Beating the Odds

Getting Into a Top College Is Increasingly a Game of Chance. Here's Advice From Experts on How to Ensure a Good Outcome.

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By ALVIN P. SANOFF

AMHERST
STANFORD
YALE
HARVARD
PENN

HE WAS AN OUTSTANDING STUdent at a demanding public high school in the Washington suburbs. He was in the top 10 percent of his class, he had taken challenging courses, and his SAT score topped 1,400. What's more, he had an impressive array of extracurricular accomplishments and was considered a school leader.

He and his family thought that with a record like that he surely would get into an elite college. He applied to a string of Ivies and a few other highly selective private institutions, with a prestigious public institution as a backup.

Last April, his dreams came tumbling down. The student found himself rejected by every school to which he had applied, including his safety school. Only special efforts by his high-school counselor and the empathy of the backup university's admissions office made it possible for him to enroll in that college.

Every year the Washington area has its share of such horror stories. They come up wherever parents of high-schoolers get together, at a business lunch on K Street, a cocktail party in Potomac, or a PTA meeting in McLean. Every time such a tale makes the rounds, it adds to the anxiety that students and their families feel about the complex and often confusing process of applying to college.

Though nightmare scenarios are the exception, those who hear them are left wondering: Could that happen to my child?

It is not an unreasonable question. But it is one that most families need not worry about. Those students who set realistic goals and apply to a range of colleges that meet their needs can be almost certain that come next spring they will have at least one college, if not more, to call their own.

But those who push ahead believing that they should consider only the most prestigious institutions may find themselves facing a pile of rejection letters. Shirley Levin, an independent college consultant in Rockville who helps families navigate the admissions maze, says, "Many people have unrealistic expectations. That is the tragedy of the whole admissions situation."

WHEN IT COMES TO THE MOST SElective colleges, admission is something of a crapshoot. Area high-school counselors say it has become ever harder to predict who will be admitted to Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, and the like and who will be rejected. That's because many more students are trying to win entry to highly selective institutions. The University of Pennsylvania, for example, has had an increase of more than 2,000 applications—from 16,700 to 18,850—in just the past two years.

"Kids were rejected last year at schools to which they would have been accepted five years ago," says Leonard King, director of college counseling at DC's Maret School. Adds Nina Marks, director of college guidance at National Cathedral School: "Nobody understands why very bright kids don't have the choices that were much more clearly available a generation ago."

But a look at the acceptance rate at some highly selective colleges explains why so many applicants, even those with outstanding test scores and grades, are destined for disappointment. Harvard and Princeton admitted 11 percent of those who applied last year. The picture is a little less discouraging at Penn and Duke, but even they take only about one applicant out of four.

Most of those rejected are highly qualified, but for one reason or another they're seen as not as admissible as some of their peers. Uni-

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PHOTOGRAPH BY STUART HUNTER/FPG; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID ZIARNOWSKI

versity of Pennsylvania admissions dean Lee Stetson acknowledges, "We have reached the point where students are being denied for whom there is nothing clearly evident as to why they weren't chosen."

HARVARD ADMISSIONS DEAN BILL Fitzsimmons offers an explanation as to why there is often little difference in the credentials of those admitted and those denied admission. The 2,100 high-school seniors accepted by Harvard each year fall into three groups, he says: "Two hundred to 300 are truly unusual academically, including having won national and international competitions. Another group of about the same size does something extraordinarily well, such as music or athletics. The bulk of those admitted are in a third group—they are strong academically, personally, and extracurricularly." Fitzsimmons describes this latter group as "good all-arounders."

The bulk of the applicant pools at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Penn, and other highly selective colleges is made up of this third group. Most are outstanding but not world-class intellects who have taken a demanding curriculum that includes advanced-placement courses and, if their school ranks students, are in the top 10 percent of their class. They are active in their high schools and communities and have strong personal qualities. Who from this group gets a thumbs-up and who a thumbs-down can depend on variables beyond an applicant's control, such as whether there is a large number of strong applicants from the same high school that year.

Colleges do not have fixed quotas for any one high school. But in an effort to ensure a diverse class, they will admit only so many applicants from one school no matter how strong its applicant pool. Sometimes when a college is deluged with strong applicants from one high school, it will call the school to ascertain which students are most committed to attending and will factor that into its admission decisions. While a college may take six students from a high school one year and ten the next, the institution will not jump from 6 to 20 admits, even if the applicant pool from that school blows the admissions committee away.

What happens when a large number of strong students from a school applies to the same college? Witness what occurred last year at Fairfax County's Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a nationally known magnet school. Of a class of about 400, 104 students applied to Princeton; only 18—or 17 percent of the 104—were accepted. The acceptance rate was higher than Princeton's overall admission rate, but it meant that 86 classmates were turned away.

Gender also can come into play. Most selective colleges are on the lookout for women interested in the sciences, especially engineering. A female engineering major stands a better chance of winning admission to Penn than a male with similar credentials.

But the science bias toward women is an exception. Overall, there is a growing gender imbalance in the applicant pool of many highly selective institutions: Typically more women than men apply, especially at liberal-arts colleges. This has led to talk about the need for "affirmative action" for men. At some schools, all things being relatively equal, a male applicant has an edge over a female with similar academic credentials and interests as colleges try to maintain gender balance.

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WHAT ELSE CAN AFFECT AN ADMISSIONS committee's decision? Whether a student's counselor has written a recommendation that is mundane or one that makes him or her stand out from the pack—and whether the student has a talent that the school needs that year yet is not so outstanding as to have been highly recruited for that talent. For example, one year Duke may be looking for a French-horn player, the next a timpanist. An applicant with the same set of credentials who is a French-horn player may get in one year but not the next.

Being a legacy—the child of an alumnus—can matter, especially if the applicant's father or mother has been actively involved in the alma mater, such as in raising funds. That helps explain why George W. Bush, a so-so student in prep school, got into Yale. It is also advantageous to be a development-office case—meaning an applicant whose family is seen as a potential big donor to the institution—or a highly sought-after athlete. If applicants bring more than one of these advantages to the table, so much the better for them.

Many families find it hard to accept the fact that admission is not based on merit alone and that the outcome of the process is beyond parental control. This is particularly true in the nation's capital, where so many people are used to being able to influence the outcome of decisions.

Says Jack Blackburn, veteran dean of admission at the University of Virginia: "The process is not totally fair, and kids have to know that going in. It is disheartening to hear that, but those are the facts of life."

SOME FAMILIES THINK THAT IF A STUDENT takes just one extra advanced-placement course, becomes engaged in one more activity, or gets 50 more points on the SAT, that will make all the difference. But that's unlikely, say high-school counselors and admissions deans.

As far as the SAT is concerned, the "recentering" of the exam several years ago has produced higher scores—so more students now come close to scoring a perfect 1,600. At Harvard last year, 56 percent of the almost 19,000 applicants scored 1,400 or higher on the exam, and more than 2,500 applicants scored a perfect 800 on the math portion.

"The scores have become less-reliable indicators," says Harvard's Fitzsimmons. Though a growing number of selective liberal-arts colleges, most recently Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, no longer requires applicants to take the SAT I, most highly selective institutions still require the test. But once students attain a certain score, generally in the 1,400 vicinity at highly selective schools, an extra 50 or 100 points is unlikely to matter. Says Georgetown University admissions dean Charles A. Deacon: "You can get a perfect 1,600 and still not be assured of entry to a top school."

As for taking one more advanced-placement course, admissions deans say a single course rarely tips the scales. Counselors advise students to take a demanding curriculum that is consistent with their abilities but not to push themselves to the breaking point. "If kids take challenging courses and are involved in activities that they enjoy, they will have lots of college options," says Bonnie Fitzpatrick, director of guidance at Potomac's Churchill High School. "It is important to enjoy high school. It is a mistake to spend four years preparing for Princeton."

Accustomed to operating in a Washington culture where name-dropping and using pull is standard operating procedure, some parents think that a letter from a VIP can put a child over the top. That is rarely the case because most such letters are pro forma. Gary Ripple, former dean of admission at the College of William and Mary and later at Lafayette College, offers a case in point: A politician running for high office in Virginia pulled him aside one day and said, "If I'm elected, you'll be getting a lot of letters from me about admitting this student or that one. Don't pay attention to any of them."

Letters from VIPs are helpful only if the writer is a powerful alumnus of the institution or truly knows the student and can tell an admissions committee something meaningful about the applicant. Otherwise, says Harvard's Bill Fitzsimmons, "they simply become filler in an application folder." One letter that did make a difference, says Fitzsimmons, came not from a congressman or a Cabinet secretary but from a custodian. "He knew the student well and provided good examples of what a fine person the applicant was," recalls Fitzsimmons. "It really helped."

AS INTENSE AS THE COMPETITION IS AT selective colleges, it is going to get worse. More students are graduating from high school than a few years ago; that number will grow from 2.9 million this year to 3.2 million in 2008.

The ease of applying online and the growing acceptance by elite schools of the Common Application, which makes it easier to file multiple applications, will contribute to the surge. Whereas students once filed a handful of applications, many guidance counselors now recommend applying to eight schools. Some students think even that's not enough. Margaret Cothern, a veteran guidance counselor at Bethesda's Whitman High School, says her students "typically apply to 13 or 14 colleges. It's a waste of time, talent, and treasure."

The factor considered most responsible for the growing interest in top schools is a thirst for prestige. More families want a brand-name school for their child, and this is more true here than in many parts of the country.

"In the Washington area, for the private-school clientele, at least, there is a mentality about prestige," Maret School's King says. "Parents sometimes judge their kids based on what schools they get in to." King recalls one couple who took their daughter to visit only Ivy League colleges even though she was in the bottom half of her class. Only after King told the parents they were being unrealistic did they pull back from that path.

Karen Cottrell, associate provost for enrollment at William and Mary, attributes the fixation on prestige in part to the attention striving parents pay to college rankings, especially those by *U.S. News & World Report.* "The conversation that comes from rankings takes on a life of its own on the cocktail-party circuit," she says. "People don't spend enough time researching schools."

It is not just at private schools that prestige is valued. Emily Eckert, who graduated from Whitman High last spring and is now at Northwestern University, says that though her parents were supportive and helpful as she went through the process of considering colleges, some of her peers were not as fortunate: "There were parents who said, 'You have to go to that school because I went there or because that is where I wanted to go but never had the opportunity.'" Says Eckert: "This put a lot more stress on the students."

You don't need a degree in child psychology to realize that it is unwise to push a child toward a name college to fulfill parental desires. It can lead to applying to schools for which an applicant is clearly not qualified, and the subsequent rejection not only produces disappointment but also can erode a student's self-confidence and cause alienation between parent and child. Even a qualified student can be pushed into attending a highly selective school against his or her will with unfortunate consequences. Educational consultant Levin recalls one student who was accepted at Yale and enrolled because his father wanted him to: "I heard from his mother midway through the next year that he had self-destructed and come home because he wasn't where he wanted to be. The designer-label syndrome is so destructive. It is so wrong and painful for so many families."

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Parents who truly want what is best for their children adopt an approach that is calm and realistic, offering support and advice but letting the child take the lead and not insisting that Harvard or some other selective school is the only place worth attending.

ANY COMPETENT HIGH-SCHOOL COUNselor will tell families that there are hundreds of excellent, less-competitive institutions, and several are likely to meet an applicant's needs. Only about 65 colleges and universities admit less than half of those who apply. Such highly regarded institutions as Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Ohio's Oberlin College, and Macalester College in Minnesota admitted half or more of those who applied last year.

"Students tend to cluster around the same 10 or 12 schools," says Shirley Bloomquist, director of guidance and student services at Thomas Jefferson High. "But there are a lot of lesser-known jewels out there, and we try to get students to give some of these schools consideration."

Regardless of what colleges a youngster is considering—elite privates, liberal-arts gems, big publics, or some of each—there are basic steps to follow to ensure a successful outcome.

Students should first think about what they want in a college. Do they prefer a small, intimate place, a medium-size institution, or a mega-university? Would they be most comfortable in a city, a suburb, or a rural area? Do they place a premium on the strength of a college's academic program in their area of interest or have no idea what they want to study? And what kind of campus culture are they seeking—a place where students work hard and play hard, a small and scholarly place, a school where the counterculture is still alive and well, an institution where preppies predominate? Once students can answer these questions, they can begin to develop a list of schools intelligently.

With all the data available in guidebooks and on the Internet—including Web sites that generate a list of colleges after the student answers a set of questions—there is more than enough information available to come up with an initial list. Many high-school counselors will help students devise a list of institutions that fit their needs and to which they have a reasonable chance of being accepted. Some counselors compile five years of college-admissions data for their high school; they can look at every college to which their students have applied and tell families the academic records of those who have been admitted and those who have been rejected.

"I don't see how anyone can do college counseling and help kids make realistic choices unless they track admissions for their school," says Churchill's Fitzpatrick. Nina Marks of DC's National Cathedral School describes such longitudinal admissions data as "a reality check. It can provide quite a jolt, especially for parents." But it is a helpful jolt that enables families to think more realistically.

LIKE MANY PRIVATE-SCHOOL COUNselors, Marks helps her relatively small class of seniors refine college lists, critiques their application essays, and generally advises them. "I get to know the students in a way that public-school counselors cannot," she says.

Whereas college counseling at area private schools tends to be thorough—counselors who do not have a good track record of getting students into suitable schools do not last long—the picture is far more uneven at public schools.

Public-school counselors typically advise 250 to 300 students, rather than the 70

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who are Marks's charges at National Cathedral. Along with college advising, they also do students' schedules and deal with emotional and family crises. Even the most conscientious public-school counselors are hard-pressed to provide the same level of support as those in private schools. Churchill's Fitzpatrick, whom college admissions deans identify as one of the area's best public-school counselors, says that given the number of students she works with, she "can't spend the time I would like with juniors and seniors. We need a commitment from the top of the school system for counselors to spend time with kids."

A growing number of families find the counseling in public high schools unsatisfactory and turn to independent college counselors. Independent educational consultants generally charge $1,000 to $2,000, although some charge as much as $7,000, for a package of services that includes helping develop a list of schools and seeing that an applicant meets deadlines. Diane Epstein's College Planning Service in Bethesda counsels about 100 students a year; 80 percent of them attend public high schools. "At private schools, families pay on the order of $16,000 a year, so they ought to be able to get college counseling in the school," says Epstein.

Until recently, independent counseling has been a mom-and-pop business, but now big SAT-prep firms such as Kaplan, owned by the Washington Post Company, and the Princeton Review are entering the market.

WHETHER THEY WORK IN PUBLIC OR private schools or are independent, most counselors recommend that every student's college list contain schools that vary in selectivity. Many counselors divide a list into three categories: "safeties," institutions that a student has an almost 100-percent chance of being admitted to given his or her academic record; "likelies," institutions to which the applicant has a better than 50–50 chance of being admitted; and "reaches," institutions at which the odds of admission are no better than one in three. Counselors usually recommend that students apply to no more than two or three in each category. Some students load up their lists with reaches while skimping on the safeties; they are the ones most likely to find themselves unhappy when acceptance letters are mailed out.

After students have developed a list but before they apply, it is important to visit as many schools on the list as possible. A place may look good on paper or on the Internet, but a visit is the only way to ascertain that there's a good fit between the student and the institution.

Katie Barletta, who graduated from Thomas Jefferson High last spring, found her campus visits invaluable. The McLean resident just couldn't see herself at some of the schools she visited. One was Brown: "It was very liberal there," she recalls. "The feeling I got was that it wasn't right for me." Barletta scratched Brown off her list and ultimately enrolled at Harvard.

Similarly, Whitman graduate Emily Eckert eliminated Princeton after visiting the campus. "I didn't like the people I met," she says. "All they talked about was the traditions and how 'We're so wonderful.' I thought to myself: 'Oh, get over it.' "

For those who have the time and money to visit, it is best to plan trips in the spring of the junior year and early in the senior year, well before application deadlines.

There is yet another reason for visiting: Many colleges keep track of an applicant's contacts with the institution. If officials perceive that a student is not really serious about going there, they are far more likely to reject or wait-list the student. "We have kids who have gotten into enormously difficult schools and have been wait-listed or denied at somewhat less-selective schools, and the reason has been that they questioned whether the student was serious because she didn't visit," says National Cathedral's Marks.

Bill Hiss, vice president for external and alumni affairs at Maine's Bates College and the school's former dean of admissions, says a student's contact history with Bates is put on the applicant's folder. The college does not count the actual number of contacts, he says, but it does look at whether the student has carefully considered the reason for applying. "If a student has given no thought to whether they belong at Berkeley or Bates," says Hiss, "there is reason to question whether we want to use one of our admission letters on that student."

VISITS NOT ONLY HELP APPLICANTS REfine their college lists and demonstrate their interest; they also help students determine whether there is one school about which they are so passionate that they want to file an early application. A growing number of students who set their sights on highly selective colleges apply under the Early Decision program. Typically, those applying Early Decision submit applications by November 1 and get replies by mid-December. If admitted, they are required to withdraw applications from other institutions. Guidance counselors say those who are the least bit uncertain about where they want to go should not apply early. King at Maret School tells of a student who almost applied early to Oberlin but decided not to. She applied under the normal timetable to both Oberlin and Barnard, was admitted to both, and chose Barnard. "I have seen kids get in somewhere early only to say later that is not where they would go if they were reapplying," says King.

Though most colleges say that applying early does not give a student a competitive edge, the data suggest otherwise. Many institutions, such as Princeton, are now taking close to half of their class from the early pool, leaving far fewer slots available for the much larger number of students applying as part of the regular applicant pool.

One of the few highly selective colleges to acknowledge that applying early offers advantages is the University of Pennsylvania. "Everybody likes to be loved, and we're no exception," explains admissions dean Lee Stetson. "We tend to give a measure of preference to those applying early." In fact, those admitted from the regular pool have a slightly stronger academic profile than those admitted early.

For colleges, Early Decision offers a number of benefits. It allows an institution to lock in a big chunk of the class without having to worry about losing students to the competition. It also helps keep financial-aid budgets under control, because a disproportionate number of early applicants need little or no aid. In fact, counselors advise students with financial need not to apply early because, if accepted, they won't be able to compare aid offers.

Some colleges offer a variation on Early Decision called Early Decision II. The deadline is the same as the regular application deadline, usually January 1, but students hear back in about six weeks instead of having to wait until late March or early April. If admitted, they must withdraw all other applications. Early Decision II, because it offers a January rather than a November deadline, gives students more time to look at colleges.

Lizzie Lockwood, who graduated from National Cathedral School last spring, had not settled on a college by the regular Early Decision deadline. But by late fall, after visiting several, she realized that Wesleyan University in Connecticut was the place for her. "I loved the school on paper, and visiting it made me realize it was my first choice," she says. Lockwood applied Early Decision II and was admitted.

A few highly selective colleges, including Harvard, Brown, and Georgetown, use a system called Early Action rather than Early Decision. Early Action is nonbinding; students can apply and be admitted but do not have to commit to attend until May 1, leaving them free to apply to other institutions. Many counselors find this a more palatable approach than Early Decision because students can keep their options open as long as possible.

Colleges that use Early Action do so for both philosophical and practical reasons.

They believe its flexibility better serves the students—and the institutions end up with such a high proportion of early applicants who ultimately enroll, and have such strong applicant pools generally, that the risk for them is quite small.

WHETHER STUDENTS APPLY EARLY or regular decision, some parts of the process are constants, including the application essay and recommendations from counselors and teachers. Though much time and effort are devoted to essays—many English teachers make writing and critiquing college essays a class assignment—less attention has been paid to the role that recommendations play in the process. Yet, say admission deans, they are generally more important than the essay.

The University of Virginia's Jack Blackburn says that in 10 to 15 percent of admission cases, recommendations play a significant role. "If a student is on the cusp of admission, a recommendation can be so compelling that it puts the student over the top," he says. "It happens all the time."

Because counselors in public schools work with many more students than those in private schools, they tend not to know students as well and so are less able to write the kind of recommendations that can help a student stand out. One former Fairfax County counselor was notorious for writing virtually the same recommendation for every student.

College admissions deans are mindful of the workload faced by public-school counselors and try to take that into account, even making phone calls to high schools to obtain additional information. But, says Harvard's Fitzsimmons, "if colleges are not conscientious, students can be left by the wayside." Georgetown's Deacon advises students whose counselor does not know them well to make sure to get a strong recommendation from a teacher and to consider getting more than one, even if it is not required. The bottom line, says Blackburn, is that "when we see recommendations beautifully done with anecdotes, that affects us."

ONCE APPLICATIONS ARE COMPLETED and sent off, many colleges schedule alumni interviews. Some students tend to view such interviews as of little importance, but admissions deans at many highly selective institutions say these interviews have become increasingly helpful. Alumni interviewers can provide a college with a textured portrait of a student that may be lacking in a school recommendation. Penn's Stetson says that some students come to interviews with alumni and are "noticeably uninterested in Penn. When that word gets back, it helps us to make a decision."

In the period between submitting applications and mailing decisions, there may be communication between a college and a high school. More often than not the colleges initiate calls to get questions answered, but some counselors, especially at private schools, will call colleges to provide updated information on applicants and get a reading on how the colleges are viewing applicants from their school.

National Cathedral's Marks speaks to admissions officials "who have read a file to answer questions and to fill in the blanks. I will talk about what makes this kid tick, what makes her interesting. An admissions official may say: 'I notice that in the teacher recommendation the word "quiet" comes up. Is this person passive or shy?' I had to explain once that a student was raised in a different cultural atmosphere and so was not going to emote or be enthusiastic in class but that she was a remarkable young woman."

It is not inappropriate for applicants themselves to communicate further with a college, but the information should be germane. Efforts designed simply to keep a high profile with the admissions committee, such as sending in a mockup of *Time's* Man of the Year cover with the applicant's picture on it, are counterproductive. "We had one applicant who literally sent in a new recommendation every day from everyone he had ever met," recalls Harvard's Fitzsimmons. "We even got a letter from his orthodontist."

While the college-search process may seem as pleasant as having a tooth pulled without anesthesia, it needn't be. Families that take a sensible and methodical approach and remember that the goal is for children to end up at a suitable college they are enthusiastic about attending will find the process largely devoid of pain. It is those families that put parental egos ahead of their children's needs who are most likely to find it a hard, even nightmarish, experience. ☐

Ten Reasons Not to Try to Get Your Child Into Harvard

1. The price tag. A Harvard bachelor's degree costs on the order of $140,000—$35,000 a year for four years. Though Harvard and its peers have good financial-aid programs, the tab can be overwhelming for families deemed ineligible for grants. Is a Harvard degree worth a second mortgage?

2. The value. The economic benefit of attending an elite college may not be all it's cracked up to be. A Princeton economist and Mellon Foundation researcher found that students who were accepted at elite colleges but enrolled at institutions a notch or two lower on the academic food chain were earning more money on average than their elite peers 15 years later.

3. The stress. With Harvard accepting only about one in ten applicants, the pressure and anxiety of waiting for acceptance—or rejection—can be overpowering. Can your family handle it?

4. The high-school hassle. Though some kids are academic "naturals," able to cruise through a demanding schedule of advanced-placement courses, others are less well equipped to undertake a high-intensity high-school program. Is it worth pushing a child to the max, and then some, on the chance that he or she will get in?

5. The rude awakening. If your child has a fragile ego and is used to being number one in the class, Harvard is not the ideal place. It is filled with students who were at or near the top of their high-school class, and not everybody can cope with the discovery that there are people smarter than they are.

6. The intensity. Competition among Harvard undergraduates, especially those whose goal in life is to get into a top medical or law school, can be intense. Many students will be more comfortable in a mellower environment than Harvard provides.

7. The faculty. Many Harvard professors are world-class scholars, but not all are hospitable to undergraduates. Bright students are likely to receive more faculty attention at institutions that are less selective.

8. The traffic. Driving around Boston can make the Beltway at rush hour seem like a tea party. Boston drivers are among the nation's worst and most unyielding, especially at rotaries, where an ongoing game of chicken is played. Do you want to subject your child—and yourself—to that?

9. Logan Airport. Boston's airport is notorious for its delays and cancellations, even when East Coast weather is good. There you are at National Airport waiting for your child to arrive for Christmas vacation. You are informed that the flight has been cancelled. When you ask why, the person at the counter explains that it was windy in Boston. What's worse, there is not a seat available on a flight to Washington for three days. Driving from Boston to Washington? Better have a full bottle of tranquilizers.

10. The Red Sox. Many of those who enroll at Harvard end up hooked on the Red Sox. Are you willing to watch your child spend the rest of his life having his heart broken?