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Higher (education) anxiety

Students and their parents feel stressed as application time rolls around

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UNION-TRIBUNE FAMILY EDITOR

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Mariana Delgado is a young woman on a mission. She strides through the large room in the Scottish Rite Temple in Mission Valley, stopping at this booth or that, collecting brochures, asking for information.

Mariana Delgado is determined to be the first in her family to go to college.

That reality is daunting enough, but added to it is the overall stress that she and most every other high school senior is feeling right now.

It's college application season, and the pressure is on. From school guidance counselors, from peers, from parents. California's state universities close the door on applicants at the end of the month. No time to waste.

And despite the hoopla surrounding Harvard's announcement in September that it would drop its early admission program next fall – a variation on a theme begun by University of North Carolina in 2002 and now involving Princeton, Yale, University of Virginia and others – little steam has been let out of the college admissions pressure cooker. The competition never has seemed more intense, the stress on students never higher, the anxiety in parents never more pronounced.



EARNIE GRAFTON / Union-Tribune
Elsa Delgado (right) talked with Sgt. Garon Vega of the Army National Guard, after she and daughter Mariana (left) met with him at San Diego High School. Mariana is considering ROTC as an option as she prepares to be the first in her family to go to college.

“Fear never helped anybody, and when we become afraid, our kids become afraid,” says Arlene Matthews, author of “Getting in Without Freaking Out,” described as “a humorous and realistic approach to helping parents understand what is – and isn't – important when their kids apply to college.”

Her message to parents of this year's applicants: “Since they've been toddlers, they've taken their cues from you. They look to you. You have to calm down.”

The former psychotherapist and college psychology instructor founded Your College Coach, an admissions advising service, after realizing “college-bound kids and their families needed emotional as well as practical guidance.”

The weight of SAT scores, GPAs, essays, school choices and the money to pay for it all come bearing down on even the most emotionally healthy families.

“Parents receive the message that if their children are not well prepared, well balanced and high achieving, they will not get a desired spot in higher education. Even parents who wish to take a lower-key approach to child rearing fear slowing down when they perceive everyone else is on the fast track,” wrote Dr. Kenneth R. Ginsburg in “The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds,” a report released last month by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Like Matthews, Ginsburg, in his report, more or less urges parents to seek balance when it comes to scheduling their kids' lives, planning their future.

Alexa Zigman likes that word, balance. The 17-year-old is sitting at a small table at Javanican, a comfy coffee shop on the corner of Cass Street and Grand Avenue in Pacific Beach. In the chair next to her is Kirk Avery, fellow Francis Parker High School senior, hunched over a copy of “The Princeton Review 2007.” They are here this afternoon to meet with Brian McElroy, the 26-year-old founder of McElroy Tutoring in San Diego. He graduated cum laude from Harvard in 2002; now he's helping other kids get into college.



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune

Brian McElroy (left) met with Kirk Avery at Javanican, a Pacific Beach coffee shop, to go over more information with the high school senior on the college application process.

Alexa, 17, says she senses the pressures her peers feel, but she can't buy into it. Just in case she's a little too laid back about the whole thing, her parents hired McElroy for a little motivation. Alexa says he's helped her identify what schools might feed her passion for photography, activism and a change from the Southern California lifestyle.

“My first choice is Evergreen State College,” she says. Her parents aren't pushing her to any particular school, and she will apply to more than just the Olympia, Wash., liberal arts institution. “I'll probably do nine or 10 schools.”

There will be UCLA, her father's alma mater, and several other UC campuses. In the end, she's pretty sure she'll get into one of the schools on her list.

Mariana, a student in the International Baccalaureate program at San Diego High School, seems to be keeping her cool, too.

“I'm confident,” she says.

Her eyes are on her prize: a degree in international relations. Her first-choice school is Richmond University in London. Second, UC Davis. Next are Cal State Chico, University of Tulsa and the newest state campus, UC Merced. And maybe UC Riverside and Humboldt State. And USC.

Elsa Delgado's eyes are on her daughter. They are full of emotion – pride, apprehension, love.

“She knows what she wants,” Elsa Delgado says, wistfully, thinking of being separated from her firstborn by a continent plus an ocean. “She has to learn to fly.”

She and Mariana are clutching pamphlets they've collected at the college fair, sponsored by CAL-Soap, the California Student Opportunity and Access Program. It's designed to serve students from

low-income families, those who would be the first in their families to attend college, from high schools or geographic areas with documented low eligibility or college participation rates.

Elsa Delgado, who came here from Mexico, says, “I don't understand the process. It makes me worry if I am well-informed enough to help her.”

Matthews is not surprised.

“Even when you want to be more low-key, it's very difficult,” she says, “because the pressure is ramping up, and you think, 'My child will be left in the dust.' Statistically, that's absurd. About 70 percent of schools take more than half of the kids who apply. The other thing to know is that most kids get into their first-or second-choice college – if they have reasonable expectations.”

Still, that's not enough reassurance for some parents.

“They come to me asking, 'Are we involved in the right activities? How should we spend our summers? What schools should we be applying to?' They see other parents starting to panic.”

They come through the door in sophomore year to improve their child's grades through subject tutoring, and for SAT and ACT test preparation. He charges \$195 an hour and meets with some students for 30 or 40 hours, others just three or four during application season. To be accessible to other families, he has a staff of tutors and consultants whose experience is not as in-depth but whose fees are lower. And he's attempting to find donors who would fund tutoring and consulting services for families who can't afford them.

“I would like to combat the stereotype that parents who come to college consulting are more controlling,” McElroy says. “They come to me because they'd rather have me interacting with their kids.

“In the end, it's the student's decision as to where and how to apply,” he says, “and I encourage my students to be self-sufficient and to fill out their applications independently. I do, however, provide guidance throughout the process, and I often act as an arbitrator between parents and students and reaching compromises between them, for example, when a kid says, 'OK, I'll apply to Stanford if you let me major in music.’”

He and Matthews are adamant that the goal should be more than just getting into college; it should be helping students get in the place that's the best fit. That school becomes the “best” school for your child. That's what the application process is all about.

“I tell them, 'Imagine yourself in college, an imaginary college that has all the things you want.' I tell them to make a list of all those things that matter to them. I tell them to do all this before any particular college comes to mind. Only when that list is made do we start looking. College is not about what you should be doing, but what you want to be doing.”

Sometimes, the list the student compiles is not the list the parents have in mind. McElroy will explain the reason and stand by it.

“I try to stay neutral and keep the student's best interest in mind. I'm not afraid to tell the truth to parents if I think they're making the wrong decisions during the college application process,” he says. “They don't have to follow my advice, but I'm certainly going to give it to them. That's what they're hiring me for.”

Kirk will apply to Stanford, his father's alma mater, and to his mother's, USC. But his first choice is University of Virginia, and that application is in the mail. His parents are aware of his preference, and he's aware that he needs to have several options. So, he'll apply to Boston College, Vanderbilt, University of Pennsylvania and Southern Methodist University.

“The only thing I can do is put everything into my applications,” he says, glancing again at “The Princeton Review.”

He finishes his tea, plays with an empty potato chip bag.

“I’m going to go surfing in the morning before school,” he says, softly. “I haven’t done much surfing lately.”

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