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Playing the Odds: College Admissions

By Malcolm Gauld

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When I applied to college 40 years ago, I recall a fun and exciting time with minimal parental intervention. After visiting 10 colleges, I applied to four, all in the “most selective” category. My teenaged naivete had me thinking that I would be accepted to at least one, but if ended up going 0 for 4 -- a far more likely outcome than I realized at the time -- I figured I'd either find a decent school with “rolling admissions” or take a year off.

Come April, I went 2 for 4. My “plan” had worked.

Looking back on those days, when I discussed my college plans with my parents, I remember feeling like an adult conversing with fellow adults about my adult hopes and plans. If you are a parent or a high school teacher, I don't need to tell you that times have changed. Not only do today's high school seniors apply to as many as 12-15 colleges, they seem surrounded by adult “handlers.” As we move into the highest anxiety phase of the annual college application cycle, I offer a few words of advice.

A Crap Shoot

Any high school senior who applies to those schools listed in the “most selective” category would do well to accept the endeavor as a crap shoot. After all, the 50 most-selective colleges present a very poor set of odds, ranging from a 6 percent to a 24 percent acceptance rate. Your prospects aren't all that much better with the next 50: about 24 percent to 33 percent.

Today's “We regret to inform you” letters basically riff on the same message I received in 1972:

“Your credentials are impressive, but...”

“We had many more qualified applicants than we could admit.”

“Don't take it personally.”

“We wish you luck.”

These letters manage to present the truth while obscuring the whole story.

Even if you manage to meet the qualifications of the publicly-stated criteria (SAT, GPA, rank in class, etc.), you then get compared against

moving targets of annually-changing secret criteria. To curb your anxiety, assume there are multiple private conversations going on behind closed doors at your dream school:

“Enough with these illiterate athletes!”

“We need more oboe players.”

“We need more math geeks.”

And on and on. (To amplify the “on and on” factor, remember that each one of these criteria also has a mirror opposite:

“We need better athletic teams.”

“Enough with the oboe players.”

To review: 1) Secret criteria exists. 2) You are not in on the secret.

To compound confusion, the “most selectives” will welcome your application with a smile, regardless of how qualified -- or unqualified -- you may happen to be. After all, an oversupply of unqualified candidates enables them to maintain their uber-selective status on the various admissions websites -- US News, The Huffington Post, College Prowler, Unigo, etc. -- all of which present their selectivity rankings based solely on absolute numbers: total applicants vs. number admitted.

When you get right down to it, it's up to you to determine whether you have a real shot at receiving an acceptance letter or whether you're wasting your time.

The Cult of Self-Esteem

I write as a 35+ year secondary school educator who has tried to help hundreds of kids navigate the college admissions landscape. I believe we have arrived at an unhealthy juncture with the colleges, the secondary schools, and the parents complicit in our current state of affairs.

A generation ago, back before the “cult of self-esteem” took such a firm hold on our families and schools, college applicants pretty much owned the process and took the good with the bad. Parents were nowhere near as engaged as they are today. In those pre-everybody-gets-a-trophy days, I recall getting cut from a middle school hockey team as well as a football season where the sum total of

my playing time was a single kick off in a losing cause.

While we experienced disappointment when we were rejected by our dream colleges, we likely had more practice with rejection than today's kids have had. For a kid whose helicoptering mom or dad has been running interference since first grade, the college admissions process may be the first realization that life is not “sanitized for your protection.”

The Decisions You Get to Make

In the end, the colleges are addressing their realities as they feel they must. So must the applicants. I consider it my job to make sure they understand who is holding the cards (the colleges). In recent years, I have found an increasing need to go overboard in helping them internalize that understanding.

I long for a game-changing admissions department to actually say to an applicant, “As impressive a candidate as you are, I must tell you that you are unlikely to be admitted here. Would you like me to give you a few suggestions of schools that might be a better fit for you?” The current structure of college rankings presents a disincentive to the admissions departments to act in this way. So, should a friendly poker face encourage you to apply to your dream school, by all means, go ahead. Just don't lose sight of the gambler's maxim: The odds always favor the house.

To be fair, I have also encountered a number of colleges striving to be part of the solution. For example, check out Colleges That Change Lives (www.ctcl.org). We've had their representatives speak to our seniors where I work at The Hyde Schools.

When all is said and done, good luck, but remember, whatever they decide -- up or down -- says little about you and everything about them. If you get in, congratulations, they let you into their club. If you don't, they didn't. But regardless of what they decide, never let your self-confidence be determined according to others' assessment of your worthiness. That decision is yours, and yours alone.

Malcolm Gauld is President of the Hyde Schools and the author of College Success Guaranteed -- 5 Rules to Make it Happen.