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Carl Wiens

For a Lucky Few, Room at the Top

By ANDREW FERGUSON
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Trust me, they're out there, and they're coming for your teenage son or daughter. The whole country is lousy with them, these Perfect Kids. They swarm the landscape, swathed in academic honors and reciting their valedictory speeches, calculators in one hand and the poetry of Sappho (which they're translating from the original Greek) in the other, their pockets stuffed with National Merit Scholarships and letters of recommendation from Yo-Yo Ma and "Uncle Warren" Buffett and report cards showing nothing but A's and photos from the free clinic they built last summer in Kuala Lumpur, with "brag sheets" -- I swear that's what they're called, brag sheets -- unfurling behind them like a battlefield standard. The Perfect Kids have decided to apply to the same colleges that your kid wants to apply to. And they will get in. As for your kid -- well.

If you're a parent and haven't yet succumbed to this paranoid vision of American life, you will, sooner or later. The math is inexorable. The number of American high-school seniors is set to peak in the next year or two, at well over 3.5 million, and the percentage of graduates that will apply to a four-year college or university will be higher than ever, too. The number of available slots, meanwhile, will stay roughly the same. The most selective colleges have thus shrunk their acceptance rates down to 10% or lower. Even such traditionally middle-tier schools as Brigham Young University are accepting fewer than one in five applicants.

"With competition at an all-time-high," writes Joie Jager-Hyman in "Fat Envelope Frenzy," "grooming for a spot at a top college has become a full-time job for scores of Ivy League hopefuls, who literally spend years of their lives studying for the SAT, loading up on Advanced Placement courses, and accumulating brag-worthy rosters of extracurricular activities." I don't know where she gets that "scores." Substitute "tens of thousands" and the statement is perfectly, nerve-rackingly accurate. That's a lot of Perfect Kids..... (It's a) grim, hypercompetitive free-for-all that for the college-bound, has turned puberty into an arms race of achievement and performance.

Ms. Jager-Hyman's roster of Perfect Kids is daunting indeed. Felix, oldest child of Chinese-American doctors, grew up on the Philadelphia mainline dreaming of Harvard. He has scored a perfect 5 on all seven of his Advanced Placement tests and has toured internationally as a concert pianist. He volunteers as an EMT at the local fire department, edits an online science magazine, serves as captain of his high school's model United Nations team and has founded a charity that brings musical performers to retirement homes. In his spare time, he does research at the local medical school.

Impressed? Perhaps you haven't met Nabil, son of a Memphis gas-station attendant, who is taking multivariable calculus at the University of Memphis, just for fun. Or Andrew of New Orleans, tennis-playing class valedictorian at his prep school, who does charitable work at his church and survived Hurricane Katrina. Or Lisa, of suburban Chicago, who is an internationally ranked gymnast. She got a B-plus once -- in Driver's Ed.

It comes as a relief when Ms. Jager-Hyman introduces us to less-than-perfect Marlene, a bright girl with excellent test scores but a spotty attendance record at school, owing to family troubles. But Marlene has other advantages. Those family troubles don't hurt, paradoxically, and her profile as the daughter of impoverished Dominican immigrants makes her catnip to admissions officers hoping to round out their incoming class with the required ethnic diversity.

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