

Opinion

College Admissions Shocker!



By Frank Bruni

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PALO ALTO, California — Cementing its standing as the most selective institution of higher education in the country, Stanford University announced this week that it had once again received a record-setting number of applications and that its acceptance rate — which had dropped to a previously uncharted low of [5 percent last year](#) — plummeted all the way to its inevitable conclusion of 0 percent.

With no one admitted to the class of 2020, Stanford is assured that no other school can match its desirability in the near future.

“We had exceptional applicants, yes, but not a single student we couldn’t live without,” said a Stanford administrator who requested anonymity. “In the stack of applications that I reviewed, I didn’t see *any* gold medalists from the last Olympics — Summer or Winter Games — and while there was a 17-year-old who’d performed surgery, it wasn’t open-heart or a transplant or anything like that. She’ll thrive at Yale.”

News of Stanford’s unprecedented selectiveness sent shock waves through the Ivy League, along with Amherst, Northwestern and at least a dozen other elite schools where, as a consequence, there could be substantial turnover among underperforming deans of admission.

Administrators at several of these institutions, mortified by acceptance rates still north of 6 percent, chided themselves for insufficient international outreach. Carnegie Mellon vowed that over the next five years, it would quadruple the number of applicants from Greenland. The University of Chicago announced plans to host a college fair in Ulan Bator.

Officials at the University of Pennsylvania, meanwhile, realized that sweatshirts, T-shirts and glossy print and web catalogs weren’t doing nearly enough to advertise its charms, and that the university wasn’t fully leveraging the mystique of its world-renowned business school. So early next fall, every high school senior in America who scored in the top 4 percent nationally on the SAT will receive, in the mail, a complimentary spray bottle of Wharton: The Fragrance, which has a top note of sandalwood and a bottom note of crisp, freshly minted \$100 bills.

Seniors who scored in the top 2 percent will get the scented shower gel and reed diffuser set as well.

On campuses from coast to coast, there was soul searching about ways in which colleges might be unintentionally deterring prospective applicants.

Were the applications themselves too laborious? Brown may give next year’s aspirants the option of submitting, in lieu of several essays, one haiku and one original recipe using organic kale.

“Compositions of 750 or even 500 words give some students syllable creativity around roughage. We want to meet them on *their* turf, especially if it’s leafy and a rich source of vitamin B6.”

Current high school seniors who had set their sights on Stanford responded to its announcement with astonishment and fury.

“This is the worst thing that has happened to anyone, ever,” said Alissa Parker, 18, a senior at Sidwell Friends in Washington, D.C. She added that whether she accepts an offer of admission from M.I.T. or one from Duke, she’ll defer enrollment and take a gap year to regain her confidence.

Taylor Abramovich, a 15-year-old senior at the Horace Mann School in New York City, blamed his parents for his dashed Stanford dream. When he was a toddler, they hired the lawyer David Boies and successfully sued Horace Mann to let Taylor begin kindergarten far ahead of schedule.

“If I’d been held back a year, I would have been applying to the Stanford class of 2021, when the school might start accepting students again,” Taylor fumed. He said that his one consolation for not getting in was knowing that none of his peers did, either.

At first blush, Stanford’s decision would seem to jeopardize its fundraising. The thousands of rejected applicants included hundreds of children of alumni who’d donated lavishly over the years, their expectations obvious in the fact that they affixed their \$50,000 checks to photographs of Emma playing an obscure woodwind in an Umbrian chamber orchestra or Scott donning the traditional dress of an indigenous people for whom he tailored a special social-media network while on spring break.

But over recent years, Stanford administrators noticed that as the school rejected more and more comers, it received bigger and bigger donations, its endowment rising in tandem with its exclusivity, its luster a magnet for Silicon Valley lucre.

In fact just 12 hours after the university's rejection of *all* comers, an alumnus stepped forward with a financial gift prodigious enough for Stanford to begin construction on its long-planned Center for Social Justice, a first-ever collaboration of Renzo Piano and Santiago Calatrava, who also designed the pedestrian bridge that will connect it to the student napping meadows.