

Upfront

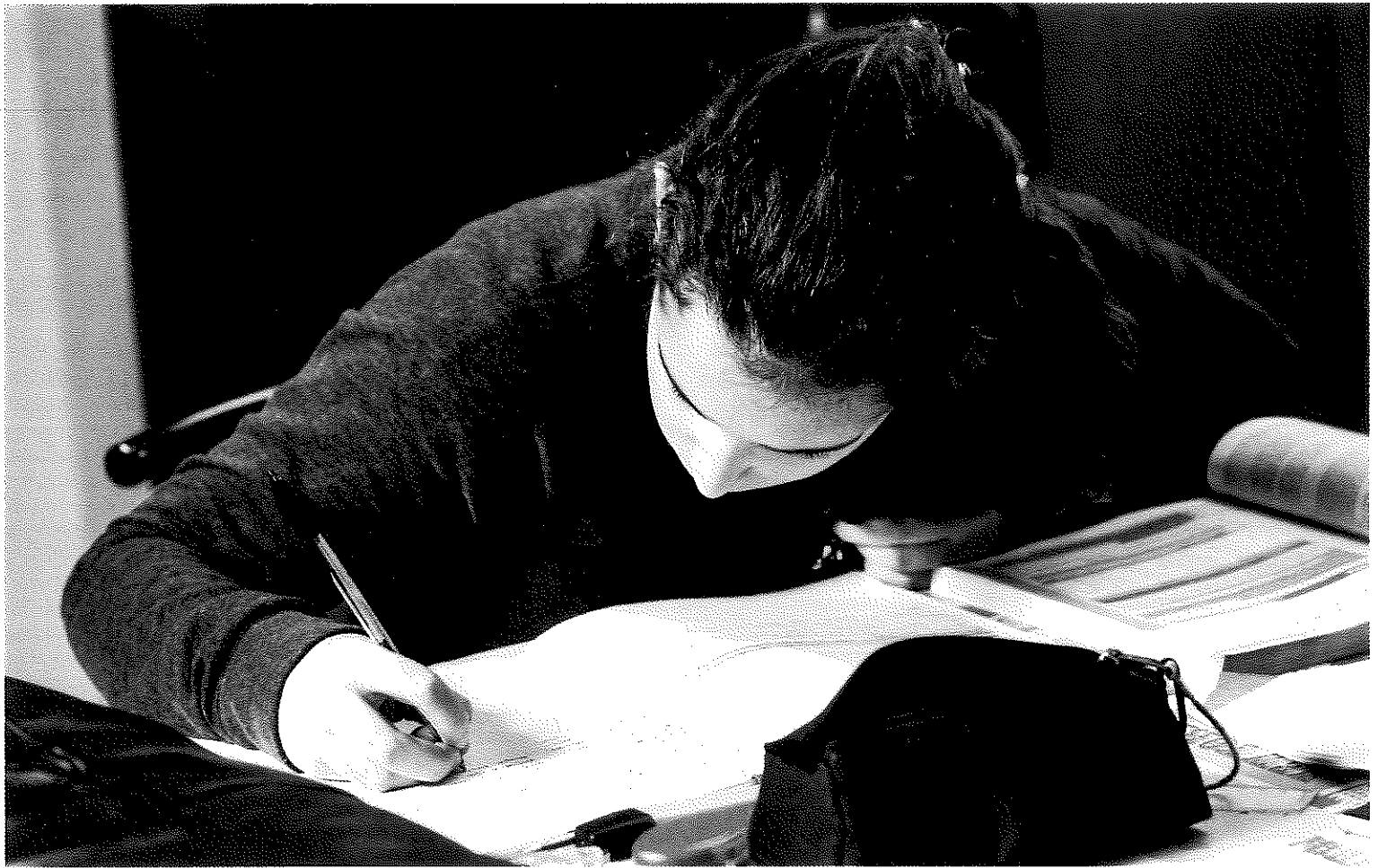
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PERSPECTIVE

Parents: Stop Trying to Design the Perfect College Applicant

BY LINDA K. WERTHEIMER

It was a high-stakes night as 800 parents and teenagers filled every seat in the auditorium at Lexington's Cary Hall. Many came with the same hope: that the five college admissions officers sitting next to me would reveal the answer to securing a bright future. So many people showed up that a fire marshal had to turn away the overflow.

Just which course, which grade, which activity could make the difference between getting accepted or rejected at a top school? Was it better, a student would ask, to get a B in an Advanced Placement course or an A in an easier class? Would it hurt his chances, another teenager wondered, because he was on a losing robotics team?

The admissions officers on the panel, which I

moderated, came from Harvard, MIT, Boston University, Tufts, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Those of us on the stage, as well as Lexington High School's principal and a town committee tasked with reducing student stress, had similar goals for our community: Persuade parents that there wasn't a single answer to getting into a particular college nor was there only one right university for their child among the more than 3,000 options. Parents should stop trying to craft children into perfect applicants.

At that 2013 event, admissions officers emphasized that they were not hunting for perfection in any category. Now, a report released last month by the Harvard Graduate School of Education and en-



Sampling of Lowest Acceptance Rates in the Nation

STANFORD

5.1%

HARVARD

6%

YALE

6.3%

MIT

7.9%

DATA ON FALL 2014 ENTERING CLASS, NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES, US NEWS & WORLD REPORT

that admissions officers define community service broadly. MIT added a new essay question for the 2016-2017 application, for example, asking students to describe how they have improved the lives of others, whether at school, home, in their neighborhood, or other places. "They don't have to be Mother Teresa," he says.

At the same time, a reality remains: The odds against getting into an elite school. MIT, Schmill notes, will likely admit roughly 8 percent of the 19,000-plus applicants for this year.

As the mother of a second-grader, I'm trying to be optimistic that the atmosphere will improve for teenagers in my pressure cooker of a town and other communities. But the signs aren't great. When my son was a toddler, another parent advised me to enroll him in soccer by age 3 or he'd have no chance of making the high school team. Other parents signed up their kindergartners for costly math centers that tout past students' perfect SAT math scores. Meanwhile, our local listservs are ablaze with parents of adolescents seeking advice on academic camps, tutors, and college coaches.

It's not easy, but parents should pull back to let children have more balanced lives, experience the joy of discovering their own passions, and make their own choices about colleges. Just how much should getting into college A versus college B really matter? As a parent, I want my child to know that it shouldn't matter much at all.

Linda K. Wertheimer, author of the new book Faith Ed.: Teaching About Religion in an Age of Intolerance, is a former Boston Globe education editor. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

dorsed by more than 80 college admission officers and guidance counselors, is trying to send that same message nationwide. Called "Turning the Tide," the report wants to make college admissions less about the numbers and more about the whole student. It aims to decrease stress for students at all income levels and let students with fewer resources know they won't be penalized if they have less access to higher-level courses or because they must work instead of spending summers in pricey academic camps.

The recommendations have a familiar ring. They include pushing back against over-coaching and the piling-on of activities and advanced courses just for the sake of impressing a college. Still,

I adore the recommendation that urges parents to help dispel the misconception that only a tiny group of universities is worth attending. "There are kids who get very fixated on MIT even from a very young age," MIT dean of admissions Stuart Schmill had quipped at our 2013 panel. "Like in the womb."

Taking a break from reviewing 2016-2017 applicants' folders, Schmill recently acknowledged that the report's content is not revolutionary. But he views its recommendations as critical because they come so widely endorsed and finally give parents the permission and confidence to advise their children to do the right thing. "The right thing is not to overdo it, not to have this push

for quantity over quality," he says. Students should challenge themselves but also make time for other important things (like sleep).

A friend of mine from Lexington says she felt like a rebel when she embraced her high school sophomore's decision not to take AP biology, despite getting recommended for the course. Although her daughter was already enrolled in AP world history, they both faced pressure from peers to stay in AP bio out of worry that the teenager would diminish chances of getting into an elite college. The mother and daughter stood their ground.

I suspect many parents will parse the report line by line, especially a call for a full year of community service for applicants—someone will read that and try to help his or her child land a project in Tanzania. But Schmill says it's easy to spot such packaging, and he emphasizes

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