

Chapter 1

Rejection-proof

Building the mental toughness of a CEO

How consecutive rejections from my dream school became a stepping stone for winning scholarships from Harvard, Wharton and other top universities

There's an important part of my story I haven't yet shared. For this I have to go back not just to before I received the fateful email on that wintry Auckland morning, but to before I arrived in New Zealand at the age of 15. In 2010, still in Ankang, I found myself anxiously pacing the hallway outside my teacher's office. I was about to find out whether I had passed the entrance exam for a prestigious high school known as North Poly.

North Poly is one of the academic crown jewels of northwestern China. It consistently ranks one of the top high schools nationally, in large part because of its *Gao Kao* results. In the US top universities limit admissions from any single high school to ensure diversity, but in China your fate rests entirely on an exam called the *Gao Kao*. No personal statements, no extracurriculars, no interviews—your raw performance on a single high-stakes test dictates which

university you can attend, what major you can study and even what jobs you will qualify for after graduation. North Poly is known for its rigorous, bootcamp-style training for Gao Kao and every year sends over 80 students to the best schools in China—Tsinghua and Peking, the country’s equivalent of the Ivy League. To put that into perspective, in my hometown of Ankang, a good year meant one or two students across the entire city made it to those schools. North Poly was the gateway to the nation’s most elite universities, an academic powerhouse and the ticket to a brighter future.

When the door opened at last, my teacher beckoned me into her office. Her expression was unreadable. My heart was pounding as she settled into her chair, pulled open a drawer and sifted through a thick stack of papers until she found my results. She exhaled before speaking.

‘I’m very sorry to tell you that you did not pass the exam’.

I had known the competition was brutal, but I’d been hoping for a miracle.

‘There are plenty of good high schools nearby’, she said, offering a small nod of consolation. ‘You’ll still get a solid education’.

A lump formed in my throat, but I refused to let it show. I couldn’t believe I was being told to move to my Plan B. This was the second time I had tried for admission to North Poly, and the second time I’d been rejected, but I wasn’t ready to give up. I had spent months preparing, and despite my best efforts I had twice fallen short. My usual study methods weren’t enough. My academic strengths weren’t enough. *I* wasn’t enough—that realisation stung most.

My only remaining chance to get into North Poly was the Zhong Kao—the high-stakes exam that every middle school graduate in the Shaanxi province took. It covered a wide range of subjects, from

Chemistry to History, but I felt more confident about this kind of academic all-rounder. I needed a score of at least 650 out of 730 to secure a place. It was a high bar but given my consistent performance in mock exams at school, it was well within my reach. Taking no chances, I worked tirelessly in the months leading up to the exam, going through every past paper I could get my hands on, subject by subject, chapter by chapter. When D-day arrived, I entered the exam hall with confidence. I felt good about this.

Weeks later the final results were announced across Shaanxi province. I received 648, a very respectable score that would allow me to attend any school in my hometown. But I missed the mark for North Poly by two points, and that two-point shortfall sealed my fate.

Two points short of my goals

The two points that did me in were in the PE component, where I scored only 46 out of 50. The PE evaluation was so routine that in previous years everyone received a 50. And as the champion of the men's 400-, 800-, 1500- and 3000-metre events at our school's sports challenge that year I hadn't worried about the PE test at all.

I asked my teacher for an explanation and was told, 'There were technical issues with the system, so to ensure fairness, everyone received a 46'. I pushed back and asked for a re-test, but they shut me down. 'That's not possible. The matter is closed for discussion'.

That was it. No appeal. No second chance. Had I scored 50, or even 48, my overall score would have been sufficient to get me into North Poly. Instead, for the third and final time, I missed my shot. I was devastated. This marked the single biggest academic setback I had ever experienced in my life. For years, I had meticulously planned to excel through middle school so I could attend North Poly, leveraging

its opportunities and resources, and ultimately paving my way to the best higher education in China. These carefully laid plans crumbled before my eyes.

I returned home in a daze. Unable to face my family and friends, I shut myself in my room to grapple with a sense of aimlessness and confusion about my future. To my 15-year-old self, the onset of that summer marked the bleakest period of my life, a time riddled with doubt and uncertainty. I began to question the value of all my efforts. Why keep trying if hard work doesn't guarantee results?

Then my dad stepped in.

Turning rejection into motivation

My father was a painstakingly meticulous civil engineer who spent his days designing bridges, tunnels and vital infrastructure in our mountainous hometown. Rational to the core, he rarely concerned himself with the emotional aspects of family matters. But this time he came to me and asked, 'Do you think Michael Jordan had a successful career?'

My father and I shared a passion for basketball. He had been the one to teach me how to dribble, pass and shoot, and more importantly, how to read the court—to anticipate plays and to stay a step ahead of the game. We spent countless hours practising on the worn-down court next to his office and watching NBA games at weekends. Across the Pacific, MJ was more than a basketball player. He was a legend, an icon, a symbol of perseverance and greatness. Like millions of other aspiring players, I had looked up to him for as long as I could remember.

So when my father asked me about Jordan's career, I gave him a look. Was this a trick question? With six NBA championships and five NBA MVP honours to his name, there was no doubt he was

the greatest player of all time. Then my father leaned forward and said, 'Did you know he faced a major rejection early in his career?'

I frowned. MJ? Rejected? That didn't seem possible.

As it turned out, Jordan's basketball journey didn't start as smoothly as I had always assumed. He attended Emsley A. Laney High School in Wilmington, North Carolina, and in the fall of 1978 as a sophomore he tried out for the varsity basketball team. At the time he stood at around 5'10". He was a talented player, but far from the GOAT he would later become. Despite his skills, he wasn't selected for the varsity squad but was placed on the junior varsity team, because the coach thought he needed more time to develop.

This rejection could have been a crushing blow to Jordan's aspirations. However, he refused to be defeated. Instead, he used it as a catalyst for improvement, delivering an outstanding season on the JV team, reportedly averaging around 25 points per game. His performance, combined with a growth spurt that saw him grow several inches over the next year, secured him a spot on the varsity team in his junior year. His basketball career skyrocketed and he became a star player in high school, in college and eventually in the NBA.

The sting of rejection had burrowed deep into my self-esteem, clouding my thoughts with self-doubt and frustration, but Jordan's story persuaded me to reframe my failures. If he could overcome rejection and go on to achieve great things, why couldn't I?

I realised that I had fundamentally underestimated the gap between where I stood academically and the level of excellence North Poly demanded. I was so fixated on the prestige of the institution that I had neglected to assess my own capabilities and the type of student the school sought. Each year over 330 000 middle school graduates in Shaanxi compete for just 700 spots at North Poly, an acceptance rate of a mere 0.2 per cent. The cut-throat competition

meant that schools like North Poly had no choice but to select from the best of the best and then teach them advanced English as well as Olympiad-level maths. I had neither done the necessary research nor adequately prepared for the daunting level of difficulty of the North Poly entrance exams. I needed to confront this gap and adjust my expectations, but that didn't mean I had to accept failure.

Like Student, Like Entrepreneur: Grow from your setbacks

In the startup world, rejection and setbacks are not just common — they are often essential stepping stones to success. The best founders and CEOs don't just persevere through rejection — they embrace it as a powerful tool for profound personal growth. Venture capitalists famously reject over 99 per cent of the startups that pitch to them. Many of today's most successful entrepreneurs, from Jeff Bezos to Elon Musk, have faced numerous rejections at critical points in their careers.

Consider the story of Airbnb. Despite being turned down by 20 different venture capital firms who doubted anyone would ever pay to stay in a stranger's home, they persisted. They refined their pitch, and eventually they secured funding. Today Airbnb is an \$80 billion company that has revolutionised the travel industry.

It's helpful to think about the idea of iterative improvement. Startups frequently adopt a 'fail fast, learn faster' methodology, using each failure as an opportunity to pivot and improve their product or strategy. My repeated attempts at the North Poly entrance exams were essentially exact iterations of the same process. Just as successful entrepreneurs use feedback loops to strengthen their ventures, I needed to embrace rejection as a form of feedback to propel me forward.

A pillar of ‘character’: Understanding the game

It is imperative that as we navigate important milestones as students, we balance our aspirations with a clear-eyed understanding of the competitive landscape. There is a fine line between audacious confidence and calculated risk. We may enter the fray with the boldness of a gambler, betting on a fortuitous stroke of fate, or we may approach the battle with the strategic foresight of a chess master, aware of the potential for loss yet undeterred in pursuit of victory. It’s the latter that embodies the true essence of courage—to confront the unknown with preparation and resolve, rather than with baseless optimism.

Figure 1.1 shows a simple yet powerful way to make sense of how we balance aspiration with competitive awareness. It maps four possible mindsets we often fall into when making high-stakes decisions—whether applying to an elite school, starting a new venture or choosing your next academic challenge.

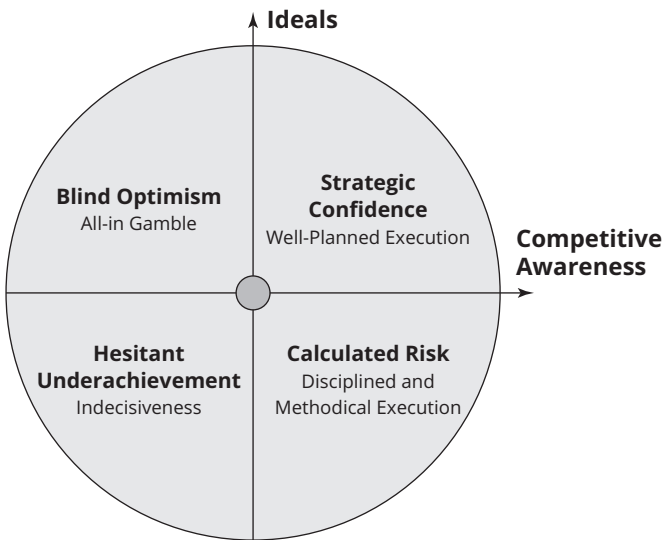


Figure 1.1 *balancing aspiration with competitive awareness*

Quadrant 1: Blind optimism

In the top left quadrant, we find Blind Optimism. This is the mindset I unknowingly embraced in my North Poly attempts—high aspiration but painfully low awareness. I had ambition, yes, but I placed my bets without fully understanding the game. Like a gambler convinced that luck alone would carry me through, I charged ahead unaware of either the steep odds or what true readiness looked like. This quadrant is defined by hope untethered from preparation, in which dreams are built on shaky foundations.

Quadrant 2: Strategic confidence

The top right quadrant is where true strategic thinkers reside: Strategic Confidence, or the Chess Master’s Approach. High aspiration is matched with high awareness. Rather than lowering your goals, you raise your game. You study your opponents and build your plan like a grandmaster getting ready for their big match. You know what you’re getting into and you move forward guided not by blind faith but by grounded optimism. This is where the most impressive student decisions tend to come from, whether you’re launching a passion project in a saturated field, but doing it with a unique edge, or applying to a hyper-selective university with a plan that shows you’re not just another applicant—you show up as the kind of candidate they didn’t know they needed.

Quadrant 3: Hesitant underachievement

The bottom left corner is the land of missed opportunities. You’re unsure of your chances or of what’s possible, so you aim low and often sell yourself short. Students in this quadrant may never apply for that competitive summer program at the Research Science Institute or becoming Head Prefect at school, not because they lack ability but because they’ve never been given the awareness

or encouragement to stretch beyond what's comfortable. It's like showing up to a chess match and resigning before your first move.

Quadrant 4: Calculated risk

Finally, the bottom right quadrant represents Calculated Risk, or the Balanced Strategy. You might not aim for the absolute peak—North Poly or Harvard or becoming an Olympic champion—but you've done your homework and know exactly how your strengths align with real-world opportunities. You make small and smart bets. You stretch, but you don't snap. For many students, this quadrant can be a sweet spot, as ambition is not significantly compromised but sharpened by clarity.

In hindsight, I wish someone had shown me this framework when I was younger. I might have approached North Poly less as a blind leap than as a deliberate climb—still aiming high but with better gear and clearer footing.

Dream big, but do the math — Jack's story

Throughout my years of mentoring, I have observed a recurring pattern of suboptimal expectation-setting driven by a lack of careful research among students despite their academic brilliance. This was the case for one of my students, a high-schooler from Australia named Jack. Jack had set his sights on going to a 'top 20' American university such as Carnegie Mellon. So I asked about his SAT scores.

When applying to universities in the US, students are required to take the SAT—a standardised test that assesses proficiency in reading and writing as well as mathematics. Colleges use SAT scores

to evaluate applicants' academic competence and their likelihood of succeeding in rigorous coursework. Jack scored 1440. I didn't know how to break it to him that it wasn't going to be enough.

While Jack's desire to venture halfway across the globe to attend a highly selective American institution was perfectly understandable and admirable, his ambition was not grounded in a realistic assessment of his profile. I walked him through the Common Data Set (CDS) published by Carnegie Mellon. The CDS provides a standardised set of information that colleges and universities voluntarily provide to the public, which includes information on the admissions process, including application deadlines, requirements and the profile of admitted students. I explained that using tools like the CDS is how students move from Blind Optimism. Table 1.1 shows the section on standardised tests.

Table 1.1 *excerpt from the Common Data Set, Carnegie Mellon University*

	25th percentile	50th percentile	75th percentile
SAT composite	1500	1540	1560
SAT evidence-based reading and writing	720	750	770
SAT math	770	790	800

When we examined the section on standardised tests, the numbers painted a clear picture. Jack's 1440 SAT score, while respectable, fell well below the median for admitted students, which stood at 1540, with the 75th percentile reaching 1560. Standardised tests aren't everything, but this was an important signal: his aspirations sat firmly in the top-left quadrant of our matrix; that is, the domain of Blind Optimism. He was dreaming big without truly understanding the odds.

Jack was taken aback. He admitted he hadn't reviewed the admissions data and had no idea just how competitive his target school was. That conversation helped shift his mindset. He moved from high aspiration with low awareness to a more grounded position (closer to the bottom-right quadrant of Calculated Risk), where he could still dream ambitiously, but now do so with a better-informed application strategy. He expanded his college list to include other renowned, great-fit local schools, such as the University of Melbourne and Monash University, and diversified his plan both emotionally and tactically.

Your Turn

Jack's story tells us it is helpful to understand the game before you play it. Now it's time for you to apply the same logic to your own goals. The short exercises below will help you move from blind optimism into calculated, data-driven action.

Exercise 1: Mind the gap

- Recall a time when you underestimated the amount of preparation or effort needed for, say, an exam, a sports tryout, a project or even a hobby.
- Write down:
 - how high you thought the bar was as you began
 - how high it turned out to be
 - how you might better have researched or anticipated the real expectations.

Exercise 2: Scout the competition

- Research, or imagine, the acceptance rates, requirements or competition for something you want — whether a university, a job or a sports team.

- Compare it with your current level of preparation.
 - Reflection prompt: 'If I'm at level X, and the competition is at level Y, what's my concrete plan to bridge that gap?'
-

The Dunning–Kruger effect

It is not uncommon for people with limited knowledge in a particular area to overestimate their abilities or their likelihood of success. In their 1999 study, David Dunning and Justin Kruger, professors of psychology at Cornell University, conducted a series of experiments to investigate the cognitive bias that would later be known as the Dunning–Kruger effect.³

In one of their key experiments, Dunning and Kruger gave 45 undergraduate students at Cornell a 20-question logic test. They then asked the participants to evaluate their performance across two dimensions. First, the professors asked the students to simply estimate how many questions they had answered correctly. More interestingly, they then asked the students to estimate how they performed against their peers. This type of self-assessment required students to guess how others did and was subject to a common cognitive bias: most people consider themselves to be better than average.

The curve in figure 1.2 captures this illusion beautifully. It shows people start their learning journey with very limited knowledge, but often experience a steep spike in confidence early on—a phenomenon dubbed the 'Peak of Mount Stupid'. At this stage, they don't recognise how low their level of competence is, which can lead to overconfidence, bravado and sometimes reckless ambition. As they gain a bit more experience and begin to recognise the depth of

the field, their confidence tends to plummet, casting them into the ‘Valley of Despair’. This is the humbling phase when people realise how much they don’t know and imposter syndrome or self-doubt can kick in.

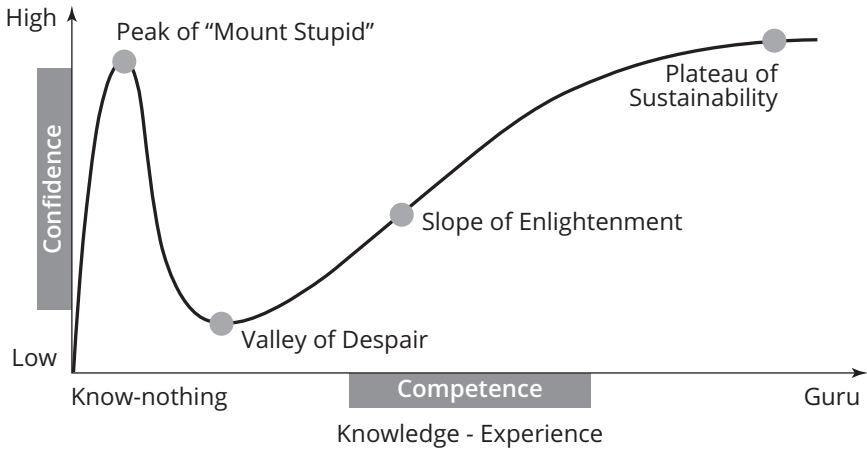


Figure 1.2 *the Dunning-Kruger effect curve*

The curve doesn’t end there, however. With persistence and reflection, individuals embark on the ‘Slope of Enlightenment’ and their growing competence begins to align with a more grounded sense of self. Eventually they arrive at the ‘Plateau of Sustainability’. Confidence is high again but this time it is grounded in genuine expertise and hard-won understanding.

Empirical studies reveal that 93 per cent of Americans think they are better than average drivers and 90 per cent of teachers think they are more skilled than their peers. This overestimation is pervasive across many domains, including logic tests. Of course, it is mathematically impossible for most people to be better than average at a certain task. The Dunning-Kruger effect highlights the disconnect between perceived and actual competence. It underscores the importance of

continuous learning to improve self-awareness and develop a more accurate understanding of our competition.

Figuring out where we stand in relation to the competition helps us avoid setting unrealistic expectations. Not only will more realistic expectations result in fewer rejections but we will find those that do come less shocking as we have already mentally priced in the risks and prepared for an alternative.

Like Student, Like Entrepreneur: Beware the peaks of Mount Stupid

Understanding the rules of the game and setting realistic expectations are core principles in entrepreneurship. Successful entrepreneurs know that market research and competitive analysis are essential for avoiding costly missteps. A startup founder, like a student applying to a top institution, must evaluate the landscape, identify their unique value proposition and assess whether what they have to offer aligns with market demands.

Take, for example, the story of Quibi, a short-form streaming platform founded by Hollywood moguls. Despite raising nearly \$2 billion, Quibi failed to gauge its market dynamics and overestimated its appeal in a crowded streaming industry. Similarly, students who fail to evaluate their standing in the competitive pool risk pursuing goals that are not aligned with their current capabilities or preparation, resulting in disappointments that could have been avoided.

The Dunning-Kruger effect can also be used to explain entrepreneurial pitfalls in which founders with limited market knowledge overestimate their ability to succeed. In Silicon Valley,

countless startups launch with bold visions but falter because of a lack of thorough research or unrealistic expectations. Startups like Juicero, which sold expensive juicers without truly understanding consumer behaviour, exemplify this disconnect. Despite securing \$120 million in startup venture capital from prominent investors like Kleiner Perkins and Google Ventures, Juicero closed its doors four years after its launch in 2017 following slow sales. By contrast, companies like Slack succeeded by first conducting extensive research into user needs and refining their product to meet market demands, turning a simple idea into a \$28 billion exit to Salesforce in 2020.

Understanding the game and how to play it is essential to building capital-C Character in the Classroom CEO Flywheel. Taking the time to understand the academic honours and leadership opportunities available and the selection criteria, alongside each university's admissions data, competitor profiles and realistic benchmarks, allows for better informed decisions, minimising misaligned aspirations while maximising the likelihood of success.

Upgrade to a growth mindset

In the summer following the rejections I was beset by negativity. I let the rejections define my self-worth and failed to give myself enough credit for trying. North Poly was incredibly challenging to get into, and the fact that I tried not once, not twice but three times was actually commendable. I had narrowly viewed the outcome in a binary way: I could see only a complete triumph or an utter failure. I ignored anything in between.

Such a perspective was overly simplistic because the situation wasn't black or white. Even though I wasn't good enough for the school, my academic skills had improved tremendously since I began the admissions process because of my exposure to intellectually stimulating materials. This realisation aligns with the principles of American psychologist Carol Dweck's *growth mindset*. I was lucky enough to take her class at Stanford, in which she explained this mindset as the power of viewing challenges as opportunities to learn and grow rather than as measures of innate ability.

In her ground-breaking book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Dweck outlines the distinction between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset.⁴ Individuals with a fixed mindset perceive abilities as static—they believe they are either good at something or they are not, so failures reflect personal inadequacies. By contrast, those with a growth mindset view abilities as malleable and believe that effort and perseverance always lead to improvement.

Studies on academic tenacity support the idea that adopting a growth mindset can positively influence resilience and outcomes. For example, research conducted by Dweck and her colleagues shows that students who believe intelligence, rather than being fixed, can be developed, tend to persevere through challenges, achieve higher grades and develop greater confidence. These students often see challenges or setbacks as opportunities to learn. As a result, they respond with constructive thoughts (*maybe I need to change my strategy or try harder*), feelings (the thrill of a challenge) and behaviours (persistence). Dweck's findings tell us that viewing rejection as a stepping stone rather than a dead end can be a powerful catalyst for growth.

Post-traumatic growth, a psychological theory developed by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, provides another framework for understanding the positive outcomes of adversity.⁵ Post-traumatic

growth occurs when individuals emerge stronger and more resourceful after experiencing significant setbacks or hardships. While rejection is not on the scale of a traumatic event, it can certainly trigger a high degree of distress. I eventually emerged from the emotional turmoil I experienced with greater clarity about my strengths and areas for improvement. I developed a deeper understanding of my personal limits, learning to take setbacks in stride and using them as opportunities to reassess my strategies. At Crimson, I often observe rejections becoming a crucial turning point in a student's journey.

The transformative power of rejection — Andrew's story

I remember a particular student, Andrew, whose experience illustrates the transformative power of rejection. Andrew was, by all accounts, an extraordinary student—a national-level physicist, a talented classical musician and the inventor of a device designed to help young learners of musical instruments. His academic record was equally impressive, boasting 15+ Advanced Placement (AP) courses and exceptional standardised test scores. With a profile that seemed tailor-made for top US colleges, Andrew applied to his dream school, Stanford, during the early application round.

In the US college application process, there are generally two major rounds—early and regular. Ambitious and talented students often aim to leverage the early round. By summer they have already worked tirelessly to perfect their essays, compile their résumés and achieve strong test scores. Their goal is to submit their applications by the early deadline (usually November) so they will hear back by mid December—more than two weeks before the regular decision deadline.

On December 15 Andrew's decision arrived: a clean rejection. It wasn't even a deferral, which would have kept his application in the running for the regular decision round. Understandably he was devastated. Years of hard work and preparation seemed to have been dismissed in a single moment. I felt the weight of his disappointment. As his mentor, I offered my support, reminding him that the regular decision round still presented plenty of opportunities to apply to other prestigious universities.

What struck me most, however, was his ability to turn this setback into a springboard for growth. Despite his initial heartbreak, Andrew displayed remarkable resilience. Instead of succumbing to despair, he channelled his energy into improving his application. He rewrote parts of his essays, refilmed his introductory video, and polished his entire submission one more time. In other words, he used the two-week window before the regular decision deadlines to reflect, refine and present an even stronger version of himself.

When the regular decision round results came in, his hard work paid off—he was admitted to Harvard, Duke, Cornell, Cambridge and other top universities around the world. The rejection that had been so devastating just months earlier became the catalyst for a renewed and more focused effort that ultimately led to his success.

Your Turn

Andrew's comeback shows how brutal rejection can become a catalyst for growth when you choose to learn from it instead of being defined by it. The following exercises will help you reflect on your own setbacks and uncover the hidden strength and insight that can come from them.

Exercise 1: Flip the coin

- Write down a rejection you've faced.
- Split the page in half:
 - **Pain side:** What hurt most (emotions, losses, expectations shattered)?
 - **Power side:** What skills, insights or strengths came out of it (or could if you reframed it)?

Reflect: What would I lose if I only stared at the pain side of the coin? What could I gain by flipping it?

Exercise 2: The rejection résumé (one of my favourite activities)

- Create a 'résumé of failures'.
- For each 'failure' or rejection, write down:
 - the event (say, 'Didn't make varsity soccer' or 'Rejected by XYZ school')
 - the lesson learned
 - the strength gained.

Reflect: How is this version of my résumé more honest than my regular achievements list?

Always have a BATNA (or Plan B)

Rejection hits harder when you don't have a solid Plan B. When you narrow your focus to a single outcome, you become overly reliant on that one possibility, which amplifies your disappointment if it doesn't materialise. Failing to consider alternatives is akin to investing all your money in a single stock instead of building a diversified portfolio. Seasoned investors build diversified portfolios to reduce risk. A single stock may offer the promise of high returns,

but a well-balanced portfolio ensures stability and resilience to market volatility. If you don't diversify, you put all your eggs in one basket—a strategy that is not only inadvisable in investing but suboptimal for many aspects of your education journey.

When I applied to North Poly, I was narrowly focused on that one goal. I didn't seriously consider alternatives, even though there were several other high schools in Shaanxi of a similar calibre. When my ninth-grade teacher suggested a Plan B, I shut down. In hindsight, this approach was deeply flawed. I had ignored what I later learned in Stanford's organisational behaviour class is termed the Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement. BATNA was coined by Roger Fisher and William Ury in their 1981 bestseller, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Without Giving In*. My failure to identify or leverage a BATNA left me vulnerable to rejection and with no contingency plan.

Had I considered my BATNAs—such as researching and applying to multiple comparable schools—I would have significantly reduced the risk of being left empty-handed. Statistically, the joint probability of being accepted into at least one of these schools would have been greater than the probability of being admitted to North Poly. This diversification of efforts would not only have improved my chances of success but also softened the emotional blow of rejection. Students can adopt this same mindset by diversifying their goals, whether that involves applying to multiple schools, trying different competitions or contacting a variety of companies to increase your chances of being offered an internship.

When it comes to early versus regular applications, one of the most important pieces of advice I give to my students is to have their regular decision materials ready way before the early results are released in mid December. Many students make the mistake

of waiting until then to begin thinking about their regular-round applications. This approach is risky because it leaves you with a very small window that overlaps with Christmas and New Year holidays in which to pull together your essays and polish the rest of your applications. In every application season, I push my students hard to have their regular-round files ‘ready-to-submit’ by the beginning of December. This timeline allows you to focus on fine-tuning, which reduces stress and ensures you are emotionally prepared to pivot to the regular round if your early applications don’t go as planned. By being ready ahead of time, you will be ready to approach the regular decision process with confidence and a clear mind, increasing your chances of submitting higher quality applications.

Like Student, Like Entrepreneur: Pivot rejection into success

Startups often begin with a primary business model, but those that thrive are prepared to pivot. Netflix is a prime example. When it launched in 1997, its primary business model focused on DVD rentals by mail. It was a revolutionary idea at the time, offering convenience and selection traditional video rental stores couldn’t match. Yet, despite its success, Netflix’s leadership recognised that the market was rapidly evolving. The rise of high-speed internet and digital media consumption posed a threat to physical media, and companies that failed to adapt — such as Blockbuster, once an industry giant — risked extinction.

Netflix didn’t wait for the market to force its hand. It had a BATNA in place: a bold pivot from DVD rentals to streaming

(continued)

services. It wasn't an overnight shift. Netflix invested heavily in technology, licensing agreements and user experience to prepare for the transition. When the time came, the company moved seamlessly from mailing DVDs to offering on-demand streaming, revolutionising the way people consumed entertainment.

This adaptability didn't stop there. Netflix continued to refine its business model by expanding into original content production, releasing blockbuster shows like *House of Cards* (one of my all-time favourites), *Stranger Things* and *The Crown*. This move further solidified its position as it expanded beyond being solely a platform for content consumption to being a creator of award-winning media.

By January 2025 Netflix had amassed over 300 million subscribers worldwide, its market cap surpassing \$410 billion. Its success story is a testament to the power of having a BATNA — a well-thought-out alternative strategy to be executed when the original plan no longer serves a business's needs.

Success is rarely about a single outcome. It's about adaptability, preparation and resilience. Whether you're navigating your education journey or building a startup, having alternatives allows you to remain flexible and maintain momentum even when the unexpected happens. A life path is rarely linear so the ability to pivot, reassess and pursue new opportunities often makes the difference between stagnation and growth. Planning for alternatives, such as getting your regular-round files ready before receiving your early results, is never a sign of doubt or weakness—it's a strategic approach that ensures you're always ready to move forward, no matter what challenges arise.

When I later studied at Stanford GSB I worked with several world-renowned faculty as a research assistant. I continued to be amazed by the fact that rejection doesn't disappear even at the top. You'd think that once you reach Stanford-level prestige, publishing papers or securing research approvals would be effortless. It's anything but. I watched leaders in their fields with decades of training receive countless rejections and 'R&Rs' (revise and resubmit) from academic journals. Some papers took five years to finally see publication. Fortunately, each rejection pushed them to rethink, refine and strengthen their arguments. For instance, I saw one professor's data request to the US Census Bureau get repeatedly rejected—something I thought was supposed to be super straightforward! But rather than taking it personally, he calmly rewrote the entire proposal multiple times and submitted it again and again, each version more developed than the previous. Getting into Stanford was hard enough, but seeing Stanford professors still face rejection regularly, and use it to sharpen their work, was tremendously inspiring.

After facing and reflecting on my early rejections I began to embrace rejection as a natural and necessary part of my growth. Rejection no longer held me back; it became something I welcomed rather than feared. When I applied to Stanford, Harvard, Wharton, MIT, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Cambridge and Carnegie Mellon for various graduate programs, I was no longer afraid of hearing 'no'. I approached these opportunities with confidence, knowing that the outcome was less important than the process of trying and experimenting. Each application became smoother and each rejection easier to digest. I still face rejection from time to time, but I greet it with a smile. Rejection has become a trusted friend—one that challenges me to adapt, reflect and ultimately to become a more resilient version of myself.

Key Takeaways

Despite the undeniable importance of resilience in life, it is rarely, if ever, taught in schools. From K-12 to university classrooms, resilience is often relegated to the realm of personal experience rather than to formal education. But you can take proactive steps to build resilience by focusing on three key principles.

First, you must understand the ‘rules of the game’, assess your own limits and set realistic expectations. This involves first carefully evaluating the competitive landscape, accurately identifying your strengths and weaknesses and approaching challenges with a strategic mindset rather than with unfounded optimism. Second, embrace a growth mindset — the belief that abilities can be developed through effort and persistence. By reframing rejection as an opportunity for growth, you will be able to focus on the skills and insights gained from setbacks rather than fixating on the outcome. Third, whether an academic or career plan or a personal goal, always prepare a solid BATNA. Having clear alternatives reduces the emotional impact of rejection and provides a path forward when initial efforts don’t work out.

Handling rejection and resilience may not (yet) be formally taught in your school curriculum, but these are steps towards developing a vital skill that will help you succeed as a student.