?
- As a parent, do you think you are pressuring your child?
- As a student, how do your peers affect how you are stressed?

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## STUDENT SUBMISSIONS

Competition has torn us apart. It has made us take upon burdens in order to impress everyone else rather than for our own enjoyment. Harder classes, more extracurriculars, and less time for friends and family. Its not only that we take classes that are too hard and take up too many new clubs to really be dedicated to, but its that we have lost our sense of humanity. We will trample anyone, or apathetically perform any act to further enhance our stance in the academic hierarchy.

For example, until this year as a senior, I've taken up 2 new musical interests, joined 3 community service clubs, and been officer of 2 of them. I did varsity debate and I've danced every year. Not one of these things have I done for my own enjoyment. I've done everything based on what my parents, my friends, and prospective colleges have presumed that I should do. Now that I'm a senior and I'm looking at my resume, half of these things didn't matter. I wasn't good at most of them, and I definitely stretched myself way too thin. My advice: Do what you love and you'll naturally be good at it.

"Stress is like an iceberg. We can see one-eighth of it above, but what about what's below"

— Anonymous

Academic stress is like a bumble bee constantly buzzing in your head. It follows you wherever you go and nags you of things that could, would, should be completed. Academic stress has been my neighbor during my student years, someone familiar, at some times annoying, others friendly. Understanding the importance of school and grades, I went to school and took my studies very seriously. I look back and wonder if I had studied so hard more for the letter grade than for the content I had actually learned in middle school. I would panic over every grade that was lower than an A. But I was the student who tried, and for whatever reason that was, it made me a better learner today. I was lucky because academic stress was often chased away by my attachment to art. My commitment to attending the studio many hours a week was a break from the rigorous courses I took in Monta Vista. I have

taken 7 periods of classes each year. In sophomore year I had “8” because I refused to give up yearbook, and dedicated afterschool to be part of it. Thus, academics became more stressed when I was compressing more activities in the limited amount of time I had. I would come home and discover that APUSH needs to be read, essay to be written, math problems understood for that test coming Friday, SAT words studied, etc. Yet, I enjoyed all my classes and I liked to study. I admired my teachers and would have rather interacted in a classroom than anywhere else in school. I did not slack off.

My only concern was when I got worried about my performances. It would make me doubt if I had enough “smarts” to be in certain subjects. When my grades started dropping, my doubts would increase and I would lose the fun in learning and instead gain the pressure of doing a good job. This would prolong in a long, slow week of worry. Academic stress would be the worst on me when I became less determined. It is a big disappointment when your class performance don’t meet your expectations. I needed resilience. So as the school year went by I became better at studying and threw away the pressure of the grades. I thought more of the “things I could do to be better” rather than the “what in the world could have gone wrong?” and gave myself up for the learning experience. Academics, no matter how stressful, will always be very important to me. Academic stress would eventually become my friend, and someone who would help me in the long run. It would be so boring if it weren’t for school.

“The difference between school and life? In school, you're taught a lesson and then given a test. In life, you're given a test that teaches you a lesson.”

—Tom Bodett

**T**he only thing I’ve been stressing out about lately is how it’s been three days and my mom still hasn’t bought a new box of chips from Costco.

Work? Tests? Stress? Those are things that people put on themselves. I have taken five periods of classes since sophomore year, all of which are ones you would consider “slacker” classes. I choose to enjoy my teenage years, not be ruined by them. In the end, we’re all going to college, we’re all going to have children, and we’re all going to grow pot bellies and go through midyear crisis. As I heard one teacher (NOT mine) say about life: life is hard, and then you die. No children, no dependent, aged parents, no income tax or bills to pay: high school years are the easy years my friends. I live them while I can.

“An educational system isn't worth a great deal if it teaches young people how to make a living but doesn't teach them how to make a life.”

—Anonymous

**I**woke up on Wednesday morning to find out that there was no school because of the shooting. No school? Shooting? I turned on the TV and heard a report about a family crying in hysterics when they found out it was indeed their family member who had been one of the victims killed at the quarry. My throat hurt from keeping my tear ducts from exploding. I checked Facebook, expecting to see the same reaction from people in their statuses, and although some people were sad about the situation, I saw way too many variations of “YAY no school today!” in my newsfeed. I was shocked at these reactions. I left the house to stay at my friend's and get some homework done and relax, when I realized, “maybe this isn't so bad...”

I felt absolutely horrible for enjoying my day. I didn't post anything obnoxious online about what a great day I had, since I felt disrespectful, but I truly did have a great day. I was thinking about what made this day so great; we have days off all the time, and I don't usually have as good of a time... but I decided it was because I *really* needed a break. And I think that's what a lot of other people at Monta Vista were feeling too when they found out

school was cancelled. Regardless of how we felt about the shooting, we all need a break.

And what did many of us do once we got that break? Many of us got ahead and did more homework! I bet that if I went to another school, I'd spend my day off going on a mini-road trip or something more exciting, but I go to Monta Vista. And I'm stressed out.

I would never want another shooting to happen, just so I could get another day off... but right now I'm really wishing it could snow. I'm wishing it could snow so hard that the school would have to announce a Snow Day, and we'd all go outside and throw snowballs at each other like in the movies.

But I know I'd consider staying inside and working on homework...

"The only person you compete against is yourself."  
—Ed Harris

7 classes. 7 grades. 7 hopes and wishes. 7 chances. 7 times where the luck of the draw determines my fate. It has been 3 years that my life, my well being has been determined by those 7 names of those 7 teachers that appear on my annual schedule. I hate that the teachers we get ultimately determine all the stress, the late nights, and the hard work, we students have to endure. I hate how competition is still seen by the outside world as if we all are on a level playing field. But in reality our teachers essentially determine if we sink or swim: not our wit or our intellect. Stressful? What do you think.

"Competition brings out the best in products and the worst in people."  
—David Sarnoff

My parents liked Cupertino because you had a clear view of the hills on all sides. I think the particular topography of the hills just symbolize my problem with this place. See everyone here is so focused on grades. I know it is said way too much

but they are. they are focused on attaining a result regardless of the work to put in. El Estoque published a couple of articles on the cheating- and that is just one example of the disregard for actually learning anything. I personally used to LOVE school. and now my love for it is fading. I LOVE to learn. I don't however love to regurgitate my chem notes on a quiz the next day. And I DONT like what i have become after moving to cupertino caring so much about school that i forgot that there is a whole other world, and i have my whole life ahead of me. so when i look at the hills i dont feel liberated. I feel like 'oh, crap, it's a long way up' and i live at the bottom of the bowl, barely keeping my head above water. And i wonder if there is something wrong in that- in feeling that any move short of perfection will destroy you and all that you have lived for?

"Of all human powers operating on the affairs of mankind, none is greater than that of competition."  
—Henry Clay

Can I say that there I've felt no academic competition at Monta Vista? Would I get in trouble for that? It's been three years at Monta Vista, and I've felt no academic competition. Yes, people certainly care about their grades. I do too. But if you work hard and do your best, what is there to be ashamed of? I remember realizing this sometime sophomore year. I simply tried my very best to study for a test, to the extent of my intelligence, and I still did poorly. The thing is, I can't do anything about it! At MV, this competitive culture comes from people who're trying to find the easy way out. People who simply aren't satisfied with who they are. Rather than reach a level of personal improvement, they strive to bring down other people. But I say, as someone who knows themselves extremely well, doing my best is good enough for me.

“Competition is such a virtue, and everybody's so busy competing, they have no time for compassion.”

—Major Owens

**O**n the first day of high school,  
my teachers gave to me  
torture that lasted til three.

On the second day of high school,  
my teachers gave to me  
two writing prompts,  
and torture that lasted til three.

On the third day of high school,  
my teachers gave to me  
three pop quizzes,  
two writing prompts,  
and torture that lasted til three.

On the fourth day of high school,  
my teachers gave to me  
four group projects,  
three pop quizzes,  
two writing prompts,  
and torture that lasted til three.

On the fifth day of high school,  
my teachers gave to me  
five hours of sleep,  
four group projects,  
three pop quizzes,  
two writing prompts,  
and torture that lasted til three.

“Thankfully, it became clear to me that when I compete, I lose my connection to the passion I have for my work.”

—Olympia Dukakis

**A**cademic stress.... It's funny because when I was approached to write about this topic I thought, “The people who are academically stressed are too

busy or stressed to write about it...” But regardless here I am putting in my two cents. Academic stress at Monta Vista is hardly a joke, everyone knows that. I myself have taken 7 periods these past 3 years to get into a good college and to live a happy and fulfilled life of opportunities and self confidence. It's always stressful, balancing everything, and still getting a Homecoming date. I think the stupid part is how teachers try to minimize the stress, but they don't realize that an hour of homework for each class amounts to at least 5 hours of homework ever day. I hate those days where 3 or 4 tests just pile up in one day. Academic stress isn't necessarily a bad thing though. It pressured me into being good at time management, and it really will better my future to some extent. But its how MUCH academic pressure there is, and how you deal with it, right? The pressure comes from my parents and myself, as well as peer pressure. But I deal with it by just hanging out with friends and studying with friends. It's not always easy, but I'm sure as hell going to be glad to get out of Monta Vista. I heard some colleges are easier than MV, or some say its about the same. Whatever the case, I'll just be glad I won't have to be at school from 7:30 am – 3:00 pm 5 days a week anymore. P.S. Although rallies and school activities are supposed to relieve stress... those poor class officers who pour hours and days into the 30 minute rally... thats not really relieving stress for them. I wonder if they'll do what some of my friends have done; move to go to an easier school. Academic stress ruins my sleep, which ruins my day, which ruins my happiness. The end.

“The ultimate victory in competition is derived from the inner satisfaction of knowing that you have done your best and that you have gotten the most out of what you had to give.”

—Howard Cosell

**C**ompetition rules our world. In Charles Darwin's “The Origin of Species” he talks about how the world runs on survival of the fittest and

competition. At first I was doubtful of this theory. I was amazed that the human species, as caring and loving as we are would believe in such a theory that practically encouraged forgetting the weak and only caring for the fit. But as I grew up through every day events I learned how our world truly is run by competition. My friends and I are very alike, that's probably why we are friends; anyways since we're alike we want to run for the same things. My two best friends and I all ran to become president of a club at school. We all wanted the position really badly and all thought we were the best for the job. Until this time we were all really good friends and looked out for each other but at this time our relationships were tense...we all did whatever we could to give ourselves an advantage over the others. One of my friends ended up becoming president, I became vice president, and the third one didn't get an officer position. Even though we were friends I was jealous of my friend who had become president I even hated him for some time. Even in class my friends and I strive to get higher grades than the other even if it is just 1%. That's when I started thinking between a 96% and a 97% there would be no change of grade, I would have an A regardless....then why did I try so hard to beat my friends and get that 97%? Because of competition. It rules all of us, it might make us do our best but at what cost? We turn against everyone because in the end life is one big competition against every other human being on this world.

"It is impossible to enjoy idling thoroughly unless one has plenty of work to do."

—Jerome K.

“Oh you go to Monta Vista? Oh wow isn't that place a pressure cooker?” “Hahaha you go to MV? All of you guys are Asians and nerds!” Once can imagine that a school with such high praise would have a lot of academic stress and competition. There is a group of people who believe

there is no such thing as academic stress, well I am most definitely not one of them. I was one of those kids who was super smart in middle school and elementary school but when I came to high school...not so much. Why? I blame academic stress. At our school there is so much importance based on academics. Academics are important sure but is it really everything? Let me answer that for you: NO!!!!. There's much more to life! Friends, family, and just having a good time! With all the academic stress I ignored the fun things in life and only studied my first two years of high school. But I was always mad about the things I was missing out and in the end didn't study too well. Junior year I was like “F\*ck studying” and then I did too many fun things. It might be a little too late but now in senior year I finally found the perfect balance of both but if it wasn't for that damned academic stress I would have found this balance out loooong time ago! Maybe freshman year! I'd probably be going to a good college if I had but no academic stress got in the way. The worst part of this academic stress is that it's not just by parents and teachers. The students are doing it too! My friends made me feel bad if I got bad grades, even I started putting myself under academic stress. I don't know what the cure to academic stress is but I do know that we need one cause this stuff sucks.

“Competition is a process or variety of habitual behavior that grows out of a habit of mind.”

—Willard Beecher

I know a lot of people seem to get stressed out by their parents and their parents seem to be the ones driving them to do well. For me, my parents are pretty lax about these kinds of things. Obviously, they want me to do well, but it isn't a big deal if I don't get a 4.0 or if I get a couple c's here and there. Honestly, that never happens because I am pressured so much to do well. I am pressured by my peers. I feel really embarrassed if I don't do well

or if I don't take that extra AP class. I honestly don't know ANY student at MV that doesn't take AP classes. I mean aren't they supposed to be ADVANCED for people who are in a higher level? Is there no higher level at MV since everyone takes AP's? Idk, but I always study hard and make myself do well, because well, everyone else works hard and does well too. You can't really slack off and just chill with your friends if all your friends are at home studying...

"A competitor will find a way to win. Competitors take bad breaks and use them to drive themselves just that much harder. Quitters take bad breaks and use them as reasons to give up. It's all a matter of pride."

—Nancy Lopez

I don't really get a lot of academic pressure from my parents, but I can't help but to feel like I am constantly compared to my brother. I don't feel any competition between my brother and I, but my mom just keeps bringing up how well my brother did in school and life in general. I don't know why, but she REALLY romanticizes him. He isn't even all that great. I remember in middle school, I thought he was SO smart, but in reality, when I look at his grades and achievements, they aren't all that fancy. He brought some solid 3.7 report cards maybe a couple 4.0's but so do I! I also bring home 4.0's! My mom found some random ribbon that he won at a track meet YEARS ago that says "Second Place" on it, and she said, "wow this is good, right". That ribbon was probably won at some middle school track meet where there was maybe one other person against my brother. Anyways, I feel like I should get as much praise as my brother sometimes.

"A competitive world offers two possibilities. You can lose. Or, if you want to win, you can change."

—Lester Thurow

Honestly, i want to kill about every person and teacher at monta vista. okay, that's a little extreme. how about every single person who values grades more than actual people. i remember once freshman year started, it became a total hell. how all my friends would complain about their "low" grades which were actually like 93.99999% and how they would start skipping out on me to go study or go to their tutor or start stressing about college which was still freaking 4 years away then. and the thing is i couldn't really blame them. i was doing the exact same thing. ranting when a teacher took away one point on a test, crying when i got an "unacceptable score" on a test which would actually be anything below a 85%. quite honestly, i am now sick of it. sick of how our lives are so warped by this ideas that if we "fail" in high school, we're going to fail in life. my parents don't help any either. always telling me how if i keep doing the way i'm doing (which is one freaking b right now out of my 7 classes), that i will fail life and that i will fail in the future, like my brother who is what they consider "doomed for the future" seriously parents of mine, lay off. i have a life. i have stresses beyond school which are probably silly and when i look back i'll laugh at, but right now are pretty important. like friends, like finding something i like, like actually finding time to breathe and relax. breathing and relaxing. you guys won't even let me do one fun thing outside of school, like those vocal lessons i really want, which would take up ONE HOUR of my goddamn ONE WEEK. i hate this school. if anything, i wish i could transfer out of here or leave early. just anything.

"The essence of competitiveness is liberated when we make people believe that what they think and do is important - and then get out of their way while they do it."

—Jack Welch

You can see the state of this school when I tell you this story. One day, I was doing my project and someone else was doing the same project. They

obviously thought they were going to kick my ass at it and humiliate me, so I was like ahahahahah no honey. i'm better. And then I did better! I got a better grade. I felt pretty damn smug. See what I mean? Our school isn't one that encourages playful competition, but legit straight out competition. Like the I-will-kill-you-if-you-f\*ck-with-me kind. If you're not part of it, it's hella funny, but it sucks ass when you are part of it. Then it goes from amusing to deadly seriously in a milisecond. Bwahahaha, I won that round though.

“Education aims to give you a boost up the ladder of knowledge. Too often, it just gives you a cramp on one of its rungs.”

—Martin H. Fischer

# A WORD FROM THE PROFESSIONAL



Andrew Naymark is the founder of Double Ivy College Consulting. He has guided many students through each phase of the high school process, making their high school experience more rewarding and successful. He has also helped these students gain admittance to many of the top colleges in the country. Andrew is a graduate of Brown University (class of 2001). To learn more about Double Ivy, please visit [DoubleIvyConsulting.com](http://DoubleIvyConsulting.com) or call (408) 915-7489.

First of all, it's an honor to be able to share my experiences and thoughts with the Monta Vista community on this important subject. I found these students' writings to be extremely powerful. Whether you're a student, a parent, or another member of the school community, I think it's abundantly clear after reading these essays that things are not as they should be. And I think we must not ignore the distress expressed by many of these students. Each essay gives a unique perspective, but they all point to an important and related set of very real problems. And these problems, as these students have vividly explained, are hurting their high school experience, and, in many cases, their lives in general.

This set of problems is complex, and described in various ways by the students: academic stress caused by teachers, parents, peers and the students themselves; cut-throat competition among peers; feelings of intellectual self-doubt due to getting a disappointing grade; worries that not getting into the best possible college will doom a student to a life of mediocrity.

There is certainly not a quick-fix solution to all of these issues. However, in my experiences as an independent college counselor, I have found that there are significant ways that the situation can be improved, not just in terms of students' emotional well-being, but also in terms of their academic results and college prospects.

Let's start by trying to understand the problem better. At the heart of these problems is an unfortunate truth about our educational system. As some of these students have pointed out, the problems of competition and stress are built into the school grading system. There is nothing vague about the difference between an A and a B grade. The A is higher, plain and simple, and leaves no room for the nuances of the situation: How much did the student grow intellectually from the class? How creative was the student in terms of her efforts and class participation? Did the student demonstrate unquantifiable qualities like leadership, or the ability to enrich the classroom experience? Or, as one student pointed out, to what extent did the teacher affect the

grade? SAT/ACT test scores are similarly "black and white." While they do tell us something about students' abilities, they certainly do not tell us everything of importance about a student.

These grading and scoring systems are unfortunately tied to this idea of comparing students through quantifiable characteristics, and forming a simple, numerical

hierarchy, without measuring other characteristics and abilities which are often more important in determining the student's future success in college and beyond. The other factor in this problem is that (to state the obvious) there are more applicants than available spots at most colleges, so colleges are selective in who they admit. So colleges also contribute to this sense of dire competition among students.

Does this mean that colleges only care about these grades and scores, and that students will be accepted to selective schools based only on this hierarchy of GPA and SAT scores? Does this mean that students should put grades and scores above all else? Fortunately, the answer is no.

Let's look at some common assumptions and misconceptions about what colleges are looking for in applicants. While colleges do care about a student's grades and scores, there is general misunderstanding about what else they are looking for, and how important those other things can be.

My own experience in high school and college they gave me a lot of insight into this process. I applied to a wide range of schools, from top-tier colleges to less selective schools. Like most students, I was extremely anxious about the process. I had strong grades, but certainly not as good as many applicants to the top schools. I had strong test scores, but again, lots of other applicants had higher scores. And I was not the president of numerous high school clubs. In fact, I was told by my school counselors that my extra-curricular activities were probably not extensive or "impressive" enough for the top schools.

The final result was that I did get into many of these top schools, including Princeton, Duke, University of Chicago, UC Berkeley and Brown University (which I decided to attend.) This story (I hope it goes without saying) is certainly not told to

## theLOWDOWN

resources for parents and teens

-*How to Be a High School Superstar* by Cal Newport

-*Colleges That Change Lives* by Loren Pope

-*Looking Beyond the Ivy League* by Loren Pope

boast, but rather to give some insight about how colleges choose students. How did I get into these schools when other students with higher test scores and better grades did not?

The reason is that my application essays and teacher recommendations had demonstrated that I was truly passionate about those interests that I had pursued, and that I genuinely loved learning. I was able to make it clear that I would have pursued them whether they were “impressive” or not, and whether I ended up in college or not. I pursued these things because I genuinely cared about them. And I did so in ambitious, creative ways outside of school, as well as in school.

My experience at Brown further proved this insight. Everyone I knew at Brown was, by definition, an Ivy League student, and the vast majority of them were genuinely passionate about whatever areas they were involved in. And they were involved in every conceivable type of pursuit, not just “impressive” ones. (This was true among students I knew at other top schools as well.) The reality is that there are no guaranteed, inherently “impressive” achievements to a college admissions office. They’ve seen everything under the sun already. What they want to see is an ambition to engage and affect the world around you in a genuine, mature and unique way. They want to see that you are thinking beyond the confines of high school. They want to see evidence that you are on the beginning of a journey of achievement that is only beginning, and will continue throughout college and beyond. And I want to make clear that this is true for the vast majority of colleges, not just the most selective ones.

I realize that demonstrating these kinds of characteristics is easier said than done, and it can be challenging to find ways of pursuing your interests in creative ways. That’s an important part of how I help and support the students I work with; I guide them to articulate their passions, and then give them the confidence and support to think “outside the box” in terms of how they can pursue them.

So yes, grades and scores matter. In my case, my grades and test scores were good enough that they didn’t keep me out of these schools. But they also certainly were not good enough to get me accepted all by themselves. The reality is that no GPA or test scores are good enough to get you into many colleges these days; you must also show these qualities of passion, intellectual curiosity and the ambition to achieve things that are impressive to you, not to some vague idea of a college admissions department. The fact is that many schools regularly turn down students with perfect SAT scores and perfect GPAs. And it makes sense why they do this if you think about the process from the college’s point of view. A college wants to admit a student who will take on leadership roles and make a real difference in their college community. Colleges know these are the kind of students who will become leaders and make a difference after college as well, and who will be the kind of alumni that will increase the prestige of the college.

For this reason, I am especially concerned when I hear students say that they are not pursuing the things are truly

passionate about, but rather other areas that are more “impressive,” often because of their parents’ advice. In my experience, this strategy does not work. In fact, from what I’ve learned through my own and my students’ experiences, as well as from speaking with admission departments, this strategy is the opposite of what you should be doing. Instead, I truly believe you should follow your passions creatively and ambitiously, beyond the confines of what you might think you can accomplish because you are “only” a high school student. If you are persistent and creative, you will be absolutely amazed at what a high school student can accomplish in the world.

The other assumption and misconception I’d like to address is the idea that a great college will lead to a great life, and a less selective college will lead to a mediocre life. In response, I’d like to paraphrase Ruth Simmons. She became the president of Brown University while I was a student there, and she gave an inaugural speech to the student body that I will never forget. In short, she told us that she had attended a top-tier college, but because of her attitude toward school, she had received a third-rate education. She told us she later attended a lower-tier college, but due to her change in attitude and behavior, she received a first-rate education. This second academic experience is the one that set her on her path to eventually becoming the president of an Ivy League university (and the first female, African-American one, at that.) The idea here is that the prestige of a college matters far less than the attitude you bring with you to that college.

Top colleges don’t lead automatically to good lives. I’ve seen proof of this countless times. Instead, I believe that pursuing your passions creatively and ambitiously; engaging as deeply as possible with the students and teachers around you; taking full advantage of the opportunities offered—these are the characteristics that will lead to a rewarding, well-balanced and successful life in high school, college and she had received a third-rate education. She told us she later attended a lower-tier college, but due to her change in attitude and behavior, she received a first-rate education. This second academic experience is the one that set her on her path to eventually becoming the president of an Ivy League university (and the first female, African-American one, at that.) The idea here is that the prestige of a college matters far less than the attitude you bring with you to that college.

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These issues are very important and I am honored to be a part of this community-wide discussion with parents, students and teachers, and I look forward to hearing your thoughts on the matter.