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Op-Ed Columnist

Stressed for Success?
By DAVID BROOKS

Many of you high school seniors are in a panic at this time of year, coping with your college acceptance or rejection letters. Since the admissions process has gone totally insane, it's worth reminding yourself that this is not a particularly important moment in your life.

You are being judged according to criteria that you would never use to judge another person and which will never again be applied to you once you leave higher ed.

For example, colleges are taking a hard look at your SAT scores. But if at any moment in your later life you so much as mention your SAT scores in conversation, you will be considered a total jerk. If at age 40 you are still proud of your scores, you may want to contemplate a major life makeover.

More than anything else, colleges are taking a hard look at your grades. To achieve that marvelous G.P.A., you will have had to demonstrate excellence across a broad range of subjects: math, science, English, languages etc.

This will never be necessary again. Once you reach adulthood, the key to success will not be demonstrating teacher-pleasing competence across fields; it will be finding a few things you love, and then committing yourself passionately to them.

The traits you used getting good grades might actually hold you back. To get those high marks, while doing all the extracurricular activities colleges are also looking for, you were encouraged to develop a prudential attitude toward learning. You had to calculate which reading was essential and which was not. You could not allow yourself to be obsessed by one subject because if you did, your marks in the other subjects would suffer. You could not take outrageous risks because you might fail.

You learned to study subjects that are intrinsically boring to you; slowly, you may have stopped thinking about which subjects are boring and which exciting. You just knew that each class was a hoop you must jump through on your way to a first-class university. You learned to thrive in adult-supervised settings.

If you have done all these things and you are still an interesting person, congratulations, because the system has been trying to whittle you down into a bland, complaisant achievement machine.

But in adulthood, you'll find that a talent for regurgitating what superiors want to hear will take you only halfway up the ladder, and then you'll stop there. The people who succeed most spectacularly, on the other hand, often had low grades. They are not prudential. They venture out and thrive where there is no supervision, where there are no preset requirements.

Those admissions officers may know what office you held in school government, but they can make only the vaguest surmises about what matters, even to your worldly success: your perseverance, imagination and trustworthiness. Odds are you don't even know these things about yourself yet, and you are around you a lot more.

Even if the admissions criteria are dubious, isn't it still really important to get into a top school? I wonder. I spend a lot of time meeting with students on college campuses. If you put me in a room with 15 students from any of the top 100 schools in this country and asked me at the end of an hour whether these were Harvard kids or Penn State kids, I would not be able to tell you.

There are a lot of smart, lively young people in this country, and you will find them at whatever school you go to. The students at the really elite schools may have more social confidence, but students at less prestigious schools may learn not to let their lives be guided by other people's status rules — a lesson that is worth the tuition all by itself.

As for the quality of education, that's a matter of your actually wanting to learn and being fortunate enough to meet a professor who electrifies your interest in a subject. That can happen at any school because good teachers are spread around, too.

So remember, the letters you get over the next few weeks don't determine anything. Picking a college is like picking a spouse. You don't pick the "top ranked" one, because that has no meaning. You pick the one with the personality and character that complements your own.

You may have been preparing for these letters half your life. All I can say is welcome to adulthood, land of the anticlimaxes.