

# *the Atlantic*

## 'Good Mother' vs. Tiger Mother: A Response to Caitlin Flanagan

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*A filmmaker cited in a recent Atlantic column takes issue with the author's message*

Caitlin Flanagan, like so many people writing about Amy Chua's new book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, not only seems to perpetuate the myth that entrance into the Ivy League is the singular key to a good job and a good life, but also [posits in \*The Atlantic\*](#) that such admission would be imminently more achievable if American mothers were less obsequious in encouraging their children's passions and more Chua-esque in facing the hard reality that children "can't have a fun, low-stress childhood and also an Ivy League education."

Flanagan claims that the "good mothers"--those more concerned with their children's health, happiness, and well-being than the Machiavellian Chua wannabes--"love ... to organize viewings of a documentary called *Race to Nowhere*," a film that I produced and co-directed. *Race to Nowhere* explores the flaws of America's lopsided, numbers-driven education system and highlights the physical, emotional, and mental toll our culture's misplaced value system is taking on our children.

While the film acknowledges that this is a complex issue for which there are no simple solutions, the majority of pediatricians, clinicians, psychologists, and authors I interviewed generally agreed that such measures as those Flanagan dismisses in her piece--limiting the number of Advanced Placement courses a child takes, prioritizing extracurriculars, protecting sleep--and generally providing a child with the developmentally appropriate latitude to be a child could, in fact, help to counter the widespread depression, anxiety, self-mutilation, and suicidal tendencies that mental-health professionals are increasingly treating in middle- and high-school students. Flanagan, in contrast, apparently sees these tactics as lowering the bar, collectively calling them "the Rutgers Solution" (which one can only deduce to mean a willingness to settle for presumed mediocrity in exchange for fewer ulcers).

To this, I respectfully offer "the Rutgers response," not as a means of defending this particular institution, as I have no affiliation with or investment in it (though I am, as noted below, newly impressed by some of its merits), but as a symbol for the thousands of competitive American colleges and universities that Flanagan apparently discounts simply because they are not ranked among the elite eight.

For 13 consecutive years, Rutgers has been ranked No. 1 in the nation for diversity by the same publication that ranks the Ivies (*U.S. News & World Report: America's Best Colleges*). One might surmise that spending four years learning to peacefully coexist and productively collaborate with other students from different backgrounds--socioeconomic, ethnic, geographic, religious--might prepare a young college graduate with the life skills to succeed in the global economy. And in January 2009, *SmartMoney* magazine ranked Rutgers No. 6 in the nation for the value it delivered to its graduates (based on college costs versus median salaries three years and 15 years after graduation). For those families not in the top income quartile--which is, according to former Harvard President Lawrence Summers, where a whopping 74 percent of the undergraduates that populate America's most prestigious colleges comfortably reside--Rutgers offers a pretty good deal.

But the point isn't really that Rutgers is a good, solid school, a perfectly respectable choice in the pantheon of four-year colleges and, if not covered in ivy, competitive by many standards (it doesn't, in fact, as a colleague of Flanagan's recently asserted, take "most applicants"; it offers admission to 59 percent of applications received, and it requires a median SAT score of 591 and 612 in verbal and math, respectively). The point is that writers like Flanagan are complicit in perpetuating an insidious "winner-take-all" mentality, convincing the whole of our students that Yale and its ilk are the Holy Grail. After they've been rejected--and even Flanagan admits that the majority will be rejected--they will not only be gravely disappointed, they may also be stressed to the point of serious illness, be it physical or mental; dependent on caffeine or even Adderall (to keep up) and tranquilizers (to come down); and potentially convinced that they are "failures for life" because, as more than one student told me during the making of the film, they think, "If I don't get into the school of my dreams ... I'm like ... totally screwed."

If Harvard receives 35,000 applications for a mere 1,640 freshman spaces, something is clearly amiss in our value system. Michael Thompson, a psychologist and author, wrote in the April issue of *Educational Leadership*, "What makes students and families crazy during ... the college admissions process is their belief that college admissions is about finding the right college. It isn't. [Students should] search for the best fit."

I believe one of the most important messages in *Race to Nowhere* is the need for us, as a culture, to redefine success. No standardized test measures for aptitude in the arts; an emphasis on rote memorization has replaced the value of developmentally appropriate, purposeful learning. Educators are just as stressed as students in the rush to survey as many topics in the curriculum as possible, as they are often forced to "teach to the test." Childhood has been replaced with résumé-building, and the joie de vivre that has historically inspired imagination (and, not coincidentally, has fueled the long-standing American-dominated excellence in innovation) has been replaced with Tiger Mom-approved tutors and coaches and lessons. By and large, we are raising a generation of joyless little professionals who, even if they gain entrance to the hallowed halls of those same eight schools, might well lack creative, independent thinking skills and crumble when criticized, and, six years after graduating high school, may still not have a college degree.

As a culture, we have to ask ourselves: What really matters, in the name of educating our children and in ensuring our place in the global economy? To quote Michael Thompson again from that same article, "No college--not Harvard, Stanford ... or any institution whose name we might insert--can answer [the] question ... 'will this teenager grow up to be an independent, productive, moral, and loving young adult?'"

Flanagan and I may agree on one point. In concluding her article, she writes, "Life is a series of choices, each with its own rewards and consequences . . . At best--at the very best--it can only offer us choices between two good things, and as we grasp at one, we lose the other forever." If the choice is between (A) pushing my children--physically, emotionally, and mentally--to the extremes of unhealthy limits so they can try to grasp that elusive Ivy-coated brass ring, or (B) encouraging their passions, instilling good values, protecting their health, and focusing on the "right fit" college for their personality, learning style, and interests, then this "good mother" has already made her choice. I choose B. So, too, do the 500,000-plus good mothers, fathers, teachers, principals, students, and others who have seen, discussed, and continue to support the message behind *Race to Nowhere*.