

'We Are the Most Rejected Generation'



Not long ago, I was at Williams College, speaking with a fascinating and terrifically observant senior named David Wignall. We were talking about what it was like to be young these days, and he made a point that I'd never considered. "We are the most rejected generation," he said.

He's right. He pointed to the admission rates at elite universities. By 1959, about half of American college applicants applied to just one school. But now you meet students who feel that they have to apply to 20 or 30 colleges in the hopes that there will be one or two that won't reject them. In the past two decades, the number of students applying to the 67 most selective colleges has tripled, to nearly two million a year, while the number of places at those schools hasn't come close to keeping up. Roughly 54,000 students applied to be part of the Harvard class of 2028, and roughly 1,950 were accepted. That means that about 52,050 were rejected.

The same basic picture applies to the summer internship race. Goldman Sachs, for example, has 2,700 internship positions and receives roughly 315,000 applicants, which means that about 312,300 get rejected. I recently spoke with one college student who applied to 40 summer internships and was rejected by 39. I ran into some students who told me they felt they had to fill out 150 to 250 internship applications each year to be confident there would be a few that wouldn't reject them.

Things get even worse when students leave school and enter the job market. They enter what I've come to think of as the seventh circle of Indeed hell. Applying for jobs online is easy, so you have millions of people sending hundreds of applications each into the great miasma of the internet, and God knows which impersonal algorithm is reading them. I keep hearing and reading stories about young people who applied to 400 jobs and got rejected by all of them. It seems we've created a vast multilayered system that evaluates the worth of millions of young adults and, most of the time, tells them they are not up to snuff.

I wanted to know what it was like to live in this sort of hypercompetitive atmosphere, so I had phone conversations with current college students and recent graduates, focusing on elite schools where I assumed the ethos of exclusion might be strongest. I asked the students if the "most rejected generation" thesis resonated with them. Every single one said it did.

Several of them told me that they had thought that once they got into a superselective college, the rat race would be over. On the contrary, the Hunger Games had just begun.

Harvard freshmen go through something called comps, which is the competition to get into the school's more than 400 student organizations. According to a 2017 story in The Harvard Crimson, the Crimson Key Society, which organizes campus tours and freshman orientation week, rejected 88.5 percent of the students who applied.

It's worth emphasizing that these club rejections are ones that students are imposing on one another. Many administrators and faculty members I've spoken to are mystified that students would create such an unforgiving set of status competitions. But the world of competitive exclusion is the world they know, so of course they are going to replicate it. One student's quote in that Crimson article leaped out at me: "You jump through this huge hoop of getting into Harvard, and you just want to jump through more to get this adrenaline going again." The competitive game is its own reward.

(605 words)

www.nytimes.com