



# College Bound: decisions, decisions and college choices



*Choosing which road to take is part of the process. COURTESY JENS LELIE ON UNSPLASH*

**By PAT BERRY**

*For Montclair Local*



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Application deadlines punctuate senior year of high school. Next up is May 1, National College Decision Day, the deadline for applicants to identify the college or university they plan to attend.

Or not.

Independent college counselors tell me that the 2017-18 college application season has yielded an unusually large number of wait-listed and rejected applicants, even among their most accomplished students. The Common Application and other platforms have made applying to several schools at once supremely easy. As a result, the most competitive schools, each with a finite number of spots to fill, have more and more highly qualified candidates to select from. The numbers make the schools even more competitive — a plus for the institutions and a big fat minus for the qualified students who can't get in.

I see this playing out with some of my own clients. While they will pay a deposit to a school that's slightly less desirable, they are holding out hope that their top choice ultimately will offer them a spot. To put feet on those hopes, they're writing follow-up essays that make a case for their fit and qualifications and that cite any recent accomplishments they managed to pull off.

## **WAITING AND HOPING**

A wait-list verdict can, though, be a diamond in disguise. When Vassar moved one local student from the waiting list to "accepted" a few years ago, the then-18 year old was overjoyed. The family ran up to Poughkeepsie for one more look. After all, in coming to terms with the likelihood that his first choice was out of reach, the student and his family had investigated two schools that had sent acceptances, American and George Washington. Both were in Washington, D.C., and both aligned with the student's nascent passion for government and politics. And American offered comprehensive support for undergrads with learning challenges, support the young man might need. On arrival at Vassar, the family was underwhelmed, particularly by the lukewarm response they received on asking about academic support. And the flexible curriculum portended problems for a student who performed best with structure. On the other hand Vassar had cachet with the relatives, and the school had checked off several must-have boxes early in his search. But eight months is a long time in a young person's life. A school that seems right in September may be utterly wrong come June. The student chose American — and thrived there.

For those seniors who are unhappy with their college choices but are set on moving onto higher education right away, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) publishes a list of institutions that are still accepting applications, some of which have unclaimed scholarship packages. The official list resides on NACAC's proprietary website, which guidance counselors can access, but online discussion forums provide lots of insights, too.

"Admissions Mom" is the handle of a Houston-based independent college consultant who advises thousands of high school seniors and juniors via Reddit's forum Applying to College. She posted a list of upcoming deadlines at <https://tinyurl.com/yayz5ty3>.

The forum, or subreddit, Applying to College, [reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/), is a terrific (and free!) resource for college applicants. It has more than 38,000 subscribers worldwide, the vast majority of them students, and receives up to two million hits per day during the height of application season.

## **A GAP YEAR?**

For those who decide either to defer or try again, a gap year may be just the thing — but what to do during those 12 months?

"There are no rules to gap years," Admissions Mom told me. "My advice is to figure out your finances first. If you need to work, do that. Real-world experience looks great to schools."

If you plan to re-enter the applicant pool, consider re-taking the ACTs or SATs to nudge up your scores. Otherwise, if you can afford to take a community college course, travel, pursue an independent project or

conduct research, and following your personal interests. One of the many gap-year programs she likes is Uncollege, [uncollege.org](https://uncollege.org), a pricey but full-service program that maximizes your gap year by filling it with a combination of work, travel, internships, and community service.

One way or another, the important thing is to make a decision. You'll move forward, even if you decide to change direction later.

In this column:

- Upcoming deadlines, via Admissions Mom: <https://tinyurl.com/yayz5ty3>
- Applying to College: [reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/](https://reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/)
- Uncollege: [uncollege.org](https://uncollege.org)