



## Perspectives in Pediatric Neurology

## Success at Any Cost is Too High a Price

David E. Mandelbaum, MD, PhD \*

Alpert Medical School of Brown University Providence, Rhode Island



## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Available online 4 April 2019

*With integrity, nothing else counts. Without integrity, nothing else counts.*

Winston Churchill

Recently, federal prosecutors charged 50 people in a scheme to secure admission to elite colleges by paying millions of dollars in bribes to coaches and test monitors, falsifying examination scores and fabricating student biographies. Among those charged were parents, coaches, test proctors, and test graders. No students were initially charged, and many of them claimed to be unaware of their parents' disgraceful conspiracy.<sup>1</sup> One of the techniques used to improve students' prospects was to obtain a bogus learning disability diagnosis, then use it to justify "accommodations" such as additional time to take the entrance examinations or allowing them to be tested individually, making it easier for the bribed test proctor to ensure the desired test results. The website of the test preparation company "Student-Tutor" declares: "This time advantage can help raise their scores significantly!" Adding, "Some students have even reported raising their score by as much as 350+ points!"<sup>2</sup>

The chorus of condemnation included the observation that what prompted the legal action was less that the wealthy were manipulating the system and more about who was getting the money. The case of Jared Kushner's admission to Harvard, as told in a book by Daniel Golden, "The Price of Admission," was frequently mentioned. As recounted in the book, the New Jersey real estate developer Charles Kushner pledged \$2.5 million to Harvard University in 1998, not long before his son was admitted. Administrators at Mr. Kushner's high school were quoted as saying: "There was no way anybody in the administrative office of the

school thought he would, on his merits, get into Harvard. His GPA (grade point average) did not warrant it; his SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores did not warrant it. We thought for sure, there was no way this was going to happen. Then, lo and behold, Jared was accepted. It was a little bit disappointing because there were, at the time, other kids we thought should really get in on the merits, and they did not."<sup>3</sup>

A column in the New York Times (March 16, 2019) defined *Snowplow Parents* as "affluent mothers and fathers now are more like snowplows: machines chugging ahead, clearing any obstacles in their child's path to success, so they don't have to encounter failure, frustration or lost opportunities." A patient of psychologist Madeline Levine (author of "Teach Your Children Well: Why Values and Coping Skills Matter More Than Grades, Trophies or 'Fat Envelopes'"), left college. She "didn't like to eat food with sauce. Her whole life, her parents had helped her avoid sauce, calling friends before going to their houses for dinner. At college, she didn't know how to cope with the cafeteria options — covered in sauce."<sup>4</sup>

Frank Bruni, in his book about college applicants entitled "Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be," notes: "The principles instilled in these children? That nothing in your life is too sacred to be used for gain. That you do what it takes and spend what you must to get what you want. That packaging matters more than substance. That assessments made by outsiders trump any inner voice."<sup>5</sup>

As disturbing as this is in general, this has significant implications for the child neurology community. We care for children with neurological problems, many of which manifest with significant learning disabilities. We seek appropriate accommodations to enable them to succeed in their academic pursuits. The idea that this process can be "gamed" raises the risk of a loss of credibility among those who genuinely need it, along with the loss of opportunity, as they lose out to those who have claimed a disability they do not have.

The implications for medical education are also quite profound. I have been struck by the intolerance of medical students and

Conflict of interest and source of funding statement: None.

\* Communications should be addressed to: Mandelbaum; Professor of Pediatrics and Neurology; Alpert Medical School of Brown University; Providence, RI.

E-mail address: [David\\_Mandelbaum@brown.edu](mailto:David_Mandelbaum@brown.edu).

residents to constructive criticism. I recognize that criticism can be done poorly, and this is to be avoided, but the complaints I have seen in student evaluations, and I am not alone in this observation, are less about how criticism is delivered, and rather are directed at any criticism at all. Seeing opposite responses to the same type of comments made by the same attending supports this conclusion. Inasmuch as it is impossible to go through medical training without making mistakes, intolerance of constructive criticism is, frankly, dangerous.

I characterize the problem as Ptolemy versus Copernicus. Throughout high school and college, the universe revolves around the student, who has to be “perfect” and in whom error is intolerable. However, a capable, humanistic physician must revolve around the patient. How can we expect students, who have been the center of their universe for so many years, to change course and place the patient above themselves, doing all they can to improve their abilities, including accepting, even welcoming, criticism? Albert Einstein said: “Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value.” When a medical student, asked if a child had any skin lesions, answers: “none that I saw” when, in fact, the student did not look, the fear of being caught in an error has overwhelmed the obligation to the patient. Being a success has become more important than being of value.

The question arises whether medical schools are choosing the right people. If the primary criterion is success in the zero-sum game of grades distributed on a bell curve, achieved by students who are intolerant of being wrong, the result will be physicians who will not question themselves, acknowledge, and learn from their errors, and not accept the obligation to place their patients first.

Fortunately, efforts are being made to address these issues. Mechanisms of grading students that encourage community and collaboration, while still assessing students individually, are being developed.<sup>6</sup> The “Making Caring Common Project” at The Harvard Graduate School of Education (irony noted) released a set of recommendations in 2006, entitled “Turning the Tide,” which

endeavored, by way of college admissions, “to elevate ethical character, especially concern for others and the common good, to increase access and equity for economically disadvantaged students and to reduce excessive, damaging achievement pressure in many communities.” A subsequent report, *Turning the Tide II*, issued in March 2019, is subtitled: “How Parents and High Schools Can Cultivate Ethical Character and Reduce Stress in the College Admission Process.”<sup>7</sup>

The headlines make it clear that we are a long way from achieving these goals, but at least they are being recognized as necessary, much as the Arnold P. Gold Foundation was established to cultivate humanism in medicine. Medical school admission committees have an especially important charge in assuring that students entering medicine have the ethical character and concern for others that, while so important in all spheres of life, is essential in providing effective, compassionate health care, especially for the disadvantaged among us.

## References

1. The New York Times. College Admissions Scandal: Your Questions Answered. The New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/us/college-admissions-scandal-questions.html>; 2019. Accessed March 14, 2019.
2. Shapiro E, Godstein S. Is the College Cheating Scandal the ‘Final Straw’ for Standardized Tests? New York, NY: The New York Times; 2019.
3. Golden D. The Price of Admission: How America’s Ruling Class Buys Its Way into Elite Colleges—and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates. New York, NY: Crown Publishers; 2006. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/us/sat-act-cheating-college-admissions.html>.
4. Miller CC, Bromwich JE. How Parents Are Robbing Their Children of Adulthood: Today’s ‘snowplow parents’ keep their children’s futures obstacle-free - even when it means crossing ethical and legal boundaries. New York, NY: The New York Times; 2019.
5. Bruni F. Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group; 2015.
6. Grant A. Why We Should Stop Grading Students on a Curve. New York, NY: The New York Times; 2016.
7. Weissbourd R, Ross Anderson T, Barnard B, Cashin A, Ditekowsky A. *Turning the Tide II: How Parents and High Schools Can Cultivate Ethical Character and Reduce Stress in the College Admission Process*. Boston, MA: Making Care Common Project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education; 2019.