

College Admission, Helplessness, And Choice

[Brennan Barnard](#) Contributor

Education *I write about an intentional approach to college admission.*

If you shock a rat or dog enough times (please do not do this) without the animal having control over its circumstances, it is likely to give up hope, believing it has no other choice but to receive a shock. This is what psychologist Martin Seligman, and his colleagues at The University of Pennsylvania, discovered in the 1960's and 70's with their experiments on learned helplessness. While I do not support any kind of cruelty to animals—or humans—it is a phenomenon not dissimilar to what we often observe in college admission.

Coming of age in today's world is not easy. Teenage years have always been challenging, but technology, a polarized society, financial uncertainty, safety concerns, and other realities of the 21st century have only complicated an already precarious time. Young people are living in a culture of competition and detachment like never before, and it can feel like they do not have much control. Moreover, access to a college education can seem way out of reach for low income, first-generation students, and those with less support and encouragement. Too many students arrive at the end of high school feeling defeated and approach college admission as if it is a burden they must “get through”—or for some avoid altogether—because they lack a feeling of agency or opportunity.

The reality is that students have choice—contrary to the dominant narrative, they do have control. Whether gun violence, opioid addiction, racism or other challenges that confront their generation, young people have increasingly been willing to speak truth to power and make their own choices. Fixating on the monoculture of selective college admission can [threaten their adolescence](#), but they can choose another path, a path with an internal locus of control, a path with intention. Rather than default to helplessness, the following are ways in which students can be hopeful and assert control and choice:

Costs: It is no secret that college is impractically expensive. For a fortunate few, financing college is not a concern, but for most students the reality of rising tuition costs and unchecked student debt make higher education seem unattainable. The decision to pay for college is different for every family. There are those who have limited means, whose families are living paycheck to paycheck, while others lament the burden of tuition as they sit on the patio of their second home. Some families are grateful for generous need-based financial aid packages, while others are indignant when their ideal college refuses to offer a merit scholarship. Money matters can lead to guilt, resentment, disappointment, and uncertainty. [Paying for college](#) is a huge sacrifice for many families, but if you are willing to consider all your options, it doesn't have to be a reason to despair. There are affordable pathways if you are open to considering a range of options. You have a *choice* to avoid the pressures of oppressive student debt.

Peer Pressure/Competition: College admission exacerbates the stress young people feel by feeding competition among classmates. From comparing test scores to obsessing about class rank, schools create a [Hunger Games](#) environment where students are clamoring for a coveted spot at a selective college or university. “What are your test scores?” “Which schools are you applying to?” “I am so stressed about

college.” These are the questions and refrains commonly heard from juniors and seniors in high school. But guess what...you can decide not to engage in this banter, not to buy into the hype, and not to share the details of your search with anyone. Make an agreement with your close friends and classmates that you will not fan the flames of college angst and will not expect each other to reveal aspects of your unique college search and application journey. You have a *choice*.

Parental Expectations: Sorry, you cannot choose your parents, but you can decide how you communicate with them about college. The experience of searching for and applying to college can be one that unites a family as you reflect on your values, interests, and opportunities. It also has the potential to be rife with shame, fear, and resentment if not handled openly and directly. Parents have a vested interest in your well-being and future, but it can be difficult for them to separate their own sense of self from that of you, their children. You can decide to withdraw from perceived expectations and fear of being a disappointment, or you can address your concerns and have an ongoing dialogue about college from the start. Pick one night of the week for a brief check-in about your search so it doesn't dominate your home life. You have a *choice*.

Athletic Specialization: [Youth sports](#) have become an untamed beast that often requires young athletes to dedicate all seasons to the pursuit of one sport. This is sad for many reasons and can create unsustainable schedules, overuse injuries and crazed competition. Students and parents invest insane resources, and time, in attempting to be recruited by a college with the hope of being offered a coveted scholarship. According to the [National Collegiate Athletic Association \(NCAA\)](#), less than 2% of high school athletes will receive a scholarship to play in college and often times young people are so burnt out by the time they reach college that they have forgotten why they loved the sport in the first place. Before you consume your high school years, ask yourself why you are going to college and how athletics will guide your search and your future. You have a *choice*.

Rankings: If I asked each of your family members to rank your last five family vacations, would you all respond the same? How about if we asked your parents to rank you, their children, who would come out on top? Absurd right? It is natural to want to quantify and to seek the “best”, but this is inherently subjective. What might be an ideal school for one student could be a disaster for another. Companies like *U.S. News & World Report*, Niche.com, and others make bundles of money preying on our collective yearnings for status and belonging. Meanwhile, these [flawed rankings](#) drive institutional decisions, bond ratings and the frenzy around selectivity and competition. You can decide [not to be pawns in their game](#)—sacrificed in the name of building a brand. Are you going to let someone else tell you what is best for you? You have a *choice*.

High Stakes Testing: Isn't it bad enough that you have to squander the better part of at least one Saturday (likely more) taking standardized tests? Students obsess about test scores and spend unthinkable hours and dollars on test preparation. True, for many selective colleges and universities, the ACT/SAT are necessary evils of admission and therefore you want to do your best to improve. At some point, you must examine why you are investing such considerable time and energy in playing the game, and ask yourself if it is worth it? There are a growing number of [test-optional](#) schools and their values may align more appropriately with your own. You can decide not to spend a year or more laboring for increased scores. Perhaps if students everywhere chose only to apply to test-optional schools, it would force the hand of their competitors. You guessed it...you have a *choice*.

Resume Building: “Hyper scheduling” is a growing epidemic among high school students who mistakenly feel they must do—and be—everything. Students are rushed from activity to activity, often with little time to sleep or eat. Weekends and family time are sacrificed so that students can be over-involved. Why? To be accepted at your dream school? If you love everything you are doing,

great. Volunteer because it is the right thing to do, join the prom committee because you enjoy the connection with others. Write for the school paper because you are interested in journalism. But the minute you are simply “checking boxes” for your application to college at the expense of balance and play, stop. You have a *choice*.

Early Decision/Early Action: Some things cannot be rushed. Colleges have created a system in which students are [pressured to apply earlier and earlier](#) to college—often making a commitment prematurely—because it serves their enrollment management models (see reason 4 on rankings). A recent [report](#) from The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) confirmed this trend. Students feel like they must apply early to have a chance of being admitted, and the reality is that your odds are likely better. That doesn’t mean you have to bow to their pressure, because college is a significant investment and one that must be made with intention. If you are not ready, you are not ready, so apply to college on your own timeline. You have a *choice*.

AP Monsters: Are you so overloaded with Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or advanced/honors courses in your schedule that you feel like every available minute is spent studying? Do you find yourself doing homework until unreasonable hours of the night? Are you giving up the arts courses you love, to load up on high-level “core courses”? Are you genuinely excited about the classes you are taking and the degree of challenge you have elected? The most selective colleges do want to see students demonstrate rigor in their course program but not if the student self-destructs in the process. Don’t bite off more than you can chew in the name of admission to a certain college. After all, you could very well take that daunting load of classes and still not be admitted. You have a *choice*.

Make It Personal: What does your [college essay](#) say about you? What do you want colleges to know about what motivates you, what you value, and who you are? Often students are stymied by having to write about themselves and unnecessarily attempt to anticipate what admission officers want to hear. This can happen throughout a student’s application in an effort to conform to perceived expectations. Colleges are looking for authenticity. When you have too many editors crafting your message, it is transparent and will end up working against you. You get to decide who it is that colleges really see, so don’t let anyone try to package you. Share your truth. You have this *choice*.

Academic Integrity: Speaking of authenticity, who are you as a learner? Are you in it for the grade or are you driven by intellectual joy and curiosity? Perhaps you are in pursuit of both high marks and academic engagement, which is admirable, but to what lengths will you go to achieve these goals? Cheating, plagiarism and an “A’s at all costs” mentality are commonplace in many high schools, and rampant grade inflation threatens to render the high school transcript devoid of any significance. Students and parents pressure teachers not to jeopardize a selective college acceptance and soon the very process of learning becomes more of a game or process, rather than a meaningful pursuit of knowledge. Do you want to be prepared for college-level learning and an informed future, or is a flawless report card more important? The *choice* is yours.

Selective Thinking: Do you feel like there are only 20-50 acceptable colleges in the country? Does a college lose value in your eyes when the acceptance rate is over 25%? Would you consider a college or university that family and friends had never heard of? It is easy for students, families, and schools to get [trapped in a bubble of perceived prestige](#) and status where it is virtually unthinkable to consider a college that doesn’t have a “brand name.” This singularity in thinking not only drives the anxiety around admission but also leads to missed opportunities. Contrary to cultural perception, you do have a *choice*.

The journey to becoming an adult is complicated enough without the added tensions that the college admissions experience can bring. If approached without intention and awareness, this powerful rite of

passage can feel like a maze and quickly become a threat to one's health and well-being. But you see, the *choice* is yours. You have the ability to avoid the “shocks” of admission—you have control over this experience. You can choose anxiety, sleeplessness, status, fear, overscheduling, competition, doubt, and resentment, or you can choose, balance, joy, purpose, mindfulness, empathy, unity, collaboration, meaning, and authenticity. The power is yours—choose wisely.

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