

'ABOVE AND BEYOND'

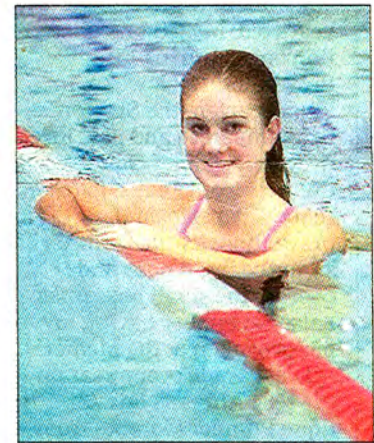


Autumn Driscoll/Staff photographer



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ABOVE: Trumbull High School senior Dan Connolly is a member of the marching band, captain of the track team and is involved in various academic clubs to boost his resume for college. **LEFT:** Trumbull High School senior Lisa Kasiewicz takes part in Fed Challenge, a real-world simulation program in which high-schoolers make presentations and answer questions on the economy. **RIGHT:** Jenny Fitzmaurice, a senior at Lauralton Hall, has focused on swimming during high school but she is also involved in other activities.



Jesse Neider/Staff photographer

High school students pad extracurricular 'resumes'

By **NOELLE FRAMPTON**
Staff writer

A typical school day for 15-year-old Amanda Rodrigues goes something like this: She wakes up at 6 a.m. and leaves her Monroe home for school in Milford an hour later.

Upon arrival, she stops at her

locker, then reads the 8 a.m. morning announcements over a loudspeaker.

After more than six hours of classes, she has one or a combination of any of six after-school activities. Once, she had four club meetings in one day and had to be excused from some.

Her mother drives her home, and

she does homework until it's time for an evening dance lesson, or to teach children's religious education classes.

Back home again, she does more homework until finally collapsing in bed at nearly midnight, to get up six hours later and do it all again.

That schedule doesn't count the

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two months in the fall when she spends three hours each weekday, plus some weekend hours, practicing for her school musical.

"I don't get much sleep, but it's worth it," laughed Rodrigues, a junior honor student at the Academy of Our Lady of Mercy, Luralton Hall, who has set her sights on Yale University. "Every little thing you do helps."

Dan Connolly, a 17-year-old senior at Trumbull High School, lives a similarly hectic life.

Captain of the track team, Connolly is also the marching band drum major, a member of three after-school clubs and a copy editor for the school newspaper. He hopes to attend Cornell.

The Amandas and Dans of the country — not only those applying to top-tier schools — have grown busier, more scheduled and more numerous lately. Experts say this year's graduating class is the most competitive ever, as more seniors are applying for higher education and a tough economy signals high demand for financial aid and less expensive state schools.

BUILDING A RESUME

Many 21st century high-schoolers start early to build their "resumes," the list of activities they'll submit to their institutions of choice, alongside grades, test scores and recommendations, in hopes of standing out among their peers.

The challenge is that the bar keeps rising.

"It is crazy, the stuff that they're doing and the amount of pressure they put themselves under," said James Maroney, director of educational consulting at First Choice College Placement in Milford, a regional guidance, tutoring and SAT-prep provider. "You can go and do all of these things, and you still may not get in. There are just too many good kids."

More students are doing community service projects,

for example, in Fairfield and Trumbull.

"We also have a large number of students competing in academic competitive teams," said Gary Cialfi, Trumbull's assistant superintendent of schools. "The competition is fierce, so they're willing to go above and beyond."

Going above and beyond can mean a number of things, such as taking harder courses, paying for private SAT-prep courses or piling on the extracurriculars.

BREADTH VS. DEPTH

However, university admissions officers said they're wise to the kids who flaunt a list of activities from their junior and senior years, superficially dabbling in efforts to appear well-rounded.

Successful applicants must often show not only that they're involved in their communities, but passionately so, all while maintaining good grades in rigorous courses.

"If they're going home at the end of the day and they're not engaged in their school and their church and their community, then we're going to make the assumption that they're not going to be engaged in our community," said Karen Pellegrino, director of undergraduate admission at Fairfield University.

Area guidance counselors said they encourage kids to try a variety of extracurriculars early and hone in on their favorites.

Dan Connolly did that, weeding out Spanish Club in his sophomore year and avoiding the plight of some schoolmates who do things they don't enjoy because they feel they have to.

"Thankfully, I've found a lot of stuff that I do enjoy, so it hasn't been a problem," Connolly said, adding that he makes time to relax "because otherwise it'd be very stressful."

Classmate Lisa Kasiewicz, 17, who is with him in the top 1 percent of their class and two academic competition teams, leads the math and debate clubs, tutors her peers, works as

a secretary on weekends and is involved in several other activities, said stress is a factor for her.

"The college process has literally been tearing me up inside," she said, adding that she doesn't usually eat during the day because there's no time.

UNDER PRESSURE

Kasiewicz, whose first-choice universities are Carnegie Mellon and Columbia, said the colleges she visited made daunting demands.

"I'm ticking off on my fingers, like, what I've done," she said. "It gets up there — I feel like people are starting to realize that you have to do these things to get in."

Admissions officials said there's no fixed formula; there are simply too many variables, including grades — still the single most important factor at most schools — test scores, essays and interviews.

Many are speculating that the economic slowdown means public universities will get more applications from students who would have chosen private schools in better times. And private schools are keeping a close eye on maintaining affordability with financial aid packages.

Lee Melvin, director of undergraduate admissions at the University of Connecticut, said he's anticipating more applications than ever this year, although it's still early.

He said academics matter most, but the university looks at each application as a whole.

If more top-performing kids apply to public schools, "there's a tremendous trickle-down," said Trumbull High Principal Robert Tremaglio. "All the kids now are looking at leverage."

When it comes to extracurriculars, depth often trumps breadth, especially among more selective schools that are looking for a well-rounded class, rather than a class full of well-rounded individuals.

Still, if students like Rodrigues, Connolly and Kasiewicz can do both, more power to 'em, college admissions

officials and high school guidance counselors said.

But what if kids do too much and burn themselves out? How much should a teenager try to cram into a week?

In the end, that's a question each individual has to answer.

"One of the things I'm afraid of is that students are so focused on getting into college that they're losing the high school experience," Maroney said. "You shouldn't do things just to get into college."

In Fairfield, administrators revised their health curriculum — they'll present the new curriculum to the Board of Education next month — to include a junior-year focus on stress management, said Director of Curriculum Gary Rosato.

Rosato said revisions resulted from surveys by the Regional Youth/Adult Substance Abuse Project, a greater-Bridgeport community coalition, which found that pressure is taking its toll on students, especially in 11th grade.

KEEPING BUSY

Despite the stress, guidance counselors said most students enjoy being involved.

Jenny Fitzmaurice, a 17-year-old senior at Luralton Hall who has combined her longtime focus on swimming — she swims year-round, sometimes six days a week — with other activities she likes, believes her busy schedule enables her to excel academically.

"I find when I have free time, I don't know what to do," she said. "I need a set schedule. You always know you have something — you just try to think of what club it is. If it's what you love, you might as well keep doing it."

Fitzmaurice, an honor student from Milford, applied to 10 colleges this year and is awaiting her answers while Amanda Rodrigues is visiting prospective schools.

Maroney said he tells his students they'll probably end up happy in college, whether they get in that first-choice school or not. "Things usually do work out."