

# **The Role of a Network of Support in the College Application Process**

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## **Today's College Admission Process**

In Colleges Today and Tomorrow, Lewis B. Mayhew states, "Until roughly 1955, even the presently highly selective institutions accepted most of the applicants that sought admission. It should be recalled that Harvard College, which now finds itself in the position to accept only the top one percent of high school graduates, as recently as the early 1950's accepted one out of every two and a half students who applied." What exactly has this rapid and dramatic increase in the selectivity of college admissions done to the application process itself? In regards to the highly selective colleges and universities in the country, it has effectively made the application process a cutthroat activity where the best students in the country fight over the precious few spaces that are open each year. This has in turn significantly changed the way that students think about where to go to college. Parents with the necessary resources send their children to private high schools, which focus on accelerated learning in order to make their child a more attractive candidate for admission to the prestigious universities and colleges.

Today's high school student must make many adult decisions when they are weighing their options toward college. The acceptance or denial to a particular school can have both positive and negative repercussions affecting the personal identity of a student. Rejection may cause a student to work harder, while acceptance may lull a student into coasting. For a young teenager, strong support can be an extremely valuable advantage in surviving this difficult process.

This inquiry will examine the connection between a network of support and the college admission process. It will seek to illustrate both the positive and negative aspects

of a strong network of support with relation to today's intense college admission process for highly selective colleges and universities.

## **Developmental Assets**

In 1996, the Search Institute completed a chart of forty developmental assets that "have been identified as forming a foundation for healthy development in adolescents." These forty assets fall under eight separate categories. The categories are support, empowerment, boundaries, and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. Without a doubt all eight categories are important to the success of a high school student in finding the right college to attend and completing the application process satisfactorily. However, I feel that the categories of support and boundaries and expectations are slightly more important than the rest of the categories regarding this task. The old adage that students will achieve what is expected of them rings true in a situation such as this. A student that has a great deal of support and high expectations is in all probability going to complete the admission process better than a student who is lacking in either support or high expectations. Consequently, one student will be admitted to a "better" school. Teenagers are very intelligent, but the admission process is so involved that without outside support from parents and teachers concerning matters such as letters of recommendation, intelligence may be overlooked for more attractive applications.

## The Experience of Mike Rose

In his critically acclaimed novel, *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose speaks of his experience with college and support at home. Mike Rose was raised in the Los Angeles ghetto on South Vermont Street, hardly an intellectual haven. His family was very poor and his father died when he was a junior in high school. He describes himself as scholastically indifferent towards school. He also mentions that no one in his family had gone to college. Only two of his uncles had completed high school.

Rose was introduced to Jack MacFarland during the year that his father died. Rose describes MacFarland as “a beatnik born too late.” He had received his master’s degree from Columbia and “decided, at twenty-six, to find a little school and teach his heart out.” MacFarland inspired Rose to love learning and helped to turn his grades around his senior year. Rose had not really thought much about college. His parents had encouraged him on a superficial level. He states that “My folks would say that they wanted me to go to college and be a doctor, but I don’t know how seriously I ever took that; it seemed like a sweet thing to say, a bit of supportive family chatter, like telling a gangly daughter she’s graceful.” He also states that he wasn’t even aware of what entrance requirements were. The fact of the matter is that Rose was not prepared for higher learning. Rose’s scenario is not altogether an uncommon one. It is not unusual for parents to support their children’s abstract dreams and aspirations in attending college, where the reality is that the child is neither prepared nor aware of the difficulty of simply completing the application process itself. Rose certainly had the ability, but he had not applied himself until his last year of high school. MacFarland recognized this and through his intervention had Rose admitted to Loyola University, where he had earned his bachelor’s degree, on a probationary level. MacFarland also succeeded in getting a loan for Rose, without which he would not have been able to afford college.

MacFarland is described by Rose as “the man I admired most.” The relationship between MacFarland and Rose is heartwarming, but at the same time highly improbable. It does however exemplify an amended network of support. With relatively little family support and while living in a poor and uninspiring community, Rose succeeded in being admitted to a four-year college. He describes this fortunate break with one word: amazing.

The interesting aspect of Rose’s experience is that he partially found and partially lucked into finding such an incredible role model to add to his network of support. Rose also writes of times when he and two closest friends would go to MacFarland’s apartment and be amazed at the quantity of dog-eared and annotated books. These friends who were equally inspired by MacFarland, shared in Rose’s appreciation of knowledge as an escape from his dreary situation as a poor high school student. Undoubtedly, these close friends were also important figures in the network of support that Rose created for himself outside of his family. More than anything, Rose’s experience illustrates how vital a network of support can be and that this essential network need not come from your family. If one looks hard enough there are usually always people who will at least try to help.

## The Rival of Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore

For Mike Rose, attending a four-year college was made possible by a series of lucky breaks and good fortune in addition to some last minute hard work. In their book *High School Achievement*, authors James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore exam the public, private, and catholic school systems and their relation to both high school success and post high school expectations. The authors rely on a large number of well-structured surveys and questionnaires as well as in depth reporting, research, and statistics to show the differences between these high school experiences. The book contains one very specific chapter that studies the outcome of high school education pertaining to two different quantifiable objectives. The first objective is the cognitive outcome of high school. Simply stated this is how well students score on standardized tests. The second objective is the student's plans for further education. Both objectives are acknowledged as being significantly higher in high performance private high school students when compared to any other sector of the educational whole.) Drawing from the data, educational expectations are shown to be higher across the board. 98.1 percent of high school seniors in high performance private high schools report plans on attending four-year colleges compared to 68.4 percent for the public sector. 75.6 percent of high performance private high school seniors report the desire to obtain at least a master's degree while only 18.8 percent report this ambition in public high schools. It is obvious to infer that high schools that expect over 98 percent of their students to go on to four year colleges are better prepared for the college admission process than schools that expect less than seven out of ten students to attend college. This inference is the relevant observation for my inquiry. The fact that the second objective, which shows high performance private high school seniors much more likely to attend a four-year college than public high school students, is in many ways directly related to the support that these high school students receive.

Students who attend high performance private high schools generally have better teachers, more resources, and perhaps most importantly a much better sense of being able to control their fate and higher self-esteem. In a student questionnaire, 23.4 percent of the high school seniors attending a high performance private high school agreed that generally their plans work out. This was significantly higher than the 16.5 percent of public high school seniors who felt the same way. 46 percent of high performance private high school seniors reported feeling good about themselves while only 32.7 public high school seniors reported feeling this way. Another obvious generalization that the authors make is that most students enrolled in high performance private high schools have extremely supportive parents. Most parents have a college education themselves and are typically very involved with their children's education.

From this study, it seems obvious that a strong network of support, while not essential, demonstrates a very strong correlation between success and support. Intuitively this seems to make sense as well. If two students of equal ability are given very different amounts of support we would expect that the student who received more support to achieve more than the student who did not receive very much support.

## **Example of Melissa Carne**

Melissa Carne is my cousin who is eight years older than I am. She attended a very small and very selective private high school that generally sends all of its graduates to four-year colleges. She recalled that during her four years of high school only one student did not go on to a four year college because she accepted a job as a professional dancer. When discussing the lack of support that I received from my high school in the college application process she was very surprised. She gave me a detailed account of the college application process at her private high school that clearly illustrated the resounding differences in professional support between the private high school she attended and the public high school I attended. Students at her high school were required to attend standardized test taking workshops, mock college interviews, and to apply to a minimum of three colleges. Students were expected to apply to a fall back school, the school that they would in all likelihood attend, as well as an ideal school. In addition to these activities, students were expected to take college visitation days and attend college information sessions. It is important to mention that my cousin also enjoys a very supportive family and a community that is very conducive to education. She has said that if the support and structure from both her parents and faculty at her high school was not what it was she would have in all probability not gone to such a high caliber school as she did. The example seems to demonstrate that a strong network of support will lend itself to success in the college decision process.

## **Rival of John Hursh**

Although I have had a very strong network of support, I was very unprepared for the process of college admissions. This is certainly not because my parents did not think I was going to go to college or that they did not take an active role in my college decision process. On the contrary, my mother told me I was going to go to college when I was the tender age of nine. My parents showed greater concern in applying to college than I did. While I assumed that I could go just about anywhere I wanted, my father would often say that I couldn't go anywhere unless I was accepted first. Despite my parent's pleas I put off applying to college until the middle of January of my senior year.

Aside from the fact that both of my parents have attended college, I have a strong secondary family support in the decision to attend college. All of my grandparents have also gone to college. In fact, all of my family members a generation before me on both my mother and father's side have graduated from college. All of their children have as well. Despite this overwhelming amount of support I found a way to nearly miss applying to college.

The guidance counselor at my high school suggested that I attend any of several small college located between one or two hours from my house. He thought that if I really wanted to stretch myself to the limits I should enroll in either Purdue or Indiana University. I was an excellent high school student who had a list of activities and recommendations a mile long. The idea that state school was the best that I could settle for was taken as an insult rather than a suggestion. Most of my high school teachers advised me similarly to my guidance counselor.

## The Decision to Act

I remember the day that I began taking action towards going to college. It was January 13<sup>th</sup>; school was cancelled because of snow. I was an eighteen year old senior in a very average high school in a small town in Indiana. The enrollment was about 230 students per class. Out of these students, approximately fifty would go on to college. Most would attend junior colleges, two-year vocational schools, or community colleges. Some would attend state schools. I was the only student who would attend college outside of Indiana.

My plan for finding the right school for me was oversimplified and poorly thought out. I went to the public library and took a look at the top fifty schools in the country. I noticed that I had already missed several deadlines so I could eliminate those. I also eliminated all schools that weren't located in a city or I thought I would not be able to continue my cross-country and track career at. It was through this method that I decided to apply to Carnegie Mellon University. Although, I knew absolutely nothing about the school I ended up going since it was the highest ranked university that I applied to. Obviously, I was very lucky in being accepted to such a highly selective university given the preparation that I did.

I think that since it was a given that I would attend college I did not take the requests of my family very seriously. I always assumed that everything would take care of itself for me. I was a great student who had a nearly ideal application. I had scored very well on all standardized tests, I was tenth in my class with a G.P.A. of 4.09, I was a sports star, and I was involved in clubs and student organizations. In addition to all of this, I had received nearly every award that my high school offered. What did I have to worry about? I would simply fill out an application and it would speak for itself.

When I finally decided to begin the application process for college I was shocked to see that I had missed the deadlines of several schools that I had thought about attending. I was beside myself when I received my first application. I assumed that one simply wrote down the bare essentials and that was that. I was stupefied to see the actual application. Essays, letters of recommendations, official test results, official transcripts, in short a nightmare. My high school guidance counselor was of little if any help, and since my parents had been pestering me since September to start applying to schools there was no way that I could ask them without being made subject to scores of resounding "I told you so's." So in effect, I was on my own.

This is a strange case where my strong network of support actually hindered my success. If I hadn't taken for granted the supposed fact that I could quickly apply and be accepted to almost any college or university in the country, I would have worried much more about the application process. Since I had such a high level of confidence and such a supportive family it was easy for me to delay on applying to college.

## **The Rival of Amber Ellison**

Amber is fifteen freshmen at Perry Traditional Academy in Pittsburgh. Although she is only fifteen years old she tells me that she is going to go to Duke University or Columbia University and that she is going to be a journalism major. This will prepare her for a career in investigating reporting. While many high school students have a school in mind that they would ideally like to attend, it is often a daydream or an unlikely possibility for numerous reasons. However, if there was ever an exception to this rule it would be Amber. Amber has often questioned me about the rigors of college and the application process. She has begun fretting over the standardized tests that she will take in the upcoming years. She is worried about a B in her current English class and whether or not she will get enough financial aid to attend either Duke or Columbia. Amber and I have spent time browsing each school on the web. She is already aware of the entrance requirements that each school has. In every way that I was under-prepared, Amber is over-prepared.

Amber has two very supportive, but at the same time very strict and demanding parents. Amber is reluctant to speak about the pressure regarding her schoolwork that her parents place on her, especially her mother. Despite her reluctance, she does make it very clear that her brother is a much less motivated student who is not expected to do exceptionally well in school. This is quite different from Amber who is expected to get nothing short of all A's. When prodded, Amber will speak about the support that her parents give her towards school and in her early interest in college. Despite the obvious parental support there are a number of other factors that help to explain Amber's obsession towards the college admission process.

Amber takes great pride in her schoolwork and it only makes sense that she would like to be rewarded for her impressive work ethic by being admitted to a highly selective college or university after high school. Amber is also motivated to get exceptional grades in order to overshadow her younger brother who doesn't get nearly as good of grades as she does. Amber has stated that although her younger brother is seen to be more amusing to her secondary family members, they take much greater interest in her plans after high school than in her brother's clowning around. The fact that Amber works as hard as she does in high school in order to make herself an attractive candidate for a highly selective college or university after high school is part of Amber's personal identity. Amber's no nonsense view towards college admissions reflects the fact that she qualifies for almost every asset that the Search Institute lists as being important for healthy personal development.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The purpose of this inquiry has been to investigate the connection between networks of support and success in making the transition between high school and college. This has been done by carefully examining the different backgrounds of support and their relevance towards a successful college application process in four cases. The cases of Melissa Carneand Mike Rose serve to illustrate the different ends of the spectrum of support towards college admissions. The cases of Amber Ellison and John Hursh serve to illustrate both the positive and sometimes negative effects of a strong network of support towards the college admission process. There are obviously many other factors that affect the ultimate success or failure of college admissions, but this paper has sought to have been very focused on the particularly interesting aspect of developmental support. I hope that

my efforts through this paper illustrate the advantages of a strong network of support without neglecting the many other factors that go into the process of college admissions.

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i The study breaks down the private high school students into high performance private high schools students and other private high school students. I am using high performance private high school students and public high school students to better illustrate the difference between greatly advantaged and disadvantaged high school students.

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