

To get into college, Harvard report advocates for kindness instead of overachieving

As your oldest child begins to fill out her college application, it is hard not to feel a rising panic. For the last four years she has thrown herself into her school work, taken AP classes, studied for the SAT, worked on the school paper, played on the field hockey team and tutored elementary school children.

Yet as she methodically records her activities on the application, it becomes clear that this was simply not enough. There are 10 looming blank spaces and although her days have been overflowing with homework, activities and volunteering, she has only five activities to report. There are 15 spaces to record the four AP classes she was so proud of taking.

You wonder who the kid is who can complete all of these blank spaces, and what has gone wrong that this is what applying to college now means.

A new report released today by [Making Caring Common](#), a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, takes a major step in trying to change the college admissions process to make it more humane, less super-human.

Parents, educators and college administrators have long wrestled with the unintended negative side effects of the admissions process, like the intense focus on personal achievement and the unfair advantages of more affluent students. The report, entitled [Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good Through College Admissions](#), aims to tackle these complex issues. It lays out a blueprint for addressing three of the most intractable challenges facing college applicants today: excessive academic performance pressure, the emphasis on personal achievement over good citizenship, and the uneven opportunities available to students of varying income levels and backgrounds.

Many colleges have tried to address these concerns over the years but it takes a unified effort to make a big impact, says lead author [Richard Weissbourd](#). More than 80 stakeholders, including admissions officers (like Harvard's), deans, professors and high school counselors have endorsed the report.

[\[5 ways to raise kind kids, according to a Harvard psychologist\]](#)

"It's the first time in history that I'm aware of" that a group of colleges is coming together to lay out what is and what isn't valued in the admissions process, says Weissbourd.

"Yes, we want students who have achieved in and out of the classroom, but we are also looking for things that are harder to quantify, [like] authentic intellectual engagement and a concern for others and the common good," explains Jeremiah Quinlan, dean of undergraduate admissions at Yale University, one of the report's endorsers.

In response to the report, Yale will be adding an essay question on next year's application that asks applicants "to reflect on engagement with and contribution to their family, community and/or the public good," Quinlan says. Yale will also "advocate for more flexibility in the extracurricular

sections on both the Common Application and Coalition Application, so that colleges can more easily control how they ask students to list and reflect on their extracurricular involvement.”

The University of Virginia is also in agreement with the report. “We support *Turning the Tide* because we philosophically agree with many of the principal points in the document, [like] promoting, encouraging, and developing good citizenship, strong character, personal responsibility, [and] civic engagement in high school students,” says Gregory Roberts, the school’s dean of admissions.

[\[How I survived 16 essays and the college application process\]](#)

Like Yale, several of the report’s endorsers have already modified their admissions efforts or practices as a result of these findings. Weissbourd said that over the next two years, Making Caring Common will work with college admissions officers, parents, high school guidance counselors and others to further implement the report’s recommendations. He hopes that many of these points will eventually be incorporated into the Common, Coalition and Universal applications as well.

Here are five highlights from the report, along with tips from Making Caring Common for how parents can help turn the tide:

1. Reduce stress by limiting course loads and extracurricular activities. Admissions offices can reduce undue pressure by sending a clear message that “long brag sheets do not increase students’ chances of admission.” To make this point, the authors recommend applications provide room for only two to four activities or ask students to describe two to three meaningful activities in an essay. Tallying up a lengthy listing of AP credits should be discouraged in favor of more sustained effort in areas of genuine interest.

Parent tip: Help your teens by encouraging them to find activities, classes and volunteer experiences that are meaningful to them, but that do not create undue stress.

2. Value the different ways students make contributions to their families and communities. Current applications often disadvantage students from less affluent backgrounds who may make important but overlooked contributions, such as working part-time to help support their families or taking care of a family member, leaving them no time for extracurricular activities or community service. Colleges need to clearly communicate the high value they place on family contributions and give ample opportunity for applicants to explain their role. By doing so, the authors hope to redefine achievement in broader terms.

Parent tip: If your teens help to run the household, babysit a younger sibling after school, or make other significant family contributions, make sure they write about it on their applications.

3. Stress the importance of authenticity. At the heart the report is the notion that admissions committees are looking for students who are authentic and honest about their interests and accomplishments. Students are encouraged to find the right college fit by remaining true to themselves, keeping an open mind about their options and examining a broad range of colleges. It should also be made clear that over-coached applications can jeopardize admission. Confidence and integrity are best reflected in the student’s own voice.

Parent tip: College admissions officers can sense when an application is not authentic or trumped up. Help teens present themselves in their best light, while still staying true to who they really are.

4. Alleviate Test Pressure. Some colleges have already taken steps to de-emphasize the weight of the SATs and ACTs by [making these tests optional](#). Admissions offices can reduce the pressure surrounding standardized tests by doing this or clearly explaining the test's weight in the admissions process.

Parent tip: Try to discourage students from taking the same standardized test more than twice, as it rarely results in a meaningfully higher score. Remind your children of that.

5. Engage in meaningful community service. The report highlights a common misconception that volunteering for certain high-profile causes or traveling to exotic countries will make an application stand out. It will, but for the wrong reasons: namely that it looks inauthentic.

Parent tip: Help your teens find sustained community service opportunities that extend for a year or more where the student can be fully engaged in something that is important to them and, in turn, have a meaningful impact. Community engagement can take many different forms, from addressing local needs to serving in a soup kitchen to volunteering on a political campaign or making meaningful contributions at home. Look for opportunities where teens can work side by side with the people they are helping, instead of for them, which can sometimes feel patronizing and may not create as rich an experience.

There will be some applicants who will try to game these new recommendations by engaging in community service in which they have no real interest and later writing insincerely about their experience. However, Weissbourd notes, even students who engage in community service with misplaced motivation may have a powerful learning experience. Research shows that for many students service activities are an opportunity for maturity and growth, even when they are mandatory or driven by the college application process.

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