

I've been Waitlisted...what now??

Next to getting denied, getting waitlisted at a first-choice college is every student's worry. Learn what to do if this happens to you—how to determine your chances, campaign for admission, and make alternative plans.

What's a Waitlist?

A college's waitlist is made up of students who the college believes are qualified to attend, but who were not admitted for various reasons. These students have the option of staying on the list in hopes of getting admitted later. Most colleges admit students from their waitlists during May, after the May 1 decision deadline for regularly admitted students.

Why Do Colleges Put Students Through "Waitlist Purgatory"?

Colleges know that some admitted students will turn them down. If more students say "no thanks" than they expect, colleges may have room in the class. Where do they get qualified students eager to say "yes"? From the waitlist. Admission staffs know that landing on a waitlist is a disappointment for most students, especially if the college is their top choice. But they also know that spaces may open up. If you are a waitlist student eager to attend, they want to give you a chance for one of those spaces.

Many students won't have to worry about being placed on a waitlist. Fifty-five percent of colleges surveyed by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) do not use one.

Does It Mean You Have a Chance of Getting In?

The answer to this natural question is a qualified yes. You do have a modest chance. However, the odds are not in your favor. Colleges admit an average of 30 percent of waitlisted students who decide to stay on the list, according to a survey by NACAC.

Colleges admitting under 50 percent of applicants admit even fewer students from their waitlists—in 2011 the average for these colleges was only 17 percent, according to NACAC. The actual percentage for a selective college can change significantly from year to year. Since the number of admitted students who actually enroll in a college can fluctuate significantly, the number admitted from the waitlist can fluctuate as well. Some colleges may admit a large number of students one year, and no students the next.

How to Reckon Your Chances

It's difficult to know your chances of getting in, but you can look for clues. First, take a close look at your waitlist letter. Some colleges may tell you that you are in the first pool to be considered for admission. Or the letter may state your rank on the list and how many were admitted from last year's list. Sometimes the letter will ask for an updated transcript or other records, although that is not necessarily an indication of interest.

Next, call the admissions office to get the rest of the information you need. If your letter did not mention this, find out if there is a priority list or if the list is ranked. Ask where you are on the list. Also ask if they know how many were admitted from the waitlist last year and if they expect this year to be similar. Ask whether there are any financial aid limitations for students admitted from the waitlist.

What Steps Should You Take Immediately?

If you get a waitlist letter, it's time to consider your options and take some steps.

- **Reserve a space at a college you want to attend.** Look at your list of colleges that accepted you and decide which one you will attend if you don't get off the waitlist. Send in your deposit. This guarantees you a spot and gives you some breathing room to consider the next steps below.
- **Decide whether you want to stay on the list.** Is this college really head and shoulders above any other? If you are depending on getting financial aid, consider the possibility that the waitlist college may have given out a large part of its merit-based aid by the time you are admitted. You can put a quick end to your torment by deciding that the college you have accepted looks just fine.

- **Tell the waitlist college your decision.** If you opt to stay on the list, follow any procedures explained in the waitlist letter. If you decide to decline, then let the waitlist college know to take you off their list.
- **Start planning to attend the college you accepted.** Even if you stay on a waitlist, chances are that's where you are going.

If You Decide to Stay on the List

Don't be passive. If you commit to a waitlist, consider launching a "campaign" to draw favorable attention to yourself. Let the college know that you think it is the best fit for you and how much you want to attend. Here are some ideas that have helped waitlisted students do just that.

- **Send the person who signed your letter a well-written upbeat letter** (not an e-mail) telling them that their college is your top choice and that you are eager to be admitted. Follow up your letter with a phone call.
- **Start regular communications with a person in the admissions office** by sending updates on grades, awards, and other signs of significant academic or extracurricular progress. Do this several times over the next few months to keep reminding the person of your interest.
- **Arrange for a new recommendation letter** from someone who did not write one before. Be sure they say something new that hasn't been said before.
- **Ask your contacts to help** by communicating with the admissions office on your behalf. These could be contacts you have made at the college, your high school counselor, and even an alumnus.
- **Let the college know if you won't need financial aid** (or not much aid).
- **Find out when the waitlist closes** and no more students will be admitted. That's when you can stop worrying.
- **Don't be a pest or appear desperate** even if you feel that way!

When More Than One College Puts You on a Waitlist

It is not uncommon for students to be waitlisted at more than one college. This creates a dilemma if you are not really sure which school you prefer. If this is your situation, pull out all the stops to make a reasonable, informed, and heartfelt decision about your top-choice college. Then accept a position on their waitlist and start your campaign.

Don't Get Trapped in Waitlist Land

When all is said and done, getting admitted from a waitlist is beyond your control. So focus your life on other priorities. Start planning your new life at the college you have accepted. Enjoy your senior year. It's that old cliché, "win-win." You win if your waitlisted college gives you the nod. If not, you win by attending an excellent school that you have chosen—one that wanted you all along.