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College Waitlist: When You're Not In, Or Out

By Kathleen Megan
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It's probably the most unsettling outcome in the college admissions process: the notification that you're neither in, nor out, but wait-listed.

"It's the worst thing they can do to a student because of the intense amount of added stress it puts on students," said Ryan Paulekas, a Glastonbury senior who was wait-listed by his first choice, Bates College in Maine. "We've been waiting from when we applied in September or October and it's, 'Oh, wait a minute, you still have a little bit of a chance. You'll have to wait longer.'"

Colleges say the waitlist is a necessary tool to manage enrollment, particularly when the ease of using the Common Application online has left them with an ever-escalating number of applications, but little way to gauge the intent of many of those people.

"It's like trying to land a school bus on an aircraft carrier at night," said Joan Isaac Mohr, vice president for admissions and financial aid at Quinnipiac University. She was referring to a university's attempt to hit a desired enrollment figure. "If you admit a few thousand students, a half a percent [off] is a significant number."

By now, most students, including Paulekas, have met a May 1 deadline to send a deposit to a school that has accepted them. But for many, there remain lingering questions.

Should they stay on the waitlist to see if they might get in to a preferred school, or should they bond with a school that admitted them? If they are accepted from a waitlist, should they switch gears and lose their deposit on the first school?

And how long can they endure the waiting game? Most colleges attempt to let wait-listed students know whether they will be admitted by mid-June, but there are many cases when students find out on a date much closer to the start of school.

Joanne Carter, of Education Solutions, a consulting firm in Essex, said she had a student who was unpacking at one college when Georgetown University called and offered to take her from the waitlist. The decision was easy. She packed back up and drove to Georgetown. "That kind of stuff really does happen," Carter said.

Students deciding whether to stay on a waitlist need to assess their chances for admission, their desire to go that school, and their own emotional fortitude.

Experts say it's important to look at the school's wait-list admission rate, though that can shift greatly from year to year. Schools will often tell you the rate if you call. Otherwise, the rates are available for many schools at <http://www.collegeboard.org>.

"If a student has his or her heart set on a particular school and the waitlist is effectively not really an option, but no one of any authority is really telling the student that, then in some ways the university is really stringing the student along unnecessarily," said Steven Roy Goodman, a Washington, D.C.-based educational consultant.

If a school puts 3,000 students on a waitlist and takes only three, Goodman said, "Is that a legitimate, ethical thing to do to the 2,997 other students?"

But even if it's not a good bet a student will get in off a waiting list, he or she may want to remain on it.

"I advise all my students ... as long as you can afford it emotionally, there's no cost to staying on the waitlist if you can handle the emotional cost," Goodman said. "Some students can't. They just need closure. If you need closure, you need closure."

Why Are So Many Wait-Listed?

The ease of the application process is the key reason waitlists have grown longer.

When it takes little more than a few clicks to send off an application, students are far more likely to do so. When that happens, the competition only gets tougher, providing students with another incentive to send in more applications. That leaves colleges uncertain about which applicants sincerely want to attend.

But many experts say colleges have made the problem worse.

"In some ways, it's a problem of the colleges' own making — they market to everybody," said Janet Rosier, an educational consultant based in Woodbridge.

The ostensible reason is that colleges want to reach students who might not otherwise have thought of applying, but cynics will say that colleges are trying to drive up their selectivity rating by pushing up the number of applications.

With widespread marketing, the offer of shortened VIP applications at some schools, and the waiver of application fees at others, colleges increase the number of applications but "trade off the ability to know who is a serious candidate," Rosier said.

According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling, the percentage of colleges reporting that they increased their waitlists in the years from 2000 to 2013 ranged from a low of 38 percent in 2011 to a high of 56 percent in 2007 to 42 percent in 2013.

For fall 2013 admissions — the most recent year for which numbers are available — institutions admitted an average of 30 percent of all students choosing to remain on waitlists, up from 25 percent in the fall of 2012.

The most selective colleges — those accepting fewer than 50 percent of applicants overall — admitted an average of only 16 percent of students on waitlists.

Other reasons that lead to wait-listing are colleges' need to fill in should accepted students change their minds over the summer and to offset for students who may have sent deposits to more than one school.

Another reason colleges are said to use waitlists is to extend a courtesy to a student with a good record, as well as to his or her school, or for a student with relatives who have attended the school.

When Ryan Paulekas first heard that he was put on the waitlist at Bates, his first choice, he was disappointed. He had applied for an early decision at Bates and been deferred, then found it frustrating that in the regular admission process, Bates would again leave him in limbo — on the waitlist.

"I would have preferred a straight yes or no than an 'oh, maybe,'" Paulekas said.

But as those on waitlists are advised to do, Ryan sent Bates an email expressing his continued interest and his more recent accomplishments during his senior year. Then he looked up his chances of getting in. According to <http://www.collegeboard.org>, last year 1,595 applicants to Bates were offered a place on the waitlist. Those accepting a place on the waitlist: 694. Of those, 26 were admitted, a 3 percent admission rate. Ryan decided his chances were too slim.

He looked at his alternatives and discovered that one, Franklin & Marshall College in Pennsylvania, had everything he wanted: good academics, a chance to be a coxswain on a crew team and opportunities to play his bass and sing. So he abandoned thoughts of Bates and is now committed to Franklin & Marshall.

"I'm perfectly content with my decision to move forward," Ryan said. "I'm very happy with where I'm going."

Emma Pellegrino, a student at East Hampton High School, had a similar experience. Her first choice had been DeSales University in Pennsylvania, but when she was wait-listed, she took a closer look at the school. Although she had really liked it, she discovered that a significant number of students who enrolled in the physician assistant program, in which she was interested, dropped out of it or switched majors before graduation.

When she checked the statistics, she discovered that Le Moyne College in Syracuse, N.Y., where she had been admitted, had a greater percentage of students sticking with the physician assistant program.

"I definitely felt that it was a good thing I got wait-listed," Emma said. "I might have made the wrong decision."

Getting Off The Waitlist

In Connecticut, the likelihood of gaining admission from a waitlist varies from school to school and year to year.

At Quinnipiac University last year, 1,657 students enrolled, and 1,600 were offered a slot on the waiting list. Of those, 890 accepted a place on the waitlist, and 220 were offered admission, for an acceptance rate of about 25 percent.

This year, however, fewer are getting in from the waitlist. Mohr said that about 2,000 were offered slots on the waitlist and 800 said they were interested. Admission was offered to 100, an acceptance rate of about 12.5 percent.

She said the waitlist became a much more important tool at Quinnipiac in 2008 in the aftermath of the national financial crisis.

"That was when everything changed: yields and funds and families and affordability," she said. A larger waitlist became a kind of "insurance policy," she said, to increase the likelihood that the school would get the number of students it needed.

At Wesleyan University last year, 893 accepted a place on the waitlist and 70 were admitted, for an acceptance rate of 7.8 percent, according to College Board statistics.

The admission rate from the waitlist was even lower at Yale University last year: 1 percent. Yale's dean of admission, Jeremiah Quinlan said in an email that 1,323 were on the waitlist last year and only 14 were admitted. This year, he said, 1,097 are on the waitlist and he expects that more will be admitted than last year.

At the University of Connecticut, 1,761 accepted a place on the waitlist last year with 1,409 admitted, or 80 percent.

Nathan Fuerst, UConn's admissions director, expects that about 4,000 to 5,000 students will be offered a place on the waitlist this year and about half will accept that offer. He said that it's too soon to say how many will be offered admission, but that most will hear by early June. All will hear by Aug. 1, he said.

As for how many are likely to be admitted from the waitlist, Fuerst said, "It could be 80 percent last year and zero percent the next," he said. The waitlist, he said, is "critical for us" to ensure that enrollment targets are met.