

Our Crazy College Crossroads

By Frank Bruni

Over recent days the notices have gone out, an annual ritual of dashed hopes.

Brown University offered admission to the lowest fraction ever of the applicants it received: fewer than one in 10. The arithmetic was even more brutal at Stanford, Columbia, Yale. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill had a record number of students vying for its next freshman class — 31,321 — and accepted about one in six who applied from outside the state. Notre Dame took about one in five of all comers.

And right now many young men and women who didn't get in where they fervently longed to are worrying that it's some grim harbinger of their future, some sweeping judgment of their worth. This is for them. And it's intended less as a balm for the rejected than as a reality check for a society gone nuts over the whole overheated process.

If you were shut out of an elite school, that doesn't mean you're less gifted than all of the students who were welcomed there. It may mean only that you lacked the patronage that some of them had, or that you played the game less single-mindedly, taking fewer SAT courses and failing to massage your biography with the same zeal.

A friend of mine in Africa told me recently about a center for orphans there that a rich American couple financed in part to give their own teenage children an exotic charity to visit occasionally and mine for college-application essays: admissions bait. That's the degree of cunning that comes into this frenzy.

Maybe the school that turned you down ranks high in the excessively publicized "College Salary Report" by PayScale.com, which looks at whose graduates go on to make the most money. What a ludicrous list. It's at least as imperfectly assembled as the honor roll that U.S. News & World Report puts together every year. And even if you trust it, what does it tell you? That the colleges at the top have the most clout and impart the best skills? Or that these colleges admit the most young people whose parents and previously established networks guarantee them a leg up? Maybe it tells you merely that these colleges attract the budding plutocrats with the greatest concern for the heft of their paychecks. Is that the milieu you sought?

About money and professional advancement: Shiny diplomas from shiny schools help. It's a lie to say otherwise. But it's as foolish to accord their luster more consequence than the effort you put into your studies, the earnestness with which you hone your skills, what you actually learn. These are the sturdier building blocks of a career.

In "David and Goliath," Malcolm Gladwell makes the case that a less exclusive university may enable a student to stand out and flourish in a way that a more exclusive one doesn't. The selectiveness of Gladwell's science doesn't nullify the plausibility of his argument.

Corner offices in this country teem with C.E.O.s who didn't do their undergraduate work in the Ivy League. Marillyn Hewson of Lockheed Martin went to the University of Alabama. John Mackey of Whole Foods studied at the University of Texas, never finishing.

Your diploma is, or should be, the least of what defines you. Show me someone whose identity is rooted in where he or she went to college. I'll show you someone you really, really don't want at your Super Bowl party.

And your diploma will have infinitely less relevance to your fulfillment than so much else: the wisdom with which you choose your romantic partners; your interactions with the community you inhabit; your generosity toward the family that you inherited or the family that you've made. If you're not bound for the school of your dreams, you're probably bound for a school that doesn't conform as tidily to your fantasies or promise to be as instantly snug a fit.

Good. College should be a crucible. It's about departure, not continuity: about turning a page and becoming a new person, not letting the ink dry on who, at 17 or 18, you already are. The disruption of your best-laid plans serves that. It's less a setback than a springboard. A high school senior I know didn't get into several of the colleges she coveted most. She got into a few that are plenty excellent. And I've never been more impressed with her, because she quickly realized that her regrets pale beside her blessings and she pivoted from letdown to excitement.

That resiliency and talent for optimism will matter more down the line than the name of the school lucky enough to have her. Like those of her peers who are gracefully getting past this ordeal that our status-mad society has foisted on them, she'll do just fine.

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