The Hidden Conformity of Standing Out

Students seeking admission to selective schools face the dilemma of trying to get noticed for identical distinctions

By Milo Linn-Boggs

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To avoid the "sameness trap" in their quest to get noticed by college admissions officers, high school students need a paradigm shift in what counts as distinctive, away from personal achievement and toward societal contribution.

By breakfast my inbox is already clogged with come-ons: a calculus-prep program, tips to increase my SAT score by 200 points, a blast of "leadership opportunities that will get you into the Ivy League." The message is clear: Distinguish yourself. Yet the tools to demonstrate distinctiveness and nonacademic achievement are the same for most high school students. We have built a college admissions marketplace where uniqueness comes in units that can be quantified and compared. The irony is brutal: The harder we try to stand out, the more we converge.

In a system of titles and stackable credentials, individuality gets measured by how neatly it fits a template. "Founder of . . . ," "captain of . . . ," and "10 AP courses" become boxes we try to check in the competition to stand out. In recent decades, colleges have broadened their definition of "merit" beyond grade point averages and test scores. But this move toward holistic evaluation, though laudable, has had

unintended consequences, generating a rash of identical extracurricular yardsticks. When the yardsticks become the point, it should come as no surprise that students' résumés start to look the same.

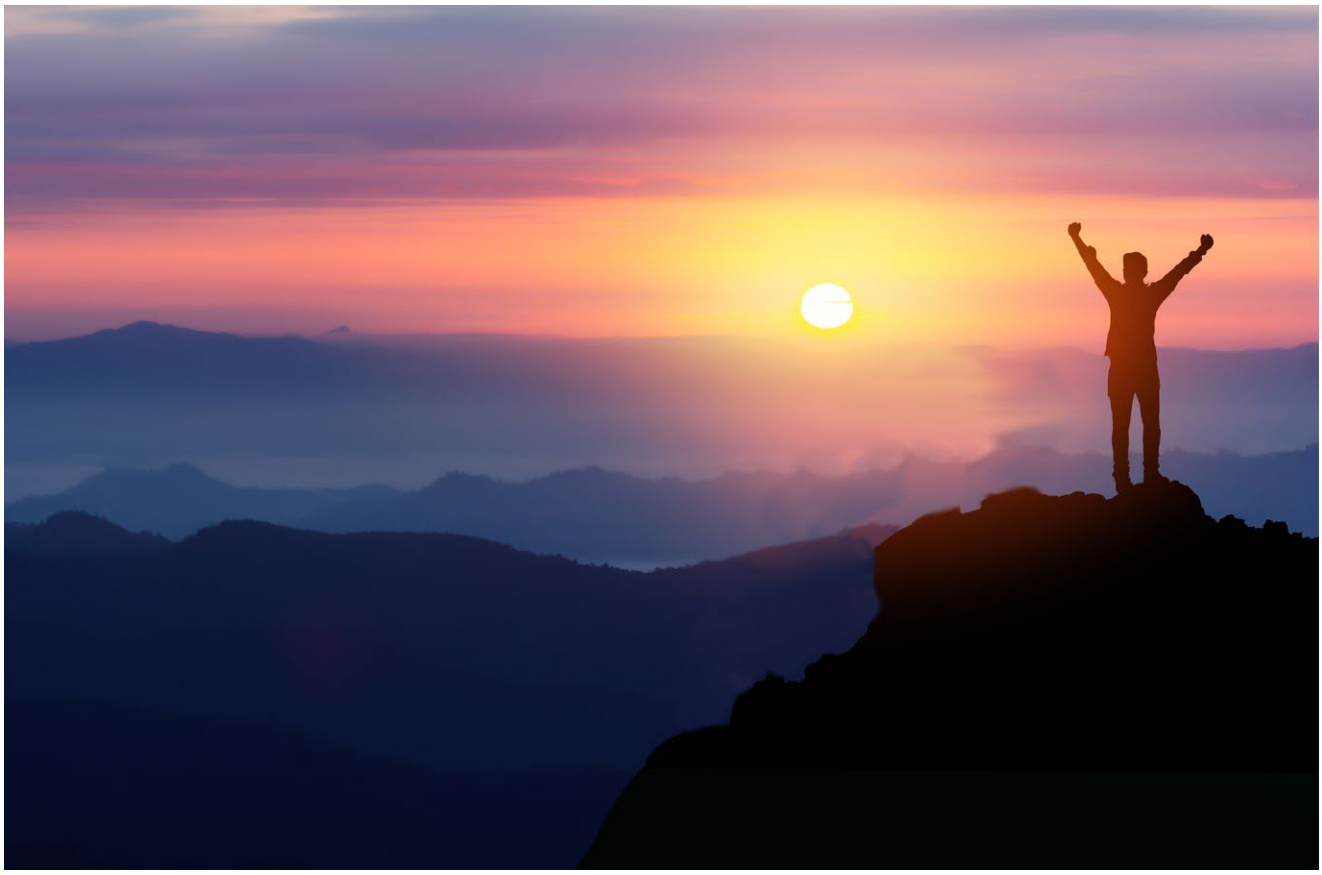
Economists and sociologists have language that helps explain how we got here. In situations with scarce rewards—admission to selective colleges or the competition for a few choice jobs—status becomes a "positional good." Its value depends on where we stand relative to others, not on an absolute level of qualification or excellence. Fred Hirsch's classic account from 1976, *Social Limits to Growth*, shows why competition for positional goods escalates without increasing total welfare: Elite credentials, by definition, cannot be expanded to accommodate everyone who "qualifies," so effort becomes a race to look better than the next person. In the context of elite colleges, that means applicants tend to cluster around the same markers of achievement, ones that decisionmakers can quickly recognize. It is not that students have an identical passion for student government or for "founding" things; it is that these are reliable "units of difference" in a race for positional resources.

A close look at the records students present to colleges illustrates this rush to conformity. A 2023 analysis of nearly 860,000 applicants, conducted by the Common App and other researchers, indicates that students disproportionately report a small set of marketable roles, especially "leadership" and top-level titles, and that reporting patterns concentrate around a narrow band of categories and distinctions.

Under time pressure, admissions officers must rely on words that serve as proxies for desired personal qualities such as "initiative" and "impact"—labels like founder, president, award winner, or participant in a named selective program. The Common App's short-form questions impose character limits on responses, compressing narratives into headline verbs, so "founded" or "launched" carries outsized weight, while steady, unglamorous stewardship is hard to convey. Students tend to rely on signals that look unique in a quick scan: micro-clubs, pop-up ventures, and summer experiences designed to read as singular regardless of their depth.

What's more, the scales are tipped by how the system weights nonacademic credentials. A 2023 Opportunity Insights study of "Ivy-Plus" admissions shows that students from top-income families enjoy significantly higher admit rates than their middle- and lower-income peers with similar academic credentials, in part because of advantages in nonacademic ratings (extracurriculars, recommendations, perceived leadership), legacy preferences, athletic recruitment, and attendance at elite private high schools. Private school environments, by design, are optimized to produce those nonacademic markers. When high-stakes systems reward a specific kind of difference, the affluent respond by mass-producing it. What looks like uniqueness on a résumé is, in practice, an industrial product.

The psychological costs of the sameness race are increasingly visible in the very settings we label "high-achieving." Studies led by Suniya Luthar and colleagues identify students in high-achieving schools as an "at-risk" group, with elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and substance use. Analyses by Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill find that perfectionism, especially socially prescribed perfectionism—the sense that others demand perfection from one—has risen notably among young people over recent decades. Indeed, achievement is no longer just about personal growth or success but about meeting an increasingly narrow, idealized standard that leaves little room for failure or imperfection. As the behavioral health therapist Josh



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McKivigan has observed, high-achieving students often appear to be "well put together," but "behind the scenes, they're barely holding it together. The only type of school they feel is acceptable is an Ivy League." More and more, students are gauging how they stack up against others and judging themselves more harshly.

Social scientists have a word for the way organizations in a given sphere trend toward sameness: *isomorphism*. That is, institutions, and the people within them, grow more alike as they respond to the same evaluative pressures. "Once a set of organizations emerges as a field," wrote sociologists Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell in 1983, "a paradox arises: rational actors make their organizations increasingly similar as they try to change them."

When organizations all chase the same rankings, their strategies converge. When students all chase the same admissions ratings, our lives do, too. We do not copy each other because we lack imagination; we do it because only a limited range of achievement indicators "count" to those who do the counting.

A booby trap is also hiding in the metrics themselves. Campbell's Law predicts that the more any criterion is used for decisionmaking, the more it will be gamed—and the more it will distort the very process it is meant to monitor. In regard to education, Donald Campbell said that "achievement tests may well be valuable indicators of general school achievement under conditions of normal teaching aimed at general competence. But when test scores become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways." Establish a

leaderboard for "originality" and you will get students who become excellent at leaderboard-friendly behaviors.

I see this happening at my own school. When a community service club announces elections, people who never attended meetings suddenly show up to vie for leadership positions. New "initiatives" pop up in the fall with glossy names and thin plans. Peers test out entrepreneurial titles in their college-application bios, like "CEO of a two-person startup," because such terms sound more impressive than "volunteer" or "member." We laugh about it privately and perform it publicly. This is not to say that my fellow students are phony. On the contrary, they are responding rationally to a system that confers real benefits for visible, sortable nonacademic credentials.

Where Do We Go from Here?

If educators and policymakers hope to rescue students from the sameness treadmill, they need not lower aspirations, abandon competition, or pretend credentials do not matter. Rather, they need to reconsider which qualities have true value and how students can demonstrate them. Shift the definition of merit away from badges and toward contribution. Distinction cannot come solely from grades and titles; it should come from making something better for others, staying with it long enough to matter, and leaving it stronger than you found it.

This recommendation aligns with what we know about motivation and learning. Studies by David Yeager and colleagues show that when students connect their schoolwork to a self-transcendent "purpose for learning"—to helping others or contributing to a community—they show stronger academic self-regulation and persistence than peers focused primarily on self-enhancement. Meta-analyses of service learning show positive effects on academic performance, civic attitudes, and personal development, especially when projects involve real responsibility and structured reflection. Mentoring and cross-age tutoring programs, when relationships are sustained and supported, produce small but meaningful gains for younger students and benefits for mentors themselves. Asking students to improve something that someone else depends on—and stick around long enough to see the effects—might well foster more durable engagement and deeper achievement.

What might that look like in the trenches of a high school where every hallway poster is about "leadership" and every inbox ping is a prod toward yet another generic achievement? For starters, students might consider three practical moves:

Revive a struggling club and document the turnaround. Most schools have at least one such organization needing a boost: a robotics team that lost its coach; a literary magazine that dwindled to a group chat; a community-service group that never recovered after the pandemic's disruptions. Taking something that matters to others from shaky to sustainable shows true leadership. It involves recruiting new members, redesigning roles, and building a handoff plan for the year after the student leader graduates. The service-learning literature bluntly defines what distinguishes "productive" from "performative": tying the work to authentic needs, building in structured reflection, and measuring effects on beneficiaries, not just the service-learning volunteers.

Maintain and improve an existing tool that other students rely on. In the college admissions game and the business world, we tend to celebrate the startup story but underrate the maintainer. But in school systems, most value is created not by invention but by upkeep: schedules for an afterschool club that are clean and accurate, shared study guides that are up-to-date, student resource sites that are navigable and accessible. Maintenance lacks glamour, yet it fosters the kind of mastery that fuels high-quality work. Motivation science offers a useful clue: Intrinsic interest is most predictive of quality, while extrinsic, performance-salient incentives tend to drive quantity. When the task is to improve the reliability of something others use, the feedback is immediate, the stakes are real, and the "quality" bar is high. Even if no badge exists for this kind of effort, the evidence says it promotes deep learning.

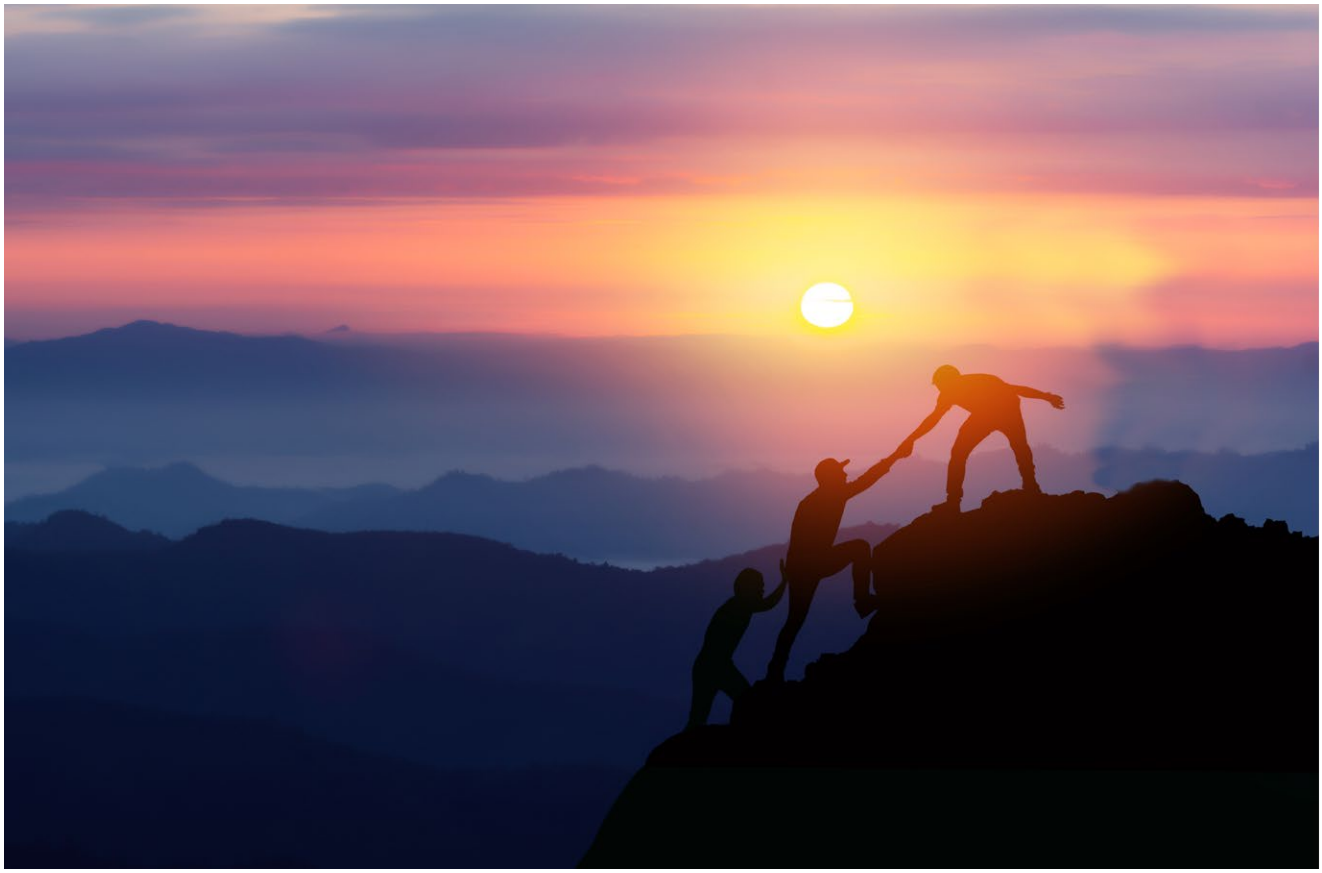
Mentor younger students and show their progress. The goal is not to supervise other kids; it is to transfer know-how, model effective habits, and help build someone else's confidence. Good mentoring is slow, relationship-based work, and the research is appropriately modest about effect sizes. But when mentorship is consistent, supported by adults, and focused on concrete skills, it reliably helps younger students reach goals—and mentors learn to communicate, to calibrate expectations, and to design instruction. If you can show that the students you mentored improved in a tangible way (everyone on the robotics team found a way to contribute, every club member volunteered for 50 hours, program attendance rose), your contribution will outlast a graduation speech.

How Not to Repeat the Same Mistakes

Some people will say, "Great—now we will just make those activities into new checkboxes." That is the trap. If we replace one set of easily digestible labels with another ("club rescuer," "tool maintainer," "mentor of the year"), we are back where we started. The point is not to invent a fresh badge for every form of stewardship; the point is to shift the emphasis from a résumé populated by titles to a portfolio anchored in effects on other people.

That raises a tough practical question: How do students and schools show student contributions without dragging us back into a metrics arms race? A few guardrails, guided by research, can help. First, favor evidence of outcomes over empty adjectives. If you revived the literary magazine, show its before-and-after participation and the plan to keep it alive after you leave, and forgo the breathless claims about "transformational leadership." Second, narrate the processes and learning, especially mistakes and course corrections. Structured reflection is essential to effective service learning because it forces us to connect what we did to what we learned and to what changed for others. Third, resist the urge to convert "character" into a high-stakes index. Angela Duckworth and David Yeager's review of the measurement landscape warned explicitly against using survey-based measures of personal qualities, such as questionnaires, for school accountability; they are too vulnerable to bias and gaming. If we want to honor persistence and care, we should spotlight them in stories, not reduce them to another score.

Parents and educators can also make a powerful change: Ask different questions. Instead of "What club are you founding this year?" try "How do you plan to help new club members?" Instead of "What new thing will you lead?" ask "What existing thing will you leave better?" A simple query about an activity becomes a conversation about stewardship when the questions shift. To succeed at stewardship, students



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need to think creatively, invest their time, and expand their beneficiaries beyond themselves. In the process, the social-comparison engine loses some steam because it is harder to copy an effect than a title.

Grades, course rigor, and the quality of a school's learning opportunities still matter in the college admissions game. But there is a meaningful difference between acknowledging what must be measured and living as though only what is easily measured matters. Studies clearly show that when your goal is high-quality work, intrinsic motivation and purpose serve you better than point-chasing; when the goal is durable learning, reflection tied to real effects serves you better than performance for its own sake.

A Perspective Change

The shift I am recommending will make some students uncomfortable because it dissolves the illusion of control that dashboards and badges provide. It demands more humility and more patience than a blast of "opportunities" in the inbox at dawn. And it asks that educators and policymakers encourage students to embrace this way of thinking. For if one aim of education is to prepare us to improve communities we inherit, and not merely to brand ourselves within them, then our measures of distinction must reflect that aim. The research on purpose-driven learning, service learning, and mentoring shows that these approaches help students learn and grow in enduring ways.

Tomorrow morning, my social media feed and emails will likely still try to recruit me back into the prestige tournament. It will promise an edge if I stack one more credential onto the pile. I cannot mute all

of it, nor do I need to pretend I am above caring. But I can choose what to build my days around. I can try to leave behind things that still work when I am gone. I can measure my growth by whether other people's work becomes easier and more effective because of what I did. And if there is a quiet kind of distinctiveness in that—in making something better for others and staying with it long enough to matter—it will not show up on a leaderboard. It will show up in the lives of the people who did not have to think about me at all, because the thing just kept working. The research suggests that such contributions also cultivate the very dispositions—autonomy, competence, relatedness—that sustain learning over time.

That is the point. The pursuit of excellence is not the enemy. Ambition is not the enemy. The enemy is the system that mistakes the flashiest label for the deepest contribution and then asks us to organize our lives around chasing the label. We can do better than that. We can build schools and family cultures that reward the difference between being noticed and being useful. We can teach students that if they want to be truly singular, the surest path is to make something or someone else stronger and to leave behind the instructions for how to keep it going. The evidence base is clear that when schools elevate contribution—by valuing purpose-driven work, service learning with reflection, and sustained mentoring—students and communities benefit.

If we do make these shifts, we may find that the paradox dissolves. The harder we strive to stand out under the old rules, the more we blend in. But the moment we organize success around making things better for others, sameness stops being the goal. Contribution resists copy-and-paste because the work is local and the proof is cumulative. It demands context, history, and care. And it carries its own reward: a life that is not a résumé but a record.

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This article appeared at EducationNext.org on February 5, 2026.