College Admission: Failed Rite Of Passage

What are the psychological implications of college admission for both parent and child? The college admission process is seen as a testing ground of fears about incomplete or inadequate child rearing, and its impact on parents of separation from their children.

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Of all the normal separations in life in our culture, departure from home is the most traumatic. To separate after a profoundly close relationship of eighteen years' duration is a significant loss for both parent and child.

At times, as a psychologist, I look at college admission and its impact on children, parents, and schools and think the gods must be crazy to have invented the process. College has achieved a symbolic importance so out of proportion to its actual meaning, and the admission process has evolved into such a Byzantine ritual, that it can make normal people act nutty and nutty people act quite crazy.

I want to step back from the college admission process and ask two questions.

1. What is it about the transition to college that is so difficult for so many children and families?

2. What is it about the college admission process that promotes or inflames these difficulties?

Each year I speak at the college weekend for parents of juniors at a nearby boarding school. The school, which has a hard time getting parents to participate consistently in any aspect of school life over four years, gets a 100 percent turnout for this weekend. Everybody has track shoes on, primed for the race. In the auditorium, the sense that the meeting is the beginning of the big something is palpable. Most people believe that the big something is helping your child get into a good college. From a psychologist's point of view, college admission is infected by irrational forces exactly proportional to the extent that the participants believe it is only about getting into a "good college."

What is really going on is the most important and most difficult transition in all of life: the end of childhood and the late-adolescent separation and individuation from parents. Of all the normal separations in life in our culture, departure from home is the most traumatic. For a certain group of late-adolescent children in our society, the transition to college is the most dramatic and stressful point in the long process of becoming their own person, becoming more self-reliant, and being able to operate outside their families--what is called "separation and individuation."

To separate after a profoundly close relationship of eighteen years' duration is a significant loss for both parent and child. The loss may not be permanent; college may turn out to be only a temporary interruption in a close lifelong relationship between parents and children. In fact, most people in the world live in the same place as their parents all their lives and do not experience the degree of separation in late adolescence that certain classes in American society do.

However, for middle and upper class children who aspire to maintain or improve their family's socioeconomic position, the first step is college. Once that separation is begun, neither party, in the years leading up to that separation, can predict how close or how distant the relationship between them will be after the transition to college or after college is finished. There is a feeling in both parties, often unarticulated or denied, that this could be it. This could be the end.

The launching of a child stirs up everyone in the family. For the parents it is the culmination of their child rearing, the end of the parental curriculum. From now if they act as parents for a college-age or older child, it will be by invitation only.
Proving Ground for Fears
What is the main testing ground of fears about incomplete or inadequate child rearing? The college admission process.

If you are afraid you don't discipline your children enough—too much Dr. Spock—the incriminating evidence of parental failure is right there in front of everyone. The child is not filling out her college applications!

If you are afraid that you have allowed your children to watch too much television and settle for low grades, the chickens all come home to roost—painfully and publicly—during the meeting with the college counselor at the end of junior year.

If, on the eve of departure, a parent decides that a child needs more self-discipline, then surely the way to drum it in is in an SAT review course or with parental pressure about applications.

The frantic involvement of many parents in the process is, from my perspective, a cover for this profound parental anxiety: Did I do a good job with this child? Did I do everything I needed to do for this child? Is this child prepared? Is this child going to have a good life? I have seen many laissez-faire parents, not much in evidence in the tenth and eleventh grade years, swoop back into their children's lives at college admission time, trying to stuff all of their wisdom and discipline into their children at the last moment.

Parents may need to be reassured as their fledglings leave the nest that they really have taught them how to fly. Since it is impossible to assess the quality of what parents have done for their children at this point, what is the next best thing? What comes closest to getting graded as parents?

The status of the college to which the child is admitted. From the standpoint of an anxious parent, an "Ivy League college" child is proof of better child rearing than a "small college" child. Our human and common sense react against this notion: no one would actually come out and claim such a thing. But the uncertainties of separation can so infect anxious parents that they begin to operate on this concrete and terrible logic.

I once sat with a talented, emaciated senior girl and her brilliant, well-meaning parents. She, they, and the school had to decide whether she should remain in school or go into a hospital. In light of her anorexia, the result of a perfectionistic personality style run amok, and to ease the stress on the girl, the school recommended in the strongest terms that she not file her early decision application to Princeton. Upon hearing this, the girl looked at the adults in the room and said, "If I can't apply early to Princeton, I'll die." The parents of this young woman were not far behind her in their need to have her get into Princeton. Why did they all need this so desperately?

Because, in this case, something was askew in the family. Due to some flaw in her upbringing, this child was not happy or self-confident. Yet she was eighteen, the culture required her to leave home, and so her parents had to hide from themselves, and she had to hide from herself, the painful truth about what she had not gotten from her parents... and probably never would get. The psychological solution for them all was the reassuring vision of a great college. Somehow going there would make her life fine and vindicate her parents' child rearing.

Such fears about letting go of an unfinished child exist in all families. How can we let go of a child who is still so young in so many ways? With the greatest difficulty. It is painful and has no cure except time and hope. For parents looking for an analgesic, the college admission process is an action arena where they can work out their anxieties. What I do, as a clinician, is try to reach into the interior of the family and touch the fear and sadness. If the fear and sadness can be made conscious, a lot of the nuttiness goes out of the action.
Facets of Separation
The separation process for parents has many rough facets. Along with the ending of their role as parents, other psychological stresses may be at work. The departure of a child means that they have to face—and this is always true when the last child leaves home—the viability of their marriage. Perhaps the children have been the pillars that propped up their marriage. They may be lonely. Perhaps their careers are not so fulfilling and the day-to-day responsibility for children has been what has given meaning to their lives.

The departure for college precipitates the "empty nest" syndrome. The separation of late-adolescent children from their parents may have almost the impact of divorce or death without anyone ever articulating the loss and grief that all are feeling. Two women were talking about dropping their children off for freshman year at college. Each had been quickly dismissed by her child at the dormitory door. One mother asked the other. "Did you cry when you got back to your hotel room?" "Oh—you waited that long?"

Some children may be aware of what their departure means to their parents. I have had young people say to me that they are afraid their parents' marriage will fall apart after they leave, or that one or the other parent will be terribly lonely. As one girl said, "Mom never went bird watching with Dad. I was the only one in the family who would."

Children, even in the midst of their excitement about leaving, may feel they are abandoning the family. This can lead to considerable guilt. They can even feel that they have to make reparation to their family for their leaving. What is the best possible gift a child can make in these circumstances? Admission to a good college. A child may think, If I can get into a good college—especially the same college one of my parents went to or wish they could have gone to—I will have gotten my parents an A in child rearing and reassured them that I—and they—are going to be OK And I can distract myself from being sad by competing ferociously to get into college and wait until later to feel happy or sad by making it into that school or not making it.

Underneath the action connected with the admission process lie all the issues of self-esteem that inevitably arise in students who are applying to college: Am I good enough? Have my parents and my school been telling me the truth about myself? If I put down on this application everything I am, everything I have done, all of my good points and faults, will somebody—anybody—want me?

Applying to college is a pretty scary and courageous thing to do. After all, what if no one likes the fundamental you? Every student seen by a college counselor has fears about self-esteem as the admission process begins. Many naturally look to the quality of a college as a grade on their self-worth; who can blame them? The "best" colleges seem to want the "best" students. Everyone knows that the best students are not always the best human beings, but that complex human understanding may not come easily for high school juniors and seniors.

We are talking about a moment of maximum personal and family stress, one that the prominent family therapist Jay Haley believes is the most difficult transition in all of life. What is a family supposed to do? Does every family have to find its own way through this maze of feelings and pressures? Most do, in consultation with friends and family who have experienced the same developmental challenge. But those who cannot manage the separation individuation process either hold on to their children too long or fling them out too abruptly.

Separation Styles
In studies of children and parents who were separating, Helm Stierlin and his colleagues documented two types—centripetal and centrifugal—and three clear subtypes of dysfunctional separation styles. Though Stierlin was working with troubled families, the concepts illuminate normal family separation styles as well.
Centripetal families exert pressure to keep a child from leaving. The completely successful centripetal family is the binding family, which keeps drawing the child back as if it possessed a powerful invisible magnet. Children from such families may be simply unable to overcome this force and make the transition to college—or leave home for a job. They stay home, only to resent their parents' inability to let them leave and experience their parents' resentment of their inappropriate dependence.

Centrifugal families, according to Stierlin, are families that cannot tolerate the slow withdrawal and separation of the child and resort to abrupt separations. The expelling family simply flings the child out early, without reference to the particular child's needs. Boarding schools often have "expelled" children in their populations, but the expulsion may be justified by an educational rationale, so that these children feel thrown out without really being able to say that they have been. The parents of these children may not be able to tolerate the pain of their growing up and leaving them slowly, and so they send them away early in an attempt to avoid pain by means of a short, sharp separation.

When both centripetal and centrifugal forces are at work in a family, the result can be the delegating family. The delegating family sends a child out, and the child believes that she is free and independent, but in fact she is on a mission for her parents that must be fulfilled. What appears on the outside to be a truly independent child is someone who is not psychologically individuated and pursuing her own goals. Often the child from such a family is delegated to live out some dream that a parent or parents were unable to fulfill in their own lives, such as attending a high status college.

Most college counselors and teachers will immediately recognize these categories described by Stierlin. Families inevitably manifest one of the styles of separating that have been perfected over generations. Most healthy families are slightly centripetal or slightly centrifugal but able to adjust in a flexible way for different children and circumstances, alternating between impulses to hold a child in or spin a child out.

Rites of Passage
It is the job of a culture to provide a ritual framework that enables people in families to sustain the psychological stress of an important life transition. Many such rituals are religious, but not all. They create a series of prescribed steps that mark developmental transition. Weddings, christenings, Bar Mitzvahs, getting a driver's license, and registering to vote are all examples of cultural signposts that ease our way along the path.

Rituals marking the transition from childhood to adulthood are known as "rites of passage." A rite of passage formalizes and institutionalizes personal and family changes into a series of forms that symbolize end cerebrate the importance of developmental changes. In American society, the end of childhood is marked by the end of high school. For those who do not go on to college, the end of childhood is marked by high school graduation and the events that surround it. For those who do go on to college, it seems that getting into college is a more significant ritual than graduating from high school; it certainly occupies more time, attention, and family preparation and anxiety. The major transitional step for these young people is the departure for college, and the series of rituals preparing for that step is the college admission process. How does this process measure up as a rite of passage?

Anthropologies studying traditional rites of passage to adulthood describe them as a three-part process. The first stage is physical separation from the community at large; children are taken away from their families in the company of others their own age.

The second stage, called the "liminal phase," is one in which the child is between classifications--neither child nor adult. In this phase, children and their age-mates become social comrades. They
are challenged, made to suffer, and, in some societies, may be beaten, circumcised, or ritually scarred in some way. It is important to note that during this phase there is no hierarchy among age-mates. Children suffer their torments individually, but no distinctions are made among them; they are all treated the same. At the end of the liminal phase, young people are reborn as adults. During this phase, they may have worn clothes of death, symbolizing the death of the childhood self.

In the final phase, the group of age-mates is reintegrated into the community and the adults rejoice. Whatever trials and tortures may be used by different cultures, all put a time limit on the liminal phase and culminate in reunion with the adult community.

It is the strength and power of these rituals, and the community's agreement upon them, that permit all members of the community to share their anxiety about the important developmental moment, be they the parents who give their children over to the ritual or the children who fear the pain of the test.

The college admission process looks like a rite of passage, comes at the right time for a rite of passage, has some elements of a rite of passage, but does not work as a rite of passage to bring children through the separation-individuation phase of late adolescence. Getting into college makes everyone anxious, in the manner of a classic rite of passage, but it does not provide the climax, or the catharsis, that psychologically supports the age-mates and other members of the community. Instead, it too often leaves everyone more anxious, exhausted, and feeling bad about themselves, not less anxious, energized, and proud of themselves for having survived.

**Why the Process Fails**

There are at least six reasons why the college admission process fails to function as a helpful rite of passage.

1. Children are not separated from adults during the college admission process. They have to go through their trials and tests in front of their parents, who cannot help being affected but who have no formal role—or do they? This leads to the possibility of shame for children, should they fail in front of their parents. It also leads to intense confusion in parents. Because of their love for their children, they either share the pain or choose not to share the pain, even when other parents are helping their children through the "torture." Better that all children should be in the hands of adults chosen by the community to see them through the ritual—but that leads to the second difficulty.

2. No consensus exists about exactly how important getting into college is in the life of the community. Each family, depending on its history and socioeconomic aspirations, has to decide how excited or how upset to become, depending on its vision of how important getting into college—or into a certain kind of college—is in the life of the family and the child.

3. These varying views on importance result in uncertain criteria for success. If a child gets into college C instead of college A, has she failed to become adult? Has she done a terrible job of becoming adult? Will she be forever scarred, her future blighted by this failure, or isn't it really a failure at all? Many students who get into perfectly credible colleges where they have every chance of having a wonderful experience feel as if they have failed in life because they did not get their first choice. I have met adults who, years later, are still mourning the college they wanted but did not get into.

4. The worst thing about uncertain criteria for success, competition, and confusion is that they tear age-mates apart. In a classical rite of passage, children go through the experience together, become adults together, and have lifetime camaraderie. Here we have the destructive effects of
different outcomes for different children. They begin to watch others, fear others' success, and ultimately wish others ill. I talked to a student last year who got into her first-choice college but was upset because another girl, her “enemy,” had also been accepted by that college. High school seniors do not get “reborn” together; many get split apart.

5. The college admission process has no time limits. It has no clear starting point—in many schools it seems to be starting earlier and earlier—and it does not go on forever, despite what we may think. Early admission is fiendish in this regard because it offers two chances to fail. One of the saddest, most destructive aspects of early admission is to watch bright students go through the anxiety of applying early, fail to get in, and then have to repeat the process. Although they may end up being accepted, they spend most of their senior year in emotional turmoil.

6. Finally, because of our mobile society, there is no promise that children will be reintegrated into the community. They may return in some sense, but in other ways they do not. Perhaps most painful for parents and children is this great unanswered question in the separation/individuation process in our society.

Criticisms and answers

Having roundly criticized the college admission process by comparing it to classical rites of passage, I open myself to two easy criticisms. First, whoever said that getting into college should be a community ritual filled with meaning, especially in our pluralistic society? The life stories of Americans who go to college are so varied that no rite of passage around college admission could ever be designed to meet the psychological needs of everyone involved.

The second criticism asks, “Where have you been? Are you naive?” After all, getting into college is not a group or age-mate experience. It is a competitive sorting process that is tough and cold but utterly essential for the economic and intellectual health of our society as it is presently constituted.

As for the first criticism, no one has said that college admission should carry the burden of being a community rite of passage. But it looks like a rite of passage, and it has the attention of the adult community. In my opinion, it should be made to function better as a rite of passage because so many adolescents break down at this time of life and are admitted to psychiatric hospitals. So many depressed college freshmen and depressed young college graduates return home after college for emotional as well as economic reasons. For them, the separation/individuation process has been incomplete, and they return to try it again. Our society sends many late adolescents off too soon or not in the right way. Some more psychologically supportive ritual is needed; our society is paying too high a price in casualties among its late adolescents.

As for the second criticism, the reply must be, “Yes, of course this is a competitive society, and we do need a method for deciding which children should go to which colleges.” However, the sorting aspect can be quicker and cleaner. It may be possible to sort age-mates by level of ability yet retain the feeling of camaraderie.

It seems a tragedy to take the best and brightest young people in our society and put them through an ordeal that ends with them losing their families, their age-mates, and, for far too many, their self-esteem. If we take the best-educated children in our society, the ones of whom we are going to ask the most, and deprive them of psychological support even as we subject them to stress, psychological casualties will be the inevitable result. If we put people through too tough a test for too little reason and with too little support, many of those who appear to thrive and survive will eventually take out their anger at society by doing whatever they please with their educations on Wall Street, in Washington, or wherever else they may work and live.
Possible Remedies

My mother always said that it is easy to tear things down but so very hard to build them up. Having criticized the college admission process from a psychological point of view, I want to offer some ideas, in the form of questions.

1. Can we--through attitude, through deliberate education, through greater consciousness--talk with parents and children about the profound psychological process that underlies the transition from high school to college, from childhood to adulthood, from family interdependence to being on one's own?

College counselors, teachers, and school administrators see the hardship and pain of this transition more than anyone else. They see anxious parents and frightened students. Do school people address these issues? Or do they talk only about admission test scores, advanced placement courses, and the "right" extracurricular activities? People in every school should be listening for, and talking with families about, the grief of separation and the loss of childhood.

2. Can we better define the role of parents and other adults in the community in the college admission process so that parents do not end up in a free-for-all, with some children being hounded to death and others neglected?

I have heard of some good parent-child college visiting experiences, but wouldn't it work better to let thirty students go out on a college-visiting bus and let them rate the colleges? Can parents be assigned specific, limited tasks and be kept out--firmly, if necessary--of others?

3. Can we keep the senior year intact, to prevent it from getting cut to pieces by the college admission process?

One school I know of has, more or less, simply given up on spring of the senior year. Two weeks before college admission letters are in the mail, the seniors go out on "senior projects," scattered to the winds and reunited only for a few days before graduation. This saves the school problems of senior class cutting and boredom during spring term, but it also splits up the seniors and robs them of being able to say extended good-byes to one another. Group sadness and separation anxiety go unacknowledged. This is only one manifestation of a tendency in many schools to give up on the senior year and allow it to be completely dominated by the college admission process.

4. Can we better sustain these age-mates as they go through their common ordeal, before they end up in different colleges and different places? Could students work on their admission essays in study groups, just as business school and law students do, instead of going off to work with educational consultants?

As a former outward Bound instructor, I know that it is possible to form a strong group of young people of widely differing abilities and prospects in life. If you orient a group to facing a common challenge, they are bound together. Isn't it possible to introduce some group outlook and cooperation into the business of getting into college? Is the process inherently so competitive that such efforts are doomed, or do we just see it as being that way and not try to make it cooperative?

5. Finally, can we have more ritual around college admission in our schools and communities? Jack Wright, a college counselor at Franklin High School in Los Angeles who works with disadvantaged students whose families may know little about college, has a map on the wall with pins marking the colleges to which students have applied. When someone gets into a college, he uses a different pin as a visible sign of success. In so doing he emphasizes the common challenge and the success of individuals within a group and minimizes the chances for individual
shame. Every student who walks into that counseling office looks at the map, is inspired by it, and feels the history of it.

If adults do not provide such occasions for ritual, students themselves will try to bind their wounds with their own rituals. Students hold "rejection letter" parties after April 15 that only those with rejection letters in hand may attend. This is clearly an attempt by the age-mate group to heal the wounded self-esteem of individuals. Shouldn't adults be helping, too? If it seems that all of these suggestions depend on group or community solutions, they do. The reason? Simple: the stress our society, and the college admission process, put on the individual and on individual achievement. The individual self is fragile. The self in isolation is not strong and can break down relatively easily, particularly a young self. The self supported by the love of family and by the ideals and rituals of the school and community, nourished by a rigorous education, and strengthened by the challenge it has faced--such a self, inhabiting the body and mind of a healthy young man or woman, can leave home and go on to one of the many colleges that are a good "match" for him or her and have a wonderful and productive experience there.

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