Miranda Chatfield graduated from Gunn High School in 2008 having done everything she was supposed to do. Smart and determined, she aimed for admission to an Ivy League college, took challenging classes and studied hard, often into the wee hours. The result was a prized admission to Cornell University. Her achievements came at a high cost, however.

“I remember fear — being fearful of my teachers, my classes. I was ... just so constantly worried about academics. ‘What if I failed this test?’ ‘What if I have three tests on the same day?’ ‘I just can’t go on. I can’t make it.’ Desperate feeling,” Chatfield, now 22, said. “I’ve only begun to reflect on it in the last year, and it sounds strange, but maybe to some extent I repressed it after leaving high school because I just didn’t want to think about that anymore. But there were times when I had stayed up the whole night ... and I had a test at 8 a.m., and I just felt like I couldn’t do it.”

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Chatfield would ask herself, “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I keep up?”
She describes the Gunn environment then as competitive, judgmental and “hostile to learning.”
Her parents, she said, pushed her but were not as demanding as other parents. She felt the added pressure, though, of other students’ parents being “transferred” through her peers onto her. The high anxiety among peers at school, and on Facebook, was contagious.
“I was thinking once I got to Cornell, everything would be perfect. But I learned ... it doesn’t seem to end,” she said. Within two years, she was burned out, anxious and lost. She needed a break.
“I didn’t feel like I belonged there,” she said. “In a certain way, I wasn’t really ready for college.”
After taking the past year off to reflect and recharge, Chatfield returned to Cornell this fall with greater self-knowledge, better coping skills and renewed purpose.
Trevor Bisset also aimed for “the prize” of a top college and drove himself at Palo Alto High School to perform at the highest levels academically, athletically and as a student leader. He had plenty of company, he said, recounting how the right college admission was “the end-all, be-all” for many of his peers. This quest carried with it a fear of failure — fear of failing parents, friends and the advantages of a privileged upbringing. Not getting into that top college for many students, Bisset said, “would say something terrible” about their worth as human beings.
Bisset, who graduated in 2005, was rewarded with admission to Pomona College. But instead of thriving, Bisset spent his first two years at Pomona “acting out, drinking way too much, and very depressed.” Hitting rock bottom, he stopped out for a year to “get off the hamster wheel and reflect.”

Finding purpose
(continued from page 33)

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Like Chatfield and Bisset, many Palo Alto adolescents spend their high school years in a contest for credentials, accumulating grades, scores and accolades they hope to leverage into a rosy future at a top college. For many, this is an intensely competitive, stressful process that crowds out other activities important to healthy development. Increasingly, it is a process that is not sustainable for many young people — despite their tremendous abilities and stellar performances — and contributes to a rising tide of mental health issues, a sense of drift, emptiness, “something missing,” or a lack of joy, according to many educators, psycholo-
gists, parents and other youth experts.

These concerns also apply to students with more modest goals and achievements, who end up feeling “less than,” discouraged, isolated or hopeless in the midst of a pressure-cooker culture.

“Is everybody talking about this? Yes. I go to a conference once a year with colleagues at peer institutions. It’s very much a concern for all of us,” said Julie Lythcott-Haims, Stanford University dean of freshmen and undergraduate advising, and a Palo Alto parent. “The mental health outcomes are an acute concern, but even without them ... I think we would all be lamenting that something is amiss ... regardless of how elite the school is or how selective or how high the achievement level of the student.”

Increasingly, the experts who examine these troubling youth trends say it’s the adults, not the youth, who have lost their way. With the best of intentions, adults have undermined the normal, healthy process of youthful exploration, engagement, risk-taking and idealism through overprotective, over-involved parenting, teach-to-the test schools, and a hyper-competitive, commercialized college admissions process. The result is youth who feel pressured to adopt unfulfilling, short-horizon goals and meet ever-greater expectations along a narrowly defined path to success, without due regard to their own inclinations, health or well-being.

Many parents recognize these forces and the problems created. Some rail privately against them, and others attempt public action towards change. But most feel daunted in the face of a prevailing culture that craves achievement and status and are challenged to bring balance to the equation, even within their own households.

It is not for lack of trying. As a community, during the past decade, concerned citizens have spawned a wide variety of committees, panels, conferences, studies and programs, all of which have focused on stress reduction, parent education, homework and testing policies, broader visions of success, the importance of balance and self-care, how to identify the signs of mental health disorders, and how to help a young person in trouble. The efforts have contributed to a more caring, connected community, many say.

However, according to Weekly interviews with students, parents, educators, psychologists and others working with youth, too many young people still feel driven beyond healthy limits by the demands they feel from parents, schools and the college admissions process. By most accounts, the pressures have not receded over the past decade but instead have continued and, in some ways, accelerated.

Many are wondering how to make the treadmill stop. And if it stops: Will young people still be as smart, as accomplished, as respected? If they get off the treadmill: Will they still be able to live a good life?

William Damon, Stanford School of Education professor and psychologist, has spent years studying this set of issues and believes that it is a sense of purpose — intrinsic, sustaining and noble — that is missing in the majority of today’s youth, causing many of them to drift and founder. And it is this lack of purpose that should be attracting community attention, and not just its by-product, stress.

“We all need a purpose, but at that formative period of life, when you don’t even know who you are, you really need it,” he told the Weekly.

Finding purpose early builds confidence and habits of mind that can be practiced and strengthened with practice, contributing to a strong core, positive attitude and eagerness to learn about the world, according to Damon.

Purpose is something young people not only need, but want.

“It’s impossible to work with young people and not see their yearning for purpose and relevance,” said Becky Beacom, former Paly parent and manager for the Palo Alto health education division of the Palo Alto Medical Foundation.

Many local youth do manage to find purpose in activities they choose, whether it is in designing service projects, making films, playing a team sport, becoming active in their faith group, working on the robotics team, designing costumes for theater productions, playing in the jazz band, or studying science in order to pursue a vocation in that field.

A purposeful life is not a life without challenges, setbacks and difficulties. But if the activities make sense to the individual, the stresses encountered can contribute to positive growth and strength of character, according to Damon. All stress is not created equal, and with a sense of purpose, there are built-in protective factors against depression and a host of anxiety disorders.

“Hard times and stress and demands are not always negative things in development,” Damon said.

“When kids have their own sense of purpose about what they’re doing, they’re in control of things. It’s their agenda, they’re owning it, and what we have found in our research is that kids who have a strong sense of purpose and find what they’re doing is meaningful, those kids can be depending enormous amounts of energy, and taking on huge challenges and meeting all kinds of demands, and are quite serene about it, quite joyful about what they’re doing,” he said.
Finding purpose

(continued from page 35)

“Purpose is a goal, but a particular kind revealed,” Damon explained. Its attributes distinguish it from other goals: long-term stability, meaning to the self, intention to contribute to the larger community, and commitment to actions designed to accomplish the goal.

Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann, Stanford’s senior associate dean for religious life and a former Palo parent, describes purpose as an “interpersonal compass” that serves both the self and the larger community — it points a person to the places “where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet,” quoting from theologian Frederick Buechner.

Everyone is capable of finding purpose, according to Damon and others who have studied the concept. Palo Alto First Congregational Church Senior Pastor Dave Howell described the ingredients for purpose available to all: unique gifts each individual has to offer, the responsibility to share those gifts with the world, and the joy to be found in doing that.

Still many are living without purpose.

“People don’t worry about the right things. The biggest problem growing up today is not actually stress; it’s meaninglessness.”

—William Damon, Stanford professor and psychologist

“Why is it important to vote? Why am I doing community service? (And if it is to document hours for a college application: Is that a good reason? Is there a better reason?) Why do I want to go to college? Damon encourages parents, teachers, and other adults to engage young people in these types of conversations. Students bear out the wisdom of this in remembering and valuing teachers who initiated class discussions exploring the reasons for things.

“My (Paly) English class was fantastic because we discussed the etymological underpinnings of the stories, and kids were able to connect that with their personal lives,” Bisset said.

In addition to addressing the ‘why’ questions, Damon and other youth experts believe that young people need to be encouraged by caring adults to explore a variety of activities, pay attention to what interests them, risk and experience failure, take time to reflect and play, and do all this amid a wide landscape of equally valued life pathways. Over time, it is this engagement, and the reflection upon it, that will build a sense of purpose.

Yet often parents, well-intentioned but misguided, usurp this role.

“The most direct damage that ‘helicopter’ parenting does is that it takes ownership away from the child of the child’s activities,” Damon said. “Who is owning that? For an activity, the child is thinking: ‘It’s not me.'”

D uring high school years, many local youth focus their lives on securing admission to a top college and may think of this goal as their purpose. Damon said that a top student’s sense of self is “a ‘transitional phase,’ characterized of youthful investigation, on the road to purpose. Finding purpose is closely linked to formation of self and identity. It is in a hand-in-hand, organic process.

“Purpose and construction of identity absolutely play off each other, all are co-evolving as you live through life. At one point in life, one will take the lead, and in another, the other will take the lead,” Damon said.

“Very often when you think about who you are or who you want to be, that will help you define the kinds of purposes you will go searching for, will focus your energy. I call that the sense of purpose that galvanizes your personal strengths and makes it possible for you to develop that strong sense of self.”

Damon’s research has identified a sequence of steps that commonly occurs as youth develop a sense of purpose (see box on page 38). According to this research, the very pursuit of purpose builds critical skills and capacities — resourcefulness, persistence, know-how, and tolerance of risk and setbacks that transform the young person’s identity and abilities with increasing feelings of self-worth, self-efficacy, confidence and control.

Recent Palo grad Colin Marchon was drawn to movies at an early age. He found himself thinking like a filmmaker — seeing a place or hearing a story, visualizing how he might use it in a movie. By high school, he was fully committed.

“The reason it enveloped my life was that I chose this activity,” he said. “I knew what I wanted to do and was supported in what I wanted to do.”

That support — from his parents, video production teacher Ron Williamson and people he met through the local nonprofit Media Center — was critical.

“It’s not always easy to pursue art,” he said.

While Marchon was “pretty laid back” about school generally, he said, he was serious about his video classes and emotionally attached to his films. He endured 12-hour editing sessions and regular roller coaster phases of despising, then loving, his film-in-progress. He learned to have perspective on others’ reactions to his films.

“Sometimes they wouldn’t get my films, and sometimes they would love films I wasn’t as proud of,” he said. Whatever the reactions, “you need to love what you’re doing and just keep doing it.”

Marchon is now a freshman at New York University Film School.

“For many youth, their path to purpose is not so obvious or found so early. It may require more time to search and sift. During this process, Damon believes strongly in the value of asking and reflecting on ‘why’ questions. Why do young people go to school? Why has the teacher chosen her profession? Why are there rules against cheating? Why is this activity important in my life? How do I know the purpose? What am I grateful for, and why?”

Why is it important to vote? Why am I doing community service? (And if it is to document hours for a college application: Is that a good reason? Is there a better reason?) Why do I want to go to college? Damon encourages parents, teachers, and other adults to engage young people in these types of conversations. Students bear out the wisdom of this in remembering and valuing teachers who initiated class discussions exploring the reasons for things.

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According to Damon, it’s not that hard to discern the high achiever who lacks purpose.

“It’s the ‘why’ questions that tell you,” he said. Ask a top student why he wants to go to Harvard University, and the answer will probably be: ‘I want to be president’ or ‘I want to be a doctor.’ Ask a top student why he wants to get into college and the answer will probably be: ‘I need it for a resume, as opposed to ‘I am fueled by a real passion for this.’”

This is not to say that purposeful activities do not involve ambitious goals.

“You need high expectations, but you need them for the right reasons. — It means challenging yourself to do something really valuable. And making the most of your potential — for the right reasons,” Damon said.

Departing youth who perform well may appear purposeful, but in fact they may not be. Instead they may fall into the 31 percent Damon believes is “at risk.” These are the kids who are not matched to what they find here, and who that without it, a “dispiriting sense of emptiness” prevails.

Madeline Levine, psychologist and co-founder of Stanford’s Challenge Success (an organization concerned about students who compromise health, integrity and learning due to performance pressure) agrees: “Status, money, possessions, achievement, the school your child goes to, or the grades he gets, are not factors that contribute to the development of a healthy sense of self.”

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Terri Lobdell is a freelance writer and is married to Palo Alto Weekly Publisher Bill Johnson. She can be contacted at terri.lobdell@gmail.com.
The high school environment does not generally promote or support a path to purpose, according to Denise Pope, a lecturer at the Stanford University School of Education and co-founder of Challenge Success, an organization concerned about students who compromise health, integrity and learning due to performance pressure.

“Our school system is set up to sort people,” Pope told the Weekly, noting that the school structure tracks kids by age, subject areas, grades, scores, lanes and learning abilities. Purpose is not emphasized in school in part because “finding yourself is in opposition to a sorting factory,” she said.

Schools have been robbed of their capacities to inspire purpose by “high stakes” standardized tests as the current chief measure of school performance, according to William Damon, Stanford School of Education professor, psychologist and a former Gunn High School parent. Metrics have put the squeeze on the core mission of instilling a broader vision of the world and a robust motivation to learn.

“The main objective of the classroom becomes improving and familiarizing with facts, names, places and formulas that students have little interest or skill in applying to problems beyond the classroom,” he writes in “The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life.”

The move to cover volumes of material has displaced deeper exploration of big ideas. One consequence is too little engagement, meaning and joy.

“Students are just performing,” Pope said. At all levels this can lead to negative stress.

Michele Dauber, Stanford law professor and organizer of the school-stress-reduction advocacy group We Can Do Better Palo Alto, agrees: “The contemporary elite public school in its drive for ever higher scores ... has bled all of the ‘purpose’ out of students’ lives.”

The amount and type of work assigned in high school, she said, is like a large “boulder these kids are carrying. The only thing many are passionate about is surviving, she said. “School is the structure where kids need to climb a ladder to go to college,” said Pope.

The pressures to perform are particularly alarming to parents, who have seen firsthand the effect of too much work. The problem is that “kids need to climb a ladder to go to college,” said Pope.

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“One of the things that is heartbreaking is the college acceptance rate,” she said. “It’s just heartbreaking to me because that shouldn’t be the goal.”

According to several accounts, some less-able students cling to the college admissions process and become highly stressed by the demands, often sacrificing their joy in learning.

To succeed, they have to push themselves beyond their limits,” said Gunn 2010 grad Yoni Alon, now a UCLA sophomore.

“Teachers should help move students forward, but without breaking them,” she said. Pope refers to this as the “just right” challenge, part of the “art of teaching,” and what good teachers know how to determine through connection with their students.

Many people confuse loud work with preparation for college, she said, but instead it is the deep understanding — gained through rigorous, interactive, collaborative learning environments — that best lays the groundwork for future educational endeavors.

Kids need to live in their high school moment,” Pope told the Weekly. “If students are always urged to look to the next stepping stone, sooner or later the stepping stones will disappear and the lack of meaning in that journey and the resulting stress will manifest.”

Palo Alto parent Sally Bemus, involved with We Can Do Better Palo Alto and Project Safety Net, a community coalition focused on youth well-being that was formed in 2009 in response to student suicides, believes that “students are succeeding despite our schools,” which she describes as “ramped up” and resistant to innovation.

“I used to think that about 20 percent of the kids were not being served by the schools,” Bemus said. But now she thinks it’s the other way around, that only 20 percent are able to do well with what is asked of them; the rest are too stressed, she said, citing examples of students with emotional struggles from both ends of the achievement scale.

“High stress isn’t good for anybody, but it’s more dangerous for some than others,” Dauber said. In cases of genetic forms of depression (like bipolar disorder), avoiding protracted extreme stress can be a matter of life and death. While certain factors, like a sense of purpose, can help decrease factors for depression and promote mental wellness, Dauber, whose adult daughter suffered major depression and died by suicide unrelated to academic stress, said: “There’s no panacea against suicide.”

Then there is the topic of school homework, which generates questions of quantity and quality that often divide communities. Palo Alto is no exception.

Attempts to place restrictions on the types and amounts of homework, according to numerous educators and press accounts, can encroach upon a teacher’s sense of professional judgment and discretion. In high school, mandates can also present logistical problems, including coordination among multiple teachers and lanes, student work pace differences, and enforcement issues. Even within teacher and parent groups, a range of views often exist about the proper balance between mental health and academic rigor.

Experts advise school districts to include teachers, parents and students in any effort to set homework policies, according to the National Education Association.

Still, when students are showing alarming levels of stress associated with workload, many see no choice but to enter the difficult territory of exploring policies to restrict homework type and amount.

Excessive homework for the wrong reasons can create “stressful, horrible situations” for kids, according to Damon.

“Homework should not be driven by the college admissions process,” he said. “That’s not a good reason to do homework, or load up on a huge amount of homework.”

However, Damon believes that it's a "really big mistake" for people to be emphasizing lowering the number of homework hours as the goal.

“I’m not saying that some teachers don’t give too much homework. Anyhow can be excessive and it’s important to get balance,” he said. “But it’s not the answer. ... It’s the quality, and it’s the reason for it. Why the kids do it and whether the kid finds meaning in it, that’s the point.”

“Kids can do a lot of things in life without getting stressed out, and feel great about it, if there’s a certain quality to their experience. And that quality needs to be self-motivated, it needs to be meaningful, that the kids can believe in,” Damon said.

(continued on page 38)
Joy of learning
(continued from page 37)

Psychologist Madeline Levine, co-founder of Challenge Success, believes it’s hard to engage joyfully in learning when school is diminished.” Levine writes in “The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Unhappy Kids.”

Gunn’s Alon had a strong interest in learning, took classes he liked, enjoyed the work, and did not compare his achievements to others.

“If you internally have a sense of purpose and value (outside schoolwork), then work doesn’t matter,” he said. Damon supports the idea of “regular serious homework assignments” to help kids learn discipline and to develop good work habits.

In implicating homework loads, he cautions against throwing the baby out with the bath water, the baby being teaching kids about their responsibility to do their work on a consistent basis.

According to Pope, school-home work policies need to address purpose and relevance, “not just time on task.” Pope writes: “While other researchers have recommended a specific maximum for hours of nightly homework ... we hesitate to provide a hard and fast rule, given that qualifications of homework is more strongly associated with students’ mental health than with their academic performance.”

Pope advocates further research to examine the question: “How much ‘useful’ homework can still be considered worthwhile?”

Gunn’s Chaffield agreed that schoolwork should be meaningful: “Homework is a good thing, but busyness as good thing.”

Citing many math and science problem sets as busywork, she said she was often kept up until 3 or 4 a.m. doing homework.

Palay grads Bisset and Zev Karlin-Neumann (’07) also complained of busywork, both citing the requirement to annotate 800 pages of Tosty for AP English class as one particularly onerous example.

Dauber, who directed high schools currently assign excessive quantities of homework, much of questionable value. While some students may handle it, “the average kid is drowning,” she said. “Two in the morning comes and they’re still doing it — and that means they’re sleep deprived, too.”

We Can Do Better Palo Alto advocates a district-wide policy on homework that sets standards for purpose and volume. The group’s efforts have helped lead the school board recently to adopt “focused goals” committed to eliminating homework.

“We’re going to try to stop the arms race. We’re looking for strategic arms control here, so teachers are not constantly ramping up,” Dauber said. “Let’s impose a limit so that our kids can thrive.”

As part of these efforts, former Palo parent Karen Kang spoke at a school board meeting this spring. She said her daughter and Palay friends “found it physically impossible to complete their school assignments in a normal day.” They suffered in silence, “not wanting to appear like losers,” she said.

Kang read a statement written by one of her daughters who has had a history of eating disorders, anxiety and depression.

“The five years I spent under the spell of this religion of achievement were a complete waste — I spent time working hard at what I didn’t love doing, and got no social, health problems, and was extremely miserable. I’ve had to put every single moment of my senior year into unlearning those back- ward lessons I learned as a student in Palo Alto,” her daughter said. This is consistent with a recent research, which found students doing more than 3.5 hours of homework per day were at risk for higher stress levels affecting physical and mental health.

The National PTA and the National Education Association recommend guidelines, suggested by Duke University professor Harris Cooper, of 10 minutes per night per grade. For a high school senior, this means 120 minutes, or two hours. According to Harris Cooper, writing in the New York Times, “many high school district policies state that (students) should expect about 30 minutes of homework for each academic course they take, a bit more for honors or advanced placement courses.”

“This is the kind of empirical standard we can do better Palo Alto is seeking. According to Dauber, it is the school district’s responsibility to lead and make decisions about what constitutes a healthy, productive learning environment, and then set limits around that for everyone to follow.”

According to Dauber, “the PAUSD board and administration have a tendency to not understand negative effects of this competitive environment, and when pressed, they will say, ‘It’s not our fault; it’s these other parents.’ I think that is just a red herring. I don’t believe there is a constituency for pressure. I think there is a constituency for rigorous, challenging curriculum, but I think that is utterly disconnected from insane quantities of homework.”

Palo Alto school district superintendent Kevin Skelly, however, re- futed Dauber’s comment about the district board and administration: “I just don’t hear that from my fellow administrators nor from the board.”

He called the examination of homework issues, “good for our community.”

Skelly felt he believes there will be a wide range of views about desired aims, with some saying there’s too much, others too little and a few calling for purgah. He also said that differing student motivations and abilities affect time on task as well as the quality of the experience.”

“If kids aren’t motivated academically, homework means slogging around and reduces the quality and increases the time students spend on the topic. Contrast that to a student who loves Shakespeare or math or science. They will devote hours to this without considering it work of any kind!”

Skelly also stressed the importance of good communications and expectation-setting between teachers and students so that students are not spending too much time on assignments.

While Dauber sees the most urgent priority as “turning down the speed of the treadmill” by limiting homework hours, she also affirms the importance of focusing on the quality of the students’ learning experience.

“I agree with Bill Damian about purpose, but has to go hand-in-hand with a realistic assessment of the kids and their potential.”

We are putting students under so much time pressure and emotional pressure and fear. ... We have to turn down the homework-o-meter on these kids and give them time and space to think about the important questions of what I want to do, who I am, and what can I do for others.”

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**TALK ABOUT IT**

What can or should schools do to ensure youth maintain the joy of learning? Share your opinion on Town Square, the online discussion forum at PaloAltoOnline.com.

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**How purpose begins**

The following sequence outlines steps in a path to purpose for youth, according to researchers’ findings.

1. **inspiring communication with persons outside the immediate family**
2. **observation of purposeful people at work**
3. **first moment of revelation: something important in the world can be corrected or improved**
4. **second moment of revelation: I can second something myself and make a difference**
5. **identification of purpose, along with initial attempts to accomplish something**
6. **support from immediate family**
7. **expanded efforts to pursue one’s purpose in original and consequential ways**
8. **acquiring the skills needed for this pursuit**
9. **increased practical effectiveness**
10. **enhanced optimism and self-confidence**
11. **long-term commitment to the purpose**
12. **transfer of skills and character strengths gained in pursuit of one purpose to other areas of life**

*Source: “The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life” by William Damon*
Support our Kids with a gift to the Holiday Fund.

Each year the Palo Alto Weekly Holiday Fund raises money to support programs serving families and children in the Palo Alto area. Since the Weekly and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation cover all the administrative costs, every dollar raised goes directly to support community programs through grants to non-profit organizations ranging from $1,000 to $25,000.

And with the generous support of matching grants from local foundations, including the Packard and Hewlett foundations, your tax-deductible gift will be doubled in size. A donation of $100 turns into $200 with the foundation matching gifts.

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Last Year’s Grant Recipients

Abilities United ........................................ $5,000
Adolescent Counseling Services .............. $7,500
American Red Cross – Palo Alto Area ....... $3,000
Art in Action ................................................. $5,000
Baby Basics of the Peninsula, Inc ............. $2,000
Broad of Life .............................................. $5,000
Breast Cancer Connections .................... $7,500
California Family Foundation ................ $3,500
Cdeo Vital Center ..................................... $3,500
Collective Roots ................................. $5,000
Downtown Streets Team ....................... $15,000
East Palo Alto Children’s Day Committee ...... $5,000
East Palo Alto Kids Foundation ............... $5,000
East Palo Alto Tennis and Tutoring ........ $5,000
East Palo Alto Youth Court ..................... $3,000
Environmental Volunteers ...................... $3,000
Footstep On-Off Foundation ................. $2,500
Foundation for a College Education ........ $5,000
Friends of the Palo Alto Junior Museum & Zoo ........ $5,000
InVision ................................................. $5,000
JLS Middle School PTA ......................... $3,500
Jordan Middle School PTA .................... $3,500
Kara ....................................................... $5,000
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New Creation Home Ministries ............... $5,000
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Nuestra Casa .......................................... $5,000
Palo Alto Art Center Foundation ............ $5,000
Palo Alto Community Child Care ............ $5,000
Palo Alto YMCA ....................................... $5,000
Palo Alto Housing Corporation .............. $5,000
Palo Alto Library Foundation ................. $17,500
Peninsula HealthCare Connection ............ $7,500
Quest Learning Center of the EPA Library ... $5,000
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St. Elizabeth Seton School .................... $5,000
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The Friendship Circle ............................. $5,000
TheatreWorks ......................................... $2,500
Youth Community Service ..................... $7,500

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Palo Alto Community Child Care ............ $5,000
The Children’s Pre-School Center .......... $5,000

Grant Recipients

Make checks payable to Silicon Valley Community Foundation and send to:
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The Children’s Pre-School Center .......... $5,000

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Finding purpose: a bigger job than before

Previous generations actually benefited from fewer choices, societal turmoil

Like the top students they seek, many colleges are themselves victims of a treadmill toward ever-more impressive credentials — including increased numbers of applications, lower acceptance rates, higher average SAT scores and higher yield rates — to prove they are the best or at least better than their competitors.

Many colleges, like many of the students they hope to attract, focus more on how they are packaged than on their own unique identity and educational values in a crowded and uncertain higher education market, according to national press accounts and reports of college admissions professionals and critics.

This increasingly competitive, commercialized contest for prestige, rankings, revenue and the perfect freshman class has become a classic "arms race" among the nation’s select colleges.

Students, parents, educators and admissions professionals worry that the competitive escalation comes at high cost for little gain.

No one is more concerned about the collective impacts of this competition on students and education than Lloyd Thacker, founder of The Education Conservancy, a nonprofit dedicated since 2004 to improving the college admissions process and calming "the frenzy and hype."

Thacker has spoken several times at the ranks that are the best "match" for their interests, and to avoid getting sucked into the commercialized rat race promoting top-ranked colleges as the prize.

According to Thacker and many other professionals in the field, the arms-race fallout is significant. It generates anxiety and cynicism among parents and students. It turns the educational journey into a high-stakes contest for a high-status prize. It encourages students to "game" the system. It distorts the way high school students are evaluated. It sours the fun out of learning. It favors the more affluent, who are able to purchase advantages. It discourages exploration and risk-taking.

"The colleges know the students are suffering," Thacker said, "but they don’t want to take responsibility for this;" noting a gross separation between the values espoused in the selective colleges’ mission statements and their hyper-competitive admissions practices.

One of The Education Conservancy’s goals is to provide a venue for the colleges to work together toward collective action for change. In a "classic tragedy of the commons" dynamic (in which students are the "commons"), Thacker says colleges are afraid to risk losing competitive position by taking independent action on their own. Thacker works to help them see the benefits of working together to realign the admissions process to better serve the students they all value so highly.

This year The Education Conservancy partnered with the USC School of Education to organize a conference titled "The Case for Change in College Admissions." The elite colleges particularly felt the heat after three days of candid conversation. When Harvard University Dean of Admissions William Fitzsimmons took the podium, he "joked he felt as if he were representing Satan or Voldemort," according to an account of the Chronicle of Higher Education.

The same report also described one unannamed dean as being frustrated by his institution’s demands for more and better applicants but was afraid to suggest changing recruitment tactics. "I’m just laying on the chopping block," he said.

According to the USC conference report on the proceedings, all too often the college admissions process causes students "to regard the high school years as an Olympic training session demanding ever greater feats of accomplishment in order to qualify for admission to a selective university."

As a result, many students become cynical, prizing college admission as "more important than personal growth, expanded understanding, and curiosity that come from a rigorous engagement with a body of knowledge."

The goal needs to become something larger than assembling an incoming class of stellar Olympians whose entry credentials help the institution to shine in the college rankings.

Institutions and their leaders must come to view the admissions process from a perspective beyond the narcissistic glass of competitive rankings.

One practice Thacker and others want to curb is the increased use of merit-based financial aid to serve strategic goals of attracting top students (whose credentials will build a "funding away from needy students" and the image of increased selectivity, which leads to student and parent anxiety, and so on.

The college marketing materials of- ten attempt to cast a wide net, appealing to as many students as possible, including students who have virtually no hope of being selected.

Another practice targeted for criticism is the large weight given to high SAT and ACT scores, which the USC conference report says is educationally unwarranted as well as biased against low-income students. Empha- sizing test scores in college rankings, marketing and media also fuels the multi-billion dollar test prep industry, which in turn feeds and finances from increased parent and student anxieties.

The college arms race is predicted on the assumption that students and parents will view admission to a prestigious, selective college as the ticket to a lifetime of advantages, especially in today’s increasingly competitive global economy. The allure of this hook (often marketed to the hilt) is difficult for students — and their parents who want the best for them — to resist.

And yet resisting this arms race is what most educators, psychologists and other professionals working with youth recommend.

Thacker and other experts emphasize that where a student goes to college is not as important as most people think.

"It’s the student and what that student does in college that contributes most significantly to educational pay-off," said Thacker.

"Stanford Dean of Freshmen and Undergraduate Advising Julie Lyth- Cott-Haims urges parents to start talking with their children about the top 100 schools (instead of the usual top 10 or 12) as excellent places to go "and to truly believe it."

"In “Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life,”" Stanford Professor of Education and psychologist William Damon warns parents not to give in to the ar- on desires and efforts for those of their children in the college application process.

"Finding the right match … is far more important for a student’s ultimate happiness than securing a spot in the most prestigious place. It is counter-productive to shackle the truth about the child’s true accomplishments, goals, and interests because the predetermination stands in the way of finding the right match. Many students, driven by their status-seeking parents, squeeze into places they don’t belong, only to discover after some failure that their interests and potentials are better recognized and fulfilled elsewhere. … These concerns are well known by educators everywhere," he writes.

"When you look at college as a source of education, you can see that different colleges have different cultures to offer and it’s not in propor- tion to how highly they’re ranked in U.S. News," Damon told the Weekly.

"One of the glories of the American higher education system is that there’s so many different choices."

Also, in past years, young people were more con- strained by traditional roles and values, and also ge- ography. There were fewer choices within familiar communities. For many young people, this made it easier to find direction and meaning. In the mod- ern era, these traditions have broken down, creating greater freedom and more choices. This can make it tougher to develop a sense of self and purpose.

"When things break down, even when it’s for good reasons, they don’t always break down in ways that make everything rosy," Damon said.

In addition to a huge range of choices for young people, the economy is "changing like crazy" and the rates of marriage are going down, creating greater uncertainties in areas of work, and family, Damon said. "That makes it harder for many young people to focus on something they’re going to dedi- cate themselves to in a purposeful way."

"The college arms race is a bigger job than before."

by Terri Lobdell

Lloyd Thacker founded The Education Conservancy, a nonprofit focused on taking the frenzy out of the college-admissions process.

"Finding the right match … is far more important for a student’s ultimate happiness than securing a spot in the most prestigious place. It is counter-productive to shackle the truth about the child’s true accomplishments, goals, and interests because the predetermination stands in the way of finding the right match. Many students, driven by their status-seeking parents, squeeze into places they don’t belong, only to discover after some failure that their interests and potentials are better recognized and fulfilled elsewhere. … These concerns are well known by educators everywhere," he writes.

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"One of the glories of the American higher education system is that there’s so many different choices."
Profiles of purposeful youth

From community service to filmmaking, Palo Alto young adults are guided by their chosen passions

In Palo Alto, as elsewhere nationwide, there are many examples of youth with purpose. According to the research of Stanford University School of Education professor William Damon, about one in five adolescents has a strong sense of purpose in their pursuits, with movement toward larger numbers for those in their early 20s.

Naomi Shachter ( Gunn High ’08), now a senior at Stanford, decided she wanted more from her high school years than admission to an elite college. “I wanted to find an authentic passion,” Shachter said. “If you don’t get into that top college, then at least you have an activity you’ve developed that you love.”

In middle school, she discovered the nonprofit Youth Community Service (YCS) and found her purpose in service there, taking on greater leadership roles with each passing year. Reflection, a large part of choosing and committing to the hard work required, something her parents and adults at YCS and her synagogue encouraged.

Palo Alto High ’05 grad John Beamer had an early passion for film and an enduring gratitude for the support of video production teacher Ron Williamson and the theater department during his high school years. For him, theater and film activities provided that needed “anchor” to develop his gifts.

She is now a graduate of New York University (NYU) Film School, working on his own film projects in New York.

Elaine Chen, Paly ’07 grad, also found her high school niche at YCS. “I wanted to do things to help people and YCS helped me figure out my direction” starting in middle school, she said. She was drawn to studying socioeconomic gaps and multicultural issues in education, an interest YCS mentors and leadership programs supported her in developing.

Chen found her college match in Rockhurst University, a small liberal arts school in Missouri. “At Rockhurst, I had a completely different experience” from Paly, she said. Going to college was not a given for most students. Her Rockhurst friends worked to help pay for college, something she said gave more meaning to their education. By sophomore year, Chen too began working — jobs she never would have worked in Palo Alto, like car-wash attendant — and contributed some of these earnings to her own education.

“This was a rich learning environment for me,” she said. “It opened my mind and eyes to other whole perspectives, especially the rewards of working and contributing.”

Chen plans to attend grad school next fall at San Diego State University for her educational-specialist degree to become a school psychologist. Paly ’07 grad Sereena Ojakian found purpose in theater costume design and construction. At one of Paly’s Career Days, Ojakian heard a wedding dressmaker talk about her job. Ojakian began thinking about her own interest in sewing, which led her to consider becoming a costume designer. She tried her hand helping Paly teacher Mike McGovern with his history classes’ reenactments.

Her growing passion for creating costumes guided Ojakian’s college choice and she picked five liberal arts prospects with strong theater programs.

“Paly’s career center was very helpful,” she said. When she was admitted to Southern Oregon University, a small public liberal arts university with a thriving theater program, she happily accepted.

Like Chen, Ojakian discovered a different atmosphere at Southern Oregon University. “It’s a state school, not fancy,” she said. “A lot of kids have jobs and need to work. They value their education. It has been a good experience to see kids going to school because they want to.”

Ojakian took her mental health seriously in high school. At Paly, she saw a lot of kids have jobs and need to work. They value their education. It has been a good experience to see kids going to school because they want to.”

Elaine Chen, Paly ’07, left, works at a YCS dinner table during the Not in Our School Event during spring 2007. The activity involved “dissolving stereotypes” by writing stereotypes on rice paper, placing them in a pool of water and watching the words dissolve.

Gunn ‘10 grad and UC Berkeley sophomore Joyce Liu was affected by the 2009 suicides in Palo Alto and wanted to find a way to help her school community.

“It was a tough time for a lot of people,” she said. She saw first-hand the importance of peer support, which sparked an idea. She and fellow seniors Esther Han and Yoni Alon co-founded a peer-support called ROCK (for “Reach Out. Care. Know.”), which recruited students to trainings, meetings and outreach activities and created social support and connection among Gunn students.

Alon said he had not done anything in the community before with which passion. Both he and Liu learned new skills, ranging from organizational to interpersonal. The efforts dominated their senior year, adding to their workloads, but they both said they coped well with that.

“The quality of stress is different if I’m doing something I want to be doing,” Liu said. “It was a heartwarming and very empowering experience.”

Even with a clear sense of purpose, students report the strain of being immersed in a college-obsessed culture, including wrestling with personal doubts and being pulled down with worry about stressed out friends.

Paly ’11 grad and NYU Film School freshman Colin Marchon (see “Getting off the treadmill” on page 33) at times felt anxious and guilty about the adequacy of his high school resume. He wondered if he should have gone out for a sport. “It’s hard to have so much uncertainty about college admissions. What and how much should you do? It scares people; it scared me ... It was a very stressful day when the admit decision came over the email. I had a headache and other physical symptoms,” he recalled.

Shachter also felt the impulse to take on too much to build her college resume. She developed her own test to help ensure her choices aligned with her own desires: “If someone forbid me from putting this on my college application, would I still want to do it?” The answer to that question told her what she needed to know.

At Paly, Chen knew early on that an elite college wasn’t for her, but still she felt external pressures to do things to bolster her college resume. Her decision to forego AP classes drew critical reactions.

“My friends would worry, asking me: ‘How will you get into a good school?’” she said. “I was OK with not wanting everybody wanted, but there was a cost to that.”

Chen felt “real insecurity” her first two years of high school and said she “did not fit in at all.” By junior year, though, “something changed me — not sure what. I realized that people were hurting themselves over not achieving at the rate expected,” she said. The harmful effects she observed influenced her to have more faith in her own decisions about what was right for her.

Chen said when her friends would get together in high school, the talk was all about academic performance — SATs, colleges, awards, how people were stacking up — and this stressed people feeling. Chen by contrast felt little academic stress and instead increasingly experienced internal peace about her choices.

Ojakian took her mental health seriously in high school. “I chose to do things because I wanted to. If I was too stressed, I would make a change,” she said. When her older brother Adam died by suicide at U.C. Davis her sophomore year, “it caused me to see the importance of self-care, knowing my feelings, being sure to pay attention to myself. It all became very pertinent to me.”

At Paly she saw a lot of people stressed out and unhappy, thinking “if they don’t really do well on everything, everything in their lives will crumble.”

“By senior year, I was burnt out on this mentality,” she said. “I was tired of seeing friends doing things to build the college resume. It upset me that people were driven like this. I kept trying to tell them that their health and happiness was more important.”
I t’s no secret that Palo Altans are concerned about negative stress and its impact on the mental health of high school youth. Local teen suicides in recent years have propelled this issue to the surface of public consciousness and generated numerous committees, forums, programs, coalitions and initiatives to address it.

What has been less noticed and discussed, however, are the burgeoning mental health problems that manifest for many youth in college. Miranda Chatfield (Gunn High ‘08) and Trevor Bisset (Palo Alto High ‘05) — whose experiences were detailed on pages 33 and 34 — are but two examples of the high price paid for running too hard on the high school treadmill. Both teens suffered emotional problems serious enough to require counseling and a year off from college.

“We need to own this problem as a community,” Leif Erickson, director of the nonprofit Youth Community Service (YCS), told the Weekly.

While many stressed-out students hold it together in high school, the emotional toll can surface in college, which carries its own set of stresses and lack of home-front scaffolding. The emotional challenges in college can range from a feeling of being lost to serious depression and everything in between, according to youth experts.

“I put all this pressure on myself, I thought I could do it all,” Chatfield said. “I’ll go to this point (Pomona College), and I thought I could relax and have all the answers. But then I had the whole world in front of me, and it was much bigger than the college selection process. If the wheels are going to come off, it will be in college. If you’re going to crash and burn, it’s going to be in college. That’s absolutely what happened to me.”

Bisset said.

Stanford University School of Education Professor and psychologist William Damon believes that a sense of purpose — intrinsic, sustaining and noble — provides built-in protective factors against depression and anxiety disorders. But his research shows that the vast majority of students entering college have not yet developed a clear sense of purposeful pursuit.

“And that’s why all of these colleges, all of them, can’t keep up with the challenges that are being demanded. Kids are flocking to the counseling services because they’re not going there for the right reasons,” Damon said. “They’ve accomplished a goal, but the goal isn’t the kind of goal that is very sustaining. And then what?”

Damon believes it’s important for young people to enter college with one or more purposes they are pursuing.

“The purpose can be further defined, be made more concrete or even be changed while in college,” he said. But without an understanding of what they want to accomplish in college and why, they are at risk.

According to Damon, some kids will make the transition to college fine, even without a sense of purpose upon entering, because “they’ll get into an exciting class or find some inspirational mentor.” This will connect them to important underlying reasons to be in college, and from there a sense of purpose will develop.

“In our research, we’re finding significant movement, especially in the early 20s,” he told the Weekly.


Stanford Dean of Freshmen and Undergraduate Advising and Palo Alto parent Julie Lythcott-Haims has given a lot of thought to this issue.

“How do we ask ourselves if that is possible true, ‘Why? What are we doing or what are we not doing that one can grow to what was once the age of adulthood without actually having formed a sense of self that enables one to step out into adulthood and function on one’s own joyfully, able to cope?”

Psychologist Madeline Levine writes in “The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids”: “There is a growing awareness that, in spite of tremendous external accomplishment, many kids are both dreadfully unhappy and impaired in their ability to function autonomously. ... Heavily dependent on their ‘public’ success for a sense of self, many of these youngsters have little in the way of authentic purpose in their lives, leaving a void where conscience, generosity and connection should be.”

A January New York Times article, “Record Level of Stress Found in College Freshmen,” reported on troubling results from an annual survey begun 25 years ago, “the latest evidence of what” (campus counselors) see every day in their offices — students who are depressed, under stress and using psychiatric medication, prescribed even before they came to college.

According to Damon, recent studies show that many college-age youth display serious signs of depression. Colleges are also concerned about a rise in suicide risks in recent years.

Chatfield reports that she “saw high levels of drinking, high levels of stress and anxiety” while at Cornell. In addition, a number of her Palo Alto friends and acquaintances had a difficult time adjusting to college; many transferred, dropped out entirely or stopped out for a year like she did. Bisset also described how “so many kids in college fall into depression, fall into abuse, various forms of escapism.”

According to Denise Pope, a lecturer with the Stanford School of Education and co-founder with Levine of the organization Challenge Success, college students used to seek counseling mainly for relationship issues; now academic issues have taken the lead, and the complaints are often more serious in nature.

“There are levels of depression and anxiety never seen before,” she said. “The systems were not set up for this.”

All colleges are experiencing this rise in mental health challenges, not just elite institutions or affluent populations, Pope said.

Lythcott-Haims confirms that the Stanford admissions office, like others nationwide, is grappling with the challenges presented by these mental health trends, which affect appetites for learning along with other important aspects of campus life.

“This year I participated in a conversation about how to ask (an admissions application) question that would in fact elicit whether that student has that sense of purpose. ... It will be interesting to see if the tweak of our questions yields on that,” she said. The new question was: “What matters to you, and why?”

In fall 2006, trends at Stanford and throughout the country led Stanford Provost John Etcheandy to convene Stanford’s Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Task Force.

“Increasingly, we are seeing students struggling with mental health concerns ranging from...
self-esteem issues and developmenta
tal disorders to depression, anxiety,
ating disorders, self-mutilation be-
haviors, schizophrenia and suicidal
behavior,” Etchemendy said in his
to the task force.
The Task Force report, issued in
2008, said there was “abundant
evidence” that today’s students,
at Stanford and elsewhere, suffer
from more emotional problems and
mental illnesses than earlier gen-
nerations.
The report indicated surprise to
find that emotional distress on cam-
pus wasn’t limited to students who
were struggling academically. Stu-
dents with stellar academic records
also were susceptible.
“We have students, who, no mat-
ter what else is going on in their
lives, know how to get those grades,
and know how to do very well aca-
demically, and so it masks that they
may be struggling emotionally,”
said Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neu-
demically, and so it masks that they
may be struggling emotionally,”
said Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neu-
man, a member of the Task Force.
“They may have no friends. They
may not have a sense of belonging.
They may feel that no one in the
community cares about them. It’s
important for us to take away the
blinders that keep us from seeing
their distress.”
The report concluded: “A shift in
cultural norms and expecta-
tions is needed. The University is
committed to fostering students’
development through learning, per-
sonal growth and success, and yet
the definition of success cannot be
limited to academic achievement
alone. The Task Force believes that
it is necessary to critically examine
expectations surrounding academic
achievement and to assess their im-
 pact on students’ mental health and
well-being. Qualifying students for
‘personal success and direct use-
fulness in life’ as outlined by the
Founding Grant means that a stu-
dent’s academic achievement may
not be the most significant measure
of qualification and preparation.”
Broadening definitions of suc-
cess beyond academic achievement,
along with greater support systems,
as recommended by the Stanford
task force, would help many col-
lege students achieve greater well-
being. However, Damon believes
the process needs to begin earlier,
especially as a counterbalance to
the pressure to achieve more super-
ficial goals.
“If, during the early years of
strenuous effort and high achieve-
ment, they had found purposes that
went deeper than the grades and
awards, they would have hit the
ground running when they entered
college. They would have been ea-
ger to gain more knowledge and
skills in order to help them better
accomplish their chosen purposes,”
he writes in his book, “The Path to
Purpose: How Young People Find
Their Calling in Life.”

When it comes to fostering
that earlier sense of pur-
pose, parents have a large
supporting role to play, according
to Damon. Yet modern parenting
styles may in fact work against the
normal, healthy formation of iden-
tity and purpose.
Many of the students interviewed
for this article spoke of parental in-
fluence in creating pressures to suc-
cceed along a path defined by elite
colleges and maternal affluence, in
part because that is what worked for
them. This mirrors what psycholo-
gists and other youth experts have
observed.
“We can be myopic when we in-
sist that high grades, well-known
schools, or particular professions
are the royal road to happiness. A
life well lived takes many forms. ... (W)hen we insist that our children
be gratified by the same things that
have gratified us, then we limit the
roads they can travel on, roads that
may be closer to their own hearts,”
Levine writes. The tendency to fo-
cus on and overly value external
measures of accomplishment “is
directly related to high rates of de-
pression and substance abuse,” she
says, and also to “a general sense
that living can be unbearably dif-
cult.”
Bisset sees parental achieve-
ments as creating strong pressures
on youth.
“Unlike the East Coast, a lot of
parents here made themselves. ... There’s a lot of grit, a lot of inge-
nuity. There’s a lot of American
Dream stories with immigrants. ... My dad is one of them,” he said.

According to Bisset, this milieu
leads kids to measure their self-
worth by their ability to integrate
within an affluent, entrepreneurial
society.
Gunn math teacher Daisy Renaz-
co says that parents, friends, TV and
newspapers often give the impres-
sion that the only path to success is
via a top school and top job.
“The Stanford connections in
Palo Alto are strong,” she said. The
kids also witness Google and Fa-
cebook dominating the local land-
scape, both high-powered compa-
ies hiring grads from top schools.
“The kids see that and feel pres-
sure,” she said.

George Kadifa, Paly ’09 and cur-
rent UC Berkeley junior, noted the
bias against risk that develops from
material wealth: “In Palo Alto we
have it good. Our parents are afflu-
ent. People are trying to preserve
this — they want the same thing for
their children. The result is that they
have created a society adverse to
risk. They are trying to replicate
success along a rigid path. They are
scared to have their kids fail — but
look at Steve Jobs and other entre-
preneurs who failed along the way.
It’s ironic that a city built on taking
risks is not prepared to let the kids
fail. And that’s a problem.”

“Palo Alto has a lot of cautious
parents who don’t let their kids fall
down. They lose their resiliency if
you don’t let them make mistakes,”
said Serena Ojukian, Paly ’07 and
current senior at Southern Oregon
Whose problem?
(continued from page 43)

University. "The whole point of being 8-18 is you run around doing stupid stuff, and you learn from it."

Parents sometimes try to have it both ways, telling their kids, "Don’t stress out about school," but also "Hurry up, you need to go to tutoring, college-prep classes, community service to get those hours, whatever it takes to look good on the college application," several local parents said. For a kid, it’s hard to know what to make of that.

And some parents outright push. "I felt like there were a lot of young adults who were afraid of their parents, of their disapproval," Chatfield said. "(One parent) just wanted her daughter to take more and more classes, even if (she) was at her breaking point. Her mom was saying, ‘You have to take all these APs; I don’t care how much you work done, and I’ll do anything so you can do this.’"

Stanford’s Lythcott-Haims believes parent behavior is at the core of this dynamic play out when parents hover and linger after bringing their freshmen to college.

"The implicit message is ‘I don’t think you can do this without me. ... You’re that fragile, or you’re that incapable, or you’re that unfamiliar with the workings of life ... to do for yourself, to put your hands in the dirt and do it,’ she said.

Palo Alto Board of Education President Melissa Baten-Caswell also is concerned about the tight conditions but cannot survive in the elements.

"Parents began to change, and for good reasons. Trying to be more helpful, useful, leverage their own expertise, connections, life experience to help place their children in better outcomes. But a line was crossed and parents started to do things for kids that kids should do for themselves," she said.

Lythcott-Haims refers to many youth who have lived a "checklist childhood," with that checklist set by adults. When they come to Stanford, she tells freshmen, "There is no checklist ... We don’t have that for you any longer."

"I want that to feel liberating and exhilarating, but in fact I think for many it is frightening because they are so good at mastering the checklist of increasingly difficult expectations. But give them a blank page, and they’re often lacking in the wherewithal to design, create, imagine," she said.

It’s often hard for parents of high school students to know when to back off. "It feels like we’re in an arms race. We parents are trying to keep up with the parents around us," Lythcott-Haims said. "We don’t want to provide any fewer opportunities for our kids, so more activities, harder classes seem to be the path to success. And those seem to be the kids who get into the colleges."

Lythcott-Haims sees some of this dynamic play out when parents hover and linger after bringing their freshmen to college.

"The implicit message is ‘I don’t think you can do this without me. ... You’re that fragile, or you’re that incapable, or you’re that unfamiliar with the workings of life ... to do for yourself, to put your hands in the dirt and do it,’ she said.

Palo Alto Board of Education President Melissa Baten-Caswell also is concerned about the tight conditions but cannot survive in the elements.

"Parents are more involved in kids’ lives these days. Many kids are not allowed to grow up until later. By the time they enter college, many haven’t had a chance to practice. They are so ill-equipped to be on their own," she said.

"We have to help parents see that holding our kids too close is not allowing them to become healthy, successful adults," she said.

Damon writes: “Young people do not wish to be shielded from hard realities. They wish to learn how to accomplish their dreams in the face of such realities.”

Damon’s work on the importance of purpose in youth development has generated numerous positive strategies for fostering a culture of purpose within families, schools and communities. Others interviewed by the Weekly have recommendations on this as well.

Starting with families, Damon’s research has identified several critical things that parents can do to foster a sense of purpose in their children:

- Listen closely for the spark, then fan the flame. Take advantage of regular opportunities to open a dialog
- Be open-minded and supportive of the growth of interest expressed
- Convey your own sense of purpose and the meaning you derive from your work
- Impart wisdom about the practicalities of life
- Introduce children to potential mentors
- Encourage an entrepreneurial attitude (you can do it!)
- Nurture a positive outlook
- Instill in children a feeling of agency, linked to responsibility (whatever you do in this world matters)

Damon also recommends regular household chores to teach children that they are needed, that others are counting on them, that what they do matters to the whole. Yet many youth are routinely excused from doing regular tasks within the family, due to busy schedules, high stress levels and parental notions that perhaps the child’s time is better spent studying or doing extra-curricular activities. This misses a key opportunity to foster a sense of purpose, Damon says.

Levine agrees: "Worrying that kids won’t be able to maintain
their grades if they are expected to straighten their room, set the table, take out the garbage, and do whatever else is appropriate for their age and needed by the family ... is a sign of misplaced priorities. ... (A)cademic competence is only one part of what children need to learn in order to be productive, emotionally healthy, good people.”

“It’s not just up to parents, however. “Even for children with optimal parenting, the broader society plays a decisive role,” Damon writes.

Adult mentors outside the family can be critical to broadening a child’s horizons and supporting them in the process of exploration and reflection, according to many youth experts.

“Kids need three healthy adults at least — besides their parents— mentoring them through the teen years,” said Cait Black, Menlo Park Trinity Episcopal Church youth director.

When it comes to schools fostering purpose, Damon advocates addressing the “why” question with students about all that they do.

“Every part of the curriculum should be taught with the ‘Why?” question squarely in the foreground,” he writes. Why do people read literature or go to a Shakespeare play? Why do mathematicians labor over proofs that students must learn? For those who worry about taking time away from subject matter to explore these questions, Damon believes finding the path to purpose, even if it appears to take time away from more immediate measurable progress on standardized tests, leads to the more worthwhile result in the long run — a love of learning for learning’s sake.

Teachers and other professionals interviewed by the Weekly agreed with Damon, although recognizing, as did Damon, the tremendous pressures teachers feel to keep up with material required by the state and subject to standardized testing.

Many suggested that schools could use existing classes to teach students about balance, self-care and stress reduction. Living Skills class — a one-semester requirement

(continued on page 46)
Whose problem?
(continued from page 45)
for graduation — topped the list.
At Gunn, a program new this fall
seeks to change the campus culture
in ways that encourage greater self-
knowledge and resilience. Called
“Sources of Strength,” it trains and
empowers students to enter, support,
to-peer structure, along with se-
lected “caring adults,” to identify
and cultivate internal and external
sources of strength (see sidebar on
page 47).
In all that schools do, Pope em-
phasizes the importance of “deep
engagement in learning.” She advo-
cates rigorous, project-based, collab-
orative approaches combined with
good pedagogy to accomplish this.

— Terri lodell

COVER STORY

Why college feels
less stressful

High school grads say they
learn to relax in college

College is less stressful than high school for many recent
Palo Alto high school grads, according to Weekly inter-
views. Stanford University senior and Gunn High School
2008 grad Naomi Shuchat said this is true for her and her high school
friends.
George Kadifa, UC Berkeley junior and ‘09 Palo Alto High grad
agrees: “I’m definitely a happier person in college.”

College feels more comfortable for various reasons, students said:
The ability to choose classes, less total class time, more flexible sched-
ules, less pressure to do extracurricular activities, activities that are
student-run, instead of with friends, greater equity when dealing
with faculty, more interesting classes due to professors being able
to determine their own curriculum, professors inviting more discussion
of “why” questions, less competition among students, less pressure
to build a resume (the possibilities after college are more numerous
than post high school), and getting away from pushy parents.

“When part of your purpose was supplied by other people, going
down to college can liberate you,” said Zev Karlin-Neumay, Paly ‘07 and Stanford ‘11 graduate.

Stanford School of Education Professor, psychologist and former
Gunn parent William Damon said this reaction to college is due to
the fact that high school and college related to fear levels and types of aspirations.

In high school, “There’s a lot of fear that: ‘I’m not going to pass
the test,’ ‘I’m not going to make good enough grades,’ ‘I’m not going
to the right college.’ I’m not going to look in comparison with
my peers,” and that fear by the way is communicated directly from
the teachers who also are afraid that they’re not going to get good
performance records because the kids are not going to do well.

According to Damon, “Fear is one of the great emotions that throw
people off balance in terms of being able to experience the elevating
tings in life like a sense of purpose, or inspiration or anything like that.
When you make someone afraid, all systems absolutely stop.”

In college, he said, the atmosphere is less judgmental and more
relaxed.

The other element of difference arises from the high school quest
to get into the most prestigious college. “That’s a status-seeking kind of
aspiration that brings out the worst, most base aspects of the motiva-
tion system. It’s very tied to greed, where nothing is ever good enough
unless you get to the top and even if you get to the top, maybe there’s
something more.”

“So these two big emotions — fear and greed — are the two pow-
erful emotional systems that deflect the more affirmative, positive,
life-giving kinds of motivators,” Damon said.

Accordingly, everybody going to be susceptible
to a degree to these elements of fear and greed found in high schools.
Youth with well-formed identities or sense of purpose will be more
resilient, but they still will feel the adverse effects. Others will
be more vulnerable to emotions ranging from fear to dis-
couragement to being completely thrown off course. Some will be
able to bounce back especially when they get to college. The change
in environment lifts a large burden for many.

— Terri Lodell
Gunn’s new peer-network program promotes healthy, supportive community

Selected Gunn High School students have begun trainings as part of a new, comprehensive wellness program called “Sources of Strength,” which empowers peers to support each other, connect with trusted caring adults, and change how teens perceive the need to ask for help, according to Shashank Joshi, psychiatrist and Stanford University assistant professor of psychiatry, pediatrics and education. Sources of Strength (SOS) was originally developed in the late 1990s in North Dakota as a teen suicide-prevention program, showing encouraging results in a statewide campaign. Since then it has expanded nationwide and shown positive results in research studies, received awards, and been recognized as a “best practices program,” according to Joshi, who is directing and evaluating the program as it rolls out at Gunn. The key to SOS’s success is the use of peer networks to deliver positive messages that ripple out through social circles, community-building activities, and in turn leads to a sense of connection, healthier behaviors and increased resilience. SOS’s approach acknowledges the critical role of young people.

“If the adults try to do it alone, it falls flat,” the SOS website states. To launch this program, Joshi and SOS recruited Gunn’s student-led peer support network known as ROCK (for “Reach Out. Care. Know”), founded in 2009 in response to student suicides. Through trainings, outreach and activities, ROCK members offer social and emotional support for any student needing a safe and sympathetic ear. ROCK earned recognition for its accomplishments last spring with the Positive Peer Influence Award from the school district and Packard Children’s Hospital, SOS began this summer with initial trainings for 10 ROCK students. Dunlap, Gunn Principal Katya Villalobos and Assistant Principal Tom Jacobowski.

“Everybody was pretty excited about it,” said Matthias Plaska, Gunn senior and ROCK leader. According to Gunn junior and ROCK leader Helen Carefoot, the SOS training focuses on a “wheel” of potential sources of strength — both internal and external — in a young person’s life. The eight “spokes” on the wheel are: family support, positive friends, mentors, healthy activities, generosity, spirituality, medical access and mental health. Each one of these areas is examined and discussed in the training.

The SOS curriculum helps teens gain balance, make better choices and cope with stress, according to Carefoot. “It helps us to steer a course for ourselves,” she said. “It encourages an empowered peer-to-peer culture to make better choices and cope with stress.”

Carefoot said there is a “big emphasis” running through the program on the importance of intrinsic motivation.

“Push yourself based on your own interests. If you have too many voices telling you what to do, then you have trouble making good choices.”

— Helen Carefoot, ROCK leader and Gunn junior

Push yourself based on your own interests. If you have too many voices telling you what to do, then you have trouble making good choices.

Clockwise, from top, Helen Carefoot, Sarah Dukes-Schlossberg, Ria Bhatnagar, Lichi Fan, Wendy Wu, Monica Logan and Laura Townsend were among the 65 students participating in Sources of Strength training at Gunn High School this month. Here they’re brainstorming what gives them strength in their lives.

Leif Erickson, right, director of Youth Community Service, works with student Anthony Su on an ice-breaker exercise during the first meeting of middle school students in November.

According to the SOS website, “Students left (the SOS training at Gunn) knowing more about how to handle certain situations where a kid was in trouble,” Plaska said. The training also included telltale signs that might indicate a student is in need of help.

According to Dunlap, ROCK leaders will continue the work of SOS and maintain a communications network with all SOS participants. Another SOS training for additional students and staff is being planned in the next several months, Plaska said. ■
Editorial
The achievement treadmill

Parents are fueling a competitive environment that is jeopardizing the health of our teens and their development of “purpose” in life

T
here is irony that the same week we learn that Palo Alto is the most educated city in California, if not the nation, the Weekly publishes an extensive look at the culture in our community surrounding student “success” and the effects that this culture is having on our kids as they try to find their way in the world.

Even as the academic achievements of our teens are widely celebrated by school administrators, teachers, parents and the students themselves, there is much evidence that our kids are struggling under the pressures of exceedingly high expectations and are leaving high school with unprecedented anxiety and lacking a critically important sense of purpose.

We are a parent community increasingly obsessed with the college admission process and every possible competitive advantage in achieving the brass ring of an elite college acceptance.

And we are all complicit.

As parents, we see other parents managing their teens’ lives, arranging for tutors, test prep classes, college admission coaches, high-level club sports teams, extracurriculars and the best teachers to write the all-important recommendations.

What kind of extraordinary willpower does it take as a parent to resist seeking these tactical advantages, and to instead opt for helping their child find a passion or purpose that will propel them into adulthood and a college (or not) that is the best fit rather than the most prestigious?

Teachers and school administrators, proud of and professionally bolstered by working in a school district that repeatedly ranks among the top in the nation by measures such as AP test scores and participation, National Merit Finalists and acceptance to top colleges, see the stress and anxiety but either feel helpless to do anything about it or consider it their duty to bootstrap every possible student into a college that will leave parents, teachers and school administrators feeling successful.

Teens themselves are often the most driven, feeling intense competition with their peers, high expectations from their parents and like failures if they don’t achieve top standing in their class.

In a school district where being in the 25th percentile academically translates to the 75th percentile in California, the “middle” students are especially vulnerable.

And the media, including the Weekly, reinforce the existing culture by publicizing the impressive academic and athletic achievements of local students.

As a growing number of parents and students are trying to sound the alarm about the culture we have created for our kids, the elite colleges themselves are joining in.

Stunned by the rising level of stress, depression and alcohol and drug abuse problems among today’s college students, college administrators are having to rapidly expand counseling and other services and many are re-examining their admissions processes.

As Stanford Dean of Freshmen and Palo Alto parent Julie Lythcott-Haims said in today’s cover story, “…many of today’s high-achieving students seem to accomplish that high achievement at the cost of something even more important, which is their sense of self or their sense of purpose.”

Stanford psychologist and education professor William Damon has made purposefulness the centerpiece of his research, and says that “the biggest problem growing up today is not actually stress, it’s meaninglessness.”

There is no easy response or solution to the culture in which our teens are growing up, nor even agreement that it needs to change. This is a problem growing up today is not actually stress, it’s meaninglessness. “Is it time, day or night.

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