

## **Decisions, Decisions, Decisions!**

This is the time of year when you learn the admissions decisions from both universities in the US as well as the boarding schools. There tend to be three major questions: If you have received multiple acceptances, how do you make that final choice? What should you do if you are waitlisted? In the event you did not receive any acceptances, what can you do?

### **How do you choose when you have several acceptances?**

If you have received several acceptances the first thing you should do is celebrate! This is a good situation in which to find yourself. Students will tell me from time-to-time that it would be easier if they did not have a choice. This is because they are afraid that they will make a mistake. Two years ago I was working with a student from China who found himself with acceptances to the business schools at the University of Virginia, Washington University in St. Louis, University of Notre Dame, Vanderbilt University, Tufts University and New York University. He struggled with his decision for over two agonizing weeks. We began by making lists of the pros and cons of each school utilizing the following questions in much the same way you would begin a school search:

1. Which school has the best record for acceptance to MBA programs in graduate school?
2. Which school size do you like best?
3. Which location do you like best?
4. Which school has the best opportunities for internships?
5. Which school offers the “other qualities” that you need to be happy?
6. Which school is the easiest in terms of travel?
7. How are the school’s ranked?
8. Which schools are considered the safest?
9. What is that little voice inside of you saying?

As you can see from this student’s list of acceptances, many of these questions had not been answered when he made his initial list of colleges to apply to, as the universities are quite different from each other in many of the above questions. His schools ranged from small to large, from private to public, from city schools to rural schools, and they were located all over the US. While the rankings for undergraduate were available, the actual rankings on the undergraduate business programs were different and the school with the best record for placement to graduate school was the school with the worst safety record. To make matters worse, everyone involved had a different opinion.

In the end, we first narrowed the list down to three schools that he and his parents agreed were the three best choices. He came to the understanding that there was not a “right” choice or a “wrong” choice. All three schools were excellent and offered

undergraduate programs in business that were highly respected. He had to trust the little voice inside himself, which he did. He is now finishing his second year of university and has done very well. During the summer after his freshman year he shared with me that although he made the decision that was right for him at the time, looking back, his fear of leaving Beijing and going to university in the US did play into the final decision. A year later, with the fear of the unknown removed, he would have made a different decision. He also is already preparing his list of graduate school programs and I can clearly tell that he is more focused on the right fit. The universities are all very similar to each other.

This was an extreme example and involved universities, but the process he used may be useful to you if you find yourself in a similar situation whether with boarding schools or universities. The lesson to be learned is the importance of doing your homework in the beginning when you first come up with your list of schools. It is important to visit schools if you can and to take time during those visits to understand the differences between the universities or boarding schools. A summer pre-college program on a university campus or a summer school program at a boarding school is also a valuable opportunity to learn about living and studying abroad. Many universities offer pre-college programs for students at the end of grade 11 and many boarding schools offer summer school academic or ESL programs.

It is equally important to have a realistic understanding of how you would rank your acceptances in the beginning. Not every child has a first choice, nor does every child get accepted to their first choice, but usually a child who has started with a good list in the application phase can rank their possible acceptances, which makes the final decision easier.

### **What to do if you are waitlisted?**

I always look at the waitlist decisions from the perspective that they see you as an acceptable candidate but they do not currently have a space for you. Many, many children are accepted from waitlists but the first step is to review the historical information at each school at which you are waitlisted to see how many students they usually put on the waitlist and how many students do they traditionally accept from their waitlist. This information is usually available on the school's or university's web site and in the letter or email you received with the decision.

Each university or school will have rules for the waitlist and it is important to understand those rules for your school. As a general rule, they will ask you to let them know if you would like to remain on their waitlist. They may encourage you to provide information about anything that has happened in your academic or extracurricular life since you applied. They may want updated transcripts. They may allow you to submit an additional recommendation. At the same time, they may tell you clearly to not do anything. It is critical that you follow the rules that each university has in place and that you do what they ask. If you do something that

they clearly ask you not to do, you will hurt your chances of being removed from the waitlist.

I always ask the students with whom I am working to bring me the actual emails or letters from each school. We then use those letters to develop a strategy to help them stand out in the waitlist if we can. The strategy starts with a nicely worded email indicating that they are happy to be on the waitlist, that they will attend if they are offered the opportunity, and we include any new information in a short concise statement. We also copy the email to the admissions person responsible for China. Here is an example but please, only say things that are true:

*Dear Office of Admissions,*

*Although I was disappointed to learn that I was not offered a spot in the class of 2019, I am excited to know that I still have a chance of being accepted. Peddie School is my top choice and if I am offered the opportunity to attend I will enroll.*

*Since I applied in December, I have been selected to serve as the Captain of the Tennis team and I had a supporting role in our spring drama production. My third semester grades remained strong and I made the high honor roll at my school.*

*Thank you for the opportunity to be on the waitlist. I truly hope I will have the opportunity to attend the Peddie School next fall.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Andi O'Hearn*

It is stressful to be on waitlists especially when everyone else knows where they are going to go. You do have to be prepared to attend a different university in the event that you are not offered enrollment from the waitlist. By May 1, you need to make a deposit at another school. Generally that deposit is non-refundable, which is unfortunate but necessary to be sure you have a university to attend in the fall.

Do not pester the admissions offices. Let them know you are interested, keep in touch if it is appropriate, and follow the rules they outline carefully.

One year I had a child accepted with a Presidential Scholarship at New York University and waitlisted at five Ivy League schools. In the end she was pulled off of three waitlists and went on to attend Columbia University, which was her second choice overall. It was a spring full of many tears and a lot of stress, but it did all work out in the end and she had an amazing four years at Columbia. It was absolutely the right school for her.

## **What do you do if you are rejected everywhere?**

This is a difficult situation but there are options. The first thing you need to do is to try to determine what went wrong. Were you applying to schools that were too competitive for your test scores and your grades? Is there a possibility that they thought you did not write your own essay? Did you indicate you wanted to study a major or follow a passion they did not offer? Try to look very critically at your application and see if you can figure out what might have gone wrong before you try to apply again so you can eliminate or fix the issue.

You will next need to decide what you want to do. You can choose to take a year off and use the time to study for your tests and improve your self as a candidate and apply for the following September. You could apply to schools that are still accepting applications for the fall semester. You could apply to schools for January instead of September. It all depends what choice is going to work best for you in the circumstances you personally find yourself.

### *“Gap Year”*

Taking a year off and reapplying in the following September can be a great option but you need to have a plan. This is more popular for university applicants although it can work at times for boarding school applicants. The overall goal is to improve your personal story so that you will be accepted at the schools you wish to attend. You do need to remember that you will need to file your applications half-way through your Gap Year so you will need to quickly address your areas that need improvement. Here is a possible Gap Year Plan:

- June – October: study full time for your SAT’s and TOEFL/IELTS. Plan to take the SAT’s in October and November. Use this time also to prepare your applications and include information about your Gap Year Plan.
- November – January: join a six week program like Habitat for Humanity in an English speaking country
- Join your family for the CNY holiday
- February – May: be involved in an internship in the area you wish to study. For example, if you want to be a teacher, do an internship in a school. If it could be an English Speaking school or program so that you are working even more on your English, that would be a plus.

I once worked with a child who had received acceptances, but did not want to go to any of the schools to which she had been accepted. We reviewed her application and the list of schools she wanted to attend and came up with a plan. Her test scores were fine as were her grades, but she had not prepared her essays well nor had she presented a personal story that matched her interest for a major. She was interested in a career as a social worker in Spanish speaking countries but had

never done anything to demonstrate her passion. In her Gap Year, she first focused on re-writing her college essays. She also took the time to personally visit each school and to interview where possible. Her top choice was Barnard College, one of the colleges of Columbia University. Barnard does grant interviews so she took advantage of that opportunity and really prepared for her interview, being careful to share her plans for her Gap Year and indicating how and why she was interested in Barnard.

She then enrolled for a semester in a Spanish language immersion program, which lasted until January. For the rest of her Gap year, she traveled to Spain and got involved in a volunteer program making a difference in the poorer areas of the country. She had a great time, improved her Spanish speaking ability and was successfully accepted in the Early Decision round by Barnard.

### *Apply to Schools still open for Admissions for September*

There are many schools in the US who will still be accepting students all the way through the summer. You can use a search engine or the common application to generate a list of schools. These schools may not be as “highly ranked” as you first desired. However, at the end of four years, it only matters where your degree is from, not the path you took to get there. Again, you need a plan to address what went wrong in the first place. For example, if your TOEFL and SAT’s were too low for the schools to which you first applied, you now need to carefully select schools that are in your SAT range and that offer strong ESL programs. You will need to work hard and get strong grades if your overall plan is to transfer in two years. You also need to get involved in an activity related to your areas of interests. Your goal with this plan is to make yourself a strong candidate to transfer if that is what you want to do. You may fall in love with your school and decide to stay there for four years, which is also fine. Community colleges and junior colleges are also excellent options as part of a four-year plan that involves transferring. Some community colleges actually offer guaranteed admissions to the state university systems. For example, the community college system in California has an agreement with the University of California system that guarantees admissions if your grades are above a 3.0.

### *Apply to schools for admissions for January term 2016*

Not every boarding school or university offers January or mid-year admissions but many do. You will need to research which boarding schools or universities do accept applications for January if this is the path you wish to follow. This option will give you the opportunity to retake your SSAT’s, your TOEFL/IELTS, or your SAT’s if needed. You can also use the summer to either study or get involved in a program to improve your personal story.

Boarding schools sometimes operate on trimester schedules and will accept students at the beginning of the second trimester, usually in November. Although

this does not give you a lot of time to address your area of weakness, you can use the summer to prepare for another round of testing if that is the area you are looking to improve. More time will also give you the opportunity to expand the list of schools to which you are applying.

In all three options, the first step is to look realistically at your application and try to assess what went wrong. It is then much easier to design a strategy that will work best for your child and your family. Education in the US is a huge investment of time and money in your child's future. It is wise to take extra time to carefully analyze your options. Do not panic! If you decide to take a year off and design a Gap Year program, you may find you will benefit from it so much in the long run that you will be thankful for the experience.

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