Let Go of the “No”

For many TAMS students, the college application process will be the first time they have been told “no.” I have seen students who were admitted to 5 or more prestigious schools but denied at one school that they did not care about, who then obsessed over the one school that said no. Students who were admitted to the only two schools they actually cared about have spent weeks agonizing over how to appeal a denial, or to get admitted off the waitlist of a school they do not want to attend. I have to ask – WHY?

College applications are neither objective nor fair. They are subjective in a world where students have only experienced objective results. A grade of 0-100 is easy to compare to others and see who was judged to have been better. A sports event usually has a winner and a loser, but many times everyone gets a ribbon or trophy for participation. College applications do not have a consolation prize or a participation trophy.

College applications are often seen as a contest – how many letters of acceptance can you collect? Can you get more than the kid next door? More than your roommate? More than your cousin? Are you better than some random person bragging on College Confidential? How about an influencer on social media? A student who was selected to write a column or blog for a local or national newspaper? How do you know if you are better than them? You don’t – you CAN’T and you SHOULD NOT!

Comparing yourself to some other student through college applications is pointless. You don’t know enough about their applications to make a fair assessment of their chances of admission, and you don’t know enough about the clear or hidden enrollment goals the schools may have. Trying to figure out why one student was admitted and one was not, is much the same as trying to figure out why one raindrop fell into the rain gauge and one did not.

College applications and class-building are human processes but not humane ones. People are making difficult decisions; people who are torn between so many different forces that they cannot possibly achieve a perfect result. Admissions officers do the best they can to meet the requests/demands of faculty committees, athletic coaches and recruiters, university presidents and administrators, financial aid officers, student life administrators, residence life administrators, individual academic departments, research laboratory and research grant requirements, accreditation agencies, community relations departments, offices of diversity and equity, offices of accessibility, student veterans affairs departments, federal and state regulations, and on and on. When they look at your application, they look to see if you could do the work on their campus. If the answer is yes, they try to determine if you understand and would thrive in the social and academic atmosphere on the campus. If that answer is yes, they start looking at how many different categories you fit, and how many checkboxes for institutional priorities they could mark for you. It may be that they could check 25 boxes for you, but they have to limit their admission list to those that have 30 or more boxes checked. This does not mean that you are not capable of doing the work and it does not mean that you would not be successful socially and academically on that campus. It means NOTHING in the larger scheme of your life.

Please do not use this process to determine your self-worth or odds of future success. This “selection” process is not qualitative or quantitative. It is the same as buying a lottery ticket and not winning. Chance and odds are not worth the emotional turmoil and self-doubt. Please, let go of the “no.” It is not you, it is THEM.