



IECA's Independent Educational Consulting Blog

[Anxiety Over College Admissions](#)

May 11, 2011 | [3 comments](#)



by [Janet Rosier](#), IECA Member (Connecticut)

I was chosen to participate on a panel to discuss the film "[The Race to Nowhere](#)" at the Jewish Community Center of Greater New Haven in March of this year. After the screening, the audience members were encouraged to give their impressions. The tension in the room was palpable. The film had clearly hit a nerve with this audience.

The reaction was not surprising. The movie depicts students who are completely stressed out. They are physically and mentally exhausted from the volume of homework and the high expectations; that they achieve "perfection." One after another student expressed how stressed out he or she was, how the homework is too much, how they are not able to balance this level of academics and also maintain a similar level of achievement in extra-curricular activities. The word "perfect" was used often. The stress seemed to come from their families, from their schools, and—in my opinion—often from themselves. Many expressed the fear that anything less than an 'A' was unacceptable. They had the fatalistic attitude that less than perfection would keep them out of the top colleges and nothing good followed that outcome. To that end, some students resorted to cheating. The film featured students with stress induced headaches and stomachaches, with eating disorders and, most difficult to hear about, suicide.

This film was a window into the way some students and their families are viewing college admissions. An all or nothing gamble; the winners go to the Ivy League and the rest go on to something less. The winners get the connections and the great jobs and the rest spend their lives toiling in less prestigious jobs for less pay.

Not long after viewing the film, I read *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua in preparation for the IECA book club, and to hear Ms. Chua speak at our [IECA National Conference](#). No doubt you have already heard all about her harsh tactics in getting her daughters to achieve both academically and in their musical endeavors.

What drove Ms. Chua to micromanage her children's academics and music lessons seems to me to be the same fear that drove the students in "The Race to Nowhere": The idea that second best is unacceptable. That getting into a very prestigious college is the goal from which all of life's successes will follow.

As [Independent Educational Consultants](#), we see this quite often. It is our job to ease the anxiety and convince families that getting into college is not a "winner take all" game. We stress the importance of making the right match—the good fit, academically as well as socially and emotionally. One family at a time, we need to present a more balanced picture of [college admissions](#) and get them to consider college choices they had not. With our [guidance](#), we can help these students find their way through the maze that college admissions has become without losing a sense of who they are and where they belong or, worse, feeling like they have failed before the game has begun. We need to help students and their families continue to strive for achievement without thinking that anything short of perfection is failure.