

The Waiting Game

It's finally arrived—the envelope from your first-choice college. Nervously, you open it. It's not a denial! But it's not an acceptance, either. You've been waitlisted. What do you do now? Colleges use waiting lists as insurance. Applicants who are qualified for a college but don't make the "cut" may be wait-listed. If enough accepted students enroll for freshman year, the college won't accept anyone from the wait list. Unfortunately, colleges often can't predict whether they will go to the wait list or how many students from the list they will need. And you may not receive a final acceptance or denial until late in the season – June or July.

Because the wait list is so unpredictable, it's not wise to count on moving from the wait list to acceptance. If you're wait-listed at your first choice, your first task is to look at the colleges that did accept you. Carefully compare your options and decide on a second-choice college. If you haven't heard anything from the wait-list college by the May 1 deposit deadline, make a deposit at your second-choice college to insure your spot in its freshman class.

Different colleges use wait lists differently. To assess your chances of acceptance from the wait list, call the admission office. Ask what percentage of students have been accepted from the wait list in recent years. If a college hardly ever goes to its wait list, or accepted only a few wait-listed applicants last year, that trend is unlikely to change this year. At this point, if you'd be just as happy going to your second-choice college, you may want to forget about the wait list and focus on getting ready for college.

If your wait-list school is clearly your first choice, let them know that, colleges like a sure thing. If they end up using the wait list, they'd rather offer acceptance to the students who are most likely to enroll. If you have any significant, positive changes since your application was submitted, send a letter and include any documentation that demonstrates these changes. Some students may send additional recommendations, but they don't carry as much weight as stellar senior grades or a prize-winning performance at the spring debate competition. Although it's important to strengthen your application if you can, bugging the admission office won't win you any points. One call or e-mail says you're interested, ten says you're a pest.

The best strategy, then, is to work with your counselor to: choose and make a deposit at a good second choice, get as much information from the wait-list college as you can, let the admissions office know that they college is your first choice, and strengthen your application if possible. Then, sit back, cross your fingers, and...wait.