

5-2-2013

Painful Admission

Deborah D. Rogers

University of Maine - Main, DRogers@maine.edu

Howard P. Segal

University of Maine - Main, segal@maine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/eng_facpub



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Rogers, Deborah D. and Segal, Howard P., "Painful Admission" (2013). *English Faculty Scholarship*. 18.

https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/eng_facpub/18

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

Painful admission

All across the US, colleges and universities are sending out their letters of acceptance and rejection. There will be tears

May 2, 2013



Harvard has proudly announced that its acceptance rate for this year's 35,023 applicants shrank to a mere 5.8 per cent. So cruel, yet so prestigious.

Acceptance rates at the other elite Ivy League institutions were only slightly higher. Yet, even though most US four-year colleges and universities admit more than half of their applicants, ever more students are applying to prestigious institutions like the Ivies, which have lower acceptance rates and higher costs. (This trend flies in the face of growing public scepticism about the long-term economic and social value of university degrees, especially in the humanities.)

Once students reach a certain level of accomplishment, randomness prevails. Although the competition may appear Darwinian, some applicants will make the cut and others won't, despite identical grades, identical scores on national tests and equivalent extracurricular activities.

Many exceptional applicants admitted into some top-ranked institutions get rejected by other similarly ranked - or even less competitive - ones. Or they get

placed on waiting lists. In this crapshoot, it is widely conceded that the students on the waiting lists would make a class of entrants just as qualified as those admitted.

We recently watched the new movie *Admission*, starring Tina Fey as Portia Nathan, a veteran [Princeton University](#) admissions officer. Although the movie is light-hearted, it is accurate in its depiction of admissions as a slap in the face to those who believe in American meritocracy. Throughout the movie, Portia repeats the message that there's no magic formula for acceptance. Equally qualified extraordinary candidates cartwheel on top of Portia's desk. They croon. They twirl. They dazzle. Most are rejected, dropped through an imaginary trapdoor.

Our own "admission": we feel their pain. Although we are both university professors, we felt unenlightened when our daughter, Raechel, who will enter college this autumn, began the admissions process. This journey has become ever-more challenging since our son went through it five years ago. Not only must students take the most rigorous courses, they must also prepare for nationwide examinations, visit universities, then revisit them for official tours and interviews.

Then comes the "packaging" of students, including the composition of up to three separate essays for each university - in addition to the two common pieces required by all reputable institutions. Raechel had to prepare some increasingly quirky essays: "If a life-changing package arrives at your door, what would it contain?"; "If you were a candy bar, what kind would you be?" The fact that acceptance letters for the candy-bar institution contained the specified treat is evidence of another trend: once universities accept students, they woo them to enroll in order to increase their yield. (But that's the subject of another rant.)

If, after all of this, the anointed are accepted by several elite colleges, they are urged to revisit and to bargain for more funding, especially if financial awards differ significantly. Attending an elite private university for the four years it takes to get a degree will set you back nearly \$250,000 (£162,000).

It is no wonder that the opaque admissions process at elite US institutions generates hysteria among applicants - and their parents. But, especially for teenagers with limited perspective, getting into a prestigious university is not a matter of life and death: it's much more serious than that.

From *Where I Sit* column: "Painful Admission." With Howard Segal. *The Times Higher Education*. 2 May 2013: 21

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/opinion/painful-admission/2003515.article>