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# Getting in to college just got harder. Here's what to do if you are waitlisted

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## KEY POINTS

- In an application cycle unlike any other, more students were rejected or waitlisted at their top-choice schools.
  - Now students are left with fewer options and only a short time to figure out their next move ahead of National College Decision Day on May 1.
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If you were waitlisted at your dream college, join the club.

The hardest application cycle to date left more students in limbo than ever before.

In addition to the number of gap-year students who already accounted for as much as a quarter of next year's freshman class, schools were "test optional" for the first time ever, which meant students didn't need certain SAT or ACT scores in order to apply. That helped drive the surge in applications for fewer spots.

Heightened uncertainty due to Covid also encouraged students to cast a wider net, resulting in a record number of applications at many top colleges and historically low acceptance rates as a result.

“It’s almost a perfect storm,” said Hafeez Lakhani, president of New York-based Lakhani Coaching.

## **Lower acceptance rates, longer waitlists**

Now students are left with fewer options and only a few weeks to figure out their next move ahead of National College Decision Day on May 1, the deadline for high school seniors to choose which college they will attend. (Last year, the coronavirus crisis pushed many schools to extend the deadline until June 1.)

At that point, they must cough up a non-refundable deposit to secure their seat at the school of their choice. And yet, many campuses remain closed to tours and visits, so students must also make these decisions sight-unseen.

And perhaps the biggest problem is that many students have been waitlisted at their top picks.

Waitlisted applicants have neither been outright rejected by a college nor have they been extended a formal offer of admission.

Instead, they may be considered for a seat between now and September, depending on whether there’s sufficient space for them in the incoming class, among other factors.

“For colleges, it’s a no-loss proposition,” said Eric Greenberg, president of Greenberg Educational Group, a New York-based consulting firm. “The more uncertainty about yield, the bigger the waitlist will be.”

Waitlists are an easy way to protect yield — or the percent of students who choose to enroll after being admitted — which is an important statistic for schools.

Nationwide, the average yield for freshmen at four-year colleges and universities fell to about 30% in the year before the pandemic, from closer to 40% a decade ago, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

“It’s so more challenging for all of us to predict our class sizes,” said Leslie Davidson, vice president for enrollment management at Beloit College in Wisconsin.

Although Beloit received 3,300 applications for an incoming class with a target size of 260 students — and already received a record number of deposits as of the latest tally — the college could still be affected by waitlist activity at other places, Davidson said. When a student accepts an offer off the waitlist at another institution, they give up their spot elsewhere (and so on and so on).

Colleges with lower acceptance rates place more students on the waitlist and ultimately accept fewer of them.

Pre-pandemic, colleges granted spots to about 20% of waitlisted applicants, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling, but that number falls to just 7% at the most selective colleges.

With far fewer students choosing to defer and many of last year’s gap year students returning, the percentage will likely be even lower this year, Lakhani said, “I expect that waitlists will not be heavily utilized.”

There are, however, ways to improve your odds.

## **How to get off the waitlist and into class**

The first thing seniors who were waitlisted should do is write a letter of continued interest to the college to let them know why they want to attend, experts say.

“Pick one school that you would definitely go to and make a very, very clear statement: If given the spot, I would absolutely take it,” Lakhani advised.

Then, provide an update that demonstrates what you could bring to the table. For example, if you took classes or completed a research project that helped solidify why that school is now an even better fit.

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—Eric Greenberg PRESIDENT OF GREENBERG EDUCATIONAL GROUP

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“Schools are waiting to hear what it is about the given student today that might be different from the same student a year ago,” Greenberg said.

Think: “How your story has evolved since you applied,” Lakhani said.

Finally, submit one more piece of information to help illustrate this new angle, such as an additional letter of recommendation or non-academic testimonial to your character story, Lakhani said.

## **Make a back-up plan for your back-up plan**

In the meantime, “plans need to go ahead as if there’s no waitlist,” Greenberg said.

Settle on a school among the list of acceptances, based on which is the best fit in terms of cost, academics, campus life and other factors.

“That’s where it becomes imperative to see schools,” he added. “There seems to be a correlation between how well a person likes a school and how many times they’ve visited.”

Also consider the amount of aid available. Some financial aid is awarded on a first-come, first-served basis, or from programs with limited funds. Students who were admitted in the first round tend to have first dibs on grants and other forms of aid.

“As time goes on, it’s typically harder to get financial aid if they get off a waitlist,” said Greenberg. “There are less funds available at that point.”

Covid has made paying for college harder, so affordability may be the most important consideration, after all.

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#### **The Greenberg Educational Group Team**

Eric Greenberg is a leading educational services expert. He graduated summa cum laude from the **University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton Business School** and is a graduate of the **Fieldston High School** in Riverdale, New York. Since establishing the Greenberg Educational Group in New York City in 1991, Greenberg and his team have helped thousands of students, of all ages, achieve their academic goals. Our accomplished and dedicated staff includes an exceptional group of individuals with years of experience who are experts in what they teach. Staff credentials include degrees such as Masters, PhD, and JD and a significant amount of tutoring and teaching experience. Our company has established a stellar reputation for providing Strategic Admission and Application Advising (high school, college and graduate school); Test Preparation; and Academic Tutoring. Greenberg Educational Group provides personalized service (in person or online). We have clients throughout the United States and internationally as well. Greenberg Educational Group has been featured frequently on television, online, on radio and in print.

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