

College Rejection Letters Can Hurt but Don't Have to Make You Crazy

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Marcie, her mother and her father sit in my office staring at me. Tears are running down Marcie's face. "I've ruined my life," she says. "What's left for me?"

Marcie is an excellent student and a member of her school's volleyball team. She works on her high school newspaper, is vice president of her church youth group and volunteers one afternoon a week at a tutoring problem for children with learning difficulties. She does not do well on standardized tests, so her SAT scores are not particularly good. But she is highly motivated, personable and usually self-assured. So why didn't she get into her first, second or even third choice college?

There are lots of reasons. Marcie's parents were unrealistic in their expectations for her, and they failed to listen to her school guidance counselor, who tried to help them see the reality of the college application process these days. Now they are sitting in my office and try to put together the pieces of their broken dream for Marcie. I ask them if they can help Marcie with this feeling that she has failed. Her dad looks at me, then at his wife, and then at Marcie.

"You haven't ruined your life, honey," he tells her. "And you haven't failed. Your Mom and I are the ones who have failed you. We didn't listen to all of the people who told us how hard it really is to get into these schools. We put unfair and unrealistic pressure on you. I'm sorry, honey."

Marcie's mother's eyes filled with tears, and then she reached over and took her daughter's hand. "We're both sorry. And we also both know that you're going to be fine, sweetie. It's a miserable, lousy experience. But you know what? Either you'll go to one of the schools that have accepted you, or you'll take a gap year and apply again - to some more realistic schools this time. But you have not ruined your life."

Scenes like this take place in homes - as well as in psychotherapists' offices - all over the United States at this time of year. Last year, when I wrote about coping with college rejection letters, I told you about NY Times reporter Jacques Steinberg's book The Gatekeepers: Inside the College Admissions Process. Steinberg tells us that most colleges are thrilled to accept students like Marcie.

The schools she applied to were among the fifty "name brand" universities that Steinberg says are the hardest to get into because they are flooded with a disproportionate number of applications.

A new book that is well-worth reading by anyone dealing with college applications this year - parents, students, grandparents and other relatives, psychotherapists, teachers, high school guidance counselors and oh yes, college admissions officers - is Andrew Ferguson's humorous memoir about trying to get his son into college, Crazy U: One Dad's Crash Course in Getting His Kid Into College. The title says it all. The process is crazy and crazy-making.

So what can you do to stay sane as the acceptance and rejection letters roll in? Whether you're an applicant or an applicant's parent, one thing to remember is that getting into any specific college - even getting into college at all - is not what will make or break your life. Oh sure, the top tier universities have cache. It would be nice to say you're studying at Yale or Harvard or Stanford or the University of Chicago (for instance).

I don't care who says it will, where you go to college will not determine how the rest of your life unfolds.

What a youngster does in college is important. How he or she lives his or her life during those years can certainly have some impact on what happens in the future. But I have known top students at top universities who stopped learning and growing somewhere along the way and who were never able to parlay their college credentials into a happy or successful or meaningful life. And I have known graduates of community colleges and of state universities and big party schools who learned how to think for themselves during those years - and who went on to live highly successful, happy and meaningful lives.

In my post on college rejection letters last year I talked about my own not-so-successful college experience. One of the most important things I learned when I quit school at the end of my sophomore year was that there is a process to every part of life - even to deciding to take time off from college. What this means is hard to explain, but since it's probably the single most important thing that I ever learned, I'm going to try.

Let's start with the college application process itself. If you look at the experience as simply a means to an end - that is, if you focus on the goal of getting into what you think is the right college - then you miss out on the fact that it is also an important learning experience. Oh sure, not too many of us will want to repeat this particular time in our lives, but even so - think about it. If you're a parent, try to put into words what you think your child might have learned during this time.

My own son fought tooth and nail with his dad and me when we encouraged him to talk about all of the different things he had done in high school. "I'm not going to go around bragging about myself, or showing off," he said. But over the course of the application process he began to see that there is a difference between

bragging and saying what makes you qualified for a particular position. And the capacity to explain what he was capable of without feeling like he was showing off was something he learned to use when he applied for summer internships; and again when he applied for jobs after graduation. Gradually learning to do something you couldn't do before - that's one of the things I mean when I talk about process.

Marcie and her parents were also involved in a process - actually in several different processes all at once. Her parents' apology meant a lot to her and helped her begin to let go of the feeling that she had done something wrong. As they all three reviewed the ways that they had engaged in the application process, they accepted that they had each made some mistakes; and they began to problem-solve, to think about what they could do to make the situation better, and even to learn from the mistakes they had made.

In the end, Marcie was accepted by two colleges. She and her parents visited them both and, to all of their surprise, realized that one of them was a very good fit for Marcie. She went to the school that had been her "safety"-and had a great college experience. The last time I saw her, she was working at a job she loved and thinking about going to graduate school. "This time," she told me with a grin, "the application process will be just that - a process. I'll use it as a chance to get to know the different programs, to see how I feel in each setting, and to think more about what I really want to do. And I'll give myself options - I know now that I don't have to go to the top school in my field to learn what I need to know."