

Crisis

- Becky Twaalfhoven

This article is dedicated to my classmates, who silently suffer behind a facade of calm and collected control. This is for the juniors who have no idea what they are doing yet, who don't know how to start planning and, up until recently, hadn't thought much about college. This is for those of my peers who are overwhelmed with the sudden onslaught of information and deadlines and demands and applications and transcripts and requests and forms and obligations.

I feel your pain.

Heading into junior year, I expected constant pressure and preparation for college. I was excited to "do college stuff" and slowly build up my confidence with thinking about the future. I was not at all prepared for what actually happened.

The "college stuff" hit like a tidal wave in the first week of March. One morning I was sitting in a study and happened to see an email from a teacher to all of his students, telling us that he would only accept 12 students who requested letters of recommendation from him, and had in fact already promised 3 of those. It took me a few moments to figure out that he meant college recommendations. College. I hadn't even thought about recommendations yet. I promptly ran to my guidance counselor to get whatever I needed for whatever he was talking about - a form, as it turned out, to sign guaranteeing his recommendation for my applications. I spent the entire day running around the school to find him, checking during and between every class with a racing heart and shaking hands. I turned in a math quiz with an empty answer simply to catch him during a transition, only to hear that he had already accepted 12. I was lucky enough to score an unprecedented 13th spot - a testament, I think, to my fanatical drive to get that signature - and, thankfully, my math grade didn't suffer. But this was it: day one of crisis mode.

As it turns out, I was at a slight disadvantage in the college preparation process, as my English class missed a two-day guidance seminar due to a counselor's absence. The next week in the seminar, we got request forms, which theoretically are still not due. The counselor attempted to explain the many packets of information and forms we received, setting a due date in early May to "give us time to think," but the damage was done. The crisis of college was upon us. The counselor also showed us how to narrow down a list of schools we're thinking about based on our preferences. "What if we don't have any preferences?" I ask. "That's okay; you'll still narrow down your list." He was utterly wrong. By the end of class, when people printed their lists of 50-100 schools, I was stuck at 463 wondering whether I can envision myself at a school where bagpiping is a major. I'm still at 463.

The information guidance gave us is only a small piece of the torrent released two weeks ago. For example, course selections for next year were due as part of a drive to get schedules for next year finalized by this spring. This wouldn't be a stressor if not for the sudden reminders that everything you do in school is important for your future and will go on your application and you should really think about who you are and what you want in life because whether or not you take Film Studies next year determines what your future will be.

For some students, including myself, applying for National Honor Society was just another weight to add to the increasingly heavy list of stressors dragging us down. I had to collect signatures, write four papers, secure teacher recommendations, and attempt to convince a mysterious board of “unknown” teachers that I am a good person within two weeks, during which time I experienced the worst side effect of achievement: insecurity. Every morning another distraught friend would confide in me, sharing their deepest fears that 100 hours of helping homeless children was not impressive enough or that nobody would believe they walked 50 miles for cancer. This is not a new phenomenon by any means, but as I was applying myself, I felt the strain of trying to find confidence while constantly confronted with other people’s accomplishments. My crisis level was on high for those two weeks; nothing else seemed as important as acceptance to the “renowned” society.

I won’t address standardized tests, because they are a separate beast and deserve their own tribute; but they are an integral factor in the heightened anxiety of these months. There comes a point where you have to recognize that the crisis is all in your head. This is not to say that the stress is not real, because it most certainly is a very real force, but the panic and sense of impending doom are by-products of that stress. I’m sharing my experiences because it bothers me that I have to tell people that junior year is “good,” and I want others to know they are not alone in crisis. I won’t say that everyone is in the same boat, because we all know that is not the case; some people really do have college counselors and talk to admissions officers and go on 12 college tours in 3 days. But for the majority of students, the college process is a smack in the face and an unwanted reminder that the future isn’t so far away. For anyone who feels lost, blind, or helpless, you’re on the right track. Everyone needs an existential crisis every once in a while, and I recommend questioning your identity at least twice a month to keep you in touch with yourself and remind yourself of what matters.