

Grade Point

## Top colleges put thousands of applicants in wait-list limbo, and some won't admit any

By **Nick Anderson** April 16

Students applying to top colleges crave to hear “yes!” when decisions roll out in March and brace themselves for “no.” But huge numbers get a vague answer that is neither admission nor denial — a tantalizing “maybe” — with an invitation to join a wait list.

Wait-list offers far outnumber seats in the entering classes at many of those schools, a Washington Post analysis found. The University of Michigan last year invited 14,960 students onto its wait list, by far the largest total from among dozens of schools that The Post reviewed and more than 25 percent of all applicants to the state flagship in Ann Arbor. Of the 4,512 who accepted a wait-list spot, just 90 — 1.99 percent — were admitted to a class of 6,071.

[\[See wait list data from nearly 100 selective schools\]](#)

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Wait lists prolong the tension of the grueling college search for tens of thousands of students a year, giving a glimmer of hope that often ends with no payoff beyond the satisfaction of learning that elite schools consider their bids worthy of a verdict other than outright rejection.

For colleges, wait lists provide peace of mind during admission season, enabling enrollment chiefs to plug unexpected holes in a class — perhaps nursing students, or prospective engineers, or out-of-state residents interested in business. But for teenagers on the cusp of high school graduation, the massive lists exact an emotional toll after they already have spent many stressful months in pursuit of their college dreams.

“I definitely do still feel like I’m in a limbo state,” said Apollo Yong, 17, a senior at Washington-Lee High School in Arlington, Va. He is wait-listed at the University of Chicago and Dartmouth College, and is wondering what his final choices will be as the May 1 deadline looms for admitted students to choose a school: “There’s still, like, hope that I’ll get in.”

A strong International Baccalaureate student with an interest in biomedical engineering, Yong plays violin in the orchestra and picked up the mandolin for a part in the spring play “Dark of the Moon.” He has been admitted to the University of Virginia, Georgia Tech and the University of Texas at Dallas, and said he is “really happy” with those options.

Chicago and Dartmouth both praised Yong’s “impressive accomplishments.” But instead of admission they offered him places on their wait lists. “Initially I thought, ‘What did I do wrong?’” Yong said. He acknowledged feeling a curious mix of disappointment, frustration and hope in knowing that he qualified for those two ultra-selective schools, if only space would open up.

It is difficult to say what the chances are that Yong will get into either school. At the most elite schools, wait-listed students seem to face prospects ranging from slim to none.

Chicago reveals little about its wait lists. Data from Dartmouth show that it is hit-or-miss: Last year, Dartmouth admitted 129 from a wait list of 963, amounting to roughly 10 percent of the entering class. But Dartmouth did not admit any wait-listed applicants in 2014 — of 1,133 names, zero made it to the New Hampshire campus.

The Post reviewed wait-list results for 2014 and 2015 at nearly 100 selective schools, drawn from responses to the Common Data Set questionnaire. Some colleges will start to make admission offers from their wait list in late April. Many, though, will wait until after the May 1 deadline for admitted students to make an enrollment deposit. Then, when they know how their classes are shaping up, they might dip into their wait lists. Or they might not.

Some famous schools, such as Harvard University, use wait lists but reveal nothing about them. Yale University disclosed that it invited 1,324 applicants to its list in 2014, about the same size of its entering class, but declined to reveal how many were admitted through that route.

Stanford, the nation’s most selective university, admitted a mere seven from its wait list in 2014 and none from a list of 927 in 2015. Wait-listed students also were shut out last year at Lehigh and Tulane universities and at the

University of Maryland, as well as Bryn Mawr, Dickinson and Macalester colleges. They had little success at Carnegie Mellon (four admits) and Duke (nine).

The dynamics of wait lists provide a stark illustration of the pecking order in higher education at a time when top-flight students often apply to a dozen or more schools.

Consider students who have accepted admission to a school ranked in the top 25 by U.S. News and World Report but not in the top 10. If those students get an offer from a top-10 school via a wait list after May 1, they might well accept it and forfeit their enrollment deposits elsewhere. But that, in turn, leaves the first schools they accepted with a suddenly vacant seat. So those schools must go to their wait lists, creating a cascading effect through the market.

Case Western Reserve, a private university in Cleveland ranked 37th nationally, keeps an eye every year on the flow of students to higher-ranked private schools such as Northwestern, Chicago, Carnegie Mellon and Emory, as well as public universities such as Ohio State, Penn State, the University of Pittsburgh, Georgia Tech and the University of California at Berkeley. Those schools sometimes lure strong candidates away from Case Western.

“What happens there matters to us,” said Rick Bischoff, Case Western’s vice president for enrollment.

To ensure that the university hits its freshman enrollment target of 1,250, Case Western keeps one of the deepest wait lists in the country and uses it aggressively. The school invited more than 9,000 applicants to its wait list last year, and wound up with 5,119 names. Ultimately, it offered admission to 518 of those students. Not all accepted, but the school met its enrollment goal.

Bischoff said that it is vital not to admit too many students through regular admission. In 2012, the university overshot its enrollment target by 30 percent, leaving the school to scramble to find beds for hundreds of unexpected arrivals and to schedule more courses. “That’s bad,” Bischoff said.

Now, Case Western doles out regular-admission offers conservatively and plans on filling about 10 percent of its class through the wait list. Bischoff said that he starts making offers from the list in late April.

“We love our wait-list kids,” Bischoff said, noting that their academic profile is as strong or stronger than the overall entering class. “It’s not that these are sub-par students. These are terrific, terrific kids.”

When the school pulls from the wait list, he said, “we’re making some kids’ dreams come true.”

Sometimes, schools activate nearly their entire wait list. Penn State admitted 1,445 of its 1,473 wait-listed applicants

in 2015 to its main campus, a year after it wait-listed no one. Ohio State let in everyone from its list in 2014 (239 students) and again in 2015 (304).

Vanderbilt University works its list heavily. In 2014, it offered admission to 210 of its 4,536 wait-listed students to help fill a class of about 1,600. Douglas Christiansen, the university's vice provost for enrollment, said Vanderbilt must ensure that it has strong candidates for its schools of music, engineering, education, and arts and science.

After students join Vanderbilt's wait list, the university keeps close tabs on their desires, asking them twice to confirm that they want to remain under consideration. Usually, some drop out during that back and forth.

“Our whole intent with the wait list is to be upfront, transparent, fair and expedited so these youngsters are not in greater level of continued agony of what they're trying to do,” Christiansen said. “And they and their families can move on — whether that's ‘Yay, moving on to Vanderbilt’ or to somewhere else.”

What wait-listed students most want to know is what will boost their case for getting in. Christiansen said that Vanderbilt's guidance is to reconfirm interest and then stay in touch via email with a regional admissions officer. (But in moderation: Too many emails can backfire.) And forget about trying to lean on the school through connections.

“You don't need to pull out your parents' influential friends. You don't need to send letters from senators, representatives, movie stars or wealthy people,” Christiansen said. Big-name testimonials “will not make a difference at all.”

Michigan said that its wait-list invites grew to that high level last year in part because application totals spiked 75 percent over five years. Surging demand creates more uncertainty as the university tries to predict a final class size based on how many offers of admission it has made, and Michigan also is seeking to maintain high standards for each of its seven undergraduate schools and colleges that admit freshmen.

“All of which, in our view, supports a desire for a robust wait list in the event that the wait list would be needed to stabilize the incoming class,” said Rick Fitzgerald, a Michigan spokesman.

About 4,500 students in both 2014 and 2015 accepted spots on Michigan's wait list — a number that is equivalent to about 75 percent of the size of the school's freshman class. Fitzgerald said that the university plans to scale back its invites this year, but could not say by how much.

Meanwhile, wait-listed students everywhere are spending April, and perhaps part of May, in high suspense.

Jasmine Ben Hamed, 17, a classmate of Yong's at Washington-Lee High, said that she has an offer from American



Dickinson	801	280	0	618	848	261	0	731
University of Maryland	n/a	n/a	n/a	4,129	500	500	0	3,937
Macalester	510	269	215	541	350	177	0	583
Lafayette	1,827	464	37	648	1,532	428	3	672
Carnegie Mellon	3,104	1,630	73	1,474	5,526	2,835	4	1,575
Barnard	1,108	573	21	619	1,195	130	6	635
Mount Holyoke	440	268	4	547	785	459	7	532
College of the Holy Cross	816	343	0	774	1,307	494	8	738
Duke	n/a	n/a	92	1,721	n/a	n/a	9	1,745
Bates	1,595	694	26	491	1,535	671	11	517
Harvey Mudd	596	399	14	195	534	354	11	214
Wesleyan	1,955	893	70	750	1,877	884	12	787
Haverford	831	368	5	338	883	354	12	346
Skidmore	1,692	385	0	724	1,742	378	13	686
Furman	197	42	17	727	208	51	14	672
Carleton	1,275	371	9	521	1,350	442	16	491
Kenyon	2,397	642	38	448	2,876	998	17	492
Grinnell	1,532	602	70	435	1,224	474	18	442
Centre	124	31	8	386	183	42	19	379
Sewanee	238	75	7	466	1,039	202	21	469
Pitzer	n/a	n/a	7	260	1,021	895	23	267
Colorado College	874	198	24	549	1,119	232	24	583
Brandeis	1,405	585	3	859	1,553	595	25	802
University of Massachusetts at Amherst	5,228	1,403	26	4,642	5,450	1,278	26	4,661
Occidental	792	297	65	546	705	359	26	517
Swarthmore	n/a	n/a	16	407	n/a	n/a	26	n/a
Wellesley	1,182	687	85	593	1,404	843	30	595
Amherst	1,341	600	61	469	1,398	643	33	477

Middlebury	1,525	663	1	580	1,304	530	33	589
Georgia Tech	3,900	2,150	174	2,809	3,397	2,031	38	3,089
Pomona	651	324	0	450	842	492	38	400
Princeton	1,138	818	41	1,312	1,206	857	39	1,319
Worcester Polytechnic	3,023	1,725	203	1,056	2,472	1,373	41	1,093
Northwestern	2,767	1,587	55	2,005	2,614	1,452	43	2,018
Emory	3,810	1,891	147	1,365	3,809	1,910	45	1,357
Rhodes	738	154	52	507	1,290	277	45	562
Hamilton	919	438	21	469	958	365	47	473
Colgate	1,707	766	56	767	1,896	913	49	773
Williams	1,238	594	70	546	1,603	573	53	551
Rensselaer Polytechnic	4,984	2,851	77	1,331	4,087	2,203	57	1,379
Bucknell	1,822	705	57	939	2,427	922	59	938
Connecticut College	1,298	560	73	501	1,306	637	61	482
George Washington	3,464	1,013	87	2,416	3,827	1,354	62	2,589
Union	847	439	4	570	1,167	626	64	568
Whitman	862	315	59	395	872	370	67	364
University of Miami	n/a	n/a	n/a	2,076	5,563	1,295	73	2,080
Claremont McKenna	614	349	38	327	919	453	75	343
University of North Carolina	3,154	1,563	31	3,976	3,144	1,513	78	4,076
Cornell University	3,143	2,026	96	3,225	3,583	2,231	81	3,180
Oberlin	n/a	n/a	n/a	797	1,126	459	86	778
University of Michigan	12,631	4,457	91	6,505	14,960	4,512	90	6,071
University of Pennsylvania	2,651	1,600	136	2,425	2,474	1,438	90	2,435
St. Olaf	562	467	75	765	729	150	113	763
Rice	2,158	1,256	150	949	2,237	1,659	127	969
Dartmouth	1,855	1,133	0	1,152	1,852	963	129	1,116

Washington in St. Louis	n/a	n/a	0	1,734	n/a	n/a	129	n/a
University of California at Irvine	3,260	1,479	1,171	5,424	7,361	4,035	131	5,756
Smith	656	362	79	616	773	398	132	609
University of Richmond	3,621	1,466	12	816	4,070	1,547	151	807
William & Mary	3,603	1,526	59	1,511	3,552	1,676	187	1,518
Johns Hopkins	1,876	1,143	1	1,414	2,752	1,747	187	1,299
Vanderbilt University	6,018	4,536	210	1,605	n/a	n/a	188	1,607
Brown	n/a	n/a	57	1,561	n/a	n/a	192	1,615
Washington and Lee	2,271	827	72	471	1,983	764	193	454
University of California at Santa Barbara	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	5,006	2,910	278	4,459
Ohio State	1,397	239	239	7,079	1,556	304	304	7,023
University of Texas	769	213	18	7,285	1,634	1,168	362	7,743
University of Virginia	5,543	3,456	42	3,709	4,547	2,081	402	3,685
Case Western Reserve	8,493	4,670	792	1,282	9,446	5,119	518	1,259
Purdue	1,215	1,208	368	6,372	1,728	1,713	643	6,812
University of California at Berkeley	3,375	2,143	437	5,466	3,760	2,445	1,340	5,550
Penn State	0	0	0	8,183	1,473	1,473	1,445	7,626
University of California at Davis	6,352	2,177	12	5,377	9,033	2,733	2,030	5,369
Gettysburg	558	n/a	n/a	720	768	n/a	n/a	699
American	1,252	73	24	1,787	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Boston University	3,503	1,803	2	3,915	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Caltech	615	482	47	226	n/a	n/a	n/a	241
Clark	651	232	90	547	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Franklin & Marshall	1,385	411	76	592	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a



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