

THE UNDERGRADUATE

Applying Yourself

by LIZ GOODWIN '08

ON A HOT SEPTEMBER DAY in 2004, President Lawrence H. Summers was addressing the large group of newly arrived freshmen and their parents about the wonders of the Harvard community. He mentioned Olympians, politicians, and dazzling professors. Then he began to speak of the “miracle” that Harvard performs on its students: an anecdote I later found printed in full on a Harvard website, if not in my memory.

Year after year we seem to deny the laws of mathematics. Here’s how we do it. We survey the freshmen, and we ask them, do you think you’re in the top half of the class or in the bottom half of the class? About 60 percent say that they’re in the bottom half of the class. We also survey seniors. Are you in the top half of the class or are you in the bottom half of the class? And almost two-thirds say that they are in the top half of the class. It’s really quite remarkable what we are able to do for you.

I remember parents and students laughing politely at this joke, enchanted by this easy promise of success. Summers seemed both avuncular and glamorous—impressive in his own towering success, yet welcoming us to Harvard in a way that was reassuring without being patronizing. *Perhaps at first it will be hard and you will be discouraged*, Summers seemed to say from his perch. *But by the end of four years you’ll be one of us: the confident, the elite, the educated.*

I grasped the magnitude of the challenge, already intimidated by the applications required for freshman seminars, the thought of taking classes with people smarter than I was, and the social marathon of integrating into a college of thousands of talented people my own age. But I had no idea of—and Summers did not mention—the emotional logistics of the “miracle” he claimed Harvard works upon its freshmen. I did not even wonder what might be involved in the transition from underestimating to overestimating one’s abilities.

SEVEN MONTHS LATER, I was lying in the bottom bunk of my cramped freshman double when I realized that I was a complete and utter failure. I simultaneously began to cry and reach for the medication I had just been prescribed for an unfortunate case of mono, which I would later refer to as “a disease without dignity.” After an auspicious start to my first year, there I was, flat on my back, diseased, and—even more shameful—unemployed for the coming summer. It seemed as if everyone else I knew had an impressive job already lined up, yet even thinking about trying to plan my own summer, a concept previously foreign, made me exhausted and sad.

My freshman year thus far had hinged on the unstoppable energy I brought to the task of adaptation and survival. I worked tirelessly to stay, as Summers might put it, above the bottom half. Joining the *Crimson*, excelling in English courses, and making friends, while all truly important to me, also served as reassuring checkpoints whenever I raised the internal question of my own inadequacy. In order to assuage my doubts, I applied for things with an almost manic energy: grants, student groups, jobs, and enrollment-limited classes. The opportunities for rejection are endless at an institution that prizes merit-based exclusivity, and I sought out an impressive number of them,



hoping for affirmation instead of denial.

If I saw a line, I got in it. Rushing for a sorority at the end of my freshman year was a symptom of this frantic need to join. Unsure of whether I liked the girls in the group, I still turned on the charm at the recruiting events and gained a spot among them. Yet despite all the groups I belonged to, I remember feeling utterly alone in my confusion and illness, as if my physical weakness made me an automatic outcast in an environment where to slow down was to be left behind. Recalling brutal images from old Discovery Channel programs of injured and dying animals being abandoned by the herd, I was certain that I would have to take time off or accept the fact that I had failed.

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It was not just the mono that had me feeling so defeated. As the youngest of four feisty siblings, my main survival skill has always been rapid and seamless adaptation. Complaining was never tolerated, so my first instinct is to adjust silently and quickly to whatever situation I am in. At Harvard, I instantly understood that to adapt successfully meant to excel at classes, social life, and preprofessional development, all with minimal discernible effort. I thought I saw this being accomplished everywhere—by roommates, by friends on the *Crimson*, by classmates—and I could not understand why I was having so much trouble emulating their easy perfection. In my frustration I left unexamined the question of what I actually *wanted*, too concerned with my fears about keeping up with everyone else to care about understanding my own desires.

What surprises me now about how disconnected and inept I felt then was my absolute assumption that I was alone in my fears of inadequacy. Alone, I berated myself for getting caught up in destructive comparisons of myself to my peers, or for not knowing what I wanted to do after college, or for not getting a stellar grade. I worried occasionally that I was

the only person I knew without a summer job lined up by November. I clammed up in sections, sure that my comments would be the least valuable of the discussion. Every small rejection or failure felt immeasurably personal, and it would have shocked me if someone had told me that other people had similar thoughts. Hiding my insecurities became almost another extracurricular activity, but one that nobody would put on a résumé.

To escape this unpleasant feeling, I decided to run away. I applied for a summer study-abroad program in Argentina and within months was taking classes in Buenos Aires, far from the environment that had so confused me. Abroad, I felt free to make mistakes, be imperfect, and admit how much I did not know. Much of the crushing pressure that had weighed upon me during the spring was gone, and I returned to school confident of my

ability to stay out of a competition for perfection that I was doomed to lose. But there were still pitfalls. Only a few months later, I found myself crying again, clutching the *University Gazette's* description of that year's Marshall Scholars. Their collective accomplishments felt oppressive. My instinct to adapt banged around, frustrated, inside of me, and I lacked the courage to seek advice from friends who I assumed would not be able to relate.

There was no one defining moment at which I made the switch from insecure freshman to cocky senior that Summers so confidently predicted. In fact, I am still not sure I would feel comfortable picking my own percentage-based place in the class of 2008. It smacks of the very comparisons and sidelong appraisals that contributed to my feeling so lost for two years. Yet, in gradually broaching the almost taboo subject of failure with my closest friends, it became harder and harder for me to assume infallibility in my peers and hopelessness in myself. That way of thinking began to look both self-pitying and unrealistic. Naturally and almost imperceptibly, my instinct to adapt and succeed stopped ruling my actions and thoughts, and space opened

up in my life to explore, to learn, and to breathe.

AND THEN, early this semester, I hit a wall again. About halfway through my belabored thesis proposal, in a moment of desperation, I decided that I needed a mentor, any mentor. After combing my inbox for a few minutes I found the desired e-mail—a notice, full of hope and exclamation marks, sent out over my House listserv about a program that matches undergraduates with a Radcliffe Institute fellow. I followed the link and filled out a brief form about my interests, motivation for seeking a mentor (procrastination?), and hopes for our future relationship.

A few weeks later, long after having forgotten I had ever applied, I received an e-mail politely informing me of my rejection from the mentor program. Alas, the letter explained, the number of qualified potential mentees was overwhelming, and the number of mentors sadly small, but I should certainly apply another time. I immediately walked out into our common room to tell my roommates.

"Another Harvard rejection!" I yelled.

They laughed, and we spent a good five minutes reminiscing about the numerous programs, grants, student groups, and classes from which we had been rejected over the past three years. Even before setting foot on campus, we discovered, many of us already felt inadequate and doomed to mediocrity. Stephanie mentioned that she had wanted to come to Cambridge early for the Freshman Arts Program, one of several optional orientation activities for incoming freshmen, but was told no. Avis said she was rejected from freshman seminars in her very first week. Kim remembered the grueling process of trying to land a summer job. Jenny cringed at the memory of her French language placement exam the first week of school.

Yet, somehow, as wizened seniors lolling about on hand-me-down futons, we found ourselves laughing about these rejections as if they never really mattered. And, perhaps, they didn't. ▢

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Liz Goodwin is slowly but steadily writing her senior thesis, with or without a mentor.*