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Waitlisted at Your College of Choice? The Dos and Don'ts

TIME

EDUCATION

The Waiting Game. More college applicants are being told "maybe." A guide to getting in off the waitlist

BY JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN

NINE COLLEGES HAVE OFFERED SARAH SIMON, OF Wellesley, Mass., a spot in their class of 2012: Brown, Cornell, Dartmouth, Duke, Princeton, Stanford, University of Chicago, Vassar and Williams. But she's a dancer—ballet six times a week, modern twice, jazz once—and Columbia University in New York City would give her access not only to an exceptional ballet program at its sister school Barnard but also to the epicenter of the dance world. Unfortunately, Columbia

has put her on the waitlist. Though she's not whining about her wealth of options, Simon, a senior at Noble and Greenough School, is holding out hope for Columbia, at least through mid-June. "I ended up getting into a lot of great schools," says Simon, "just not the one that would make me disregard all the others."

Lots of seniors are in the same predicament this spring for several reasons: the high school class of 2008 numbers nearly 3.4 million, the largest in U.S. history; there's a swell of kids submitting seven or more college applications; and Princeton and Harvard got rid of early

admissions this year. More than 6.3 million applications were submitted to four-year colleges in the fall of 2006, and though the numbers aren't yet available, they most likely increased this school year. No surprise then that many schools are logging record-low admissions rates. Columbia, for example, let in 8.7% of applicants, compared with 10.4% in 2007. And more schools are hedging their bets by upping the number of applicants they put on the waitlist. That's because the most talented students will probably have offers from multiple schools, but they can attend, of course, only one.

Even the most selective colleges end up using the waitlist to fill out their classes. In 2006, colleges admitted on average 29% of students from the waitlist. For the schools, that's not a bad thing. Rather than assign waitlisters a numeric rank and pluck them from the top in order, most schools reassess the whole pool of kids to try to ensure a well-rounded campus. "It's a great way to shape the class and meet our institutional priorities," says Dick Nesbitt, director of admissions at Williams College. "Maybe we could use a few more artists or a few more math or science researchers." Williams waitlisted 1,000 applicants this year for a class of 538 and last year admitted 52 from the list.

So what's the secret to getting in off the waitlist? Most colleges require students to decide where they want to go by May 1, after which they will re-evaluate the kids they've kept on hold. Given the odds, those who choose to remain on a waitlist should still accept an offer from—and, yes, probably pay a nonrefundable deposit to—another school, lest they have nowhere to attend in the fall. Some waitlisted students use the time to take action. Sam Davison, a senior at Highland Park High School in Texas, was waitlisted at his first choice, Vanderbilt University. To boost his chances, Davison had a family friend who is an alumnus write a letter on his behalf. And he is in touch with a Vanderbilt admissions officer. Vanderbilt, which waitlisted 25% more applicants this year than last for a class of 1,550, lets its reps speak frankly with students about their chances. "We try to humanize this experience," says Douglas Christiansen, dean of admissions, "because it's very emotional and stressful for the students and families."

But every school is different. Independent college counselor Jeannie Borin, founder of Los Angeles-based College Connections, tells waitlisted student clients never to send anything extra to admissions offices without asking permission. Generally, colleges welcome updates on grades and achievements, which is what Sarah Brown-Campello, captain of the soccer and lacrosse teams at Thacher School in Ojai, Calif., is sending to her top choice, Dickinson College (she wants small classes and a chance to take Portuguese), along with a new teacher recommendation. Davison's classmate Jordan Vincent, whose heart is set on University of Virginia, has written a new essay on an unusual accomplishment: as a parliamentarian for the Texas Junior Classical League, a statewide group to promote study of Latin and Greek, Vincent worked with the IRS to revise the organization's by-laws so it could regain tax-exempt status.

For some, being waitlisted by their dream school can be a blessing in disguise. It can spur them to take a gap year or to take a closer look at their other academic options. If Vincent and Davison don't get into their preferred schools, they'll both go to University of Texas; Brown-Campello would go to University of Vermont; and Simon thinks she'd attend Princeton or Stanford. Kavya Rao, a freshman in the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) Medical Scholars Program who was waitlisted at Harvard last spring, thinks they will be just fine. "I would have loved to go to Harvard," she says. "Now I don't want to leave UCSD and all the people here who can help me become a doctor." College is what you make of it, no matter where you end up. ■

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Kavya Rao. Waitlisted last spring at: Harvard. Strategy: Rao, with the assistance of College Connections, put together and sent a packet of additional accomplishments since applying, including becoming certified to teach karate. However, with Jeannie Borin's help, she was offered a spot in a prestigious pre-med program at University of California, San Diego and she accepted – extremely satisfied with her choice.

PHOTO: KAVYA RAO FOR TIME