Reflections on Rejections

Second Edition

Edited by Abigail Lipson

IN THE COLLEGE YEARS

IN THE COLLEGE YEARS is a collection of essays, teaching materials, and other publications from the Bureau of Study Counsel at Harvard University. The collection adopts its name from the classic study, *Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968) by William G. Perry, Jr., the founding director of the Bureau.
INTRODUCTION

At some point in your life, you have been, or will be, rejected. You apply to a school, a job, a publication, a grant, a fellowship, a role, or some other dearly sought prize, and it doesn’t work out. A rejection can feel devastating, and at the same time can lead you in new directions and to new opportunities you could never have predicted.

When I began to invite colleagues and students to participate in the Reflections on Rejection project, everyone was intrigued by the idea of a collection of rejection letters and the recipients’ reflections. Surprisingly often, a particular rejection popped immediately into their minds. They knew exactly which letter or what experience they wanted to contribute. It had stuck with them — sometimes for decades. The experience of failure or rejection was so personal, so powerful, that it made an indelible impression, inspired a reconsideration of their goals or values, or prompted a sharp turn in their life path.

Although everyone I spoke with had a story about a rejection, not everyone had an actual letter or other physical relic of the experience. As it turns out, rejections come in many forms: not just in a letter, but via email, on the phone, or simply rejection-by-excruciating-silence. Furthermore, many of us simply are not keepers — we are shredders, tossers, rippers, burners, deleters, and, well, losers. So this collection includes reflections both with and without an actual rejection letter.

How we respond to a failure or rejection emerges in these pages as one of the most important skills we learn in our lives. It requires first that we feel bad: really really bad. That part usually seems to come pretty naturally. But how to feel really really bad is the part that we learn. We learn to recognize our bad feelings as an indication that we care, we have high standards and high hopes, and we expect a lot of ourselves and of the world — rather than assuming that we are hopelessly untalented or unworthy. We learn to comfort ourselves, and accept comfort from others, and just plain stand it for a while — rather than running away or acting out. We learn to find strength and faith in dark times to nourish our resolve and resilience — rather than

Note: Rejection is a very personal experience. Each reflection presented here is solely that of the individual contributor.
losing hope and giving up. And finally, we learn to actively seek out the invaluable information and lessons to be gleaned from even a truly awful experience — rather than getting defensive or dejected or derailed.

Just a few examples of the stories in these pages:

A Professor at the Harvard Medical School contributes a copy of his expulsion letter from the doctoral program in biochemistry at Duke University, for failing grades. He was then accepted by Harvard, has had a stellar academic career, and is currently best known for co-creating the genome marking procedure that led to the Human Genome Project. (George Church)

A Harvard College alum felt it was “the major catastrophe of my existence on earth” when she was rejected in her bid to become a columnist for the Crimson. She went on to earn the Society of Professional Journalists Mark of Excellence Award, travel in Cambodia on a Rockefeller journalism fellowship, and publish numerous articles. Her first book is coming out this summer. (Ariane Cohen)

A Professor at the Graduate School of Education admits “ample experience in being rejected” for research funds, and selected a rejection letter from his file of over a hundred such letters. But he always looks for the “ray of hope” in any rejection: “more often than you think, a rejection can transmogrify into a very useful suggestion about other funders or even some kind of support in the future.” (Howard Gardner)

A Harvard College student graduated and moved to L.A. to become an actor. He needed to pay the bills, so he applied to work at Starbucks — and was rejected as “overqualified.” He went on to establish an academic tutoring service, OverqualifiedTutoring.com, and co-author a book on study skills for high school students, thestraightaconspiracy.com. (Hunter Maats)

Other wonderful contributors include faculty, staff, students, and alumni, reflecting on their rejections from schools, jobs, grants, and other prizes. They appear here in not-quite alphabetical order, as space allowed. Every one of the contributors has my deepest thanks and greatest respect for sharing their stories. Their insights are courageous, funny, thoughtful, and amazingly generous.

I have sent them each an acceptance letter.

Abigail Lipson, Ph.D.
Bureau of Study Counsel
Harvard University
Paul Barreira, M. D., is the Director of Harvard University Health Services and the Henry K. Oliver Professor of Hygiene at Harvard Medical School. He is a graduate of Boston College and Georgetown University School of Medicine.

ASK FOR HELP

Paul Barreira

I was never accepted to medical school.

After graduating from college I taught in high school and applied to medical schools. I was wait-listed on every school. I was disheartened until I received a call from a friend who was accepted to Georgetown’s medical school.

He told me that there were many unfilled positions and the medical school considered students who were wait-listed as accepted students. He urged me to drive to Washington and present myself to the admissions office. At the time I didn’t have the chutzpah to follow his advice. But another friend offered to drive with me to Washington and accompany me to the door of the admissions office.

Four years later at graduation I was presented with the Edward B. Bunn Award for excellence in contribution to community medicine.

So, I’ve learned never to hesitate to share with a friend bad news or difficult times and ask for help. I would have never shown up in the admissions office without my friends’ companionship. I’ve kept with me the notion that it is not important if I was the “first chosen” for school or work, what matters is how I get the job done.

“Nothing will work unless you do.”
- Maya Angelou -

IN THE COLLEGE YEARS

Ronald Bosch, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Scientist in the Department of Biostatistics at the Harvard School of Public Health. He works with the Center for Biostatistics in AIDS Research (CBAR) and his research focuses on “data synthesis to improve medical treatment and understand disease pathogenesis in HIV/AIDS.” [http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/research/ronald-bosch]

I WOULDN’T BE HERE

Ronald Bosch

After I got my Ph.D. in statistics in the 90s, if I hadn't been rejected at the three universities where I made the short list and was invited for interview and job talk (offers went to different persons on the short lists...), I would not have been free to accept the offer of a postdoc here at HSPH Dept of Biostatistics from Louise Ryan! I am still in Dept of Biostatistics, now Sr. Research Scientist, and it has been (and is) a great experience and excellent place to be a biostatistician. So without those rejections, I wouldn't be here!

P.S. I may still have my favorite rejection letter, from Polaroid after undergrad -- it was a beautiful color picture card. While essentially still a ‘form letter’ it was very well done.

“I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.”
- Louisa May Alcott -
AROUND THE CORNER
Benny Belvin II

I was a young, newly-minted graduate student with not much work experience, but a lot of talent and heart around the occasion of this rejection letter. I was applying to the University of Wisconsin at Madison for a number of counseling types of positions. This letter would be one of four rejection letters in two months that I received from the University and, as you can imagine, that sort of thing can be quite frustrating.

Yet, this particular letter for me was a turning point in how I perceived the process of achievement and “getting in.” It was the first letter that articulated not just the obvious point that I was no longer being considered, but it made it clear that I was close. It gave me confidence that my opportunity was around the corner and that if I just kept applying, and applying myself, then I would be successful; and not too long after I was victorious in landing my first full-time position.

It is true about that last line in the famous poem, “Don’t Quit.” It goes, “and you can never tell how close you are, it may be near when it seems so far.” Thus, “stick to the fight when you are hardest hit, it is when things seem the worst that you must not quit.”

“Failure is only the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.”
- Henry Ford -
George Church, Ph.D. (GSAS ’84), is Professor of Genetics at Harvard Medical School and Director of the Center for Computational Genetics. Among his many accomplishments, he co-created many genomic sequencing methods before and after the Human Genome Project.

**SUITABLE FOR FRAMING**

George Church

In the “unauthorized autobiography” on his webpage, [http://arep.med.harvard.edu/gmc/pers.html](http://arep.med.harvard.edu/gmc/pers.html), Dr. Church offers the following reflection under the heading “Awards”.

As of 2003, none really. Well, one in eighth grade when nearly all of us got an award for making it through elementary school (without air-conditioning and uphill both ways). I also managed to repeat ninth grade and flunk out of Duke in 1976 and hence received an official letter suitable for framing. (Fortunately, Harvard saw some value in my extracurricular activities and accepted me in 1977).

“Success is not final, failure is not fatal:
it is the courage to continue that counts.”
- Winston Churchill -
Oh, the Pain of Rejection
Ariane Cohen

It’s rejection season. Common casting, Crimson column, performance group and Harvard fellowship rejections all went out on Monday. I am one of the many to weather a major disappointment: I was not chosen as a Crimson columnist for the fall semester.

The saving grace is that there are many other wonderfully talented students currently in the exact same boat. They too all really wanted their own personal forums in The Harvard Crimson and are now stuck voicing their opinions to bored roommates and family members. Even more comforting is the thought of the hundreds of students across campus wallowing in bitter Rejection Land. They too have seen their short term plans take a nosedive, felt their pride take a kick in the stomach.

It’s funny how rejection works. Application and tryout-based opportunities seem extremely pivotal to your life only when you find out that you can’t have them. ...

In my case, it suddenly doesn’t matter to me that I’ve survived twenty column-less years in perfect contentment. … I’m sure that in ten years I won’t remember The Crimson, let alone this little blip in my writing career. But right now this failure seems to be the major catastrophe of my existence on earth. As far as I’m concerned, my life is in shambles.

This scenario of partial failure is typical at Harvard because of the high quality applicant pool. Everyone is over-qualified for all positions, so good people get turned down. … In this way, Harvard becomes the reverse of a meritocracy, because when everyone’s competent, superficial details become the deciding factors. First-years and sophomores, for example, regardless of how talented, are always at a huge disadvantage to the upperclass students who are “running out of time.” ... Friendships carry more weight with hirers, as do small meaningless details, such as e-mail grammar. Ability is no longer the determining characteristic where everyone’s able. The Rhodes Scholar applicants who didn’t receive Harvard’s support on Monday, and the writers who applied for columns and were rejected, and the singers who were refused membership to prestigious groups, and anyone else who has ever been rejected from anything at Harvard, all heard this message loud and clear. It’s hard to win at a genius school where everyone is not only competent, but exceptional.

At least competent people won. (My mother brought up this point by reminding me that at least I’m not Al Gore.) ... And there are always opportunities outside of Harvard.

“We didn’t lose the game, we just ran out of time.”
- Vince Lombardi -

Ariane Cohen (HC ’03) wrote this reflection on the occasion of being rejected as a columnist for the Harvard Crimson. It was printed in the Crimson on September 26, 2001, and she says now that “my feelings on the matter have not changed” (email to Abigail Lipson, February 25, 2009). Two years later, Ariane’s Crimson editorial column won the 2003 Society of Professional Journalists Mark of Excellence Award. She graduated magna cum laude from Harvard, spent a year in Cambodia on a Rockefeller Fellowship working as a reporter for the Cambodia Daily Newspaper, and went on to write/edit six books. She currently runs a project based on her book, The Sex Diaries Project, published by John Wiley & Sons, 2012.
Journal of Universal Rejection

About the Journal
The founding principle of the Journal of Universal Rejection (JoUR) is rejection. Universal rejection. That is to say, all submissions, regardless of quality, will be rejected. Despite that apparent drawback, here are a number of reasons you may choose to submit to the JoUR:

- You can send your manuscript here without suffering waves of anxiety regarding the eventual fate of your submission. You know with 100% certainty that it will not be accepted for publication.
- There are no page-fees.
- You may claim to have submitted to the most prestigious journal (judged by acceptance rate).
- The JoUR is one-of-a-kind. Merely submitting work to it may be considered a badge of honor.
- You retain complete rights to your work, and are free to resubmit to other journals even before our review process is complete.
- Decisions are often (though not always) rendered within hours of submission.

Instructions for Authors
The JoUR solicits any and all types of manuscript: poetry, prose, visual art, and research articles. You name it, we take it, and reject it. Your manuscript may be formatted however you wish. Frankly, we don’t care.

After submitting your work, the decision process varies. Often the Editor-in-Chief will reject your work out-of-hand, without even reading it! However, he might read it. Probably he’ll skim. At other times your manuscript may be sent to anonymous referees. Unless they are the Editor-in-Chief’s wife or graduate school buddies, it is unlikely that the referees will even understand what is going on. Rejection will follow as swiftly as a bird dropping from a great height after being struck by a stone. At other times, rejection may languish like your email buried in the Editor-in-Chief’s inbox. But it will come, swift or slow, as surely as death. Rejection.

Submissions should be emailed to J.Universal.Rejection@gmail.com. Small files only, please. Why not just send the first couple pages if it is long?

Subscriptions
An individual subscription may be secured for £120 per year (four issues). Institutional and library subscriptions are also available: prices will be provided upon enquiry. It is unknown whether the subscription will be delivered in print or as electronic content, because no one has yet ordered one.

Archives
- March 2009 (Vol 1, No 1) contents: (empty)
- June 2009 (Vol 1, No 2) contents: (empty)
- September 2009 (Vol 1, No 3) contents: (empty)
- December 2009 (Vol 1, No 4) contents: (empty - because we were on holiday)
- March 2010 (Vol 2, No 1) contents: (empty)
- June 2010 (Vol 2, No 2) contents: (empty)

http://www.math.pacificu.edu/~emmons/JoUR/
DING DONG, THE EGO’S DEAD

Elizabeth Falk

Before the phenomenon called “HLS Corporate Recruiting” entered my life last fall, I have to say, I wasn’t really used to rejection. I mean, if I got to HLS, I must have been doing pretty well in life. Back then, I took rejection personally: I recall losing one internship and sitting around for hours wondering whose resume could have been more compelling than mine. And laughably enough, being pissed off about it.

My recent “ding” letter from a San Francisco law firm called McCutchen Doyle has shown me how far I’ve progressed in my analysis of rejection, specifically, law-based rejection. After reading the standard “I really enjoyed meeting you and found our conversation compelling,” I looked at the letterhead and thought, “Nice.”

But I never even interviewed with McCutchen Doyle. I was rejected for a job I had not applied for and told how compelling I was by a man I’d never met.

This is the best rejection letter I have ever received. While reading it several times and absorbing the absurdity of the situation, I realized that I held proof of the level of artificiality and ridiculousness that is every 2L and 3L’s October existence. Following which, I more seriously and sadly realized that if this process, the supposed culmination of our tenures, is so artificial, why in the hell am I participating? Did I go to HLS to have what makes or breaks me come down to decisions made by people who reject applicants they’ve never seen? …

I’m still not sure what the privilege of this education means to me. It’s something I constantly ponder; despite my denigrations of this place, I realize the magnitude of the gift and need to reassess it continuously, lest it be cheapened. But far more than any acceptance I ever received, I now realize that, in setting ego aside, meaning does exist in those ding letters I have had the pleasure of receiving over the last two years. For through these dings, I have at least formulated a measure of what I don’t want my life to be. I am lucky to have been shown that there’s meaning behind every last ridiculous one. And it is only those of us who are lucky enough to understand the meaning of dings, rather than revel in the glory of acceptance, who have the potential to find the promise of happiness behind the HLS degree.

“Every emergency, every crisis, reveals unsuspected resources of personal strength…. In speaking of the hero born of such a crisis, people say, ‘I didn’t know he had it in him.’ But most of us, in fact, have a better, stouter-hearted, more vigorous self within us.”

- John W. Gardner -
THE RECORD’S FIRM REJECTION LETTER

HARVARD LAW STUDENT
1775 Massachusetts Ave
Cambridge, State of Ames 02138

October 13, 2005

Big Fancy Corporate Law Firm
Cold Impersonal Office Building
Any Major City, USA

Dear Ms./Mr. My Firm is Too Good For You:

Thank you very much for your recent letter explaining that, despite the fact I am a wonderful person and will likely win the Nobel Prize for Law someday, you were not able to offer me a callback interview and/or a position as a Summer Associate. I regret to inform you that I am unable to accept your refusal to offer me a position as a Summer Associate/callback interview.

This year I have received an unusually large number of rejection letters, making it impossible for me to accept them all. Despite your outstanding experience in rejecting applicants, your refusal does not meet my needs at this time.

Therefore, I shall initiate employment with your firm in May of 2006. Best of luck in rejecting future candidates.

Sincerely,

Harvard Law Student

SEVENTEEN YEARS LATER

Ghazi Kaddouh

I dropped out of college in my third year after failing two classes. I was twenty years old at the time.

During my time in the “wilderness,” I became a flight attendant, a teacher, and a maitre d’. But quitting my education had left a burning hole in my heart, which motivated me to get back to school. When I decided to go back to school seventeen years later, I went back with a vengeance.

In my new country, the U.S. provided the unique opportunity that encouraged adult education. I became the best student I could be; graduated valedictorian from junior college, graduated with the highest honors from U.C. Berkeley, and ended up getting a doctorate. I now live the life of a successful and a very content person.

If not for that experience many years ago, I might not have been as motivated as I have been to achieve what I have achieved.

“Opportunities are usually disguised as hard work, so most people don’t recognize them.”
- Ann Landers -
WORTH A TRY

Howard Gardner

My actual rejection letters are numerous, indeed innumerable, but no particular one stands out in my mind.

Nonetheless I have a reflection that might be of use to students. As a researcher who lived on ‘soft money’ for twenty years and has been applying for grants for over forty years, I have ample experiences in being rejected. Indeed, I would estimate that I’ve received at least 100 grant letter rejections, mostly form letters, very few of any help in and of themselves.

But my colleagues and I have learned at least two lessons over the years:

1. In addition to acceptance and rejection files, keep a ‘ray of hope’ file. This is a file where the particular proposal has been rejected but the funder has left open the possibility of future funding of a similar or different project. So long as the ‘open door’ is not completely formulaic, this is important information to keep in mind and on hand.

2. Even when you get a flat rejection, don’t share your annoyance/anger/depression with the funder. Indeed, if you have any kind of history or relation with the funder, do the opposite. Thank the funder for the care taken with your application. Ask if they have any additional suggestions or feedback. Keep them informed about what you are doing. More often than you might think, what your mother told you is true: “it never hurts to express gratitude and to stay in touch.” And more often than you think, a rejection can transmogrify into a very useful suggestion about other funders or even some kind of support in the future.

As a researcher, I have also had dozens, perhaps hundreds, of rejections of scholarly or popular articles. Usually you cannot do anything about these

[email]

Dear Howard,

I spoke with our other national staff about your idea for the joint proposal with [Xxxx] University. While the staff were enthusiastic about the concept, because of budget constraints and a need to focus on current priorities (such as supporting efforts aimed at achieving comprehensive immigration reform), we are planning to support very few new initiatives this year.

So, right now, we must pass. I am sorry.
Best, [Xxxx]

[Xxxx Xxxx]
Director, [Xxxx] Fund
[Xxxx] Foundation

except send the piece elsewhere. But if the rejections come with reasons, and the reasons seem spurious, you can sometimes change the mind of the editor. Anyway, it is worth a try.
FULL CIRCLE

Judith Kidd

In 1981 I arrived in Boston to take up a position as Director of Marketing and Fundraising for the Boston University School for the Arts. I became interested in BU’s School of Management (SOM) and wanted to take a few courses on business communication and organizational behavior. However, staff were not allowed to take courses in the SOM unless they qualified for admission to the MBA program, which required the taking of the GMAT.

Math phobic from birth, I first took a math review course and then the GMAT. Subsequently I was turned down by the SOM for entry into the MBA program. In meeting with the director of admissions he said “you essentially got them all right in the verbal and all wrong in the math”. He smoothed this over by saying that an MBA program, which is heavily quantitative, would harm my other skills and relative success to date by undermining my confidence through failure in business school.

Subsequently I enrolled in the Certificate for Advanced Studies in Management program at the then Radcliffe Seminar Program. The Certificate program was essentially the first year of an MBA program and, although I had to take Quantitative Methods and also Financial Management and Accounting, I did it in an environment that did not “undermine my confidence” in myself.

Ultimately I became a teacher in the Radcliffe Seminar Program, and later Harvard Extension, teaching Fundraising Management and Nonprofit Management.

Life sometimes comes full circle. From 1997–2001 I taught those same two courses at the BU SOM. And I later turned down the SOM’s request to considering joining their staff as director of the BU SOM Nonprofit Management Cluster within the MBA program.

SHOCKED

David Pilbeam

My first faculty teaching position was at Cambridge University in 1965. The following year I applied for research funds from a non-UK source (it might have been a NATO Fellowship) in order to do some work with European fossil collections. Early in 1967, I was shocked to receive a rejection letter (I have no copy), the first in my academic career and a major blow to my strong ego (colleagues and friends might well add that this seems to have suffered little diminution); so shocked indeed that I thought seriously of abandoning an academic career entirely. An indication of my level of seriousness is that I obtained application forms for late entry into the British Civil (Foreign) Service. But faced with going through a substantial application process I invested some uncharacteristically introspective time thinking about my future, and ultimately decided to stick with paleontology. The rest, as they say…. I’m glad I stayed the course!

“Many of life’s failures are because people did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.”
- Thomas A. Edison -
CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY

Elizabeth Knoll

Publishers' rejection letters always say that an author's manuscript “doesn't fit our lists.” It sounds like a euphemistic brush-off but most of the time it's the truth. Different publishers have different personalities, specialties, and market niches, and success for them, and their authors, comes from making a good match. From the editorial point of view, a good match also has to be made between authors, their subjects, and the audience they hope to reach. It's harder than it looks to write the kind of writing that looks natural and conversational!

It's very hard not to take any kind of rejection personally. But if you can throttle back the feelings of frustration, anger, or disappointment, and consider the possibility that the explanation in the letter -- if any -- might actually be an experienced person's honest assessment of the gap between what you offer and what they need, you'll know how to strengthen your case next time.

“When one door closes, another opens for us. But we so often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.”
- Alexander Graham Bell -
IN THE COLLEGE YEARS

David Lat (HC ’96) is the founder and managing editor of Above the Law, an award-winning legal news website that receives millions of pageviews per month. His writing has also appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the New York Observer, Washington Magazine, and New York Magazine, among other publications. Before his entry into journalism, David worked as a federal prosecutor in Newark, New Jersey; a litigation associate at Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz in New York; and a law clerk to Judge Diarmuid O’Scanlайн of the U.S. Court of Appeals for Ninth Circuit. David is a graduate of Yale Law School.

LITTLE DID I KNOW

David Lat

A clerkship with a U.S. Supreme Court justice is one of the most coveted credentials in the legal profession. Obtaining one establishes you as one of the law’s brightest young stars. Clerking on the Court is a chance to participate in history. Post-clerkship opportunities - jobs at leading firms, elite government positions, tenure-track professorships - are unparalleled.

In September 2000, I interviewed for a clerkship with Justice Antonin Scalia. I thought to myself: if only I can get this, then my life will be perfect. I had thought the same thing about getting into Harvard College, and then Yale Law School. Of course, each time I snagged a brass ring, a new one materialized.

Alas, I didn’t get the clerkship. Looking at my rejection letter was so deeply painful - sometimes it pushed me to the verge of tears - that I buried it in papers stashed in a bottom drawer.

Little did I know that my feelings of dejection and inferiority would come in handy. Several years later - while working as a federal prosecutor, after a few years at a New York law firm - I started a judicial news and gossip blog called Underneath Their Robes. I wrote under a pseudonym, “Article III Grouper” - a young lawyer whose failure to secure a Supreme Court clerkship gave her an amusingly unhealthy obsession with federal judges.

The rest is history - of a bizarre and perhaps trivial nature, but history nonetheless. Underneath Their Robes became a runaway hit. After I was featured in the New Yorker magazine, I received an offer to blog full-time, for the politics blog Wonkette. After gaining that experience, I launched Above the Law, a blog about law firms and the legal profession.

Today it one of the country’s most successful (and profitable) legal blogs, receiving over 10 million pageviews per month.

Although I never got a Supreme Court clerkship, I suspect I’m more professionally satisfied now, as a blogger, than I would have been as a lawyer. Sometimes failure in achieving one goal is merely a way station for success in achieving another.
OVER THE TRANSMON

Thomas Lee, Jr.

The rejection letter on Doubleday letterhead dated June 29th, 1977, was warm and funny – no surprise, since it came from a warm and funny friend, Whit Stillman ’73, who would later leave Doubleday to write and direct his own films (Metropolitan, Barcelona, and The Last Days of Disco). Whit had overlapped with me at The Crimson for just one year, but that was enough for me to claim that “I have a friend in publishing” when I started to think about a book on health care policy a few years later.

I was just a medical student at the time, but full of visionary thoughts that I thought everyone else should read. I drafted a Table of Contents and a first chapter, and sent them “over the transom” (i.e., unsolicited by the publishers or proposed by an agent) to people I knew or were friends-of-friends in about a dozen publishing houses. And then I waited.

I didn’t have to wait long. The houses that responded did so within a couple of weeks; the others never responded at all. They were all rejections. Whit’s was the kindest (with the gentle praise running up the left margin).

I never did write that book – I can’t even find the proposal today, only the rejection letters. Looking back, I can see now that I did the right thing. I swallowed my disappointment, and settled down to the real work I was supposed to do – i.e., learn medicine. I became an internist/cardiologist, did some research, started working at The New England Journal of Medicine, and became a Professor and part of the senior management at Partners HealthCare System.

I actually have a health policy book coming out this fall [2009] (Chaos and Organization in Health Care, MIT Press) – my first one. It’s not bad, and I’m kind of proud of it. Something tells me that if I hadn’t been rejected by everyone back in 1977, I might not have been able to write this one.
THIRD TIME’S THE CHARM

Sarah Lipson

As a junior at Tufts University, I decided to write a senior honors thesis. Tufts did not agree with my decision.

I turned in a proposal during the spring of my junior year. It was rejected, partly because of insufficient faculty specialization in my topic. My proposal was marked with a large red “NO ENROLL” across its first page, indicating that I could not enroll in the mandatory senior thesis course. (Unfortunately I do not have a copy of this proposal; I threw it away without realizing that an exciting opportunity to reflect on this rejection would present itself years later!)

After this initial rejection, I spent much of the summer reworking my proposal and courting a faculty member who I knew had expertise in my area of interest. He had not advised an undergraduate in over a decade. In September, I went to his office hours and begged for him to be on my committee (though I would like to think my actions could be described with a less pathetic verb). He told me that my topic was interesting and to “keep in touch” but did not promise to serve on my committee. At least someone other than my mom thought my concept was interesting.

I submitted my proposal a second time and again I was rejected. Perhaps I could advise myself, I thought, perhaps this would be my own not-for-credit-amazing-pseudo-thesis. Realizing that this was not a workable plan, I continued to develop my research questions and returned to this faculty member to share my recent findings. At this meeting, he agreed to be on my committee.

I submitted my proposal for the third time -- and the department gave me a stamp of approval. There was no time to celebrate; I dove right into my research.

In the months of work I dedicated to my thesis, I developed wonderful relationships with my readers, and leaned on them for support and guidance. I finally made the connections with faculty members that I had assumed would form on move-in day my freshman year.

In March I was selected to be the primary presenter at the “Tufts Undergraduate Research Symposium.” In May I was awarded the “Ted Shapiro Award for Best Honors Thesis of the Year.”

As I reflect on the rejections that I faced in this process, I learned two important lessons that I carry with me always:

1. Do not drop your passions just because other people don’t support them. Pick your battles and identify a balance between following your dreams and stubbornness.

2. Put time and effort into cultivating relationships with faculty members. This is one of the most significant parts of any truly satisfying academic experience.

“We could never learn to be brave and patient if there were only joy in the world.”
- Helen Keller -
OVERQUALIFIED

Hunter Maats

I don’t have a rejection letter but I do have a rejection story. I was rejected by Starbucks for being “Overqualified.” That’s why our tutoring company is called “Overqualified.”

I’d moved out to LA in the summer of 2004. The most convenient explanation is that I moved out here to act. Looking for a way to pay my bills I decided to apply to Starbucks. It seemed like the sort of thing an actor should do.

As I wandered to the interview my major concern was whether I’d be able to get a free latte this early in my Starbucks employ. So imagine my surprise when Starbucks decided to reject me. Their reasoning was that I was Overqualified.

Ultimately I managed to persuade Starbucks to give me a job only to prove to them that they were right not to want to hire me. I quit after two months.

By then I’d started tutoring. It was pretty obvious to me and many others what the problems were in education. To that end, four of us in the class of ’04 founded a tutoring company. We named it Overqualified.

Tutoring teenagers is a rejection-filled wonderland, because most teenagers in America today reject the idea that they can be really smart. A staggering number of kids believe they didn’t get the math gene and they don’t have a natural ear for languages. No wonder so many kids don’t try in school. By dealing with all the rejections students dish out, you realize teenagers are pointing you to the opportunity of a lifetime: the chance to fix education for zero dollars. Different, huh?

Rejection turns your world upside down. That’s exactly why its so powerful. I think there are two lessons here:

1. That if you’re persistent you can always get a job you should be glad you got rejected by.
2. You should always be on the lookout for opportunity and humor. :)

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TABLE

Rory Michelle Sullivan

During Freshman Week I signed up for the Freshman Talent Show. My roommate at the time played for me, and I sang Habanera from Carmen in a jean dress, cowboy hat, and motorcycle boots. I felt comfortable with the piece since I’d performed it in festivals before, and decided I didn’t need to rehearse that much.

Well, I got up there and decided I would try something new – I decided it would be a great idea to try to involve the audience somehow. At the chorus I turned the microphone to the crowd, but that threw me off and I lost my focus. My pianist stopped playing and I looked back at her during the obvious silence. Somehow, both of us picked up the song from somewhere else and finished it.

People still remember the performance favorably, but more importantly, my first relatively major failure on stage (of course I’d flubbed lines in plays before but usually had smoothed over it in character) lessened my desire to perform. Instead, I took up the other side of the table and for the next two years produced a musical, which I absolutely loved. In fact, I just applied to graduate school for arts administration to continue my newfound love after college - and get paid for it. Good thing I messed up in front of the entire freshman class the first week of college!

“Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can’t lose.”
- Bill Gates -
A (HOPEFULLY) WELL-ACCEPTED STATISTICAL THEORY OF REJECTION

Xiao-Li Meng

“If you have never been late for your flight, you have wasted too much time at the airport. If you have never been rejected for love, you have not loved enough.”

- Andrew Gelman (Professor of Statistics and Political Science, Columbia University)

**Theorem 1** For any acceptance worth competing for, the probability of a randomly selected applicant being rejected is higher than the probability of being accepted.

**Proof:** Anything worth competing for means more than 50% of people will be rejected.

“Ok, but I am not a randomly selected person! I am the best of my school/class/peer group.” Yes -- but so are many others who are competing with you! Sooner or later, someone is going to beat you, because ...

**Theorem 2** A local maximum cannot exceed the global maximum.

**Proof:** By definition, the global maximum is the maximum of all local maxima.

“But I am really the best, the global maximum.” Sure, you may indeed be the ultimate champion of Ultimate Frisbee, and chess, and tennis, but ultimately there will be a game that is simply not your game. In other words...

**Theorem 3** The probability that you will be accepted for everything you compete for is zero.

**Proof:** You wouldn’t be reading this if this theorem were false.

“Alright, I admit that I was rejected a couple of times. But that was really unfair, as everyone told me that I should have won/been accepted!” True, if you modify “everyone” by “everyone who talked to me”, because...

**Theorem 4** The probability of hearing that you should be a winner is higher than that of hearing you should be a loser.

**Proof:** How many times have you told someone you know, “Hey, you are going to be a loser!”?

“But I still think it was unfair, because I was just so well qualified!” True again, but there are others who were equally so. Even if you make it into the final two and a fair coin has to be tossed to decide, the very phrase fair implies that you still have 50% of chance of being rejected!

**Grand Theorem:** Statistically, you are rejected, and probabilistically, it is fair.

[By Xiao-Li Meng, a statistics professor who wishes that your personal experiences reject this theory.]

“Victory goes to the player who makes the next-to-last mistake.”

- Savielly G. Tartakower -
NOT SURPRISED

Gardiner Morse

In early 2001, the medical magazine I edited, Hippocrates, was killed by its publisher (talk about rejection!). I was offered a lateral-move kind of job in the company but reasoned that this was as good a time as any to take a run at a science journalism fellowship I’d been thinking about for years. The fellowship promised a year of immersion in the field with a handful of journalists from around the world who wanted to hone their craft, network, and recharge. When I looked at who’d won the fellowship in previous years I realized that I was something of a long shot – I was much more of an editor than a journalist. I also knew (though I wasn’t fully admitting it to myself) that I didn’t have a clear idea about what, exactly, I hoped to accomplish should I get accepted – beyond that it would surely be a fun year, and it would buy me time to figure out what to do next.

When the rejection letter arrived I was both not surprised and hurt. The hurt part is simple enough. Who likes to be rejected? The not-surprised part is more complex. Though I pulled out the stops on my application – calling former winners for advice, making contact with faculty in the program, recruiting my best references, crafting my best guess at a pitch-perfect essay – I knew at some level that I was trying too hard. Though I was truly interested in the program, my application was more well-crafted than authentic. I suspect they picked up on that – and indeed in his rejection the program director said he hoped that the process of applying “has helped clarify where you want to go with your career...” a comment I always took to mean “we know that you know that your heart wasn’t really in this!”

I picked myself up, dusted myself off, and landed a job as an editor at Harvard Business Review. It’s a great fit and a terrific job. Thinking back to my application and interviews, I recall something distinctly different about my approach to this job: I told them what I really thought. I told them, for example, that the article I’d been given as an edit test was so flawed it shouldn’t be published (they published it, of course), and that my crowning achievement in my previous job was to shut down a major project my boss had championed. Those may have been risky admissions, but I think one reason I got this job was that I wanted it enough to abandon the script.
THE PATH

Craig Partridge

In the fall of my senior year at Harvard, I was sure I wanted to get a graduate degree either in my major, history, or the field I’d pursued for fun, computer science. I concluded I was more likely to make a difference in the world if I pursued computer science. So I applied to the Ph.D. programs at, as I recall, four top computer science schools in the U.S.: Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley, and Brown.

As senior year progressed, I was taking advanced courses in computer science and getting A’s (duly reported in my transcripts to the schools). I scored very high on the GRE’s. From where I sat, any grad school with vision would understand my choice of history as a major and see from my grades and GRE’s that I was highly skilled at computer science.

I was very surprised that not one school accepted me. I wondered what went wrong. I wrote to the chair of Computer Science at Brown asking if there was something I could have done to improve my chances. He sent me a gracious reply, saying that I was “very close” but I needed a few more math classes on my transcript to give them confidence I could do good graduate work.

That left me with the immediate problem of finding a job. My graduating year was during the Reagan recession, and I had classmates literally plastering their walls with rejection letters. I landed a job with a startup firm in Newton, but soon realized that it was not going to let me grow intellectually. Then, through my roommates, I got a job at Raytheon BBN Technologies (at Fresh Pond in Cambridge) helping them with this thing they called “the Internet” that they’d just turned on for the Department of Defense.

The job was great fun. There were hard intellectual problems almost every week that needed solving. My employer also paid tuition for one course a year at a local university, so for two successive spring semesters I took a math course at Harvard. Two years after college, I was ready to try for graduate school again in computer science. This time I had the math, knew what I wanted to study in computer science (networking), and knew how to do research (having done it at Raytheon BBN for two years).

Then some luck intervened. Harvard created a part-time Master’s of Science program in computer science. I could keep doing research at work and get a Master’s degree (with tuition assistance from my employer!). Three years later, as I was finishing my Master’s, my thesis advisor said, “You know, if you just go to the department office, you can file a form and switch to the Ph.D. program.” So I did and a few years later got my Ph.D. (still studying part-time).

There’s a temptation to see this story as a straightforward illustration that rejections aren’t always permanent. That’s certainly true. I received the Ph.D. in computer science from one of the schools I originally applied to. But I also want to point out the benefits of the path. I would have been a very different Ph.D. student but for my time in the work force – indeed, I ended up doing my Ph.D. thesis on computer networking, a field that really didn’t exist when I originally applied for Ph.D. programs.

"Obstacles don’t have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don’t turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.”

- Michael Jordan -
PERMISSION SLIP

Lowry Pei

When I received this message late last summer, it had been almost twenty-two years since the publication of my first novel, *Family Resemblances*. In that time I’ve written six other novels and tried many times to land an agent to represent my work, but I haven’t gotten another book published. I’ve harvested every kind of rejection, ranging from the agents who requested a manuscript and never bothered to write back, to those who said they loved the work I sent them – they just couldn’t sell it. Meanwhile I have taught writing, had a fulfilling work life as a professor, and kept on writing novels. I felt suspended between failure in the marketplace and what I experienced as artistic growth and maturation.

This rejection message came as a completion and a release. A group of people who wouldn’t know me on the street, who read novels for a living, seemed to believe in my latest book as much as I do. Their track record of placing manuscripts says they understand the publishing world, and what they understand is that, for reasons beyond my control, this book that’s worth reading won’t get published. Their message was somehow the permission slip allowing me to change course altogether.

I have since put all my novels on my website, full text, freely downloadable (www.lowrypei.com). Is this failure, or success? The answer is no. It’s neither. This is my work, my gift to the unknown reader. And in breaking the putative link between commercial sales and artistic validity, it is also my gift to myself.

“Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.”
-Arthur Ashe-

------ Original Message ------

Subject: WITH AND WITHOUT YOU
Date: Fri, 15 Aug 2008 13:28:54 -0400
From: Editorial at MRA <edito-
To: <lowry.pei@simmons.edu>

Thank you so much for submitting your novel to us and for the extraordinary patience you’ve shown while we deliberated. Everyone in the office has read your book, and though the writing is beautiful and the story heartbreaking, I’m afraid we won’t be able to represent your project. As I’m sure you know, the fiction market is getting tougher every day, and though we still love quiet, meditative fiction, I’m afraid that it is getting more difficult to place. I know that’s of no consolation to you, but we’re hopeful that it won’t be long before there are more places again at the proverbial fiction table.

We so appreciate the opportunity to see your work, and thank you again for being so patient.

Sincerely,
Julie Mosow
THEY WERE ABSOLUTELY RIGHT
Sheila Reindl and Abigail Lipson

We thought that *College Composition and Communication (CCC)* would be a great place for our essay on the subject of plagiarism. Then we received their rejection letter, letting us know that all three readers and the editor independently and unanimously rejected it. They went on to offer numerous reasons for their rejection, and were unextinguishing in their enthusiasm that the article had no business being published by *CCC*. (Fortunately, the whole of their letter won’t fit onto one page here, so you are spared from reading their many criticisms!)

Their comments certainly stung. But when we could bring ourselves to read the letter over again, we realized that at the end they made a very important comment – they didn’t actually hate the article. They thought it was a poor match for their specialized readership and suggested we try a publication with a more general audience in higher education.

And, in fact, they were absolutely right! This essay really didn’t belong in *CCC*. The article was subsequently published in *About Campus*, a much better venue for it. So the *CCC* rejection actually helped this article find its best audience.

“Learn from the mistakes of others. You can’t live long enough to make them all yourself.”
- Eleanor Roosevelt -
WHAT MIGHT BE A GOOD TIME?

Carina Rosner

I made a career change about three years ago when I burnt out of high tech work and decided to do something with my hands. I had been making beaded jewelry and was doing well selling it to individuals. The next step was to sell to galleries, so I contacted a local art center and asked the manager to look over my work. Her reply essentially said, "what you do isn't art — anyone can string beads together — if you ever become a REAL artist and actually make your own pieces, then give me a buzz." Since my biggest obstacle to my career change was believing that I could be an "artist," this response was a crushing blow. I didn't study art, don't have a degree/certificate/blessing-from-royalty or other qualification for this career, and here was a director at an art center calling me on it. I sat and moped for a while, read and re-read the email, called a couple of friends for support, and moped some more.

Then I got angry. All she had to say was "no, thank you." The rest of the email was just nasty. Her views on what was and was not art and whether I was an artist or not were just her views. OK. But that had nothing to do with whether I was making art, whether folks would like my work, and whether it would sell. I made more calls, visited more stores, talked to other artists, and started to figure out the world of wholesale. I sold my beadwork, got galleries to carry my designs, and moved forward.

Her rejection comments were always in the back of my mind, however.

Over the next couple of years, while continuing to sell my beadwork, I developed a line of "Organic Silver" jewelry where I actually forge the metal and cut the stones myself. I am now in about 60 galleries around the country (plus Canada), several key art museums (including Georgia O'Keefe and Falling Water/Frank Lloyd Wright), have juried into the highest rated and most competitive art shows around the country, and have customers contacting me for personal commissions.

While I am still in the early years of this new career, I definitely consider myself an artist, and proudly call myself a jewelry designer, a metalsmith, or a stone carver depending on my mood (and the state of my hands that day). I recently pinged the same art center director to see if she might be interested in my "Organic Silver" and "Organic Gold" lines but she said the store was overstocked given the current economy. She didn't comment on whether my new work is "art" or not. I guess I am making progress. :-)

From: Xxxxx Xxxxx <xxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.com>
Sent: Thursday, March 03, 2005 10:38 AM
To: xxxxxx@xxxxxxx.com
Subject: RE: Would love to show you my jewelry designs

Dear Xxxxx,

I sent an email to you last week after you gave me your web address - but I guess that you never received it. I feel that your jewelry will not work for The Xxxx Shop. Your work is lovely, but for us it is not enough to string wonderful beads on a chain. We require that the artist must shape those beads herself, or make interesting clasps, fittings etc. The work must have the hand of the artist on it - buying beads and gems and stringing them isn't enough. I suggest that you take your work to the Xxxxx Gallery on Xxxxx Street. Thanks for your interest in The Xxxx Shop!
THE BACK DOOR IS A DOOR

Aurora Sanfeliz

Like most people, at different points and in many areas of my life, I have received the dreadful news: “We regret to inform you…” “We had a wonderful pool of highly qualified applicants…” I have never saved any of those letters. However, I have stories of rejection that have changed my life.

After 8 years of teaching in Mexico City I was ready for a change, and a doctoral program was not an unrealistic idea. As an older student I was picky and applied only to Stanford and Harvard. While Palo Alto said NO, Harvard said MAYBE. I was accepted to the CAS (Certificate of Advanced Study) program instead of the doctoral program. Coming all the way to Cambridge for a “second choice” was not easy. But I did.

That year I met incredible students and faculty, who encouraged me to reapply to the doctoral program in Human Development and Psychology. Two months later, the letter came stating not only that I had been accepted but that I was the recipient of a Larsen Fellowship. I had come in the back door through the CAS program, but four years later I walked through the gates of Harvard Yard in a crimson gown, graduating with a doctoral degree.

During my doctoral studies, I had another back door experience. I applied to a clinical training program in pediatric oncology at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. A few weeks after my interview, the director of training called. She was kind and clear: “We have stronger candidates than you. They come from APA approved doctoral programs… but we liked you and we think that you could learn a lot if you join our program.” They could not offer me one of the regular stipend positions, but they would find another way to compensate me. Once again, I was entering this life-changing experience through the back door. Instead of a bi-weekly check, I got lunch coupons and one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.

Years later, after I had graduated from GSE and taught for several years at Wheelock College, I went back to Dana-Farber as a staff member, and stayed for eleven years working with children and their families.

I have learned to like, trust, and feel increasingly comfortable coming in through back doors, as they have proven to open wonderful opportunities for learning and growth. Back doors have worked for me when I have been able to present myself (both strengths and weaknesses) in an honest way, when I have felt a deep sense of respect for the institution and staff interviewing me, and when I can see that there is room for personal and professional development.

As a counselor at the BSC I talk to students about their plans, about their hopes and fears for the future. I listen to them when they feel sad and disappointed for not getting that internship, that job, that post-doc that they so much wanted. When they are unsure about accepting something else, I often reflect on the power of back doors.

“I really wish I was less of a thinking man and more of a fool not afraid of rejection.”

- Billy Joel -
BYERLY HALL ALWAYS GOT IT RIGHT

Michael Shenkman

I hold the rare combination of a rejection letter and a degree from Harvard College. Indeed, Harvard turned me down twice before admitting me. When I graduated in 2001, I wrote about this in a *Crimson* commencement week opinion piece headlined “Byerly Hall Finally Got It Right.” I described how my unusual admissions path afforded me a deep and personal appreciation of my time at Harvard.

I did not, however, write the headline. In fact, I disagreed with its implication that the admissions office, then housed in Byerly Hall, had ever gotten it wrong. The first turnaround, at least, probably had something to do with my being in the bottom academic quartile of my high school class. Moreover, the rejections proved to be a gift: It is not just Harvard College that I think of as a formative experience, but also the opportunity to have learned from my rejections to be persistent and to chart my own path – lessons that I drew from Byerly Hall getting it right, each time that I applied.

To give just one example of happy and unanticipated journeys, my Harvard rejections launched my government career. As part of the transfer process, I took a term off from college, during which I interned in the Clinton White House. There, I found my senior thesis topic. I also found the inspiration – and the credential – to get my first job after college as research director for a senior member of the House of Representatives. And I stuck with the path: Most recently, I worked for the Senate Judiciary Committee and taught a political science seminar on staff work in government at Yale.

Still, I remember the searing disappointment when I received my first rejection letter from Harvard. I felt that, for the first time in my life, a door had been closed to me that no amount of work could reopen. It turned out not to be the case for college admissions. Instead, I learned to believe the door is always open to persistence and that, in any event, some of the greatest professional rewards lie behind the doors you fashion on your own through a mix of grit and creativity.
WHAT CAME NEXT

Ryan Travia

Upon completing my graduate degree in educational administration, I found myself on the job market. Interested in pursuing a career in student affairs administration, I focused my search mostly on entry-level positions in residential life, which is the trend for most Higher Education Administration Master’s graduates. Throughout graduate school at Boston College, I had worked with the Office of Alcohol & Drug Education and served as a judicial hearing officer – two areas of particular interest to me – so I also applied to as many judicial affairs positions as I could find, since the Alcohol & Other Drug (AOD) Professional postings were few and far between.

I was selected as a final candidate for a student/judicial affairs position at a Boston-area college. This seemed to be the ideal position for me. I would be responsible for coordinating the student conduct system for the college, while providing support for the Student Affairs Division. In addition to a modest salary, the job provided a fully furnished apartment and a meal plan, in exchange for on-call responsibilities. I was enthralled by the idea of working at the college and living in Boston, and the apartment would have been enormously helpful financially to me and my wife (we were planning to be married and she was just starting graduate school). Needless to say, I was devastated when I received news that the position had been offered to another candidate. Without many other interviews set-up, I was at a loss for what the future had in store for me. I put my faith in God, determined not to “settle” for just any position. What came next changed my life forever.

I received a call from Dartmouth College regarding my application for their Coordinator of Alcohol & Other Drug Education Programs. At first, I thought it was a joke. To my mind, this was totally a “reach” application. Despite my qualifications, I felt woefully inexperienced compared to the many substance abuse prevention specialists I knew would apply. But after surviving a grueling interview process, I got the job. The job allowed me to pursue my passions for teaching, substance abuse prevention, policy development, and peer education, and ultimately led me to my current position here at Harvard.

I know it sounds cliche, but good things come to those who wait. As disappointed as I was to not land the job, I relied on my faith to guide me through a difficult process. I believe that everything happens for a reason, even if sometimes, we don’t know what those reasons are. This experience changed the direction of my life, which ultimately allowed me to follow my heart and embrace my true vocation, doing what I know I have been called to do in life.
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“Whether you read this booklet or not, you will be rejected. The difference is between feeling there is not another tomorrow and tomorrow is another day.”

— Xiao-Li Meng
Professor of Statistics, Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University.

“I don’t know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody.”

- Bill Cosby -