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Learning

from the April 12, 2005 edition

'No thanks, Harvard. I found a better fit.'

Is the pull of an Ivy school lessening - or is it just that much harder to get into one?

By **Teresa Méndez** | *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

When she opened the e-mail that would tell whether she had been accepted to Harvard, Lin Gyi was pretty certain (99.9 percent sure) that whatever it said didn't matter. Her mind was made up: She'd found a school that was a better fit.

Come next fall, Lin will be attending Swarthmore College, a top-tier liberal arts school in Pennsylvania. It wasn't her first choice. As fine as the 1,500-student college is reputed to be, to Lin it didn't quite have the luster of an Ivy League school.

But when she visited the Swarthmore campus not far from her home in Meadowbrook, Pa., she discovered a place where she could "fit right in" - something she has decided matters more than the prestige of a Harvard degree.

College counselors have long extolled the virtue of finding the school that fits, rather than opting for the one with the best-known name. Now, there may finally be early signs that students have been listening.

That's not to say Harvard and other elite universities should begin fretting about a dearth of applicants, or that the U.S. News & World Report college rankings will go unread.

But some educators see mounting



SCOTT WALLACE - STAFF

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evidence that high school seniors are themselves becoming more selective about college - with fewer adopting the "apply everywhere" strategy, and a majority professing to rank a school's "overall fit" above a prestigious reputation.

They are "ever so slightly paying more attention to the quality of the college experience and how it fits with a student's learning style," says Robert Massa, vice president for enrollment at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa.

Many who work with these students say they don't see the college "name game" losing its grip. Instead, the ever-intensifying competition may simply be forcing high schoolers to come to realistic terms with the slender odds of being accepted at the nation's most prestigious schools.

One way or the other, though, more say they are hearing tales like that of Christine Lutian.

Opting for a solid state school

A high school senior, Christine was considering applying to Middlebury College in rural Vermont until, on a trip to take the school's pulse and get a feel for whether she could "blend in," she encountered a quad full of students who looked to her "like they'd all just stepped out of an L.L. Bean catalog."

Christine, who is from Clinton, Conn., knew of the school's reputation as a highly regarded liberal arts college, but had hoped for more diversity. Middlebury students struck her as just a bit too "vanilla."

So rather than opting for a school considered one of the "little Ivies," Christine is almost certain she'll attend the University of Connecticut, a solid state school that's larger, nearer to major cities, and packed with a wider variety of people.

No one is suggesting that the top-ranked colleges have lost their lure. Many of the country's most elite schools saw application numbers leap even higher this year.

But educators do say, to some degree at least, students seem now to grasp better that the place they choose will become home, academically and physically, for the next four years.

Pragmatism may also play a part. Realizing that competition at the most coveted schools is fiercer than ever, students and parents have latched on to the idea of fit as a way of affirming their choices, some suggest.

"There's an interesting psychological twist here," says Mr. Massa. "Because the most popular colleges and universities, in the perception of parents and students, are impossible to get in to, they tend to buy into the notion of fit in order to justify the decision they ultimately make."

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The percentage of applicants admitted to Harvard has dipped into the single digits - 9 percent of more than 22,000 were accepted this year, an all-time low.

Jon Reider, director of college counseling at San Francisco University High School, says his students are "adapting" to these discouraging odds.

"They protect themselves," he says. "They say they don't expect to get into [Ivy League] Dartmouth, so when they don't, it's OK."

For the first time last year on its "College Hopes & Worries Survey," test-prep service Princeton Review asked students and their parents to identify the most important factors in choosing a college. Given three options, 71 percent chose "best overall fit," while 14 percent cited "best academic reputation."

This year a fourth answer choice was added, making it difficult to compare the two years. But 55 percent of the 3,930 respondents selected fit, while just 8 percent said reputation. The fact that so many chose fit over reputation two years in a row seems to undermine the long-held assumption that students are consumed with concern about prestige.

More telling may be that the number of students who applied to three or more schools declined by about 10 percent between 2002 and 2003, according to a finding by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Students may have become more discriminating on the front end of the admissions process, as well, suggests David Hawkins, public policy director at the National Association for College Admission Counseling in Alexandria, Va.

They "have figured out there's a point of diminishing returns when it comes to submitting tons and tons of applications," he says. Students may be "looking for the schools that are a better fit rather than going about it willy-nilly and sending out 15 applications."

Perhaps more for parents than students, the message of fit still seems to be muffled by the buzz surrounding annual college rankings - especially the list put out by U.S. News & World Report - and the name-brands they help create.

For parents who want the best for a child, an Ivy degree may still seem synonymous with success - though research tends to belie this. (Recent studies have shown, for example, that fewer heads of top corporations were educated at the eight Ivy League schools than in the past.)



HOW TO GET IN: An arch leads to the Harvard campus.
MELANIE STETSON
FREEMAN - STAFF

Yet with the cost of college continuing to climb - a typical undergraduate now borrows close to \$20,000 - even parents who can afford \$40,000 a year tuition find it preposterous to shell out that kind of money to a school they've never heard of.

Parents usually get on board with their child's college choice eventually, counselors say, sometimes out of necessity - that

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second choice or back-up may be the only option.

Yet even with this renewed talk of fit, James Fraser, a visiting professor at New York University's education school and former dean of the education school at Northeastern University in Boston, questions how much the luminescence of "names" has really dimmed. The real tension, as he sees it, is between rank and cost and convenience.

Whether the push comes more from students or their parents, Mr. Reider, the college adviser at San Francisco University High School, also says the tremendous "clout" carried by schools like Harvard, Yale, and Stanford remains "the bane of any counselor's existence."

At the same time, Reider is hearing a bit more thoughtful commentary from students like Joshua Parish, a senior at University High School, who says he would be turned off by a college where the students seemed unhappy - even if it had a great reputation.

"Prestige and reputation have a little bit to do with it," he admits. "But more for my ego than where I want to go to school."

Joshua thinks he's found a good match in Northwestern University near Chicago. He applied to 16 schools, and has yet to get final word from five, including Columbia, Brown, and Stanford.

But at this point he says he's had enough of the whole process - "I think I'm just going to blow them off and go to Northwestern."

As for Lin, she wasn't accepted to Harvard, which made her decision to become a Swattie - as Swarthmore students call themselves - that much easier.

• *Mary Beth McCauley in Philadelphia, Elizabeth Armstrong Moore in Portland, Ore., and Eliza Strickland in New York contributed to this report.*

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