High Anxiety: How Can We Save Our Students From Themselves?

[Commentary]()

Randy Enos for The Chronicle

By Jonathan Zimmerman October 20, 2017

When Stephen Paddock killed 59 people including himself in Las Vegas this month, Americans broke into predictable political camps. Gun-rights advocates called for expanded mental-health services, insisting that no law could have stopped an obvious madman like Paddock. Nonsense, gun-control supporters said; whatever Paddock's mental state, the easy availability of firearms makes violence more likely.

I've been thinking about this debate following a recent suicide on my own campus, the University of Pennsylvania, where at least 14 students have taken their lives since February 2013. Whenever a suicide happens, the spotlight turns to mental-health services. Do students know whom to call in times of crisis? And are there enough services for everyone who needs them?

These are urgent and important issues, and I'm glad we're raising them. As in the case of the Las Vegas shooting, though, I'd also like us to explore more fundamental questions about the culture that gives rise to these tragedies. Why has there been a spike in mental illness on college campuses, especially at highly selective institutions? And

what can we do to prevent it?

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It's not all the colleges' fault, of course. Many of our students grow up in an atmosphere of hyperachievement, so they think they have to be perfect in every way. And social media reminds them that there is always someone, somewhere who is better — smarter, sexier, and more successful — than they are.

Sadly, then, many students arrive on campus with mental-health problems, particularly anxiety. It only gets worse after they get here, as best we can tell. Nearly two-thirds of college students report experiencing "overwhelming anxiety" during the past year. Almost one-third reported feeling so depressed that they had trouble functioning; nearly half said they had felt "things were hopeless."

But there are things we can do, right now, to make life less stressful for the young people in our charge. They have learned to regard life as a kind of Darwinian war of all against all, which is a sure-fire formula for misery and anxiety. So it's incumbent upon us to ratchet down the competition between them, via a few simple steps:

1. Admit qualified students on a lottery basis: Everyone knows that there are many more people who are qualified to attend selective colleges than those colleges can possibly accept. But we continue to operate under the fiction that the last student admitted is somehow "better" than the first kid on the waitlist.

That perpetuates a most-poisonous idea: that everyone earns their success, and mine can only come at the expense of yours. As the Swarthmore College psychologist Barry Schwartz has suggested, it would make more sense to set a standard — of grades, scores, and extracurricular activities — and make a random selection among everyone who meets it.

The colleges would end up admitting students who were every bit as accomplished and talented as our current crop, but they would be less inclined to view admission decisions as a reflection of their ultimate worth. And that would improve their mental well-being, which is already too dependent on external validation.

2. Require open access to all extra-curricular activities: When I arrived at Penn last year, I was appalled to discover that many clubs and other social organizations had become their own forms of competition: You have to write essays and even get interviewed to get in. A student recently told me that she and a friend applied to join a group that visits people with Alzheimer's disease, which required them to produce essays about why they wanted to do that. My student was accepted, but her friend was not

Applications? To help people with Alzheimer's? That's madness, plain and simple. We should erect a hard-and-fast rule: If you want the college's support for a student activity, you need to take all comers. We'll pay for you to expand your organization, if need be. But we won't give you a dime if you make your activity into yet another Darwinian battle, where only the fittest survive.

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College officials have assured me that they don't like the cutthroat nature of student life any more than I do, but that the students themselves insist on it: They've been socialized to rank each other from the very earliest ages, so it seems "natural" to them. But there's nothing natural about it. It's a product of our own time, so it's also incumbent upon us to change it.

3. Ban on-campus recruiting: Every fall, representatives from consulting firms and other businesses descend on elite colleges. We see worried seniors in dresses and suits, trudging across campus for interviews. And we hear lots of talk about who got the coveted offers and who got left behind.

That makes the end of college even more stressful than the start of it. Of course graduating students will face job-related anxieties, given the tenuous nature of our economy. But there's no good reason for us to up the ante by turning our colleges into recruiting stations. That just makes a miserable situation worse.

Let's be clear: mental illness on our campuses is real, and it is rising. And we need expanded counseling and treatment to help people who suffer from it. At the same time, though, the focus on mental-health services lets the rest of us off the hook. It puts all the attention on relieving illness, which distracts us from asking how institutional practices promote it.

On their own, I realize, none of my suggested reforms will make a big difference. Taken together, however, they might start to reform the callous, hypercompetitive culture in which many of our students have been raised. We made these children into the anxious young adults they have become. It's up to us to teach them a healthier way to live.

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