

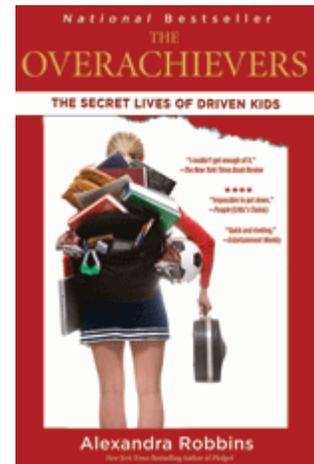


Upper School assemblies are like a breath of fresh air; they provide breaks in the schedule of classes, assignments, tests, and quizzes. Of course, some assemblies are fresher than others. Tuesday's assembly was one of the best we have had in a long time. We were treated to a powerful and controversial presentation by Alexandra Robbins about the culture of overachievement. Ms. Robbins is the author of The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids. A self-proclaimed overachiever herself, Ms. Robbins spoke about her book and the pressure many high school students feel to be "the best." This often means to get into "the best" college....the Ivy League. A few years after graduating from Yale, Ms. Robbins returned to her highly competitive high school to see what had changed for students in the intervening years. She followed nine students as they applied to college and explored the pressure to succeed that she had experience first hand ten years before. What did she find?

The main question faced by students today is: 'do I want to be happy or do I want to be successful?' Are these two qualities mutually exclusive?

Through a series of anecdotes and quotes from the subjects in the book, Ms. Robbins challenged students to ask themselves why they are focusing on the potential colleges they are considering. Are students and parents influenced by magazine rankings? Do these rankings really tell us anything of value? How do you know which school is the best? The question that students should really ask is "which school is the best for me?"

According to Ms. Robbins, overachieving culture prioritizes prestige over substance and has dramatically changed the student experience. Pressure is also put on parents and teachers, so both home and school life have been altered. The playground and the playing fields have become arenas for college preparation and resume building as well. Is all this pressure worth it, especially if it leads to cheating, using stimulant drugs to enhance test scores, packing the schedule with grueling APs, losing sleep, impairing parent-child relationships, and being unhappy?



So, what can we do to stem the tide of overachiever culture and help students enjoy life while charting their own paths? Ms. Robbins offered the following tips:

1. Pare down activities. Colleges report that they would rather see commitment to one or two activities than a laundry list.
2. Ditch the superstar mentality—it is exhausting. There is a huge difference between striving for excellence and demanding perfection. Do something you love!
3. Parents agree to bring up college talk with their children only one time/week. Children may bring it up anytime.
4. Reclaim summer. Do something unrelated to school, test preparation, sports camps. Remember that it is okay to relax and have fun.
5. Get this through your head: admissions decisions are not personal.

The bottom line is that success is not defined by a fat acceptance envelope. To be happy is to be successful. Follow your own path, do what matters to you, and get some sleep!

Summary by Janet Maurer, Ph.D. 02.08.08