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MY SO-CALLED HIGH SCHOOL RANK



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DISCUSSION GUIDE

MY SO-CALLED HIGH SCHOOL RANK

HBO Documentary Films presents a Break Thru Films production.

Directors: Ricki Stern, Annie Sundberg

Executive Producers: Nancy Abraham, Lisa Heller

Producers: Ricki Stern, Annie Sundberg, Alexander Baertl, and Sarit Work

Editor: Hannah Vanderlan

Original Music: Paul Brill

RANKED, A MUSICAL with book by Kyle Holmes and music and lyrics by David Taylor Gomes.

Run Time: 101 minutes

Hashtag: #HighSchoolRankHBO, #HBO, #HBO Max

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Introduction

I assign myself no rank or any limit and such an attitude is very much against the "trend of times"

- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Life imitates art in this feature documentary from directors Ricki Stern and Annie Sundberg, exploring the unique challenges faced by today's generation of US high school students as they grapple with questions of mental health, ethics, and access, in their pursuit to college. The film follows teenagers from three vastly different communities around the country as they overcome remarkable obstacles, and remind us of the extraordinary resilience that binds this generation across socio-economic and racial divides.



How to use this guide

Thank you for watching **MY SO-CALLED HIGH SCHOOL RANK** and sharing it with your community. This guide is designed to navigate you through a conversation about your thoughts, questions, and reactions to the film. It contains information about the film, resources for further learning, and discussion questions to deepen your understanding of the topics explored in both the film and the musical, encouraging reflection on the experience of being a high school student, for both current and former students alike.



Film overview

What happens when you take a major scandal that exposes the ugly inequities of higher education - and mix it up with student theater? You get RANKED, a new musical born in the very place where Rick Singer (the mastermind behind the 2019 Varsity Blues scandal) got his start.

Months before the college admissions scandal made headlines in March 2019, students at Granite Bay High School in Sacramento, CA were deep in the process of creating a new musical that drew from their own experiences related to the pressures of college admission. Together with director Kyle Holmes and musical director David Taylor Gomes, the students grappled with questions of mental health, ethics, and access to college, to create a work that presciently spoke to a moment just about to hit.

RANKED premiered just over two weeks after Federal charges against Singer and others were made public. For many, the college admissions scandal had a cultural impact, raised academic expectations, and intensified pressure on students and their families to secure their futures at all costs. As news emerged about a musical that tackled these issues head on, schools from around the country reached out to stage it with their own students.

From Emmy-nominated directors Ricki Stern and Annie Sundberg (*Joan Rivers - A Piece of Work*; *The Devil Came On Horseback*; *Marathon: The Patriot's Day Bombing*; and *Reversing Roe*), the film follows the journey of RANKED and its student performers as they navigate the pressures of the final years of high school, while Covid and other events begin to upend their dreams. Shot over two years in various public schools representing diverse communities, **MY SO-CALLED HIGH SCHOOL RANK** reveals the remarkable resilience and similarities that bind this generation across economic and racial divides.



RANKED, A MUSICAL book by Kyle Holmes (Courtesy of HBO)



RANKED, A MUSICAL music & lyrics by David Taylor Gomes (Courtesy of HBO)

Discussion questions

HIGH SCHOOL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

*"It seems like there's no way to win here
And feels like I might spend the whole year
Working harder, working smarter
Working for a break
That's never coming"*

- "Work Harder," **RANKED, A MUSICAL**



1. How did watching the film encourage you to reflect on your own experience as a high school student? Do you feel a lot has changed since you were a student, or did you face many of the same challenges young adults face today?
 - 1.1. If you are a student now, can you relate to any of the pressures and anxieties felt by students in Cupertino, CA; Ripley, WV; and the Bronx, NY?
3. Granite Bay High School's Director of Theater Arts explains that, *"In writing the musical RANKED, we wanted to amplify everything our students were saying to us."* If a musical was written about your high school experience, what would be its main plot and the important themes that it would explore. What would it be called?
4. A song from RANKED, A MUSICAL asks: *"Has it always been this way? Can you tell me something different isn't better?"* If you are a former high school student, how would you respond to this question?
 - 4.1. What were some positive aspects of your time attending high school that you feel today's students aren't able to experience?
 - 4.2. If you are a current student, in comparing your experience to that of your parents and/or past generations, do you think that academic pressures have increased over the past few decades? If yes, discuss the possible reasons why, as well as the negative consequences that this has had on your generation of students.
6. If you could pick the top three qualities of a student that you would look at if you were a college admissions officer, what would those be?
8. One of the students in the film remarks: *"My idea of the American dream is I want to leave something; I want to leave a mark."* Discuss your own concept of the American dream. How important is it for you to achieve, personally, and what steps are you taking to make that dream a reality?
 - 8.1. If you could leave one lasting mark, what would that be?
 - 8.2. Name someone who you think has achieved the American dream and left a positive impact with their work or legacy.
10. Towards the end of the film, we see the celebratory reactions as students open their acceptance letters from colleges. Can you recall one of the greatest moments of accomplishment you experienced as a young adult?
 - 10.1. If you are a young adult now, what is something you've recently accomplished that made you proud, or something that you are currently working towards achieving?

EDUCATION FOR ALL?

*"When someone has to lose
Take a guess at who gets screwed
You need a mirror
To see it clearer?"*

- "Someone Always Bleeds," **RANKED, A MUSICAL**

1. Horace Mann, often referred to as the Father of American Education, said that *"education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery"*. Do you feel these words ring true today? Is it realistic to consider education the great equalizer?
 - 1.1. If yes, discuss the positive ways in which education creates equal ground for all students.
 - 1.2. If not, what do you feel has changed about the American education system since Horace Mann wrote these words, that has contributed to educational inequality?
 - 1.3. Take a few minutes to discuss ideas for improving our education system, and providing equal resources, opportunities, and ultimately, outcomes to all students, regardless of factors such as socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity, and geographical location.
2. Many of the film's students from Ripley, West Virginia express that while it almost feels like a "pipe dream" to be able to get out of the state after high school, staying there would make them feel stuck. Why is it that we so often equate leaving our hometowns (if they are smaller) with success, and remaining with failure? Did you or do you feel that same pressure?
3. Since 1980, college tuition and fees in the United States are up 1,200% ([source](#)), while student loan debt now totals \$1.747 trillion ([source](#)). In the film, some students question whether the cost of a college education is worth what one receives from it, while others are prepared to take out as many loans as possible to achieve their dream of attending college.
 - 3.1. Do you feel that a college education is worth the cost? How has the significance of a college degree changed over the past few decades?
 - 3.2. Do you think colleges should cost as much as they do, or should education be at a minimal or free cost?



SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ARTS

*"I feel the leisure setting in
We don't worry who will win
And it's feeling really good"*

- "Not Today," **RANKED, A MUSICAL**

1. Can you describe one of the most pivotal experiences you've had with the arts? For example, a memorable play or musical that you saw, your first time performing in front of an audience, or a piece of artwork that left a lasting impression on you. Why was this experience important to you, and how did it ultimately affect the role that art has played in your life?
2. Growing up, did you have, or have you had, opportunities to engage with the arts in school through arts classes, programs, and after-school activities?
 1. How important do you think arts education is, and should schools place more or less of an emphasis on the arts?
 2. What benefits or disadvantages result from taking arts classes, be they drawing, band, theater, etc.?
3. In the film, as COVID-19's impact on the US becomes greater, we watch as Broadway in New York City shuts down and schools are forced to call off their productions of **RANKED, A MUSICAL**. Before long, however, we see a reemergence of the arts online through live, digital readings of musicals. What are other examples of innovative and creative ways in which the arts began to be explored digitally throughout the pandemic, and what lasting benefits has this had on society?
5. The Mexican painter Frida Kahlo once said, *"I am happy to be alive as long as I can paint."* What creative outlet brings you the most happiness?



YOUNG ADULT MENTAL HEALTH

*"These waves keep crashing down without a care
They push you down and spit you out
You'll come around and still have doubt
But treading water doesn't get you anywhere
When do we come up for air?"*

- "Come Up For Air," **RANKED, A MUSICAL**

1. From 2009 to 2021, the share of American high school students who say they feel "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness" rose from 26% to 44%, the highest level of teenage sadness ever recorded ([source](#)). Do you find this surprising? Why or why not?
 1. Discuss some of the main factors that you feel have contributed to a decline in the mental health of young adults and people in general.
3. During the film, the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and subsequent protests across the US, display just one example of many in which young adults have used their voices to ignite change. One of the film's most powerful scenes is when students from Fordham High School for the Arts in the Bronx sing "Come Up For Air." In that moment, a song originally written about the pressures of high school academics takes on significant new meaning.
 1. What are other pivotal challenges or moments that today's youth have had to overcome, and how have they shaped this generation?
 2. Can you think of significant events or challenges faced by young adults in the past, unique to their own generation? How did they come together in the face of adversity?
5. For you personally, what are some of the greatest changes that the COVID-19 pandemic has made to school and/or work, or life in general, and how has that impacted your mental health?
 1. Have you focused on any strategies for supporting your mental health that you'd recommend to others?
4. How, if at all, did the pandemic encourage you to re-evaluate your goals and priorities for the future?



Actions & activities

While **MY SO-CALLED HIGH SCHOOL RANK** follows students from three vastly different communities, many of their challenges and anxieties stem from remarkably similar circumstances. After your discussion, we encourage you to regroup with your screening attendees (or reflect on your own, if you watched it solo!) and discuss how your own schools and students might be grappling with these same dilemmas, and how you could take action as individuals or a community to confront them.

SUPPORT THE ARTS

- Bring a performance of **RANKED, A MUSICAL** to your community, live on stage or digitally, by applying for a license [here](#).
- Join *Americans for the Arts* in their mission to advance the arts and arts education, and in building a movement of one million people who believe arts education matters. Check out their [action center](#) to see how you can get involved.
- In this [advocacy toolbox](#) from Educational Theatre Association, you'll find a wealth of templates, fact sheets, and presentations to help you make a successful case for promoting theatre education in schools.
- [Donate](#) to TYA/USA and support their work in connecting, cultivating, and advocating for the field of theatre for young audiences.



SUPPORT EDUCATION

- Work with [Challenge Success](#) -- the organization whose work with schools helped to inspire the original musical -- to improve student well-being, belonging, and engagement at school. Learn more about surveys, workshops, and programs they offer for schools, educators, parents, and students.
- Join the ACLU in the critical fight for free speech and equitable education by [taking the pledge](#) to defend every student's right to learn.
- Each year, more than \$24 billion of financial aid goes unclaimed. Ahead of the June 30 application deadline, take the first step to #FormYourFuture by learning more about FAFSA and how to apply, [here](#).
- Students and allies - add your name to Our Turn's student-developed [Student Agenda](#) and join the fight for restorative justice, appropriate funding, and the education all students deserve.
 - Elevate the Student Agenda by sharing your own story related to education equity, through writing, videos, or other creative forms, [here](#).

SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH

- The Jed Foundation's [Mental Health Resource Center](#) provides essential information about common emotional health issues and shows teens and young adults how they can support one another, overcome challenges, and make a successful transition to adulthood.
- Whether you're a student, an educator, a parent, or an advocate, [these tools from GLSEN](#) will help you take action to ensure that every member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.
- Did you know that LGBTQ+ youth are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their peers? The Trevor Project's [2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health](#) reported significantly lower rates of suicide attempts from LGBTQ+ who felt high social support from their family or who live in a community that is accepting of LGBTQ. If you are an LGBTQ+ youth, or a parent, sibling, friend, or ally looking for support, information, and/or resources around mental health, head over to [The Trevor Project](#).
- Parents: Support your teen's mental health with tips and resources from the [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#).
- Find mental health resources and tips at The Mental Health Coalition's [free resource library](#). Also, [find actionable ways](#) to support your community (and yourself!)