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College rejection isn't the end of the world

Record numbers of applications leave many high-achieving students without a seat at their first-choice school. But in some cases, second-best ends up being a winner.

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With nearly perfect grades at a prestigious Los Angeles prep school and high SAT scores, Emily Podany should have nailed a spot at Stanford. But when she applied early to study astrophysics at her dream school, the Palo Alto university flat-out rejected her. Podany was crushed.

"When you see the small envelope, you just know it's not good news," said Podany, 18. "I just felt very sad for a couple days. Then that turned into anger at myself for not doing better."

Podany, now a freshman at Washington University in St. Louis, is not unlike hundreds of thousands of high-achieving students who failed to get into their first-choice school in recent weeks. It's also the first time many of them have faced rejection, leaving them devastated, depressed and angry.

But today's high school seniors who received envelopes thick and thin this spring from the likes of Harvard, UC Berkeley and USC can learn a thing or two from their brothers and sisters in rejection.

Their worlds did not crumble, and their lives largely worked themselves out -- many grudgingly attended their second choices and surprised themselves by falling in love with campuses they once sneered at. Some immediately began plotting transfers to their first-choice school, and others, such as Meena Madan of Long Beach, decided to work hard for four years in hopes of attending their top choice for grad school.

Madan was obsessed with UC Berkeley because of its stand-out programs in geology and paleobiology. When she was rejected last spring, Madan was happy for one small solace -- she found out while she was alone.

"I hate crying in front of other people," she said. "It was absolutely awful. I was crying and crying. The first thing I did was call my sister [who attends Berkeley], and she was crying too. She felt so bad for me. I was miserable for so long. In the end, it took me a couple of months to stop feeling so bad."

As the fall approached, she girded herself to study earth-system science at UC Irvine.

"It can't be that bad," the freshman recalled telling herself. "This is other people's first choice; there must be something good about it."

The Orange County campus, affable classmates and smart professors grew on Madan. The 18-year-old plans to stay put until grad school.

"People in the dorm I'm living in are really wonderful," she said. "I like it a lot. The only thing that keeps me actually from thinking this school is absolutely amazing is the fact my major is not perfect here; it's more broad than what I wanted. But it's an extremely nice school."

Competition at elite schools such as Berkeley and Stanford has grown because more students than ever are vying for admission -- the population of high school graduates has ballooned and is projected to increase this year and next. Seniors are also applying to more colleges than ever. At Podany's alma mater, the all-girls Marlborough School in Hancock Park, guidance counselors recommend that seniors apply to about 10 colleges; some have been known to apply to two dozen or more.

All this means that universities such as Harvard, Yale, Stanford, USC, UCLA and UC Berkeley received record-high numbers of applications this year. Meanwhile, the number of class seats has remained stable, so schools are reporting record-low acceptance rates. USC admitted 21% of 35,809 applicants this spring. Fifteen years ago, the school accepted 70%.

"We are not able to take, because of space limitations, students whom we love," said Jerry Lucido, USC's vice provost for enrollment policy and management.

Parents and students do not take rejection lightly. Online discussion forums are filled with student angst over denials, pleas for help in crafting appeals, and sympathetic posts aimed at soothing hurt feelings. One anonymous writer, who was accepted at Berkeley and Duke, asked fellow collegeconfidential.com readers where he should enroll and what he could do to ease transfer to Stanford or MIT, both of which rejected him.

"Would I need to write a book, become president of my local chapter of Mensa, secure a patent?" he wrote.

Dennis Murray, 19, understands all too well. He thought he was a shoo-in at USC: The Thousand Oaks student had straight As, scored 1370 on his SATs (when the top score was 1600) and passed five Advanced Placement tests. The flourish on his resume? He was a legacy. His father graduated from USC, and he grew up cheering Trojans football.

So when Murray was rejected, he was confused and hurt.

"The toughest part was the end of senior year when people were talking about where they were going," he said. "I didn't."

Instead of attending one of the four-year institutions that accepted him, including UC San Diego and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Murray decided to attend Moorpark College, a two-year community college.

Murray said he was asked repeatedly why he didn't try one of the four-year schools for a year or two. He believed that he could transfer more easily from a community college.

Murray is now a sophomore majoring in business at USC. Though being a Trojan is not

everything he dreamed it would be, Murray said, he has no regrets.

"In all honesty, I wasn't nearly as happy as I thought I would be," he said. "Maybe I have some bitter feelings" about the initial rejection.

Over the summer, USC admissions officials will meet one-on-one with hundreds of rejected students, many of them legacies, to discuss their possible future enrollment.

But right now, they are consoling students who didn't get in.

"So many students think that the admission process is a referendum on their self-worth," Lucido said. "The truth is, there's not one right and perfect school."

Podany felt better when she was accepted by the other nine schools she applied to, including prestigious Brown University in Rhode Island. But when Washington University in St. Louis offered her a full ride, she couldn't say no.

Still, she was rattled by deciding to attend a school many of her high-octane Marlborough peers had never even heard of.

"Everyone was asking if it was in Seattle," she said.

Her father told her she could always transfer if she hated the school but urged her to try to be happy there.

"When I got to campus, I was prepared to not like it, which sounds awful," she said. "I knew that St. Louis was a big city, but Missouri carries all these negative connotations, a town full of people who don't know anything, and the Midwest, and the Bible Belt."

But the warmth of her math and physics classmates and her musical theater peers combined with challenging professors changed her mind.

"I realized that surprisingly enough, people in Missouri are a lot nicer than people in Southern California," she said. "Everyone opens doors for you here and everyone's incredibly nice and friendly . . . and so much more down to earth and grounded and less competitive."

The first time the Windsor Square native saw it snow, she knew she had made the right choice. After building snowmen and icy mermaids with her friends, an impromptu snowball fight broke out among hundreds of students on the quad.

"It was that sense of community that made me so happy to be at Wash U. I realized I made the right decision -- or the right decision had been made for me," she said. "I am so lucky that the school that wasn't my first choice ended up being the perfect choice for me."

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