

How to Survive the College Admissions Madness

By Frank Bruni

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Credit Ben Wiseman

HERE we go again. At Harvard, Emory, Bucknell and other schools around the country, there have been record numbers of applicants yearning for an elite degree. They'll get word in the next few weeks. Most will be turned down.

All should hear and heed the stories of Peter Hart and Jenna Leahy.

Peter didn't try for the Ivy League. That wasn't the kind of student he'd been at New Trier High School, in an affluent Chicago suburb. Most of its graduating seniors go on to higher education, and most know, from where they stand among their peers, what sort of college they can hope to attend. A friend of Peter's was ranked near the summit of their class; she set her sights on Yale — and ended up there. Peter was ranked in the top third, and aimed for the University of Michigan or maybe the special undergraduate business school at the University of Illinois.

Both rejected him.

He went to Indiana University instead. Right away he noticed a difference. At New Trier, a public school posh enough to pass for private, he'd always had a sense of himself as someone somewhat ordinary, at least in terms of his studies. At Indiana, though, the students in his freshman classes weren't as showily gifted as the New Trier kids had been, and his self-image went through a transformation.

"I really felt like I was a competent person," he told me last year, shortly after he'd turned 28. And he thrived. He got into an honors program for undergraduate business majors. He became vice president of a business fraternity on campus. He cobbled together the capital to start a tiny real estate enterprise that fixed up and rented small houses to fellow students.

And he finagled a way, off campus, to interview with several of the top-drawer consulting firms that trawled for recruits at the Ivies but often bypassed schools like Indiana. Upon graduation, he took a plum job in the Chicago office of the Boston Consulting Group, where he recognized one of the other new hires: the friend from New Trier who'd gone to Yale. Traveling a more gilded path, she'd arrived at the same destination.

He later decided to get a master's degree in business administration, and that's where he is now, in graduate school — at Harvard.

Jenna, 26, went through the college admissions process two years after he did. She, too, was applying from a charmed school: in her case, Phillips Exeter Academy. Her transcript was a mix of A's and B's, and



she was active in so many Exeter organizations that when graduation rolled around, she received a prize given to a student who'd brought special distinction to the school.

But her math SAT score was in the low 600s. Perhaps because of that, she was turned down for early decision at her first choice, Claremont McKenna College.

For the general admission period, she applied to more than half a dozen schools. Georgetown, Emory, the University of Virginia and Pomona College all turned her down, leaving her to choose among the University of South Carolina, Pitzer College and Scripps College, a sister school of Claremont McKenna's in Southern California.

"I felt so worthless," she recalled.

She chose Scripps. And once she got there and saw how contentedly she fit in, she had a life-changing realization: Not only was a crushing chapter of her life in the past, it hadn't crushed her. Rejection was fleeting — and survivable.

As a result, she said, "I applied for things fearlessly."

She won a stipend to live in Tijuana, Mexico, for a summer and work with indigent children there. She prevailed in a contest to attend a special conference at [the Carter Center](#) in Georgia and to meet Jimmy Carter.

And she applied for a coveted spot with Teach for America, which she got. Later she landed a grant to develop a new [charter school](#) for low-income families in Phoenix, where she now lives. It opened last August, with Jenna and a colleague at the helm.

"I never would have had the strength, drive or fearlessness to take such a risk if I hadn't been rejected so intensely before," she told me. "There's a beauty to that kind of rejection, because it allows you to find the strength within."

I don't think Peter's example is extraordinary: People bloom at various stages of life, and different individuals flourish in different climates. Nor is Jenna's arc so unusual. For every person whose contentment comes from faithfully executing a predetermined script, there are at least 10 if not 100 who had to rearrange the pages and play a part they hadn't expected to, in a theater they hadn't envisioned. Besides, life is defined by setbacks, and success is determined by the ability to rebound from them. And there's no single juncture, no one crossroads, on which everything hinges.

So why do so many Americans — anxious parents, addled children — treat the period in late March and early April, when elite colleges deliver disappointing news to anywhere from 70 to 95 percent of their applicants, as if it's precisely that?

I'm describing the psychology of a minority of American families; a majority are focused on making sure that their kids simply attend a decent college — any decent college — and on finding a way to help them pay for it. Tuition has skyrocketed, forcing many students to think not in terms of dream schools but in terms of those that won't leave them saddled with debt.

When I asked Alice Kleeman, the college adviser at Menlo-Atherton High School in the Bay Area of California, about the most significant changes in the admissions landscape over the last 20 years, she mentioned the fixation on getting into the most selective school possible only after noting that “more students are unable to attend their college of first choice because of money.”

But for too many parents and their children, acceptance by an elite institution isn’t just another challenge, just another goal. A yes or no from Amherst or the University of Virginia or the University of Chicago is seen as the conclusive measure of a young person’s worth, an uncontested harbinger of the accomplishments or disappointments to come. Winner or loser: This is when the judgment is made. This is the great, brutal culling.

What madness. And what nonsense.

FOR one thing, the admissions game is too flawed to be given so much credit. For another, the nature of a student’s college experience — the work that he or she puts into it, the self-examination that’s undertaken, the resourcefulness that’s honed — matters more than the name of the institution attended. In fact students at institutions with less hallowed names sometimes demand more of those places and of themselves. Freed from a focus on the packaging of their education, they get to the meat of it.

In any case, there’s only so much living and learning that take place inside a lecture hall, a science lab or a dormitory. Education happens across a spectrum of settings and in infinite ways, and college has no monopoly on the ingredients for professional achievement or a life well lived.

Midway through last year, I looked up the undergraduate alma maters of the chief executives of the top 10 corporations in the Fortune 500. These were the schools: the University of Arkansas; the University of Texas; the University of California, Davis; the University of Nebraska; Auburn; Texas A & M; the General Motors Institute (now called Kettering University); the University of Kansas; the University of Missouri, St. Louis; and Dartmouth College.

I also spoke with Sam Altman, the president of [Y Combinator](#), one of the best-known providers of first-step seed money for tech start-ups. I asked him if any one school stood out in terms of students and graduates whose ideas took off. “Yes,” he responded, and I was sure of the name I’d hear next: Stanford. It’s his alma mater, though he left before he graduated, and it’s famous as a feeder of Silicon Valley success.

But this is what he said: “The University of Waterloo.” It’s a public school in the Canadian province of Ontario, and as of last summer, it was the source of eight proud ventures that Y Combinator had helped along. “To my chagrin,” Altman told me, “Stanford has not had a really great track record.”

Yet there’s a frenzy to get into the Stanfords of the world, and it seems to grow ever crazier and more corrosive. It’s fed by many factors, including contemporary America’s exaltation of brands and an economic pessimism that has parents determined to find and give their kids any and every possible leg up.

And it yields some bitter fruits, among them a perversion of higher education’s purpose and potential. College is a singular opportunity to rummage through and luxuriate in ideas, to realize how very large the world is and to contemplate your desired place in it. And that’s lost in the admissions mania, which sends

the message that college is a sanctum to be breached — a border to be crossed — rather than a land to be inhabited and tilled for all that it's worth.

LAST March, just as Matt Levin was about to start hearing from the schools to which he'd applied, his parents, Craig and Diana, handed him a letter. They didn't care whether he read it right away, but they wanted him to know that it had been written before they found out how he fared. It was their response to the outsize yearning and dread that they saw in him and in so many of the college-bound kids at Cold Spring Harbor high school, in a Long Island suburb of New York City. It was their bid for some sanity.

Matt, like many of his peers, was shooting for the Ivies: in his case, Yale, Princeton or Brown. He had laid the groundwork: high SAT scores; participation in sports and music; a special prize for junior-year students with the highest grade-point averages; membership in various honor societies; more than 100 hours of community service.

For Yale, Princeton and Brown, that wasn't enough. All three turned him down.

His mother, Diana, told me that on the day he got that news, "He shut me out for the first time in 17 years. He barely looked at me. Said, 'Don't talk to me and don't touch me.' Then he disappeared to take a shower and literally drowned his sorrows for the next 45 minutes."

The following morning, he rallied and left the house wearing a sweatshirt with the name of the school that had been his fourth choice and had accepted him: Lehigh University. By then he had read his parents' letter, more than once. That they felt compelled to write it says as much about our society's warped obsession with elite colleges as it does about the Levins' warmth, wisdom and generosity. I share the following parts of it because the message in them is one that many kids in addition to their son need to listen to, especially now, with college acceptances and rejections on the way:

Dear Matt,

On the night before you receive your first college response, we wanted to let you know that we could not be any prouder of you than we are today. Whether or not you get accepted does not determine how proud we are of everything you have accomplished and the wonderful person you have become. That will not change based on what admissions officers decide about your future. We will celebrate with joy wherever you get accepted — and the happier you are with those responses, the happier we will be. But your worth as a person, a student and our son is not diminished or influenced in the least by what these colleges have decided.

If it does not go your way, you'll take a different route to get where you want. There is not a single college in this country that would not be lucky to have you, and you are capable of succeeding at any of them.

We love you as deep as the ocean, as high as the sky, all the way around the world and back again — and to wherever you are headed.

Mom and Dad

Frank Bruni is an Op-Ed columnist for The New York Times. This essay is adapted from his [book](#), "Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania."