



Wait Lists: The Good News and the Psychological Impact

The Good News about Wait Lists

In past years colleges typically sent more letters of admission than there were slots available with the expectation that some students would decline. Most schools took none or very few students from the wait list, but the *good news* is that this has significantly changed for the better in 2008. Wait lists are now more fluid than in the past because a significant number of students applied to an average of 15 colleges. Therefore as more and more wait listed students get accepted than ever before at top colleges, the result is a domino effect of opening doors for more students on wait lists at other schools.

The Psychological Impact of Wait Lists

Historically, being on the “dreaded” wait list has been devastating to thousands of hopeful teens. It is hard not to take a wait list decision personally. Being caught in that gray area between acceptance and rejection means that these students have the credentials for admission, but they are not quite as attractive as others who are competing for the same spots. Students are left waiting and wondering. For many, the fact of being in a holding pattern has robbed them of the excitement of graduating. On blogs and in interviews throughout the country, students have stated that they prefer to be told whether they are in or not.

For others, getting on the wait list at prestigious schools is a huge honor in itself—a form of “honorable mention.” The chance, however slim, is tantalizing. Students may feel that at least they have a chance and their challenge is to balance muted hope with the near future possibility of despair.

The fact is that contrary to popular belief, a wait list is more about college enrollment needs than student qualifications. Schools look to the wait list as a resource for replacing the kind of student who had turned down their offer of admission. For example if a school needs more students from a certain geographic region or with a preference in for a certain academic major or with specific talents (e.g. music, sports), students with those characteristics might have the added edge.

Unfortunately for many students, wait list jockeying continues throughout the summer months. How wait listed students react to their own situation all depends on how much a particular college means to them coupled with how well they can cope with uncertainty and the level of anxiety that surfaces. When the uncertainty causes an adverse reaction to a student’s health (e.g. lack of sleep, stomach pain, headaches etc.) it’s time to close the door on the unknown and move on with the sure thing. As is often the case, students who attend their second choice college turn out to be very happy there for the next four years and cannot imagine themselves being anywhere else.

Telephone: (516) 313-2988
nancybrennan27@yahoo.com
www.TheWriteDoc.com

Manhasset, NY

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