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Lifestyle

Many applicants bide time on colleges' wait lists

By **Beth Teitell** | GLOBE STAFF MAY 02, 2014



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Sydney Gad has been waiting anxiously through two rounds of applications for an answer from her beloved Tulane University.

Danielle Darveau has spent most of her life yearning to go to Boston College. She's the daughter and granddaughter of alums, the owner of a wardrobe of BC apparel, and a great student at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School. So when Darveau, 17, applied early last fall, "everyone was like, 'You're definitely going to get in.'"

But 5,500 other students applied for early action at the school, too, and BC deferred her application until the spring. She didn't get in then, either, and now she's in limbo, this time on the wait list.

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"I feel like I can't even wear my BC T-shirts," she said. "I'm stuck in between."

The college wait list has become an anxiety-producing reality of today's college application process. With high schoolers applying to more schools, and acceptance rates important to a university's reputation and its bottom line, wait lists have swelled, along with the hopes of the students on them.

Thursday, May 1, was the day students needed to put down deposits — a few hundred dollars, generally nonrefundable — with their chosen college or university. But families who can afford it often put down a deposit at one school, but remain on the wait list at another that they prefer.

Many families are perfectly willing to forfeit their deposit if, by some chance, their child is taken off the wait list and offered admission to her top choice. The average percentage of students accepted off wait lists was 25.4 percent in fall 2012, according to industry statistics, but at selective schools, the percentage can be much lower.

But playing that game means a student must wait past the May 1 date, while their classmates gleefully announce their choices on Facebook.

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"It's like going standby for a flight, but your name never gets called," said Don McMillan, president of McMillan, Howland & Spence, a Back Bay-based college-consulting firm. "You think you are almost there, that it's like a 'maybe.' But they are banging on a door that's never going to open."

Statistics on the total number of kids stuck in the wait list holding pattern are hard to come by, but the director of public policy and research at the [National Association for College Admission Counseling](#) in Virginia, says the past decade has seen “a marked increase in the number of students being placed on wait lists by colleges and universities.”

At Princeton, for example, 1,141 students were offered spots on the wait list for fall 2014 — up from 585 for fall 2003. Bates College in Maine offered wait-list spots to 1,595 applicants for fall 2014, compared with 841 spots offered in 2003. Brandeis offered 755 applicants a wait-list spot for fall 2003, compared with 1,347 for fall 2012, the most recent numbers available.

In two cases that have become notorious in wait-list circles, MIT and Stanford took zero students from their lists for the freshman class that entered last fall.

The colleges, meanwhile, are trying to protect themselves from unpredictability in an admissions process that has become a crowded race. More and more, students have started applying to what was once considered an excessive number of schools. At the Boston Latin School, for example, 373 seniors submitted more than 3,000 applications for fall 2014, the director of guidance said.

With students applying to so many schools, admissions officers have a harder time estimating how many accepted students will actually enroll. This, in turn, has led the schools to use their wait lists strategically.

Some kids are on the wait list because they're overqualified. They are wait-listed — but not accepted — because the school fears being turned down, which would drive down an important metric called “yield rate.” That's the percentage of accepted students who actually enroll, and it can affect the perception of a school's desirability and even its bond rating.

Underqualified students also make the wait list. “They're there as a courtesy,” said John Katzman, chief executive of [Noodle](#), a New York-based education research company. It is the school's way of keeping up a relationship with a guidance counselor, a high school, or parents who are alums. “It's a much gentler rejection,” he said.

Perhaps, but limbo is its own kind of pain. Sometimes students, and their parents, wait into the summer, hoping to get picked off the wait list of their favorite school, though that is rare.

In Back Bay, Sydney Gad has been waiting anxiously through two rounds of applications for an answer from her beloved Tulane University.

“Part of me is like, couldn’t you just reject me?” said Gad, a senior at Beaver Country Day School in Chestnut Hill. “I am so tempted to pick up my phone and call the admissions office. I just want to know, am I high up on the wait list? Am I on the bottom? Do you have an idea when you are going to let me know? I just want to talk to them, but I know I can’t.”

Indeed, while advisers counsel students to update admissions officers periodically on recent accomplishments, the author of “Don’t Stalk the Admissions Officer” says there’s a fine line between enthusiasm and being a pest.

“Admissions officers hate it when you call and ask where you are on the wait list,” said Risa Lewak, who interviewed admissions officers at 75 colleges and universities for her book. “I always liken it to being in love. You want to let the college know it is your college soul mate, but you can’t go overboard. You don’t want to reiterate why you want to go, but how you will enrich the school.”

The word “enrich” is often taken literally. As Jim Montague, director of guidance at Boston Latin School, and others, point out, by the time a school gets to selecting students from its wait list, it has often exhausted its financial aid.

“What I find most frustrating is when a student discovers he is offered a spot, he might not get sufficient financial assistance,” Montague said. “Wait lists work better for students of means.”

Students and high school guidance counselors are not the only ones who are unhappy with the supersized lists. At Boston University, Kelly Walter, the executive director of admissions, says that while the wait list can provide an “opportunity” for a student, “I also understand that colleges and universities have a certain responsibility to be realistic. We all have probably gone a little overboard in recent years.”

With that in mind, this year Boston University offered 3,503 students a spot on the wait list for fall 2014, down from 5,056 who were offered wait-list spots for fall 2013. That year, 2,421 students accepted spots on the BU wait list, and 69 were admitted. At the same time, the school is reducing the size of its freshman class, from 4,023 for the class of 2015, to a goal of 3,600 for the class of 2019.

Princeton and Bates also offered fewer wait list spots for 2014 than for 2013. Princeton offered 1,395 students a spot on the wait list for fall 2013, and Bates offered the wait list to 2,098 applicants.

Meanwhile, even as list anxiety mounts, McMillan, the Back Bay education consultant, offered consolation to the vast majority of students who will not get the call-up. A disproportionate number of students who come to his office seeking help transferring from one college to another were students who got in off the wait list. “They may have been in over their heads,” he said.

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