

“We Regret to Inform You”: College Admissions Angst in the U.S. through a Lacanian Lens

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Abstract

The college application process in the United States has become increasingly competitive. This competition has contributed to a growing sense of anxiety among educators, admissions counselors, and applicants. This article aims to, first and foremost, highlight the frustration, alienation, and anxiety of students, educators, and admissions officers in the face of a precarious admissions landscape. Using an eclectic mix of Lacan’s earlier and later thoughts, including his theory of anxiety, concept of “the subject supposed to know,” and theory of the four discourses, this paper will explore the underlying dynamics that govern the college admissions process in the United States.

1. An Anxious Youth

Written in Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) form, Sarah Hecklau's thesis entitled "Everyone is Anxious: A Narrative for Admissions Professionals, Students, and Parents, on College Admissions and Anxiety" recounts the author's experience of admission anxiety, both as a student and admissions counselor. Hecklau writes, "the entire process of applying to college is riddled with anxiety. Each person involved in the process feels some level of anxiety."¹ Notoriously frustrating, college admissions in the U.S. have, over the past thirty years, become increasingly cutthroat. As applications increase and slots in America's top universities remain primarily unchanged, students have turned to extreme methods to enhance their applications, often sacrificing their psyche and body in pursuit of an acceptance letter.^{2,3} Juggling deadlines, extracurricular activities, social pressures, and high-stakes examinations, students are pushed to the brink.

A study by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling found that seventy-three percent of applying students expressed concern that even a minor error in their application may adversely affect their likelihood of admission. Furthermore, fifty-two percent of applying students indicated that this experience has proven to be more stressful than any other academic endeavor they have undertaken.⁴

Beyond a source of anxiety, the college admissions process—particularly among the so-called "Professional Managerial Class"—has become a means of social currency and comparison.⁵ Under the current regime, universities have become brands, empty signifiers of class, intellectual, and social positioning. Look no further than the "Varsity Blues" scandal in which wealthy Americans invested hundreds of thousands of dollars to, through cheating and manipulation, secure their children's spots in elite institutions.⁶ Association with a "good college" carries with it a sense of "worthiness" as if to say, "Look at me. I belong among the best, the smartest, and the richest."

In this context, one can understand Hecklau's frustration: "You compare their schools to the schools you applied to and try to decide if it is a stronger one. If they got into Colgate, will I

¹ Sarah F. Hecklau, "Everyone is Anxious: A Narrative for Admissions Professionals, Students, and Parents, on College Admissions and Anxiety," MEd thesis, (University of Vermont, 2017), 5, <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/grad-dis/667>.

² John Bound et al., "Playing the Admissions Game: Student Reactions to Increasing College Competition," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 23, no. 4 (2009): 119–146, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.23.4.119>.

³ Common Application, *End-of-season Report, 2023–2024: First-year Application Trends*, August 22, 2024, https://www.commonapp.org/files/FY_application_trends_end_season_report_23-24.pdf

⁴ National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), *The State of College Admission, 2023*, https://www.nacacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/NACAC-College-Admission-ProcessResearch_FINAL.pdf

⁵ Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

⁶ Sophie Kasakove, "Varsity Blues trial ends with a guilty verdict," *New York Times*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/09/us/varsity-blues-scandal-verdict.html>.

get into Skidmore? You like to think that it works... You want to think that the system is just."⁷ Indeed, one does want to think that the system is just.⁸

The reality, however, is much more complex; race, class, and privilege play a significant role in shaping admissions. A study by Bussey et al. from the Institute of Higher Education Policy (IHEP) found the process to be riddled with disparities.⁹ Further, the Lumina report of the National Association of College Admission Counselors (NACAC) and National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) described the college admission process as a virtual "obstacle course" with many hoops to jump through that is difficult, especially for people of color.¹⁰ Not only is the process undoubtedly flawed, it is, as Hecklau identifies, "riddled with anxiety."¹¹ Our purposes here are to investigate this anxiety, how it arises and to offer a potential way out. For this question, we turn to Jacques Lacan.

2. The Desire of "the Other" and the Idealized Admitted Student

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan described anxiety as "a sensation of the desire of the Other."¹² This "Other," differing from the lowercase "other," is "that absolute otherness that we cannot assimilate to our subjectivity... the symbolic order... [the] foreign language that we are born into and must learn to speak if we are to articulate our own desire."¹³ Zizek expounds on this definition, describing this Other as "acting like a yardstick against which I measure myself... [which] can be personified or reified in a single agent: the 'god' who watches over all real individuals, or the cause that involves me (Freedom, Communism, Nation) and for which I am ready to give my life."¹⁴

Anxiety originates in our relationship with this Other. This Other's ambiguity, its obliqueness, births our anxiety. To explain this, Lacan asks us to imagine one dressed in the skin of a male praying mantis, unsure whether one is recognized as a mate (for whom the female praying mantis cannibalizes). One looks into the eyes of the female praying mantis but cannot see his reflection due to her globe-shaped eyes. One is, as it were, unable to recognize himself in the gaze

⁷ Hecklau, "Everyone is Anxious," 20.

⁸ Admittedly, finding a wholly *just* college admissions system is a difficult task, one which I do not take on in this paper. See perhaps the section "Justice in University Admissions" in Joan McGregor and Mark C. Navin, eds., *Education, Inclusion, and Justice* (Springer International Publishing, 2022).

⁹ Karen Bussey et al., *Realizing the Mission of Higher Education Through Equitable Admissions Policies*, (Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), June 2021), 56, https://www.ihep.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IHEP_JOYCE_full_rd3b-2.pdf.

¹⁰ National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), *Lumina Report on College Admissions and Financial Aid*, 2022, 37, https://nacac-net.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/08/nacac_nasfaa_lumi-na_report_0122_10.pdf

¹¹ Hecklau, "Everyone is Anxious," 5.

¹² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A. R. Price (Polity Press, 2014), 10.

¹³ Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (Routledge, 2004), 70.

¹⁴ Slavoj Zizek, *How to Read Lacan* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 9.

of the Other.¹⁵ Anxiety, thus, is created through the subject's awareness of the onlooking Other, whose true desires are impossible to ascertain. As Lacan taught, "I do not know what I am as [an] object for the Other."¹⁶ It is this precarious quality, stemming from unknowingness, that creates the sensation of anxiety. The subject feels constantly under observation, unsure of how to perform.

Moreover, this anxiety, stemming from a desire *to be desired*, leads the subject to ask, "Che Vouï?" or "What does the Other want with me?"¹⁷ In the context of the college admissions process, the question is: "How do I compare to the "idealized imaginary reference" of the admitted student?"¹⁸ A student, in asking, "What does Harvard want of me?" asks as well: "Who is the ideal student for college admissions?" Of course, such a student does not exist, "there is no Other of the Other."¹⁹ This is not to say that admitted students are not real, but rather that some "idealized imaginary reference" point (acting as an Other to compare oneself to) does not materially exist.²⁰

Curiously, if we follow Lacan in that there *really* is no big Other, we see a parallel with the college admissions process. There is no all-encompassing college admissions machine which objectively determines one's acceptance. Neither the yardstick nor the measurer really exist. Instead, there are only individual admissions officers, with their personal inconsistencies and subjectivity.

It is important to note here that the source of the student's anxiety is not merely a product of pressure from parents, educators, or peers; instead, the student's anxiety originates from the student's precarious relationship with the Other. The student is forced to ask: What would an admitted student do? Would the admitted student prioritize soccer or theater? Would he take AP Biology or AP Chemistry? Would she join the robotics team or do student government?

3. The Admissions Officer "supposed to know"

The Lacanian concept of the "subject who is supposed to know" can be useful here in analyzing the various roles in the college admissions process. As Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* outlines, the "subject who is supposed to know" is the one presumed to know, the one presumed to have truth. For Descartes, this subject is God; for the analysand, the subject "supposed to know" is the analyst.²¹ In the classroom, the "subject who is supposed to know" is the teacher, while the "subject who is supposed not to know" is the student.²²

¹⁵ Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, 5-6.

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IX: Identification (1961-1962)*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (Karnac Books, 2002), 197.

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 300.

¹⁸ *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, directed by Sophie Fiennes (2012; New York City, NY: Zeitgeist Films, 2013).

¹⁹ Lacan, *Seminar IX: Identification*, 195.

²⁰ Sophie Fiennes, *Pervert's Guide to Ideology*.

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, rev. edition, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 224.

²² Mark Bracher et al., eds, *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society* (New York University Press, 1994) 164.

It is not a far leap, then, to assert that the figure occupying the position of the “subject supposed to know” in the college admissions process is the admissions officer, while the “subject supposed not to know” is the applying student. It is this belief in the knowingness of the admissions officer that enables the institution’s power over the student. In this sense, the admissions officer becomes an oracle of truth, a grand predictor of student success. Such an officer cannot, of course, *truly* predict the success of every applying student if they were to attend their university, but still, through no fault of their own, they attempt to. The student, too, must accept their fate, whether it be an acceptance, rejection, or the dreaded waitlisting, as they are assumed “not to know.”

4. The Postmodern Father Regrets to Inform You

What follows are sample rejection letters from a website that purports to allow its users to simulate their rejection letters from several leading institutions, based on rejection letters from previous years:

Harvard: “I am sorry to inform you that we cannot offer admission to the Class of 2024”

University of Chicago: “We appreciate the interest you have shown in the University of Chicago. Please accept our best wishes as you pursue your educational goals.”

Princeton: “The committee’s conclusion is not a judgment about your worth...”²³

As if the existence of this website (one that allows its users to “brace themselves” for their rejections) was not sign enough of a problem within the college application process, one is also struck by the faux-comforting language of these letters. Is one really expected to believe that someone at Harvard is truly “sorry” for denying students? Or that the University of Chicago has sincerely given their rejected students “best wishes”? Or, perhaps most absurd, that Princeton is not making “a judgment about [one’s]... worth.” This is, on its face, ridiculous. The harsh reality is that these universities are making judgments about whom they perceive to be most able to succeed (and, therefore, contribute to the university’s alums and donation networks). This is not done out of cruelty; instead, it is rooted in the reality that highly desirable universities have more applicants than they have slots for – a product of their unwillingness to forfeit exclusivity.

These rejection letters embody what Slavoj Žižek calls the “Postmodern Father.” He describes the postmodern father as follows:

Let’s say that you are a small child and one Sunday afternoon you have to do the boring duty of visiting your old senile grandmother. If you have a good old–

²³ IvyHub Education, “Rejection simulators,” August 25, 2022, <https://ivyhub.org/rejection-simulators>.

fashioned authoritarian father, what will he tell you? "I don't care how you feel, just go there and behave properly. Do your duty." A modern permissive totalitarian father will tell you something else: "You know how much your grandmother would love to see you. But do go and visit her only if you really want to." Now every idiot knows the catch. Beneath the appearance of this free choice there is an even more oppressive order. You seem to have a choice, but there is no choice, because the order is not only you must visit your grandmother, you must even enjoy it.²⁴

The admissions officer - in the position of the "subject supposed to know" - is sending a clear message: "You are not up to par." Rather than reject the applicant in the way of the "good old-fashioned authoritarian father," which is to say bluntly that "you are not up to par," the admissions officer asks the applicant to accept their unknowingness, to accept that they are "supposed not to know" and to do so with zeal. In some sense, the rejected applicant is asked to say, "Thank you for rejecting me. It was for my own good."

5. A Brief Introduction to Lacan's Discourses

In *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan lays out his theory of the four discourses that govern desire, knowledge, and power in the social sphere.²⁵ These discourses are the discourses of the master, university, hysteric, and analyst. The master's discourse serves the purpose of governance, the university's the purpose of education, the hysteric's the purpose of protesting, and the analyst's the purpose of revolutionizing (Bracher, 1994, p. 107).²⁶ For relevance and brevity, this paper will only cover the discourse of the university and the analyst.

Lacan uses elements to represent distinct aspects of each discourse. These elements are the master signifier (S_1), knowledge (S_2), the divided subject ($\$$), and the object a (a).²⁷ The master signifier is the organizing, domineering term that defines the discourse. This is best explained as follows by Hook and Vanhuele:

As way of introducing the concept of the master-signifier, one might imagine the following scenario. You are accosted by a camera crew who ask to film you as you list in a few words what is of greatest significance in your life and why. "What," the interviewer asks you, "would you be prepared to give your life for?" True

²⁴ Slavoj Žižek, "The Superego and the Act," Lecture at the European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland. August 1999, <https://zizek.uk/1999/08/01/the-superego-and-the-act/>.

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

²⁶ Bracher et al., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, 107.

²⁷ Bracher et al., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, 111.

enough, not everyone would be reduced to a state of stumbling inarticulacy by such a situation. Many might quite happily offer an initial response (“My children,” “The church,” “My country,” “Science,” “Humanity,” etc.). Then again, even those who can summon up an appropriate response will doubtless be dogged by a sense of the inadequacy of their words, by their own inability to fully articulate the reasons for the depth of this libidinal investment. Added to this is the inevitable prospect that the words one uses in such situations will seem hopelessly derivative, abstract and formulaic, devoid of any real personalized significances...such signifiers refer on and on to other signifiers without ever “hitting the Real.”²⁸

The Divided Subject (\$)	The Master Signifier (S₁)
Knowledge (S₂)	Object a (a)

Figure 1: Chart of Lacan’s Elements

Knowledge (S₂) is self-explanatory. Knowledge is technology, “know how”, or what can be known. The split subject (\$) represents the subject divided through language, the incohesive subjectivity we all embody. The object a (a), represents the object cause of desire, or that lack which spurs us into desire.²⁹ Using Bracher et al. in Figure 2, each of these factors can be mapped onto a respective position which “provides unique insights into the interrelationships between knowledge, truth, subjectivity, and otherness, and how particular configurations among these elements are produced by different discourses.”³⁰

1) Place of agency	2) The other
4) The underlying truth	3) The by-product/loss

Figure 2: Schemata of the Roles of Each Position Within Lacan’s Discourses³¹

²⁸ Derek Hook and Stijn Vanheule, “Revisiting the Master-Signifier, or, Mandela and Repression,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, (2015), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.02028>.

²⁹ Bracher et al., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, 107-114.

³⁰ Matthew Clarke, “The Other Side of Education: A Lacanian Critique of Neoliberal Education Policy,” *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives* 1, no. 1 (2012): 52.

³¹ From Clarke, “The Other Side of Education,” 46-60, adapted with permission.

6. The Discourse of the University in the Context of College Admissions

The university discourse is essential for understanding the current state of the college admissions process. In this discourse, the master signifier is in the position of truth, yet the position of agency is filled by knowledge (see Figure 3). In this way, knowledge seems to have agency within the symbolic system. However, this agency is simply a veneer for the true power of the master signifier. As Bracher et al. write, the discourse of the university "insofar as master discourse of overt law and governance is suppressed, functions as an avatar of the Master discourse, promulgating master signifiers hidden beneath systematic knowledge."³² Master signifiers in the college admissions process include terms like "holistic admissions," "comprehensive review," and "well-rounded." These terms exert power over the entire discourse by acting through systematic knowledge onto the object cause of desire (*a*) – the idealized student – which produces as a by-product the barred subject (\$) in the form of the alienated student.³³ This systematic knowledge – in the context of college admissions in the U.S. – takes the form of the GPA, high-stakes examinations (ACT, SAT, etc.), and the college application CV. While seemingly meritocratic, this kind of bureaucratic system merely reinforces the interests of the master, of power, and of hegemony (see Figure 4).

S_2	<i>a</i>
S_1	\$

Figure 3: Schemata of the Discourse of the University³⁴

S_2—GPA, standardized testing, extracurriculars, etc.	<i>a</i>—the idealized student
S_1—holistic admissions, "well-rounded" class, etc.	\$—alienated students

Figure 4: Lacan's Theory of the Discourse of the University in the College Admissions Context³⁵

³² Bracher et al., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, 117.

³³ Clarke, "The Other Side of Education."

³⁴ From Lacan, *Seminar XVII: Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 69.

³⁵ From Clarke, "The Other Side of Education," 46-60, adapted with permission

7. The Discourse of the Analyst

Therefore, how does one exit the oppression of the discourse of the university? Lacan proposes entering into the discourse of the analyst. In the analyst's discourse, the subject's object cause of desire (*a*) takes center stage in the position of agency (see Figure 5). Informed by knowledge (*S*₂), which is in the position of truth, the subject (\$) can produce "a master signifier that is a little less oppressive...less absolute, exclusive and rigid."³⁶ Entering into this discourse means, in essence, robbing the master signifier of its power. As Mathew Clarke outlined in his Lacanian analysis of education policy, entering into the discourse of the analyst means "thinking how education can be rethought more in terms of a collaborative adventure and less of a competitive race."³⁷ In the context of the college admissions process, entering into the analyst's discourse means encouraging students to define their own discourses, create their own meanings, and use the admissions process for their own ends, not the other way around (see Figure 6).

<i>a</i>	\$
<i>S</i> ₂	<i>S</i> ₁

Figure 5: Schemata of the Discourse of the Analyst: Explanations of the Roles of Each Position within Lacan's discourse.³⁸

<i>a</i> – the student's passion/true desire	\$ – the student
<i>S</i> ₂ – Knowledge of the inequity and unfairness in the system	<i>S</i> ₁ – The student's unique master signifier

Figure 6: Application of Lacan's Theory of the Discourse of the Analyst to the College Admissions Process

This transformation can be seen in Bunn et al.'s qualitative pedagogical research into five students within marketized universities. One student, Molly, underwent a transformation from the discourse of the university, where she "jumped through hoops" to please her teachers,³⁹ into the discourse of the analyst, transforming herself from an "uncertain undergraduate to a firebrand."⁴⁰

³⁶ Bracher et al., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, 124.

³⁷ Clarke, "The Other Side of Education," 57.

³⁸ From Lacan, *Seminar XVII: Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 69.

³⁹ Geoff Bunn et al., "Student Subjectivity in the Marketised University," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, (2022), 7, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.827971>.

⁴⁰ Bunn et al., "Student Subjectivity," 8.

In essence, Molly, through entering into the discourse of the analyst, was able to create her own master signifiers, to define her own discourse.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, the college admissions process in the U.S., operating within the university's discourse, is filled with immense angst. Students are pushed to the brink as they experience anxiety as a "sensation of the desire of the Other."⁴¹ Admissions officers occupy the position of the "subject supposed to know," while applicants occupy the position of the subject "supposed not to know." In an attempt to minimize this anxiety, college rejection letters use the faux-comforting language of the "postmodern father," concealing a more sinister command: that the rejection is not only necessary but for the student's good. In the context of the college admissions/rejection system, hegemonic, self-justifying master signifiers (ex. "holistic review" and "well-rounded") dominate the current discourse through the veneer of knowledge (GPA, test scores, etc.), creating the alienated educational subject. To exit this discourse is to enter into the liberatory, revolutionary discourse of the analyst, a discourse in which the student's object *a* takes center stage.

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⁴¹ Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety* (Polity Press, 2014), 10.

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