College Admission as a Failed Rite of Passage

by Michael G. Thompson

As a psychologist, I sometimes look at college admission and its impact on children, parents, and schools, and I 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. First, what is it about the transition to college that is so difficult for so many children and families? Second, 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% 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 the issue is only 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
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.

The separation process for parents has many rough facets. Along with the ending of their roles 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
his colleagues documented two types—centripetal and centrifugal—and three 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. 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
On Childhood and Adolescence

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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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
On Childhood and Adolescence

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.

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.

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.

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?

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

One school I know 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 project," scattered to the winds and reunited only for