



Waitlisted: Turning “Maybe” into “Yes”

There’s the thick envelope from the college admissions office bearing congratulatory news; the very thin envelope signaling rejection; and the slightly thicker thin envelope with a post card enclosed explaining that the admission people have not rendered a final decision on your application. Welcome to Wait List Limbo Land.

Waiting in limbo need not be a passive activity. Many savvy applicants have launched successful campaigns to gain admission.

The first step is to understand the wait list situation.

All colleges and universities desire a full entering class. The school’s financial health is dependent on revenue from students. In order to avoid an oversubscribed situation with crowded dorms and classrooms, admissions officers tend to conservatively estimate yield (percentage of admitted students who will enroll) when deciding how many students to admit. Yield varies from year to year, and can fluctuate significantly based on student preferences, the economy, and the availability of financial aid. When yield is less than projected, admissions officers turn to their wait lists to fill the incoming class.

The wait list contains a pool of qualified students to draw from to replace admitted applicants who chose to enroll elsewhere. The protocol at most schools is for wait listed students to complete a post card indicating their desire to remain on the wait list. Some schools encourage students to send in a letter indicating their interest, along with any additional information for their file that they wish to add. Some schools rank their wait listed candidates, while others do not.

For most colleges the deadline for regularly admitted students to notify the school of their intentions is around May 1, after which admission officers reconvene to discuss yield and decide on the wait list.

Since most colleges are concerned about yield (a proxy for selectivity, and a component of many popular college rankings), admissions people tend to favor applicants considered likely to enroll if admitted. This is especially true when it comes to the wait list, where the yield can be managed to approach one hundred percent.

While politely demonstrating sincere interest and providing updates often helps, tread carefully because going overboard can diminish your chances.

Many colleges state that they do not require any additional information. However, students who send well-written letters assuring admission officers that they will enroll, if admitted, in general stand a better chance. Successful candidates often provide updates on their second-semester senior grades, awards, and other achievements. If you are a strong athlete, musician, artist, or performer, contacting the coach or director may also help. Another strategy, when appropriate, is to follow-up with your alumni or on-campus interviewer, or with an admissions officer if you built a relationship during the admissions process. A well-timed, and well-received, telephone call to the admissions office can also increase your chance.

Some schools go on record with the number of students on their wait list, while others do not. Judging from the size of the list, past yield, and class size, you can get a sense of your odds. Usually they are not very good. At some prestigious colleges and universities the wait lists are very large and relatively few students are admitted. It's been speculated that it is not unusual for these schools to place qualified, but unremarkable children of alumni, or those recommended by influential people, on the wait list for courtesy or development purposes. Depending on their qualifications, these candidates may not be real contenders and may have a lower probability of admission than others on the wait list.

Whatever you do, do not make a pest of yourself, flooding the admissions office with irrelevant updates and questions. Bribery is also considered taboo. Generally, it also does not make sense to visit the campus hoping to meet with an admissions officer.

While some students seek creative opportunities to stand out from other waitlisted applicants, they run the risk of doing something considered childish or inappropriate that could dim their chances completely.

While most students are admitted off of the wait list in May and June, it is not unheard of to be accepted much later, even on registration day. Most schools advise students on the wait list to commit to another school, even if it means sending in a deposit to another college, and to only remain on the wait list if they are seriously interested.

Finally, while your parents may be key members of your college planning and admission team, it is best for the student to be their own advocate when seeking admission from the wait list. Mom or Dad should not be the ones communicating with the admissions office.

Good luck!

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