

CHAPTER 2

COPING WITH REJECTED COLLEGE ADMISSIONS APPLICATIONS: GETTING INTO SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

Had I not been admitted to Swarthmore College after my service in the Navy, the possibility of an academic career might have ended for me. After graduation from high school, I entered Pennsylvania State University and majored in biochemistry. An uncle, Walter Latshaw, had a PhD in biochemistry and left Kansas State University when the chemistry building burned to conduct air pollution studies for a mining company in Utah. His career choice was the only academic field I knew, so I chose biochemistry also. In the middle of my undergraduate career at Penn State, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. My academic career was interrupted, as was virtually everyone's life at that time.

I met my spouse Jean at Penn State. She completed her degree in biochemistry, and we were married during the war. When the war ended, we had our daughter Karen.

I could have been readmitted to Penn State, but housing was scarce. Even had housing been available for married students with children, the GI Bill money I was relying on would almost certainly not have been adequate to cover living costs. My mother-in-law, Eleanor Ogden, owned a house where Jean and Karen were already occupying one room. The three of us could live there if I enrolled in a Philadelphia-area college. So, I immediately began making the rounds of the colleges in the larger Philadelphia area within reasonable, and even unreasonable, commuting distance. The first five institutions quickly turned me down. Since many veterans were attempting to enroll, the decision of these colleges was quite rational, but very unfortunate for me.

Finally, I approached Swarthmore College; I knew nothing of its stature or high admissions standards. My first interview was with Dean Everett Hunt. This interview immediately alerted me to the fact that Swarthmore College was indeed unique. My encounters at the previous institutions had been with staff members in the admissions offices, and I had not even encountered a faculty member, let alone a dean. I did initially encounter staff members at Swarthmore also, but they immediately sent me to Dean Hunt's office. Regrettably, I cannot remember my conversation with him in detail, but I did discuss my past academic record, why I thought I would do better, and what my hopes were for the future. I had refocused my academic interest on biology, as a result of reading while I was in the Navy and of talking with some of the persons with whom I served. One part of the interview, however, I do remember vividly. Dean Hunt asked me how I had chosen Swarthmore. I described how I had taken a map and, with a compass, had drawn a circle of a certain diameter around my mother-in-law's house, where my family and I could live. I related how I was hoping I could find a college within the circle, which represented a reasonable commuting distance, willing to accept me. Dean Hunt then had what appeared to be an uncontrollable coughing fit, which only weeks later did I realize was almost certainly an attempt to cover his uproarious laughter. He then wiped his eyes and, to the best of my recollection, said: "that may be the most honest answer I have ever heard." He sent me to interview with Robert K. Enders, then acting head of biology, because Laurence Irving, the chair, was in Alaska or some other part of the world.

When I entered Professor Enders office, I noticed that he was informally dressed, had his shoe resting on his desk, and was gluing on a rubber sole, repairing ones' own shoes was a common practice in those days. I remember a series of questions that made me aware that Dean Hunt had phoned Enders and given a thumbnail sketch of our discussion. One question I remember in particular: if there were freshwater sharks in Central America and most sharks were found in salt water, how could I explain this? Such questioning and probing were not done just during interviews. Months later I remember talking with Professor Enders in the laboratory while he was obviously keeping one hand behind his back. Suddenly, without any warning, he threw a small skull into a container filled with cotton. The cotton was so plentiful that the skull disappeared from view. Enders then asked me to comment on the skull based on what I had briefly seen. Fortunately,

airplane recognition in the Navy had helped me develop some immediate recognition skills. I was able at least to guess that it was the skull of a bird and made some other comments about it.

After my initial interview with Enders, I was asked to furnish letters of reference. One letter of recommendation was from Dr. "Pappy" Willits, for whom I had worked just before the war at the US Department of Agriculture Research Laboratory on Mermaid Lane in Wyndmoore, Pennsylvania. Even though I was probably the lowest rank possible in the employment hierarchy, I was assigned to a research project extracting rubber from North American plants found in arid climates. Since the extraction was a continuous process, I was placed, after a brief period of training, on the midnight to 8:00 a.m. shift. My task was fairly straightforward. I had to change samples from one extraction process to another, weigh dried residue, and the like. Periods elapsed when I could read or whatever I chose while waiting on completion of processes. I indicated that I would prefer washing laboratory glassware or doing any other work that I could do with relatively minor instructions and without supervision. Apparently, the fact that I could work well without supervision and was more interested in helping in the laboratory than in filling in time left an impression that was not quickly forgotten. Consequently, I had one good reference from a Swarthmore graduate, although I was not aware at that time that Willits was an alumnus.

The Swarthmore faculty members I remember best are Ruth McClung Jones, Walter J. Scott, and C. Brooke Worth; all frequently advised me. I majored in biology and minored in chemistry and physics, both of which were extremely helpful later in my career.

I could not afford to eat in the Swarthmore dining room, so I took sandwiches, which I ate in my car or in an empty classroom. As a consequence, I have a very dim memory of classmates, and they probably have no recollection whatsoever of me. My anonymity is not at all surprising, since most people lived on campus, ate in the dining room, and socialized together. At times when the car did not work, I commuted to the 69th Street bus terminal from Havertown, Pennsylvania, and then to Swarthmore. Counting waiting time between buses and so on, this commute took at least an hour each way—another reason for not socializing. I do recall having trouble with German at Swarthmore and was approached by another undergraduate proficient in German who offered to tutor me at no cost. Clearly, Professor Enders or one of the other faculty members had a hand in this assistance. So, classmates helped when I needed tutoring; but, when I currently read the alumni news, I regret missing the strong bond that has lasted for years between other Swarthmore graduates.

Actually, I spent so much time on academic courses that I did not interact to any degree with anyone outside the classroom. Jean and other family members were extremely tolerant because I spent practically all my time either in class, commuting, or studying, including weekends. I was determined to get high grades; I worried that the years without attending classes would keep me from doing well.

After a few weeks of attending class, I became aware of Swarthmore's reputation and the fact that everyone around me was academically successful. Further, most students had not spent time in the armed forces. It was daunting to find that the standards were far higher than I had thought. Nevertheless, my grades were satisfactory, due in part to the time I invested, which almost certainly was more than most other students. My classmates, all younger than I, went to dances, concerts, and the like—I studied.

I graduated in 1947 after completing an advanced chemistry course at the University of Pennsylvania during the summer following completion of the Swarthmore courses. My diploma was delayed until satisfactory completion of the summer chemistry class. Then, suddenly, my options increased, and several graduate schools were available to me. However, graduate student support was scarce in those days, and my tolerant mother-in-law continued to house us while I went to graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. Fortunately, for her and for us, at the completion of my first academic year at the University of Pennsylvania, I was offered a full-time summer position at the Academy of Natural Sciences in the newly formed Limnology Department under the direction of limnologist Ruth Patrick. This job was extended to a permanent position at the end of summer, which took care of my financial problems. Even so, I still had a time management

problem—how to finish a MS and then a PhD while holding a full-time position that often included out-of-town trips for two or more weeks. Nevertheless, from the time I graduated from Swarthmore, I always had several career options available.

Although I officially retired from my last professional position on June 1, 1995, I still mentored students, especially probable “late bloomers” who faced similar problems to those of mine after World War II. As a consequence of my own experience, I have always tried to emphasize persistence when advising both my assigned advisees and anyone else who asked for help. Since becoming a faculty member myself, I have often spent hours discussing career options with students that I had never seen before and who were not formally assigned to me. When they thank me for taking so much time, I always tell them it is a partial payment on an old debt. In fact, it often helps them to hear my story if they are late bloomers.

A major lesson from my Swarthmore experience is not to become discouraged, even when things look very grim indeed. Fortunately, I did not focus on what would happen if I did not get into Swarthmore, probably because, despite all the setbacks, I still had confidence in my abilities. Since then, my career has had a few extremely crucial points when the situation seemed, if not hopeless, extremely discouraging. I never lost confidence that the future would not be bleak. Undoubtedly, the experience at Swarthmore was responsible for this belief, and it has been a blessing for over five decades.

Another major lesson from the Swarthmore experience is to always seek out people who are not afraid to make professional judgments and who use institutional criteria and standards as guidelines rather than rigid standards. In retrospect, until I interviewed with Dean Hunt, not a single admissions person had asked me how military service during World War II had changed my attitude towards education. No one before Dean Hunt attempted to determine whether my motivation had changed or whether I had achieved a better focus on career aspirations and the like. However, it is a mistake to assume that only persons holding high rank can exercise judgment—the secretary who sent me to see Dean Hunt had the same evidence that resulted in rejection elsewhere.

In the process of cleaning my desk at home a few years ago, I uncovered Swarthmore College’s *Halcyon II* from 1997, which was produced to commemorate the 50th reunion of the class of 1947—my class. An amazing number of people had submitted fairly extensive summaries of their careers since graduation, undoubtedly due in large part to the persistence and enthusiasm of Cliff and Mildred Gillam, editors of the volume. These classmates of mine were, and are, interesting people; some were truly exceptional! I was saddened to realize that I did not know a single person well and only recalled a few names of people who sat beside me in histology laboratory or something of that sort. Out of the entire class, I did not have a single friend with sufficient common experiences so that we kept in touch in any meaningful way. Due to the circumstances I described earlier, this lack of camaraderie was easily rationalized, but was not grounds for satisfaction. I could have rectified this lack of knowledge of others, to a modest degree, if I had attended class reunions, which, from descriptions in the *Swarthmore Alumni News*, were memorable and nostalgic for participants. However, I was usually in the field working during reunion times. In 1995, when I stopped going into the field, I was faced with travel restrictions for health reasons, which is why I stopped fieldwork in distant places. Our daughter Heather attended Swarthmore for only one year, even less time than my short experience, and had to leave because of asthma. Heather lived in a dorm, ate meals in the dining room, and, I am sure, was a typical Swarthmore student; I was an atypical commuter who could not even afford lunch in the dining room. Heather can remember individuals extremely well, even their eccentricities, values, ethics, etc. If that much rapport was established in only one school year, it is quite clear that the level achieved for someone attending for four years must be truly exceptional. In contrast, during my first college experience at Penn State, I was a very social creature. I can remember the names of many of my classmates, particularly those in my fraternity Alpha Zeta, and I can picture many of them in vivid detail and even still correspond with some of them. It was at Penn State that I met and courted Jean, who somehow managed both good grades and a social life. Recently, I wrote to a fellow student from the Penn State days who had lost his spouse and to another fighting a major battle with prostate cancer. I do not know a single,

former Swarthmore student to whom I could even come close to writing a letter of that sort. In essence, my vivid memories of Penn State all involve fellow students, and my vivid memories of Swarthmore involve faculty. My father had the gift of being able to approach a total stranger and walk away with a condensed version of the person's life history. He could learn more about a person in less than an hour than most people could during years of acquaintance. I have never had this gift, but I do think that the Penn State period demonstrates clearly that I am not inherently antisocial.

World War II certainly matured all those who experienced it more rapidly than would otherwise have been the case. However, World War II and the associated maturation are only partial explanations of the differences in my two college experiences. The major difference was the realization, however poorly articulated, that I could not achieve the professional goals that would provide enduring satisfaction without considerable focus. This degree of focus diminished both the depth and number of purely social relationships. I have only recently reestablished communication with some of my cousins after a lapse of many decades. On the other hand, the number of professional relationships has grown enormously and covers many areas of the world. Naturally, these professional relationships also have a social side, often a very satisfying one. Some of my Russian colleagues have even honored me with poems, and I regularly get birthday cards, Christmas cards, and emails from China, India, Indonesia, Europe, and Australia. In many cases, I have never met these colleagues, nor is it likely that I will ever do so. Yet we exchange photographs and other items quite peripheral to our professional relationship, although very satisfying.

In the United States, the present rage is "having it all," that is, a successful professional career, enjoyable leisure time, exciting vacations, a loving family, and a large circle of friends. I have the good fortune to know multidimensional people who actually have succeeded in this endeavor, but they are exceedingly rare. Most people are fortunate to manage exceptional success in one area and moderate to poor success in others. When I returned from World War II, I realized that I had to make enormous sacrifices to regain lost intellectual momentum and to go well beyond my initial performance. I never dreamed I could "have it all," but I realized that my focus would have to be intense to achieve professional success. While I do regret the lost social interactions, I realize that everyone has limited energy and time. I find great satisfaction in my professional career, which would not have been possible if I had given it less attention.

In retrospect, I count three main lessons from my Swarthmore experience: (1) even though I had an unexceptional beginning to my academic career, an institution was willing to give me a second chance if I was sufficiently persistent and was willing to follow through with performance when given the chance; (2) unless my failures were truly spectacular, they were likely to be forgotten if followed by some degree of success; (3) problems that seemed intractable seemed less so after modest applications of reason.