

Making a Calm College Decision

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This is typically the week many high school seniors are a little tense about their college plans. The last few colleges are sending out decisions this week, and they tend to be the colleges where the admit rates are a little less than getting struck by lightning, so the hopes are high, while the odds remain low.

Now that the big week is finally here, here's a quick list of things you should focus on to make a quality decision for life after high school:

What you do with the college experience matters more than where you go. Most counselors save this advice for the end of articles like this, but these are unusual times. Chances are, if you've applied to a highly selective school, you have what it takes to do well there—it's just that the college runs out of room before they run out of great applicants. This means that the talents, habits, interests, and way you look at the world has prepared you to do great things wherever you go. The college you attend won't automatically make you a success; that will still be up to you. So your future will still be in your hands, no matter what the colleges have to say this week.

It looks like another record breaking year. There are fewer students graduating from high school this year, but that isn't keeping many colleges from seeing new highs in applications—and some that are seeing declines are still admitting less than 20 percent of their applicants. Combined with an increase in the number of students many colleges took through early action and early decision plans, that leaves precious few seats to give out this week.

Yes, No, or Maybe, read the entire letter. A student I am close to—OK, it's my son—was so happy to read he was admitted to his first choice school he didn't bother to read page 2 of the acceptance letter. I did, and it's a good thing, since it included information on the merit scholarship that made his attendance their possible. Other yes letters have information about when deposits are due, and those are important as well.

Letters that waitlist you are even more important to read, since staying on the list may require you to do something—email, send back a card, update your application—by a specific date. Even the letters of denial could give you information about transfer options that may now come into play. So read the letter from start to finish, and have a parent do the same.

Read, and update, your financial aid information. There's a good chance all your colleges are going to be sending financial aid packages this week. These are based on the financial aid information you gave them two months ago, when the world was a quiet place, before the stock market lost 30 percent of its value—and possibly before you or your parents lost their job.

The only way a college will know your financial picture has changed is if you tell them, and this is college—so it's not time to be shy. Pick up the phone, call financial aid, tell them your new story, and be ready to send supporting documents. You're this close to making the dream real. Keep working.

File financial aid for the first time. It's certainly true most colleges have given all their aid away to students who applied for it in February, but many of those students turn down packages, or go to a different school. If you now need help paying for college, get the forms in yesterday—check the college's website to find out all the forms they need, and where you should send them. Calling to ask is an even better idea.

Ask for an extension to the May 1 deposit. Many colleges understand that this spring isn't exactly normal, which is why they are moving their deposit deadlines to June 1 or later. If your college isn't doing that, you can still call and request an extension for personal reasons. They might say no, but the only way they say yes is because you ask—kind of like the only way they admitted you is because you applied. Make. The. Call.

Apply to more colleges. Except for the Top 50, every college in this country is still taking applications for fall admission—and, as mentioned before, some will still have financial aid to offer you. If you're looking at changing your college plans due to all the changes in the world, lots of colleges are eager to hear from you for the first time...

Consider transferring ...and thanks to some pretty strong transfer options, you could still end up graduating from your dream school, even if you can't start there. The best way to plan a transfer is to call the college where you want to finish, and ask about transfer options. Building the plan from the end means you know where to start, and what classes are best to take to minimize the credits you'll lose when you make the shift. Ask for transfer admissions when you call.

Talk to your counselor. One upside of all of this is that counselors now have more time than ever to talk college with you, since they don't have to do lunch duty. I know, I know—they have 8,000 students on their caseload, and they might not know you well. They will once you tell them who you are, and what you need—and that window is now more wide open than ever before. Most schools have sent students direction on how to reach out to counselors. As is the case with most things in life, what you do with that information is now up to you.

Patrick O'Connor, Ph.D. has been a college counselor since 1984, serving students in rural, urban, and suburban high schools, as well as community college.