

DANGER: TOX

Students feel the pressure and stress of getting into a good college on a daily basis. Here are some ways the school can do to help.

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College, the “supposed” reason for our existence, or at least the reason why we all chose a college preparatory school, creates a system that thrives perfectly in our world. More people want and need it, so colleges can raise the prices and the stakes.

Other than tuition, we pay a personal price for being a piece of the college system. Brand-name colleges breed one type of student: a well-rounded overachiever. However, humans are inherently not well-rounded. Instead, we are fragmented and imperfect, we have slants toward certain subjects, and we make mistakes; this makes us multi-layered and diverse. While colleges preach the “holistic application review process,” they actually look at whether you conform to their cookie-cutter identity. This leads to a natural selection of sorts; in order to receive this “holistic review,” you must have certain prerequisite qualities such as belonging to the top 5 percent of the class and speaking multiple languages.

“Colleges do want well-rounded students, but they also want students who are passionate about chemistry or literature or physics. When students try to make themselves into what they think a college wants - they are doing themselves a disservice. You could do everything right - earn straight A’s, have 15 AP classes, and still not get into a selective college,” college advisor Sharon Bikoundou said. “My advice is to take the classes you want, study what you love and then apply to a balanced list of colleges and I promise there will be a college for you.”

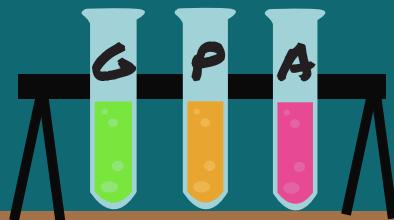
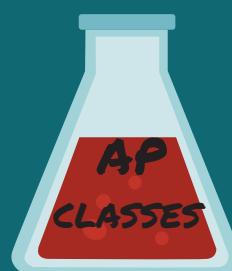
Students often trade a workable schedule for a high-AP course-load due to the influence of peers. “Even though I’m only taking three APs (my junior classmates are taking more), I constantly feel pressure to do more, take on more, participate more, but the reality is that time is an inescapable constraint, and it is super overwhelming to try and manage everything,” junior Paula Mitre said.

This societal pressure for more APs is detrimental to fellow peers. Students should take classes because they want to learn from them, not because they want to say they have another AP under their belt. When consulting with guidance counselors in the upcoming months, consider what classes are best fit for you, not just best to see on paper. About 87 percent of students at Heritage (polled from 229 students) feel the need to be well-rounded, but only 63 percent feel unique. Since most Heritage students know what colleges look for, nearly everyone already fits the ideal identity or tries to fit it now. This leads to most people thinking the same: “I need a 100 percent” or “I need the hardest class.”

“Although the classes at Heritage are demanding, I think it’s the culture at Heritage that puts the most pressure on the average student. We compete immensely with one another in order to get good grades,” senior Victoria Macklai said. It is not detrimental to chase a high grade, but it is detrimental to determine self-worth based on those grades. With our rigorous course load, students should welcome study groups and group work as a way to alleviate the pressures of many assignments. Besides students shining individually, college advisor Sharon Bikoundou explained that colleges also admit to comparing applicants to students within their schools more than they compare them to students outside of their school. This creates a cutthroat environment; more people feel willing to slight others if it means raising their grade by even one percentage point.

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- senior Aaron Thaler



TOXIC ACADEMIA

basis. Despite falling victim to college preparatory lifestyle, there are things our

Senior Aaron Thaler feels guilty of getting caught up in the system as well but notes how unjust it is. "A lot of this is said jokingly among the senior class, but there is truth to it. Some people will say 'don't apply to this school because you'll get in over me.' We shouldn't be thinking like that," Thaler said. "We're seniors, and we've grown up together for years, some of us for our whole lives. This is the point where we should be most supportive of each other, not competing against each other."

The competitive environment creates a stress bubble around the student body. When asked to rank the level of stress students feel in school out of 10 (one the lowest, 10 the highest), 88 percent of students rank their stress levels above five, and 17.3 percent rank stress levels a 10. Additionally, 77.7 percent of students name school as their main source of stress. As a way to combat this, administration is planning to offer mindfulness workshops. These

will mirror the previously given assemblies on ways to handle stress (i.e. box breathing).

"I suggest that teachers communicate to each other more efficiently in order to not assign several assessments, projects or large homework assignments on the same day," freshman Christopher Fonseca said. While full cooperation between teachers may not be possible due to conflicting curriculum requirements, teachers should at least consider students' other academic obligations in order to enhance student performance.

While most of this seems personalized to Heritage, the cutthroat environment and lone wolf thought process are inherent to the college process. As students attending a college preparatory school, we fall victim to college's ploys. Our environment has evolved into a high-stress, every-person-for-themselves mentality. Heritage however, does contribute to the problem.

Senior Nicholas DiStefano said that Heritage's marketing tactics foster a robotic sense of appreciation. "With rigor, you'll have stress, but the school does not try to limit it. They just add on with 'oh look, this person won,' and you start to think 'wow, if they're winning and I'm not, I'm not going to go anywhere in life.' Then you always have that mindset that 'this person is better than me, so why am I even going to try?'" DiStefano said. He believes the school should cheer for everyone equally. Some ways to include and appreciate more students is to feature monthly student profiles similar to @humansofahs posts on Heritage's instagram (@americanheritageplant) and have a senior pamphlet that includes all college acceptances, not just the top 40 acceptances.

Beyond changing marketing efforts to include a wider range of students, our students should change what we joke about and value mental health over grades. When asked about what humor the students at our school bond over, most students mentioned dark humor. Student jokes varied from "wanting to jump off the bell tower," "ridiculing stress, "very negative stuff like failing tests" and "wanting to die." Around 41 percent of 229 students polled at Heritage have felt a decrease in their happiness since coming to the school. High statistics like those do not belong in a high school.

Amy Morin from Forbes magazine reiterated that repeating thoughts leads to believing them. "Your thoughts are a catalyst for self-perpetuating cycles. What you think directly influences how you feel and how you behave," Morin said. If we stop joking about real problems like suicide and high stress, then we can become a more accepting and joyful class.

American Heritage students are victim to toxic academia, but we don't have to live that way. We need to think holistically— past the Intelligence Quotient and on to our Emotional Quotient.



(Graphics/Amber Bhutta)

