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## How Does The College Admissions Process Affect The Choices High Performing Students Make Throughout Their High-School Career?

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### Abstract

The aim of our study was to examine high school students' motivation and philosophy behind applying to college, and how the college admissions process impacts the scholastic and non-scholastic decisions they make throughout their high school career. College education turns out to be one of the most sought out education needs for students worldwide. At a 40% increasing rate, the appeal to attend selective, elite colleges remains a hot topic throughout society. The whole college admissions process leads to a whole cycle of stress and lowered self-esteem especially for Ivy League admissions. In our research, we conducted a survey to assess and analyze the different viewpoints of the college admissions process and how it affects the students' choices throughout high school. A linear regression test was performed on the data collected and through t-tests we aimed to find a correlation between factors such as course load difficulty and how it affects their perception of clubs and academic life. The tests revealed that there was a strong correlation between the rigor of a course load ( $p < 0.001$ ) and the student's reflection of their course load ( $n = 59$ ). Throughout this study, it became apparent that depending on the rigor of a student's academic courses, there was a noticeable trend that taking such courses led to a lack of self care and awareness of health deterioration.

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Categories: Psychology, High School  
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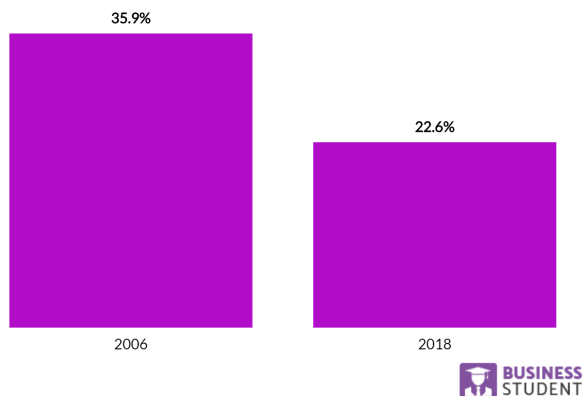
## Background Research

College education is thought to be the best investment that any student can make in today's society. With an economy that continues to grow at drastic rates and a world population that increases by the second, jobs can go almost anywhere in the world. As a result, proper skills and education can often be the determining factor for success (US Department of Education, 2012). Recent evidence shows that a college education pays off in tremendous amounts, with the average income of someone with a high school diploma versus that of someone with a master's degree being twice as low (Nietzal, 2020). Knowing that, the appeal of going to college has increased drastically over the past two decades in ambitions to be able to succeed both economically and mentally.

The appeal of going to an elite, selective college has dramatically increased since the 1970s, as the rate of high school graduates who apply to selective four-year colleges, among those who apply to four year colleges in general, remains consistently at 40% for decades. (Bound, et. al). However, the demand of going to an elite college is far greater than the supply. According to [Ivy Coach.com](https://www.ivycoach.com), which examined admissions into Ivy League universities among the graduating class of 2024, only two thousand Harvard applicants were accepted among the elite college's forty thousand applicants. Meanwhile, in 2002, two thousand Harvard applicants were accepted among its nineteen thousand applicants, putting Harvard's acceptance rate at 11 today at that time and 5 percent today ([The Pennsylvanian](https://www.thepenncollegian.com)).

### It's a Lot Harder to Get into a Top School Than It Used to Be

Overall top 50 college acceptance rate in 2006 compared to 2018



From Business Student, 2018.

The paramount number of applicants to elite colleges may be influenced by the culture of prestige. We undoubtedly live in a culture obsessed with prestige, which especially applies to the colleges that we attend. Achona Online brings up a good point: "Hypothetically, imagine you're meeting your friend's college-age sibling for the first time. You ask what college they go to, and they respond with "Yale" or "Harvard." Your reaction, based on societal norms and connotations

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surrounding such a school, would most likely be, “Oh! Wow! That’s such a good school! They must be so smart!” (Alfonzo, 2021). The high rate of applicants to elite colleges could also be economically motivated; some sources have suggested that enrollment into elite private institutions is associated with higher wages than their counterparts in significantly lesser ranked institutions (Brewer, Eide, Ehrenberg, 1999). Attewell and Witteveen had similar results analyzing earnings post-graduation from college. They found that, 10 years post-graduation, those from the most competitive colleges (i.e. Yale, Stanford, and Harvard) earned 8% more in income than graduates of highly selective, but not the most selective, colleges; 11% more than graduates of colleges that are moderately selective; and 19% more than graduates of non-competitive colleges. (Attewell and Witteveen, 2017) However, it has also been widely suggested that entry into elite colleges is not the best measure of future success. In fact, the undergraduate institution with the highest amount of Fortune 500 (500 of the most successful and wealthy entrepreneurs) CEO-graduates did not turn out to be an Ivy League institution; instead, it was the University of Wisconsin, a non-Ivy League institution with an applicant acceptance rate over 50%, which graduated 14 Fortune 500 CEOs (Barnard, 2019). Additionally, research done at the University of California at Riverside found that among 3,990 senior executives from 15 sectors, including government, only 10 percent of them attended Ivy League colleges. (University of California at Riverside). Moreover, “colleges like Montana Tech and Oregon Health and Science University are among the top 10 colleges with the highest early-career salaries — with Stanford and the Ivy Leagues barely making the top 25.” (Ivywise)

According to the most influential organization in college readiness, CollegeBoard, factors influencing admissions decisions include the courses taken, grades received, class rank, standardized test scores, personal statements and essays, recommendations, extracurricular activities, and interviews.

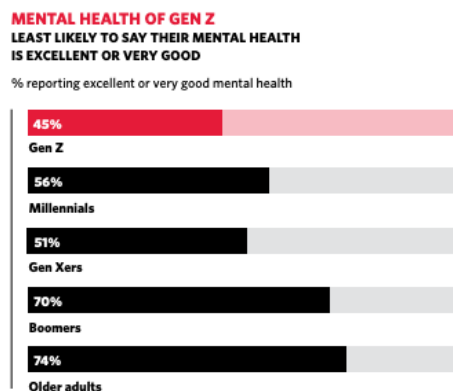
Specifically, highly selective colleges look for applicants who take and perform well in challenging, college-level courses, most famously Advanced Placement (AP) courses. (CollegeBoard). These exams are set up to assess a student's capability to handle rigorous and challenging course work and apply it to exams. As for standardized test scores, the average SAT score of those who apply to elite colleges is a 1540 out of 1600 (VeritasPrep). Extracurriculars also hold deep significance in getting admitted into elite colleges. In particular, selective colleges look for a focus on a limited number of interests, documented long-term involvement with organizations, activities related to a major or career goal, and a display of leadership skills and ability. Conspicuously, there are multiple dimensions to the college admissions process.

In 2017, a scandal known as Operation Varsity Blues leaked. Rich families, including actresses Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin, paid millions to the head of the illegal enterprise, Rick Singer, to get their childrens’ way into elite colleges. Singer did this by “using part of the money to fraudulently inflate entrance exam test scores and bribe college officials” (Wikipedia). This infamous case revealed how unfair gaining admissions into selective colleges can be. Furthermore, one study found that more students from Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, Penn, and

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Brown belong to the top 1 percent income distribution-families, rather than the bottom 60 percent. (Equality of Opportunity Project).

The corruption, ambiguity, and arduousness of the college admissions process adds even more stress for adolescents than they are already experiencing. High teenage stress has been consistent throughout the years, and has even increased. The *EDC* found as of 2017 that 36% of high school students reported feeling extremely stressed, in comparison to the same study conducted in 2012 which found that 29% of the high school students reported feeling extremely stressed in the last 30 days, (*EDC*, 2017). Even more shocking, the American Psychological Association found that the stress levels of today’s teenagers, especially during the school year, trumps that of adults: on a 10-point scale (in which the score of 10 leans towards the most stressed), teens scored an 5.8 while adults scored a 5.1 (APA, 2014). The top five causes of stress in adolescents may include “school, especially homework, exams and pressure to do well; relationships with friends, boyfriends and girlfriends; life changes like leaving school, getting into university or getting a job; too many things to do, and feeling unprepared or overwhelmed by tasks; and lack of sleep.” (Raising Children). More than a decade ago, now 27 year old Jennifer Glickman described getting to school some days so “stressed from overwork and lack of sleep that she felt nearly sick to her stomach,” (Kaufman, 2008). What is very concerning is that while 31% of teens reported that their stress increased in the past year (compared to 16% of teens who reported that their stress decreased in the past year), “nearly half of teens (42 percent) reported they were not doing enough or were not sure if they were doing enough to manage their stress, and more than one in 10 (13 percent) said they never set aside time to manage stress.”(APA, 2014). Mismanagement of stress could pose dangers on mental and physical well being, short term and even some cases, lifelong. “Many teens also reported feeling overwhelmed (31 percent) and depressed or sad (30 percent) as a result of stress. More than one-third of teens reported feeling tired (36 percent) and nearly one-quarter of teens (23 percent) reported skipping a meal due to stress.” (APA, 2014). Additionally, . A *CASA* study from 2003 found that those students who were highly stressed were almost twice as likely than their less stressed counterparts to resort to activities such as smoking, drinking, get drunk and use illegal drugs (T, 2020).



From the American Psychological Association, 2018.

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In this study, we aim to pinpoint high school students' exact motivations for getting into a selective college. Next, we examine how much the prospect of college admissions impacts scholastic and non-scholastic decisions made in high school. Finally, we observe if college admissions is less or more important to mental and physical wellbeing, to high school students. We hypothesize that: prestige and reputation will be a popular motivator for getting into a selective college among high school students, that college admissions will heavily influence scholastic and non-scholastic choices, and that college admissions is a bigger priority to mental and physical well being, to the point that high school students are willing to neglect their mental and physically health if that would promise them admissions into an elite college.

### **Materials and Methods**

Participants will include high school students in New York City. Our focus demographic will be high school juniors and seniors, although freshmen and sophomores may be considered. In particular, we want to identify those who have prospects of applying to selective colleges (acceptance rate under 15%). Still, we do want participants who are aiming for less selective schools, in order to compare the motivating factors and how influential college admissions plays into the decisions they make throughout their high school career in our study. We will administer a survey using the platform Google Forms, which will be forwarded through social media platforms to high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The survey will compose of questions in the form of Likert scales, combined with short response questions that will give participants the opportunity to explain their answers or provide more information. For example, when asking participants about their motivating factors behind applying to selective schools, that question will be in the form of a short response. When asking how big of a part college admissions plays into their high school decisions, we will use Likert scales.

We will be using parametric analysis of ordinary averages of Likert scale data and using techniques such as t-tests and regression procedures to further examine the significance of our data as a whole. In particular throughout our survey we used questions that would bring the variable understanding of how the college admissions really affects students across the city academically, mentally and physically. We asked questions that would examine thought processes that correlate how many high schoolers often think about. Firstly, we chose to understand the “driving forces,” in other words the motivation that causes students to apply for college. Is it the reasoning that is provided by their parents? Is it the reasoning to go to college to help uplift themselves and their family out of poverty, to become rich? Next, we proposed three questions relating to mainly standardized testing including the SAT and the ACT. These questions delved into why students were studying for examinations that often wield down many of them mentally and can become overwhelming at times or just extremely exhausting to deal with. How often are kids spending prepping in or why didn't they take these examinations is also something that we have to correlate to the admissions process as a whole.

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In the next section of questions we aimed to understand what types of courses that students were taking throughout the entirety of their high school career. Were they taking mainly advanced placement courses, IB, honors or just regular courses, and why did they choose to do so? Did they mainly do these classes for college, or did they do it because they enjoy these classes and want to genuinely challenge themselves to work harder?

In terms of analyzing the data:

- We performed linear regression and p and t tests on the data to find a correlation between factors such as course load difficulty and how it affects their perception of clubs and academic life
- We also explored how the correlation changes in relation to the student's graduation year, and compared the confidence level in their application based on this principle.

The following questions will be asked to survey participants:

- Briefly describe your ideal college and what factors you will prioritize when looking for colleges. (e.g. Tuition expenses, distance, reputation, etc.) *Short Response*
  - What is your "driving force" throughout your college admissions process? What is motivating you to apply for the colleges you are applying for? *Short Response*
  - I am only taking the SAT/ACT because I want to be a competitive qualifier for college
  - My course load, including the amount of college-level (i.e. AP, IB) courses I am taking, reflects the college(s) I am aiming for. *Likert*
  - From most to least important (1=most and 6=least important), rank the following factors. Please list only one response per column (e.g. GPA=1, Family=2, Standardized test scores= 3 etc.) *Likert*
1. The effort I put into taking standardized tests (e.g. SAT, ACT, AP exams etc.) reflects my drive to get into the college of my choice. *Likert*
  2. I am more likely to take rigorous college-level courses, not because I like them, but because they look good to colleges. *Likert*
  3. I am not planning on majoring in any of the courses I am taking right now; I am only taking them for the rigor. *Likert*
  4. During course selection, I often overestimate myself and select courses that end up stressing me out. *Likert*
  5. My extracurriculars don't reflect my interests but it gives me an advantage in the college admissions process. *Likert*
  6. Not having enough extracurricular activities stresses me out because I don't feel my application is competitive enough. *Likert*
  7. In order to get a good letter of recommendation, I believe that leaving a good impression on my teacher is more important than actually learning the curriculum. *Likert*
  8. Negligence of self care is due to my academic life and preparation for the college admissions process. *Likert*
  9. The college admissions process makes me lose track of time and makes it difficult to juggle my life. *Likert*

10. I am devoted to getting into my dream college, even if it means my mental and physical health will suffer. *Likert*

## Results & Discussion

Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p	Mean Difference	SE Difference	95% CI for Mean Difference		Cohen's d
							Lower	Upper	
I am devoted to getting into my dream college, even if it means my mental and physical health will suffer.	In order to get a good letter of recommendation, I believe that leaving a good impression on my teacher is more important than actually learning the curriculum.	2.752	58	0.008	0.458	0.166	0.125	0.791	0.358
My extracurriculars don't reflect my interests but it gives me an advantage in the college admissions process.	Not having enough extracurricular activities stresses me out because I don't feel my application is competitive enough.	-10.081	58	< .001	-2.017	0.200	-2.417	-1.616	-1.312
I am more likely to take rigorous college-level courses, not because I like them, but because they look good to colleges.	Negligence of self care is due to my academic life and preparation for the college admissions process.	-1.731	58	0.089	-0.339	0.196	-0.731	0.053	-0.225
My course load, including the amount of college-level (i.e. AP, IB) courses I am taking, reflects the college(s) I am aiming for.	I am not planning on majoring in any of the courses I am taking right now; I am only taking them for the rigor.	7.523	58	< .001	1.525	0.203	1.120	1.931	0.979

Note. Student's t-test.

A paired sample t-test was conducted between various survey questions as a means to find the correlation of the responses. Through the use of JASP, an accessible program for statistical data analysis, it was revealed that participants's responses (n = 59) suggest that there is a strong correlation between a student's reflection of their course load and the rigor associated with them (p<0.001). Depending on the rigor of their academic courses, there was a noticeable trend that taking such courses led to a lack of self care and awareness of health deterioration. Students also mentioned that they were willing to sacrifice their well being and morals to achieve their end goal. Additionally a student's extracurriculars seem to play an important role in their mental health. Most students felt that their extracurricular activities do not reflect their best interests, which also leads to a state of doubt and stress as participants start to criticize their own competence in the college application process.

Our limitations include that our methodology consists primarily of specialized high school students. As specialized high school students typically have greater prospects of going to elite colleges than non-specialized high school students, we have not accounted for another high school demographic who applies for college. In addition, our participants primarily consisted of NYC DOE students, in which the curriculum (IB vs. AP) and pressures may be different compared to other states. Most of these students in specialized high schools don't necessarily correlate to the mindset that students in "average" or "less-than average" schools may foundationalize.

Another limitation to our data that we found was the difference between the graduating classes that we have garnered responses from. Upwards of 77% of our responses were derived from the graduating class of 2022, which can oftentimes become a skewed set of data. The mindset in

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which juniors and sophomores often function, especially as the college process approaches, can become separated by the fact that juniors are closer in terms of timeline to the ending of the college process. This means that the barriers and challenges they might face in terms of mental and physical health would be exacerbated compared to that of the sophomores and freshmen.

Even within elite high schools with upwards of 3,000 students, we grasp only the mentality of certain students who have continuously dealt with an environment that is competitive. Parenting for students who attend schools such as Stuyvesant or Bronx Science is oftentimes extremely competitive. These students have parents who motivate this competitive aspect of them, leading to sleepless nights and functioning based on coffee. This representation may not be comparable to a student who attends the local zoned school, where they may have been nurtured in a completely different environment, and where college isn't the mindset for many students. Even so, we believe that our results are heavily reliable in a few aspects. We found that an overwhelming majority of students have a motivating force behind the college process, including their parents or prestige related factors including a prestigious job or attending a prestigious college. There is evidence to prove that a majority of students are also relying on competitive testing and are determining what they have to offer only based on the reliability of becoming a competitive qualifier for college. Out of the 58 responses we collected, 75% of students stated on a scale from 1-5 that their reasoning behind "becoming a competitive qualifier for college" is placed at a 5 for them taking the exams they do. 50% of students placed a 5 for the same scale detailing that the courses they take reflects the college they would like to attend. In the same vein, 32% of students placed a 5 on the scale stating that they would "damage their mental and physical health in aims of getting into a top college."

Representatively, our data has proven that students are more than willing to go above and beyond and make choices that negatively affect their health, or they are making choices to take difficult classes just to stand out in the eyes of college admissions officers. Oftentimes we fail to realize that there isn't a single method to getting into college, however, students do not necessarily realize that and aim to take the hardest courses and do the "best" extracurriculars in order to be "successful" in their college aims.



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