# ‘We Are the Most Rejected Generation’

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**By David Brooks**

Opinion Columnist

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.

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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.

Student clubs are a crucial part of college life. Your club can determine who your friends are, what connections you will make. Many of these clubs are hard to get into. According to a 2023 article by Rachel Shin in The Atlantic, the Voyager Consulting business club at the University of California, Berkeley, typically receives 800 to 1,000 applicants each semester and rejects all but six or seven. Shin, who is graduating this month from Yale, described a fellow student's efforts to get into the Existential Threats Initiative, a club in which students gather to talk about climate change and artificial intelligence. The young woman got rejected because she didn't have enough experience with existential threats. "We wanted to be more selective so we could have more advanced conversations," the club founder told Shin. The selectivity system means it's harder to try new things; you have to be an expert in something to even get in the door. 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.

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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.

Even if you get your club life settled at an elite school, the competitions don't end. You still have to apply to selective classes and selective majors. When I taught at Yale, I'd typically get around 120 applicants for 24 seminar slots. I'd make applicants write short essays about themselves, and I can tell you my admission criteria were mostly arbitrary. There's no way to measure a human being's potential in one short essay — or, for that matter, in a 21-year-old's college transcript.

I have not even begun to discuss the everyday rejections that afflict everybody in this age group — the Instagram posts nobody likes, the cool friend groups that exclude you, the hookup partners who ghost you, the hundreds of times you swiped right on an online dating app, only to get no response. And in this column I'm not even trying to cover the rejections experienced by the 94 percent of American students who don't go to elite schools and don't apply for internships at Goldman Sachs. By middle school, the system has told them that because they don't do well on academic tests, they are not smart, not winners. That's among the most brutal rejections our society has to offer.

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I asked the students I spoke to at elite colleges if living in this exclusionary regime affected their personalities. One young woman told me it had made her harsher; she put on a protective shell. A foreign student noticed that her American peers all had perfect elevator pitches; they were masters of impression management. As a sometime college teacher, I've come to recognize this as the Miss America syndrome. You ask a certain kind of promising undergrad a question, and he or she will put on a beaming Miss America smile and give you the perfectly articulated answer that is carefully designed to warm the cockles of your middle-aged heart.

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One young man told me the system caused him to value security and stability above all — to find a place where he wouldn't be vulnerable to the next rejection. Subsequent to our conversation, David Wignall emailed me. He observed that the culture of rejection leads many young people to favor earliness and decisiveness above other qualities. You've got to specialize in a sport or a musical instrument by age 12 if you want to be good enough to be impressive by the time you're 18 and the culling begins. You have to pin yourself down to a single coherent life narrative if you're going to impress an admissions committee. You'll want to pick a career track early so you won't be tortured by uncertainty.

Finance and consulting firms now take advantage of this craving by making job offers to some students during their sophomore year. The kids are 19 or 20. Most of them probably haven't had time to explore the secrets of their hearts' desires. But here comes a prestigious job offer that takes away all the uncertainty. You'll be forced to work on PowerPoint decks through your 20s, but at least you won't have to risk more rejection.

One student described a bifurcation that takes place toward the end of senior year. Some of her friends going into banking and consulting have their job offers. They know where they're going to live; they're picking out apartments and roommates, shopping for furniture. Many of the other students, aiming vaguely toward more creative sectors, don't know what they want to do with their lives. They fear that the fancy degree they thought would give them a pathway to prosperity will

turn out to be a weight around their neck. In the age of President Trump, maybe some employers won't want to hire an Ivy League grad, with all that elite baggage. A couple of Ivy League students said they sometimes don't put their college name on their applications. Many once thought that if they got into their dream school, their future would be secure. That's clearly no longer true (if it ever was).

Over at The Atlantic, Rogé Karma and Derek Thompson have been writing about the oddity of today's postcollege job market. The unemployment rate is low, so you'd think jobs would be plentiful. But recent grads are buried under avalanches of rejections. Karma and Thompson have offered a series of plausible explanations: It could be that even though the unemployment rate is low, people just aren't switching jobs as much, so there are fewer openings for labor market entrants. It could be that a college degree doesn't give a person the same labor market advantages that it did a few decades ago. It could be that the A.I. effect is kicking in. The bots mean that fewer existing employees are required to perform the same tasks.

Maybe the core problem is the overproduction of elites — that we're churning out more knowledge worker graduates than there are knowledge worker jobs. Or maybe it's just a feature of online life. It's easier to apply to stuff, and with more applicants, the competition grows ferocious. According to an article in Business Insider, the average knowledge worker job opening now receives 244 applications, compared with just 93 as recently as 2019. One young woman lamented to me that she wished she'd been young in the 1990s; it would have been easier. I told her I was relatively young in the '90s, and it was.

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Psychologists like Roy Baumeister and others have studied the long-term effects of rejection, and they are not pleasant. People who have suffered rejections become, on average, more aggressive, less empathetic, have a harder time with self-control. After all, rejection threatens some of our core psychic needs — for belonging, for agency, for competence. People need to feel that they can control their lives, that they are good at performing important tasks, that they are welcomed by others. Constant rejection tells them: No. No. No.

Rejection reinforces the dark world mentality that is so prevalent in our culture — the idea that the world is menacing and that people and institutions are untrustworthy. I spoke with one young woman, a few years out of college, whose chosen profession, journalism, is shrinking. She had a temporary job but felt certain it's about to be replaced by A.I. She told me that none of her friends are doing long-term thinking or saving for a mortgage. The world seems so radically unstable to them that they'd rather enjoy what they can today than sacrifice now for some possibility that may never come to pass two decades from now.

I should close by reiterating the fact that the people I'm writing about here are the meritocracy's alleged winners. The valedictorian class. The golden children. Are they just whining through their privilege? Maybe a little. Young Americans who came of age in 1860 or 1916 or 1932 or 1941 weren't exactly living on Easy Street.

Nonetheless, these conversations — and all the research I've read on everything from smartphones to the psychic effects of the meritocracy to the rising mental health crisis among the young — point to one conclusion: It's just phenomenally hard to be young right now. There must be an easier way to grow up.

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