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# More College Applicants Aren't Welcome Till Winter

By **ARIEL KAMINER**

Elizabeth Bricker of Rumson, N.J., was still half-asleep when her mother came into her room two weeks ago carrying an envelope from the [University of Southern California](#). Even through the haze of spring break, she could see that the envelope was big — big enough to mean she had gotten in. “I was so excited,” she recalled. “Then I opened it and I read the letter and I was like, oh no! I started to cry.”

She had been admitted, but not for the fall of 2013. She was being offered a spot one semester down the road, in January 2014. “I never heard of anyone being accepted in the spring,” she said.

Elizabeth was worried that accepting the offer would leave her out of sync with her peers, all of whom were gearing up to start college life in September. But as it turned out, her two best friends got the same offer from their first-choice colleges, too.

So did a lot of other students across the country.

Exact numbers are not available, but according to the [National Association for College Admission Counseling](#), over the last few years more and more colleges have been sending out a new kind of acceptance letter, inviting some applicants to wait until the new year before showing up.

Back in 2001, when U.S.C. started doing it, Timothy Brunold, the director of admissions, said he assumed the university was a pioneer. Now the list includes, among others, Skidmore College, Hamilton College, Brandeis University, the University of Miami, [Northeastern University](#), Elon University in North Carolina and Middlebury College (which actually beat U.S.C. to the punch by a few decades).

They all have their own variation on the theme. Some, like [Middlebury](#), in Vermont, allow students to request second-semester admissions; some make the decision for the students. [Hamilton](#), in Clinton, N.Y., does not enroll students until they arrive on campus in the spring; [Skidmore](#), in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., and [Northeastern](#), in Boston, enroll them right away but direct them to spend their fall semester at a designated program abroad.

But all are motivated by the same basic arithmetic: between freshman-year attrition and junior-year abroad programs, campus populations drop off after the first few months of college each year. “With the economy the way it is, they need to be doing what they can to get tuition income,” said Scott G. Chrysler Jr., a college counselor in Louisiana who is active in the national group’s admissions practices committee. “An empty seat is not generating any income.”

The arrangement may not be profitable for everyone, warns Tom Weede, chairman of the committee. “Often the letter says, ‘We encourage you to enroll in another school and take core-related classes,’ ” he said. “Well, at the other school, if you want financial aid you have to be a full-time student. The school that takes you doesn’t know you’re just going to be there for a semester. So it creates a built-in retention problem at a moment we’re calling for more accountability and more numbers about outcomes like retention.”

As fast as the practice may be growing, it is still unknown to most college applicants, and even to many guidance counselors. At [Brandeis University](#), which now enrolls 100 or so students for midyear arrival, the dean of admissions, Mark Spencer, said some applicants were so rattled by the offer that they begged to be placed on the fall waiting list instead. “I say, ‘Wait, you want me to un-admit you?’ ” Mr. Spencer said.

To address students’ concerns, many of these colleges set up special midyear open houses, or enlist former midyear arrivals to call their potential successors and talk about how it all works. And when that spring semester rolls around, these colleges generally offer midyear orientations, modeled on the welcome-to-campus events that greet most first-year students.

High school seniors looking to arrive at U.S.C. next spring are already chatting with one another on a Facebook page that the university set up for them. And at Hamilton, which last year enrolled about 10 percent of its incoming class for spring semester, everyone gets a Hamilton e-mail account and password, even those who won’t arrive on campus for a few more months.

At Middlebury College, where one-sixth of the class arrives for the first time in February, Greg Buckles, dean of admissions, said, “We kind of cast about for these ‘Febby’ qualities,” like risk-taking, entrepreneurial spirit and a drive to lead.

Jessye Kass, a senior at Brandeis, said she was “very upset” when she was first offered admission for the spring semester. “I called and demanded to be put in the fall class,” she recalled. When that did not work she raised some money and went to volunteer in Ghana.

On the strength of that experience she has since started an organization to promote arts education in Ghanaian schools. In a few weeks she will graduate with dual majors — anthropology as well as African and African-American Studies — and dual minors in

social justice and social policy as well as peace conflict and coexistence studies, as well as a Fulbright scholarship. She said none of it would have happened if it were not for that deferred semester.

Ms. Kass took extra courses along the way in order to graduate with a majority of her class. Other midyear arrivals use advanced placement credits from high school, or transfer credits from their fall semester at another college. But some who arrive midyear and then end up graduating midyear say that schedule has a hidden advantage: it gives them a few months' running start before the much larger mass of spring graduates hits the job market.

At Middlebury, midyear graduation brings another difference. Unlike their classmates who must sweat through their late-May ceremonies, sticky in an academic gown, the Febbies get to graduate in the middle of winter, at the top of a big hill. And then [they zoom down it together](#), on skis.