

# College admissions' wrenching ins and outs

## For school officials, deciding on students' dreams is a difficult, emotional task.

April 03, 2009 | Angel B. Perez | Angel B. Perez is the director of admission at Pitzer College in Claremont.

I've been talking to a lot of angry people this week. They yell; I listen patiently. They cry; I empathize. The pain of not getting into the college of your dreams is unlike any other. Students call here to Pitzer College to find out what they could have done differently. Parents call to ask us to reconsider. It's hard to justify to someone who has just been "denied" the college of their dreams that although they've done everything right, we just did not have enough seats in the class.

What these families don't see is the amount of emotion that admissions officers across the country pour into making these decisions. These students don't know that behind closed doors, we argue about these difficult decisions. Each of us fights for the kids in admissions committee meetings, and we're truly sad when we turn away applicants who we know have worked hard but, because of circumstances beyond our immediate control, we cannot admit.

It's still hard for me to erase the images of the downcast expressions on my staff members' faces when the decisions go against the students they had argued for in committee. Just days ago, we were deliberating between a few candidates for a special scholarship opportunity -- knowing we had room for only one more. You could feel the tension in the room. Every admissions officer wanted his or her kid to get in. When the tough call was made, there was profound sadness. We knew we would positively affect the lives of some students while turning away the majority of those who had applied.

No matter how many years you work in college admissions, it never gets any easier to say no. At my institution, we received 4,079 applications but only have 245 spots in the freshman class. Choosing among a majority of overqualified students is our challenge.

I recall the fate of one young woman whose academic profile was top-notch. She had a 4.0 grade-point average at a competitive high school in Los Angeles, she listed a fair amount of extracurricular activities, and her essays read well. But she was from a town very close by and had never taken the time to visit the college. We offer many opportunities to do so, but she had had no contact with us.

In a year in which predicting how many students will enroll is going to be more difficult than ever, were we going to take a chance on her, that she was serious in wanting to come to Pitzer? With the pressure of having too many applications and not being sure of who really will enroll, we have to find ways to turn down students. In the end, we passed on her.

I also recall the young man from New York City who was academically below our margin. If I had read his application without meeting him, I probably would have denied him admission. But he showed up for my school visit when I was in New York, and had several contacts with me throughout the year. Then I interviewed him, and in my evaluation I wrote, "This kid bleeds Pitzer College." He was concerned about issues of social justice and social responsibility -- two key values that our institution was founded on. Clearly this kid had done his research and was determined to help me realize that he was the right fit.

His application eventually arrived on my desk, and I knew he was not going to be an easy admit. With a GPA below our typical average of 3.9 and no test scores submitted (we are a test-optional institution), the committee was not going to be kind. Therefore, I decided to read parts of his essay out loud to the committee. I needed to make sure they saw him outside the context of his numbers. They laughed out loud in response to this young man's humor, and they could not believe how much time he took to demonstrate to us how right he was for Pitzer.

I followed up the reading by telling them about my impressions from the interview: "He won't graduate top of his class, but he is going to be a powerful presence here." One of our staff members, who was clearly impressed, said, "This kid really does want to change the world, doesn't he?"

In the end, personal contact made a difference, and the young man's ability to paint a clear picture as to why he was the perfect match for our institutional culture won us over.

This week, students across the country received admission decision letters from thousands of colleges. They have poured their hearts and souls into their applications. They have worked hard and taken risks to share some of the most intimate details of their lives. They have told us about their goals, aspirations, triumphs, failures and adversities.

As I sat in my apartment, at the local Starbucks, in my office, (admittedly sometimes at the strangest hours of the night), I read their applications. With a constant cup of coffee in hand, I pored over each of their life stories. I laughed, I cried, and sometimes I performed a cheer of triumph (earning me some strange looks at Starbucks).

Regardless of my reaction to individual applications, I am truly inspired by young people today. They are much more motivated and qualified for college than I was when I was applying. Each day, I read stories of young people who are working hard to change the world and create new experiences that require them to take risks, have courage and overcome obstacles. We can't admit all the students we love, and that's because we tend to love many more than there will ever be room for.

To all these students, I say that where you get into college is not a representation of your worth, and please remind your parents that your college acceptance letter is not their final grade on the parental report card of life. If a school did not admit you, it's not a personal rejection.

In fact, most kids we turn away have done absolutely everything right, but given the seats we have available and the conflicting institutional needs that we have to balance, many kids are turned away because of the needs of the college, not because of a lack of achievement on their part.

We want an even representation of women and men, in-state, out-of-state and international students. We try to create a strong balance of socioeconomic and ethnic diversity as well. We need to make sure some kids can staff our athletic teams while others man our orchestras and theater productions. The list of needs is endless and seems to grow longer every year.

So for all of you getting the thick envelopes, the thin envelopes and everything in between this week, thank you for sharing the details of your lives and your aspirations. It's what keeps admissions officers in this business -- knowing that young people are doing amazing things and creating transformative experiences that will affect our world tomorrow.

Regardless of the decision letters you received, you have worked hard and have earned the right to brag about your accomplishments. You are indeed the hope we have been looking for.

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