

The Complete

COLLEGE

WAIT LIST

Survival Guidebook

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Table of Contents

This guidebook offers an efficient approach to dealing with college waitlists. It is divided into three sections. You should do all the steps in the order that they appear.

The first section provides a general overview of how college wait lists work. It gives you the tools you need to find out about the wait-list policies at particular colleges. This section ends with an exercise that helps you to determine if you even want to attend the college that wait listed you.

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The second section of the book contains the plan of action of how to increase your odds of being accepted from the waitlist. It walks you through a series of activities that allow you to determine which unique traits you can bring to the college. At the same time, it helps you build a case that the college is the best fit for you. This section provides specific questions to ask the admissions office to determine what you can do to improve your odds of admission from the waitlist.

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The final section of this book provides step-by-step directions telling you what you can do to improve your odds of admission. In particular, the activities will walk you through the steps to writing a winning letter to the admissions committee. You are provided you with templates of letters to write. This section also provides you with specific steps that you can take to get an excellent letter of recommendation and prepare for a campus interview. Finally, it provides advice about alternative strategies for trying to gain admission to your waitlisted school.

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College Wait List Checklist

- Research Common Data Set to find out how many students were accepted off wait list last year.
- Grid Analysis—Determine if you even want to go to the school.
- Send in a deposit and intent to register to a school that has accepted you.
- Opt in—Inform the school that you want to remain on the wait list.
- Self-reflection activities—Explain why you are an outstanding candidate.
- Call admissions office to learn about college wait list policy.
- Write a letter.
- Arrange for additional letter of recommendation.
- Prepare for interview.
- Consider questions to ask if you do get in.

Ugh. You've been placed on the wait list. This means that you have not been accepted—but the college could still accept you. The best way to think about this is to pretend that you are at the airport and that you have been bumped from an overcrowded flight. You might get on it. You might not. In the meantime, however, you have to wait in limbo until you hear one way or the other.

All colleges accept more students than they can accommodate because they know that not all admitted students will choose to attend their school. If you get put on a wait list, it means that the admissions committee will look at your file again if the school has fewer students accept spots than they anticipated. Generally, schools don't even begin to look at this until after the May 1 deadline for deposits. Therefore, you may not hear if you have been accepted from the wait list until May, June, or even later.

Admissions Committees and Waiting Lists

At every college, at the very least, an admissions officer reviews your initial file. In addition, some schools also enlist the help of other evaluators—including faculty members—to examine and assess files. These evaluators examine your file, and take notes on your essay, letters of recommendation, and academic record. By some estimates, admissions counselors read anywhere from 25 to 30 files per day during the peak season of admissions. As they review these applications, reviewers generally assign each application with a rating based on the applicant's record as well as the goals of the institution. All colleges have different priorities for characteristics that they want in their incoming class. Some are paying special attention to your academic interests, being careful not to admit students to an overenrolled or impacted major. Others are looking for students with particular musical or athletic talents. You have no idea about the specific interests of the admissions

office. Much of the admissions process is objective, based on test scores and GPAs. But some of the process is subjective.

Admissions folks often talk about their job of building a freshman class. This means that they are considering the needs of their school in terms of whom they admit. In particular, some colleges may want to increase the number of female students in the sciences. As a result, the admissions committee may be asked to look for applicants who are female and interested in the sciences. Other schools like to ensure that they have students on campus who grew up in different parts of the country or even different parts of the world in order to promote diversity. Perhaps another school is looking for male soccer players to help bolster its team after its seniors graduated last year, leaving the team down five players. As you can see, different colleges have vastly different institutional needs for building their freshman class. To make matters even more complicated, the needs of different schools can change from year to year.

Because different colleges are looking for different characteristics of students to build their freshman class, you are never guaranteed admission to a school simply based on your academic credentials. And in recent years, the high level of competition for the small number of spots at top schools has resulted in thousands of completely qualified applicants being put on the wait list.

More Colleges Using Wait Lists

In recent years, there has been a huge spike in the number of students being placed on wait lists. According to the 2011 “State of College Admission” report by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, 48% of American colleges and universities used a wait list for fall 2010, up from 39% the previous year. And some schools that never used wait lists before—like the University of California campuses and the City University of New York—have recently started to use them.¹

¹ Beekie Supiano, “The Economy and College Admissions,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 20, 2010.

Moreover, the size of college wait lists has also increased. Nearly half of colleges and universities reported that they wait listed more applicants in 2010 than they did in 2009.² In 2010, *The New York Times* reported that Duke University placed 3,000 students on the wait list. Both Stanford and Yale each offered 1,000 students a wait list spot.³

Colleges put an average of 10% of their applicants on the wait list in 2010. When asked whether they wanted to remain on the wait list or be taken off of it (and no longer considered for admission), over 50% of wait-listed students opted to remain on the wait list. In that same year, colleges admitted only about 30% of students on the wait list, down from 34% in 2009. The most elite colleges accepted very few applicants off of the wait list, admitting only about 11% of them.⁴

Why Did This Happen to Me?

The number of students placed on wait lists has skyrocketed in recent years. This has happened for two main reasons. First, more students—from the U.S. and internationally—are applying to college. This makes the competition for spots at elite schools especially fierce. The second reason why we have seen such an increase in the use of wait lists is because students are applying to too many colleges in the first place. As a result, schools are having a hard time predicting their enrollments and they use the wait lists to help manage the unknowns about how many admitted students will attend.

More Applicants

There has been an explosion in the number of college applicants in the past few years and college admissions are particularly competitive at this moment due to this baby boomlet. According to a 2008 article in *Newsweek*, colleges have recently seen huge increases in the number of applicants, with schools like Ball State in Indiana recently seeing a rise in applications by 22%. At Rutgers University in New Jersey, the number of applicants

2 Eric Hoover, “Fair Practices’ in Admissions,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 19, 2011.

3 Jacques Steinberg, “For Students, Waiting List is Scant Hope,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 2010.

4 Zach Miners, “You’ve Been Put on the Wait List for College. Now What?” *U.S. News and World Report*, April 9, 2010.

jumped by nearly 40%.⁵ Moreover, so many highly accomplished applicants apply to the country's most selective colleges. Oftentimes, students who were completely qualified wind up on the wait list. Colleges—especially the most elite ones—just do not have enough room for all of the outstanding applicants that are applying these days.

The good news about the baby boomlet is that demographers have calculated that the number of high school graduates in the U.S. will begin to come down to more normal levels by 2015.⁶ At this moment, however, college admissions are competitive in a way that we have not seen before.

To make college admissions even more competitive, we have also seen a huge jump in the number of international students applying to U.S. schools. International students at American colleges have increased exponentially in recent years. In 2010, for example, over 700,000 international students were enrolled at American universities.⁷ The U.S. universities with the highest number of international students are University of Southern California, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and New York University.⁸ Yet smaller and less well-known colleges have also recently begun to recruit international students in high numbers.

American schools tend to want international students for two key reasons. First, colleges are looking to expand the diversity of their campuses by including students from all over the world. Second, the recent recession has decimated public spending on state universities. As a result, many state schools are recruiting international students who pay higher international fees.

Applying to Too Many Schools

The other reason why so many colleges have increased their use of the wait list is because admissions number crunchers are having a tough time predicting enrollment patterns.

5 "Getting in Gets Harder," *Newsweek*, January 3, 2008.

6 Ibid.

7 Beth McMurtrie, "International Enrollments at US Colleges Grow But Still Rely on China," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 14, 2011.

8 "US Institutions with the Most International Students," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 14, 2011.

High school students are applying to more schools and the number of applicants at many universities has increased tremendously. This spike in the number of applications has made it difficult for colleges to predict yield (the percentage of accepted students who enroll).

So why has the number of colleges that students apply to skyrocketed in recent years? Basically, we have seen an increase in the number of applications because it is much easier to apply these days. Online applications have changed the landscape of college admissions because they make it very simple to apply to multiple schools. In particular, many students will send in multiple applications through the Common Application because it is so easy to add another school to the list. A second reason why more students apply to more schools is because some colleges actively encourage them to do so. In recent years, over 100 colleges have started to recruit students to apply to their schools by offering them shortcut applications. These applications often don't require the dreaded personal statement and, in many cases, waive the application fees.⁹ These are often referred to as "fast apps" or "snap apps."¹⁰

Why would these schools do such intense marketing? Many of these schools are pricey private schools worried about finding enough students to fill their freshman classes with students who can afford the tuition. The other reason why schools encourage high numbers of applicants is that a jump in applicants can raise the rankings of a school in the *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings issue.

9 Jacques Steinberg, "Colleges Market Easy, No-Fee Sell to Applicants," *The New York Times*, January 25, 2010.

10 Eric Hoover, "The Complexity of 'Fast Apps,'" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 23, 2011.

I hate to give you bad news, but you need to know the truth here. The odds of gaining acceptance from the wait list are not good. Before you do anything else, you should take a quick look at the college(s) that wait listed you and determine what their recent wait list numbers have looked like. The easiest way to find this information is through the Common Data Set. The Common Data Set is a survey of admissions and enrollment questions that colleges and universities fill out each year.

To give you a sense of just how many students are placed on the wait list, here is a table of recent wait list statistics from some American colleges and universities (Figure 1).

FIGURE #1

Sample College Wait list Statistics				
College	Number Wait Listed	Number Who Accepted a Place on Wait List	Number Admitted from Wait List	Percentage Admitted from Wait List
Cornell	3213	1976	279	14%
Grinnell	740	279	16	6%
Middlebury	1231	603	0	0%
Penn State	1828	1704	1356	80%
Skidmore	1584	522	59	11%
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor	8385	2776	525	19%
Yale	728	204	56	27%

UC Berkeley	201	121	0	0%
Tulane	4617	2485	105	4%
Compiled from Common Data Set (http://www.commondataset.org/)				

You can find out the specific data about your school's wait list by Googling "(Name of School) Common Data Set". You might have to dig through the Common Data Set Report, but schools are required to include specific numbers about their wait lists in those reports. Do a search for "wait list" and it should pop up.

Figure out what the odds of being accepted off the wait list are for your school(s). Using the Common Data Set, fill out this chart (Figure 2).

FIGURE #2

College Wait list Statistics				
College	Number Wait Listed	Number Who Accepted a Place on Wait List	Number Admitted from Wait List	Percentage Admitted from Wait List

The first thing you need to do is to figure out if you even want to go to the college(s) that wait listed you. You might be feeling very emotional right now since you are staring at a wait list letter. It is perfectly normal to be angry or sad. But because you are in an emotionally charged space right now, you might not be thinking about things in a rational way. Before you get totally worked up about this wait list letter, it is best to take a deep breath and think about whether you even want to go to this college. To help you do this, I've designed an activity that will help you decide if your wait listed college is actually your top choice.

College Grid Analysis

This grid analysis works by having you list the different colleges that have accepted and/or wait listed you. Across the top of the grid, create column headings that indicate the factors that you need to consider for each school. Then, assign a score for each college/factor combination, rate the relative importance of each factor, and add up the scores for a total number for each college. This may sound complicated, but this technique is quite easy to use.

Here are the steps to work through this analysis:

STEP 1

List all of the colleges that have accepted or wait listed you as the row labels. List the factors you need to consider as the column headings. I have provided the most common factors for you to assess, including school size, geography, academic program, social life, and cost.

STEP 2

Now work your way down the columns of the table, scoring each college for each of the factors. Score each option from 0 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

You do not have to have a different score for each option. In other words, if none of your colleges are good for one factor, then you can give them all 0.

STEP 3

Next, you need to determine the relative importance of the factors in your decision. These should be ranked as numbers from 0 (not important) to 5 (very important). Again, it is possible for different factors to have the same amount of weight or importance.

STEP 4

Now you need to multiply each of the scores in Step 2 by the values that you assigned for the importance of each factor in Step 3. This will give you weighted scores for each college/factor combination.

STEP 5

The last step is to add up the weighted scores for each of your schools. The college with the highest score wins. Here is a sample of one student's grid analysis (Figure 3).

FIGURE #3

Sample College Grid Analysis						
I: Unweighted Assessment of Each College						
Weights	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	Unweighted
School Name	Size	Geography	Academics	Social Life	Cost	Total
Cal Poly - SLO	3	5	3	5	5	21
Loyola Marymount - Wait List	5	5	3	4	0	17
Pepperdine	5	5	3	2	0	15
UC Santa Barbara	2	5	4	4	3	18

II: Weighted Assessment of Each College						
Weights	0	5	3	3	5	Weighted Total
School Name	Size	Geography	Academics	Social Life	Cost	
Cal Poly - SLO	0	25	9	15	25	74
Loyola Marymount - Wait List	0	25	9	12	0	46
Pepperdine	0	25	9	6	0	40
UC Santa Barbara	0	25	12	12	15	64

It looks like this student is headed off to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo! After looking at all of the characteristics of the schools that accepted or wait listed this student, the wait-listed school didn't score that well.

Here is a blank chart for you to use (Figure 4). Go through and do a grid analysis of the colleges that accepted or wait listed you.

FIGURE #4

College Grid Analysis						
I: Unweighted Assessment of Each College						
Weights	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	Unweighted Total
School Name	Size	Geography	Academics	Social Life	Cost	

II: Weighted Assessment of Each College

Weights						Weighted Total
School Name	Size	Geography	Academics	Social Life	Cost	

By doing this analysis, you may find out that your wait-listed college is really not for you. If the grid analysis makes it clear that you should attend a different college, so be it. They are lucky to have you! If, on the other hand, this analysis demonstrates that your wait listed school is still the best fit for you, I will give you strategies for how to increase your odds of acceptance from the wait list later in this book.

If You Decide to Go to A Different College

After you finish the grid analysis, you should have a good idea about which school you want to attend. If there are schools that accepted you that you do not want to attend, you need to tell them so right away. It is the right thing to do. You don't want to hold that spot if you have no intention of attending that college. Think of it this way: you are opening up a spot for someone who really does want to attend that school, but might be stuck in wait-list limbo as well. If all students quickly informed schools that they weren't coming, the whole wait-list game would be over much sooner.

Hedge Your Bets

If you decide to hold out and wait to hear from your wait-list college, you still need to make sure that you have somewhere to go in the fall. The first thing you need to do is to look at your schools that have [accepted](#) you and send in a deposit to [one](#) to hold the spot. You have to send a non-refundable deposit and letter of commitment by May 1. Why

do you have to do this? Because you have to make sure you have at least one alternative college secured for the fall.

Also, make sure you that you don't send in multiple deposits to hold spots at different colleges. This is unethical. You can only commit to one school. You can't hold two or more spots while you try to make up your mind. Not only is it bad karma when you hold spots to multiple schools, but it can have awful consequences. Most notably, if you double deposit, the college can renege on your acceptance since you violated their admissions policy.

What About that Deposit?

This is another reason that the extensive use of wait lists is so awful. Let's say that you send in your \$500 non-refundable deposit to Pomona College to hold the spot. You have been wait listed at Yale, however, and it is your number-one choice college. In June, you receive news from Yale that you have been accepted off of the wait list. You will need to inform Pomona that you have opted to go to Yale. But you don't get your money back. You are out the \$500.

If your wait-listed school is still your number-one choice, you need to inform the college that you want to remain on the wait list. This is sometimes referred to as “opting in.” When you received your wait-list notification, the school also provided you with information about how to inform them about whether you want to remain on the wait list or not. Some schools ask you to send in a postcard or letter. Others ask you to do this through their online application portal. If you are still interested in attending the school, send this in immediately. If you have decided not to attend the school, make sure you inform them that they can take you off the wait list.

Your wait-list letter may also contain some other important information. It is critical that you sit down and read it very carefully. Your letter may explain how the wait list process works. It may also give an idea of when you can expect to hear if you will be accepted from the wait list. Oftentimes, however, these letters are quite vague. As a result, you will have to do your own research to find out how the college’s wait-list program works. I’ll show you how to do that later in this book.

Which Students Get Admitted Off the Wait List?

Before we go any further, let me give you an overview of the factors that influence how colleges use their wait lists. Different colleges look at different factors to determine if someone will be admitted from the wait list. These factors can include the student’s academic credentials, expressed interest in the college, prospective major, geographical region where they live, or ability to pay the full tuition.

A recent study by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling gives an idea about how important these factors are to college admissions folks. Fifty-six percent of colleges said they ranked their wait list based on student test scores and GPA. Nearly half of schools looked at whether students demonstrated a strong interest in the college

(by attending an optional interview, visiting the campus, or attending a recruiting workshop). One-third of colleges based their wait-list decisions on whether or not the student demonstrated a strong commitment to attend the school if they were admitted. Finally, 27% of colleges stated that a student’s ability to pay to full cost of tuition and fees impacted their decision about who was accepted off of the wait list. Also, bear in mind that public and private universities often used different criteria for accepting students off the wait list¹¹ (See Figure 5).

FIGURE #5

Factors Influencing Student Acceptance from Wait List		
	Public Schools	Private Schools
Test Scores, GPA	36%	62%
Interest in attending	19%	53%
Ability to pay full price	7%	35%

¹¹ Supiano.

Before we move to a discussion of what steps you can take to increase your odds of being admitted from the wait list, it is important to do some self-reflection. First, you need to take stock of your academic achievements. Since your academic record—test scores and GPA—is the most important factor influencing whether you will be admitted from the wait list, it is important to take a good look at your record. Fill out the academic assessment here. Also, make a note of any positive changes that you may have made in your academics since you submitted your application. For example, did you retake the SAT and improve your score? Did your grades go up? Did you win an academic award? Have you recently applied for an internship? Did you enter an academic contest? If there have been any improvements in your academic credentials, highlight them on this assessment sheet (Figure 6).

FIGURE #6

Academic Assessment (Grades and Test Scores)	
Grades	
1. What is your GPA?	
_____ standard	_____ weighted
Has your GPA improved recently? Explain _____	

2. Have you taken any AP courses? If so, list them below with test scores for the exams you have already taken.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Test Scores (Include old and new scores if you have retaken the test.)

SAT Critical Reading

_____ 700 or above

_____ 650-690

_____ 560-640

_____ 460-550

_____ 450 or below

SAT Mathematics

_____ 700 or above

_____ 650-690

_____ 560-640

_____ 460-550

_____ 450 or below

SAT Critical Reading

_____ 700 or above

_____ 650-690

_____ 560-640

_____ 460-550

_____ 450 or below

SAT Mathematics

_____ 700 or above

_____ 650-690

_____ 560-640

_____ 460-550

_____ 450 or below

Scores for Any Additional SAT Subject Tests

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Academic Achievements or Awards that You Have Received Since You Applied?

After you have completed this academic assessment, you will have a good overview of your academic record. Moreover, you will have notes on any improvements that you have made in your application. This will come in handy when you write your letter to the admissions committee later in this book.

The second self-reflection activity has two parts. First, you need to think about unique skills, interests, and experiences that you can bring to the college community. The best way to do that is to create a profile of your extracurricular activities, travel experiences, sports participation, volunteer work, or part-time job. You need to list your activities into six categories:

- [1] School-Sponsored Activities (clubs, political positions, newspaper, the arts),
- [2] Employment (paid jobs or internships),
- [3] Community Service (volunteer positions),
- [4] Sports (differentiate between community and school sports clubs),
- [5] Travel (any domestic or international travel experiences), and
- [6] Special Interests/Talents (hobbies, pursuits, special circumstances).

In all likelihood, you will not have activities for all six categories. Really, that is not a problem. The purpose of this activity is to demonstrate your interests and passions in a few key categories. More is not better.

You should include a fair amount of detail in your descriptions. Be as specific as possible. If you did fundraising for a club, how much did you earn? If you played a leadership role in an activity, indicate what it was. This part is really important. Admissions committees prefer evidence of leadership rather than just membership in a ton of different clubs. If your sports team was highly successful, explain the level of competition that it faced. If your newspaper won an award, include the particulars. You want to be super specific with this list of your activities (Figure 7).

FIGURE #7

Activity Sheet			
School-Sponsored Activities	Years/Hours	Position	Description
Employment	Years/Hours	Position	Description
Community Service	Years/Hours	Position	Description
Sports	Years/Hours	Position	Description
Travel	Years/Hours	Position	Description

Special Interests/Talents	Years/Hours	Position	Description

Now you need to go through this worksheet and think about the most important contributions that you have made to your life outside of the classroom. You need to think about what skills you gained in these activities. For example, do you have good leadership experience from your work as team captain for your swim team? Or did you gain business skills while working part-time? Do you have strong language capabilities and want to use them in your academic coursework? Be specific. Below, list out at least five unique skills or talents that you have demonstrated through your activities (Figure 8).

FIGURE #8

Unique Skills That You Can Bring to the College	
1.	_____
2.	_____
3.	_____
4.	_____
5.	_____

The second part of this self-reflection is to determine exactly why you want to attend the school that wait listed you. In particular, you want to determine how your unique skills that you listed above make you a particularly good fit for your wait-listed college. It is very important that you specifically explain how your unique abilities make you the best candidate for the college.

You will need to visit the school’s website and dig around to find out some specific information about academic programs, internship opportunities, study abroad programs, special institutes, and important faculty members. While you may be most interested in attending the school because of its sports team or the fact that your friends are all planning to go there or because it is inexpensive, it is best to highlight the academic and professional opportunities available at the college. Fill out the following questionnaire to determine exactly why your wait-listed college is the best one for you (Figure 9).

FIGURE #9

College Questionnaire
<p>1. What majors interest you? How do your specific skills relate to these majors? What are the unique contributions that you can make?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

2. Are there any specific internship opportunities that interest you? Explain why.

3. Are there study abroad programs at the college? Why are you interested? What makes you a good candidate for study abroad?

4. Does the college have any special institutes in subjects that interest you? Explain.

5. Are there any notable faculty members that you know about? Have you read their books? How do your interests overlap?

Now that you have completed this questionnaire, you need to think about specific reasons why your wait-listed college is such a perfect school for you. For example, does the school have a special major concentration that particularly interests you? Or do they offer a study abroad program that you plan to attend? Have other students at that college received jobs or internships that particularly interest you and fit with your career interests? Be specific. Below, list out at least **five** unique characteristics of your wait listed college that match your interests and goals (Figure 10).

FIGURE #10

Unique Characteristics of the College that Fit Your Interests

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

The next self-reflection activity is to talk with your parents about finances. Over one-third of private colleges look at the student's ability to pay as a top factor in determining who gets admitted from the wait list. You need to determine how much, if any, your parents are willing and able to pay for your college expenses. Unfortunately, at many private colleges, your chances of admission from the wait list decrease if you cannot foot the entire bill yourself (Figure 11).

FIGURE #11

Cost of College
Total cost of college (tuition/fees, room/board, supplies) per year: _____
How much money your family can pay per year: _____
Will you need to request financial aid? ___ yes ___ no

The next self-reflection task is to determine if you applied for an oversubscribed major on your initial application. These days, the most popular majors throughout the country are: business, education, biology, communication studies, and psychology. It is a bad idea to put down a major if it is in the top impacted majors at your school. Seriously. This is a little-known secret but, at some schools, listing an over-enrolled major can hurt your chances of acceptance and might even result in getting you on the wait list.

If you put down one of these majors on your initial application, you might consider picking a different yet related major (e.g., instead of Communication Studies, put down Rhetoric; instead of Business, put down Economics or Mathematics). You also need to think about a reasonable explanation about why you might want to change your major. For example, perhaps you did an interesting activity in your math class and it convinced you that you would rather pursue a math major than a business major. Below, write down what major you put on your initial application. Then think about alternative majors and possible reasons to explain the change (Figure 12).

FIGURE #12

Impacted Majors

What major did you indicate on your initial application? _____

What are some alternative majors that interest you? _____

How can you justify your interest in those different majors? _____

Your final reflection is to think about how you would feel if you were offered an alternative admission option. There are two lesser-known admission possibilities. First, many schools offer admission to freshmen for the spring semester instead of the fall. UC Berkeley, for example, has long had a large spring admission program. Schools accept students to begin during the spring semester because they know that not all freshmen will return for the spring term. As a result, places open up in the freshman class midway through the year.

In recent years, a second admissions possibility has emerged, known as “the guaranteed transfer option.” This program guarantees admission to any student who begins their college coursework at a different institution. These are generally four-year schools. I’ll talk about how to transfer from a community college later in this book. The student must maintain a required GPA and, if they do, they will be admitted to the college that initially deferred them. Colleges turned to this new approach to help fill vacancies left by students who may drop out, enroll in study abroad programs, or transfer to different colleges. At this point, Cornell University and many of the SUNY schools practice this transfer option.¹²

So you need to think about whether or not you would still want to attend your wait listed college if you were offered one of these admission plans (Figure 13). But keep in mind that it will have an alternative freshman year experience if you start halfway through or don’t wind up on campus until you are a sophomore. On the other hand, if your wait-listed school offers you this option, it can give you the only opportunity to attend.

12 Lisa Federaro, “Admission to College, With Catch: Year’s Wait,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 2011.

FIGURE #13

Alternative Admission Plan

You would be interested in an alternative admission plan: ___ yes ___ no

Now you need to do some research and find out what the college's policies and rules are surrounding the wait list. Different schools treat their wait lists differently. Some give students on the wait list a ranking. As spots open up with the incoming freshman class, they simply go down the rankings of the wait list, beginning with number one. If your wait listed college uses a ranking system, you have much better odds of getting in if you are at the top of the list.

Other schools, by contrast, don't rank wait list applicants. Rather, they try to replace an accepted student who decides to go to a different school with another comparable student. For example, if a tuba player turns them down, they may be looking for a tuba player replacement from the wait list. Remember that admissions committees are often trying to build a unique freshman class. If your wait-listed college uses this strategy, it is very difficult to predict whether you will be accepted off the wait list.

Your task now is to get on the phone and call the admissions office at the school that wait listed you. Ask for the admissions officer for the state where you live. Be upbeat and happy (even if you just want to cry). Tell them that you are thrilled to have made the waiting list of their excellent college and that you have a few questions about the status of your application. Then go through and ask them the following questions (Figure 14). Now don't get upset if they won't answer some of the questions, or even any of the questions. Wait lists have become so big recently, that there are many things that even the admissions counselors can't predict. But be insanely polite and cheerful and see if you can find out answers to the following questions. And when the conversation is over, thank them profusely.

Here is a checklist of things you need to find out:

FIGURE #14

Worksheet—Research on Wait List Policy

1. Are students on wait list ranked? ___ yes ___ no
2. If so, what is my rank? _____
3. With that rank, what are my chances? (They probably won't tell you, but it can't hurt to ask.)
4. Am I allowed to submit additional materials to my file? ___ yes ___ no
 - a. essay: ___ yes ___ no
 - b. updated transcripts: ___ yes ___ no
 - c. updated student résumé: ___ yes ___ no
 - d. additional letter of recommendation: ___ yes ___ no
5. Are there any alternative acceptance plans available? ___ yes ___ no
 - a. For example, do you accept spring admits? ___ yes ___ noOR
 - b. Do you offer a guaranteed transfer option for sophomores? ___ yes ___ no
6. May I schedule an interview (in person, on the phone, or through Skype) with an admissions representative to discuss my continued interest in your school?
___ yes ___ no

Don't Be Crazy

Be enthusiastic and resourceful, but do not come across obsessive or desperate. Admissions officers say students can help their causes by obeying the school's instructions. Don't try to

buy your way in with bribes. There are stories circulating about students sending cookies to admissions officers or filming YouTube videos of their dog barking the school song. Avoid this behavior. You should not grovel. Also, don't send e-mails every day inquiring about your status. It is hard to wait, but you have no choice at this point.

Also, make sure that you parents don't engage in crazy behavior either. One admissions counselor recounted a mother who called every member of the admissions department to inquire about her son's application. She did this daily for weeks on end. Don't let your parents do this. It demeans them and also makes you look bad.

Finally, don't trash the college on your Facebook page or anywhere else on the web. You want to make sure that your online presence is a professional one just in case admissions officers decide to look you up. If this sounds like Big Brother is looking over your shoulder, he is. A recent study by Varsity Outreach, for example, found that 80% of colleges use social networking sites to help in recruiting and admissions decisions.¹³ It is entirely possible, therefore, that admissions committees may look you up online.

13 "Facebook and Admissions," by Varsity Outreach, November 16, 2011, <http://blog.varsityoutreach.com/>.

Now you need to write a letter. Even if your wait-listed college tells you not to submit supplemental materials, everyone trying to get admitted from the wait list should write a letter. You should send a hard copy as well as e-mail it to the director of admissions. It is very important that the letter be well written and upbeat. Do not grovel or beg, but be direct in explaining exactly why you want to attend the school. Refer back to the College Questionnaire that you filled out. Make sure that you clearly describe the characteristics that you have that make you an excellent candidate for the school. Tell them exactly what you can bring to the college. Then clearly describe what qualities the college has that would improve your life.

In addition to telling them why their college is such a perfect fit for you, also tell them of recent successes that were not on your application. Provide any updates on your academic achievements. An example could be something like, “I raised my Art History grade from a B- to a B+”. If you have done any other activities—applied for a part-time job, entered a contest, or a volunteered for an organization—you should mention those as well.

You need to write out your letter and proofread it carefully. Also, make sure that you get someone else to look at it as well to provide you with some feedback. Here are five letters for you to use as models (Figures 15 through 19).

FIGURE #15

#1 Sample Letter—Specific Academic Program

Director of Admissions [address to the admissions person who signed the wait list letter]
College X
Sampleville, CA 99999

Dear [Name of Director of Admissions],

I recently learned that I have been wait listed at College X for next fall's incoming freshman class. Though I'm disappointed, I am writing to inform you of my continued interest in being accepted to College X. In fact, your school remains my top choice.

I want to attend College X because of its nationally recognized study abroad program that would give me the opportunity to study in China during my college career. I have been studying Mandarin for the past five years and I plan to pursue a major in International Relations with a specific focus on emerging Asian economies. Attendance at College X will allow me to bring my language skills to your International Relations program while also allowing me to pursue my career goals of researching Asian financial markets.

I thought it might be to my advantage to send you some additional materials, which, if appropriate, I'd appreciate your including in my application file. I've included with this letter the following:

1. A copy of my third quarter grade report.
2. A copy of my new SAT scores. Since I applied to College X in January, I have retaken the SAT and improved my scores. My math score jumped from a 580 to 620, and my reading score went up by 50 points. I've also instructed the College Board to forward you official scores.
3. An additional letter of recommendation from _____, my _____ teacher; this will arrive in a separate envelope.

If there is anything further you could suggest I do to help you come to the conclusion that moving me from the waiting list to the accepted list is called for, please don't hesitate to contact me. I would be happy to make myself available for an interview if that would help.

Thank you very much for your continued consideration. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Jane Doe

FIGURE #16

#2 Sample Letter—Request for January Start

Director of Admissions [address to the admissions person who signed the wait list letter]
College X
Sampleville, CA 99999

Dear [Name of Director of Admissions],

I recently received word that I have been wait listed at College X for the Class of 2016. Though I'm disappointed, I am writing to inform you of my continued interest in being accepted to College X. In fact, your school is still my number-one choice because I am particularly interested in writing for the award-winning newspaper, *The Mustang Daily*.

I'm a senior at Sampleville High School in Sampleville, California. I'm busily completing my fourth quarter with an intense academic schedule compounded by my job as editor for our campus newspaper. In fact, I have just returned from this year's High School Journalism Convention held in April in Seattle, Washington. At the conference, I placed as a finalist in the 2012 National Scholastic Press Association Online Pacemaker contest, which recognizes high school publication websites. Out of 159 entries, 31 websites were chosen as finalists by a team of three professionals assembled from across the country.

I thought it might be to my advantage to send you some additional materials to supplement my application file. I've included with this letter the following:

1. A copy of my third quarter grade report.
2. The above-mentioned award from the National Scholastic Press Association for my work on our newspaper website.

I understand that the number of applicants that you had this year was very large and that the pool of applicants was particularly competitive. I also understand that my SAT scores were not particularly high. However, I'd like to think that my GPA and my hard work on our student newspaper will outweigh those scores and convince you that I will be a tremendous asset to College X's Class of 2016.

If there is anything further you could suggest I do to help you come to the conclusion that moving me from the waiting list to the accepted list is called for, please don't hesitate. I would be happy to make myself available for an interview if that would help.

One final question: have you ever offered a wait-listed candidate like myself a January admit? I might be interested in such a possibility.

Thank you very much for your continued consideration. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,
Jane Doe

FIGURE #17

#3 Sample Letter—Request for a Different Major

Director of Admissions [address to the admissions person who signed the wait list letter]

College X

Sampleville, CA 99999

Dear [Name of Director of Admissions],

I am writing to reiterate my interest in attending College X and to request a change of major on my initial application. While I indicated that I wanted to study Business on my application, I have come to realize that Political Science is a much better major for me.

I wish to pursue a degree in Political Science in order to prepare for a career as a public defender. The program in Political Science at College X complements my career goals nicely. Specifically, the Institute for Leadership Studies is something I find exciting because of my interest in the field of law. The Institute for Leadership Studies would give me an opportunity to gain academic and experiential skills by allowing me to work as an intern in Washington, D.C.

In addition to my interest in Political Science, I feel that I will bring a unique perspective to the College X community. Due to my extensive experience in student government as student body president as well as my position as the school board representative for my city, I will bring real-life experience with the theories and concepts of leadership to the community.

I also wanted to take this opportunity to update my initial application. Since submitting my application, I have earned a 4.0 for my third quarter grades. In addition to that, I started a volunteer job at a local law firm, where I am currently learning about law, civic engagement, and career opportunities in the courts.

College X remains my top choice. The programs it offers fit neatly with my legal interests, [location of College X] is a place I can see myself living, and the student body at College X is one that I will not only learn much from, but also provide a great deal to. I would be honored to be offered a place in the College X Class of 2016.

Thank you very much for your continued consideration. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,
Jane Doe

FIGURE #18

#4 Sample Letter—Demonstrates Commitment

Director of Admissions [address to the admissions person who signed the wait list letter]

College X

Sampleville, CA 99999

Dear [Name of Director of Admissions],

Thank you for taking the time to review my application for the 2012-2013 school year, and especially for offering me a place on the wait list. I am writing to assure you that, if I am extended an offer from the College X wait list, I will gladly accept the offer and withdraw all of my other pending applications immediately.

I have absolutely no doubt that College X is the right school for me. Since submitting my application in early December, I have learned that the youth soccer team for which I work as a volunteer assistant coach has qualified to play at the U.S. Youth Soccer Region IV (West) Championships in Phoenix, Arizona in June. While I am proud to have attained this coaching milestone, I am more pleased with the impact I have been able to have upon local children by helping them train hard to reach this level of competition.

The potential to have an even greater impact upon children is exactly what draws me to College X. My goal is to pursue a career in teaching. At no other school could I have the opportunity to participate in the Program for Urban Education, benefit from Professor X's experience in Educational Leadership Policy, or perhaps even apply for a Teach For America position with the intent of using it to serve America's youth, as two of your recent graduates have done.

From my first visit with [name] in the Admissions Office, to the extensive tour provided to me by current student [name], to my most recent Skype call with [name], another member of the Admissions Office staff, I have enjoyed every experience with College X

I have had to date. I look forward to continuing those positive experiences should I be extended an offer to join the Class of 2016.

Thank you very much for your continued consideration. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Jane Doe

FIGURE #19

#5 Sample Letter—Ability to Pay in Full

Director of Admissions [address to the admissions person who signed the wait list letter]
College X

Sampleville, CA 99999

Dear [Name of Director of Admissions],

I am writing to reiterate my interest in becoming a member of College X's Class of 2016. While College X has been among my top choices since I began the application process, my interview in the fall with alumna [name] and my recent trip to [city] to visit the campus has made it clear that College X would be a perfect fit for me and is definitely my top-choice school. Moreover, my desire to College X is so intense that my family is willing to pay the full cost of tuition and room and board.

During my campus visit, I had the opportunity to sit in on Professor X's History of Education course. By chance, the lecture and discussion was focused on an area I am incredibly passionate about: the impact of poverty on public education.

While I have gained first-hand experience with the ways that poverty affects education in my work as a tutor at a low-income school, it was intriguing to think about the issue historically. Even more exciting was the remarkably high level of classroom engagement and the unique perspectives offered by the students. College X's commitment to creating a community of intelligent, motivated students with diverse backgrounds and experiences was evident in the wide range of ideas and viewpoints offered in the session. Visiting the class, along with touring the campus and speaking with current students, reinforced my belief that College X is the school for me.

While I know that College X has a lot to offer me as a student, I also feel that I would bring a unique perspective to my class and become an energetic contributor to the school community. In my current part-time job as a tutor, I have worked with students to help them improve their reading skills. I've also served as a mentor to kids enrolled in the Big Brothers and Big Sisters Program. As a student at College X, I hope to work with the Building Bridges for Others Program, where I can utilize and hone the skills I've gained through my work as a tutor and mentor to younger students.

I also wanted to notify the Admissions Committee of updates to my application. Since submitting my application in November, I have earned a 3.5 GPA, and in December, I learned I have been nominated for the Outstanding Youth Volunteer Award in (name of city).

Thank you for your time and continued consideration. While I have already been admitted to a number of excellent schools, College X is absolutely my top choice; if I am admitted, I will definitely attend. Please let me know if you have any questions regarding my application, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you very much for your continued consideration. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Jane Doe

If your wait-listed college allows you to submit supplemental materials, you may want to arrange for an additional letter of recommendation. You can send one extra letter of recommendation from a teacher, coach, or administrator. Make sure that your letter writer can explain why you are a good fit for the school. You want to make sure the letter reveals who you are and what you can bring to the schools to which you are applying. It is therefore very important that you select your letter writer carefully.

Whom Should I Ask?

How do you choose your reference? Ideally, the teacher should be a recent one. It is also better if you approach a teacher that you have in an academic subject because they can specifically comment on your academic capabilities and provide specific example about your work in the classroom. You want to ask the teacher who knows you well and will have the capability of including specific examples about you in the classroom. If you wrote a strong paper or did a top-notch lab report or gave a stellar class presentation, consider approaching the teacher for that course. At this point, you should be able to narrow down a list of references to four or five. You should rank these folks 1 through 5 (5 being highest) for your interest in requesting a letter of recommendation (Figure 20).

FIGURE #20

List of Possible Letter Writers			
Name of Letter Writer	Name of Class	Year Class was Taken	Ranking (5 is highest)

How to Ask

The next step is to approach your potential reference in person and ask them if they can write you a letter recommendation. Now this has to be done somewhat carefully. Letters of recommendation can carry a lot of weight with college admissions committees. Therefore, you need to make sure that your reference will write you a positive letter. Starting with your highest-ranked recommender on your list, say this: “I have been wait listed at College X and I was wondering if you know enough about me to write me a strong letter of recommendation to supplement my application.” Then stop talking. At this point, you should closely observe your teacher. If they are enthusiastic, that is fantastic. If they are reluctant, however, it is better for you to abandon ship. Tell them that you appreciate it, but that you will ask someone else. Then move down your list.

And if they say no or tell you that they will write it but it will not be positive, politely tell them that you will ask someone else to do it. You do not want to include a negative or even lukewarm letter of recommendation in your file. Amazingly, many students never check with the letter writer to ensure that they will receive a positive letter. This is a real mistake. Letters can have a big impact on your file. Just a having a letter—any letter—is not enough. You need to make sure that you have a solid one.

Other Letters of Recommendation

Other types of letter writers that you might consider including in your application are people who know you well outside of the classroom, like a coach, employer, or adult in a community activity in which you participate. Again, the whole point of the letter is to have it written by someone who can talk about you in depth as a person and highlight your unique characteristics. Moreover, you want the letter writer to explain exactly why you should be accepted off the wait list at that particular school. As a result, don't include a letter from someone you barely know who is a famous alum or a work acquaintance of your father's. These letters will not help your application because they won't be written by a person who knows you well and can comment on your unique personality.

Information Packets for Your Letter Writer

Once you have your reference lined up, you need to create a packet of information to drop off to them as soon as possible. Your reference needs a summary of your academic record as well as an overview of your activities. You will put this together in the worksheet below. In addition to providing your references with background information, it is very important that you include a stamped envelope addressed to the director of admissions at the school that wait listed you. It is your job to make it easy for your reference to mail the letter.

So what should go in the information packet? These packets should include:

- ❑ A copy of the letter that you wrote to the college to tell them that you still want to attend their school.
- ❑ A copy of your most recent transcript.
- ❑ A stamped envelope addressed to where the letter should be sent, with the school's address as the return address.
- ❑ A list of any specific accomplishments you may have had in the class (e.g., strong participation in a debate, an excellent science project, a fantastic paper).

Make sure that you follow up with your letter writer in a week or so to confirm that they completed your letters. Just send a short e-mail that says something like, “Thank you for taking the time to write me a letter of recommendation. I just wanted to remind you that the admissions committee will examine applicant files beginning May 1.”

You might also consider asking your guidance counselor to intervene on your behalf. You can ask them to call the college admissions office and ask about your chances of being admitted from the wait list. Sometimes, guidance counselors know particular admissions counselors. They might be able to help with a phone call. But, just like the letter of recommendation, you need to provide your counselor with some concrete evidence to explain why you should be accepted at your wait-listed school. Before you ask your guidance counselor to go to bat for you, make sure that you review the College Questionnaire that you completed. Write up a list for your college counselor, and explain exactly what benefit you will get from admission to your wait listed college. Also make sure that you include at least three to five things that you can bring to the school as well. Moreover, if you have any additional academic achievements or extracurricular accolades, be sure to include a short blurb on those things as well. You want to make sure your counselor has specific examples that they can share with the admissions office when they talk to them.

If you attend a large high school, you may have noticed that your counselor might be pretty overwhelmed with students. In fact, your counselor might not even really know who you are. Recent state budget cuts have led to increased workloads for many high school counselors and hiring freezes have limited the number of counselors being hired. The American School Counselor Association recommends a counselor to student ratio or 1:250 but, in the past few years, the ratio has jumped to an average of 1:600. At some schools, the ratio is even more lopsided. In California, for example, counselor-student ratios have hit a whopping 1:986 at some schools.¹⁴

So what does this mean for you? If you are at a smaller school or one with a robust counseling staff, you are fine. You probably know your counselor fairly well and they may be able to help you through the wait list process.

¹⁴ Scott Jaschik, "Bad Advice, No Advice," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 3, 2010.

If, on the other hand, you are one of a million students that your counselor works with and they can't remember who you are, you will need to be your own advocate. What does that mean? It means that you will have to be persistent and well organized to get your counselor to help you with your wait list situation. Make sure that you provide your counselor with your list of accomplishments and reasons for wanting to attend your wait listed college. You should also provide your counselor with the name and phone number of the director of admissions. You want to make this as easy as possible for them. You should remain as polite as possible throughout this process, but you also need to check in and follow up with your counselor to make sure forms have been submitted on time.

Some colleges allow wait-listed students to do an interview. If you are offered an interview, definitely take it. Try to schedule your meeting with the dean of admissions, and make your case directly. Interviews can be a good opportunity to show why you are a good fit for the college. It is not necessarily required for you to travel to the school in person for an interview. If your wait-listed college offers you an interview, but the campus is far away, inquire if you might be able to do it through Skype or the phone. You want to show you are interested, but flying across the country is expensive.

Interview Rules to Follow

Here are some strategies for having a good interview:

- No parents allowed.
- Make sure you are on time.
- Bring a copy of your College Questionnaire to refresh your memory.
- Dress nicely. No need to wear a suit, but make sure you look decent.
- Shake hands firmly and make eye contact.
- Sit up straight and smile.
- Try to answer in more than one-word answers.
- Focus on academic interests first and foremost. Extracurricular activities are secondary.
- Make sure that you prepare. Have a list of questions to ask the interviewer (see below).
- Follow up with a thank-you note. Make sure that you get the interviewer's business card or e-mail address when you are finished.

Practice, Practice, Practice

The most important piece of advice for giving a good interview is to prepare well. Careful preparation will also make you less nervous during the actual interview. Here are five things that you should do before your interview. And please don't wait until the last minute. This whole thing is stressful enough. Give yourself at least a few hours to complete these tasks and try not to make it the few hours the night before the interview.

Visit the school's website once again. You have already done a good deal of research about the school, but it is time to go back to the website and dig a bit deeper to learn even more about the college. Poke around the website to see what the college promotes about itself. Does it heavily emphasize its academic programs? If so, which one? Does it highlight its sports teams? What about faculty research interests? Is the college interested in helping graduates find careers after graduation? Make sure that you learn how the college defines itself and how it differs from other schools.

Think carefully about your strengths and weaknesses as a student. Refer to your Academic Assessment Worksheet. Go through line-by-line and think about the positives and negatives for each one. Highlight any specific strengths that you bring to the table. For example, if your math test scores are sky-high and you want to pursue an engineering major, make sure you jot that down. By the same token, you should examine any weaknesses that you have that might pose challenges when you arrive at college. Perhaps you struggle with writing and it shows in your test scores. Because you are thinking about this now, you can strategize about how you might address this challenge. In particular, perhaps you will seek out help from a writing tutor before your first papers are due. Everyone has weaknesses in their academic background and it is important to think about them now and strategize about how to deal with them.

Prepare answers for practice questions. Write down answers to the practice questions on the worksheet below (Figure 21). This worksheet includes ten of the most-common college interview questions and you are bound to get at least some of them in your interview.

Practice your responses. Now, this is important. You need to practice your answers out loud. Keep practicing until your responses sound totally natural when you open your

mouth. If you are self-conscious and don't want anyone to hear you talking to yourself, go sit in the empty, dry bathtub and practice them. The important thing is that you practice saying your answers out loud. It isn't enough to do them in your head. You need to say the actual words. This exercise will help you gain confidence for the actual interview.

Make a list of your own questions. Almost all interviewers will ask if you have any questions. Make sure you don't ask questions that you could easily find the answer to on the college's website. Rather, think about questions that demonstrate your true interest in the college. It is important that you have some ready to go. It looks bad if you don't have anything to ask them. For a list of sample questions, see below (Figure 22).

Mock Interviews

It is also a good idea to do at least one mock interview with family or friends. By doing a mock interview, you will gain a tremendous amount of confidence that will come through during your real interview. Block off 30-45 minutes of time and give the list of practice questions to a trusted friend or relative. Don't ask anyone that is hypercritical or laughs too easily. Ask your mock interviewer to run through the questions and give feedback on your answers. Yes, this is extremely dorky and you will feel like an idiot while you are doing it. But if you want to give a strong interview, you cannot go into it cold. You have to practice and prepare to give your best performance.

FIGURE #21

Interview Practice Questions

Make sure that you can answer these practice questions.

1. Why do you want to attend this college?
2. What are your academic strengths? What are your academic weaknesses?
3. How have you prepared for college?

4. What are your future career plans?
5. What can you tell me about your extracurricular interests?
6. Do you have a favorite book? A favorite author?
7. What accomplishment are you most proud of?
8. What personal qualities can you contribute to the student body?
9. What do you do for fun?
10. Who is your hero?

FIGURE #22

Sample Questions to Ask the Interviewer

These are some good questions to ask in the interview. They are strong questions because they show that you are really interested in the school and you have thought about how you can get the most out of your experience there.

1. How does the college promote student/faculty contact?
2. What kinds of special projects, seminars, or other experiences are offered?
3. What opportunities are there to do research for faculty?
4. What kinds of internships are available through your college? What types of internships have other students participated in?
5. Do many students participate in service-learning classes (i.e., classes with required internships)? If so, what kinds of service opportunities do they have?
6. What kind of career placement opportunities does the college offer?

There are two radical alternatives that you might consider if you are not admitted from the wait list. First, you could go to a community college and then transfer to your wait listed college. The second option is to take a year off—or a “gap year”—and then apply again next year. I’ll talk about both of these options below.

One way to try to attend your wait list college is to go to a local community college and complete the first two years of your degree. You need to make sure that your college accepts transfer students from community college. If you do choose to go to community college, it is imperative that you know exactly which classes you need to take in order to fulfill the transfer requirements. Oftentimes, these requirements are available on the community college’s website. Community colleges generally refer to these documents as “reciprocity agreements” or “articulation agreements.” Essentially, these forms tell you exactly what classes you need to take to be able to transfer to a four-year college. You will also need to maintain a minimum GPA. Check with your local community college for details.

The number of community college transfer students to four-year schools has skyrocketed recently and the American Association of Community Colleges reports that 12.4 million students were enrolled in community colleges in the U.S. in 2008. And many of these students go on to top universities. In 2009, the University of California calculated that 30% of its graduates attended a community college prior to transferring to UC schools.¹⁵

Gap Year

Another radical alternative is to take a gap year. This is a year off from school in between high school and college. Gap years are very common throughout Europe. In Great Britain, for example, about 11% of the 300,000 college-bound seniors take a gap year

¹⁵ Jeremy Hyman and Lynn Jacobs, “10 Tips for Transferring From Community College,” *U.S. News and World Report*, September 16, 2009.

before enrolling. An increasing number of American students are participating in them as well, particularly as companies set up gap year programs for students. For information about gap years, go to the website for USA Gap Fairs at www.usagapyearfairs.org/programs. The best part of the gap year is that it gives you an opportunity to work, intern, or travel. It may give you something juicy to write about in your personal statement when you apply to college again next year.

My advice, however, is to look at your list of colleges that accepted you for this year and ask if you can defer admission for one year. If this is permitted by the college(s), you definitely have one school lined up for the following year. You can also apply to your wait listed college with a new and better application, but you want to make sure you have at least one school that accepted you and will allow you to defer admission for a year.

There are two important things to keep in mind if you are thinking about taking a gap year. First, do not take any for-credit college classes during the year—not at a four-year or a community college. This can complicate your application when you apply next year. Second, you need to figure out an interesting activity to do during your gap year. A gap year is not intended for you to sit around in jammies and play video games. You need to do something that will improve your college application for the fall.

Here are some tips to ensure that you have a productive gap year. First, come up with a game plan for the gap year. Articulate your goals and create a structured schedule for yourself. Second, do your research. Go to one of the gap year fairs mentioned above. Make sure you talk to other students who have completed the program to see what their experiences were like. Third, take care of yourself socially. You will be a bit of an oddball because you are not enrolling in college in the fall. Make sure that you make an effort to connect with friends and maintain social contacts. Fourth, check your parents' health insurance policy to see what the rules are. If you can't be covered by it, you should look into getting your own individual plan for the year. You don't need some medical catastrophe ruining you financially.

OK. You just received e-mail from your wait list college. You are in! Now what? Don't rush into this decision. You need to carefully think about this decision and you need to weigh the pros and cons. Here are the questions that you need to ask of the admissions committee (Figure 23):

FIGURE #23

Questions to Ask if You Are Accepted

1. Am I being admitted for the major I requested? Or a different one? Am I guaranteed acceptance to a major that is currently impacted?
2. Is campus housing available? If not, where am I expected to live? Will the school help arrange my housing?
3. Am I being offered any financial aid? If so, how much? Will I be eligible for work-study or have those funds already been disbursed? What about grants?
4. How much is the deposit? (If you choose to attend the school that accepted you from the wait list, you will lose the deposit you made at the other school.)
5. Is it possible for me to defer admission for one year? (If you have made gap year plans, this is particularly important to know.)

Questions to Ask if You Are Accepted

Even if you get the news that you have so been hoping for, it is important to get the answers to these questions before you commit to attend your wait-listed school. By having all of the information before you make your decision, you will be ensuring that you are picking the college that is the absolute best fit for you.