
PROJECT PLAN: WHAT ROLE DO WAITLISTS PLAY IN COLLEGE ADMISSIONS?

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ABSTRACT

For some students, part of the college application cycle is applying to their “dream school” and settling for a place on the waitlist — rather than gaining an immediate offer of acceptance. Although the waitlist is typically not a desired outcome for applicants, it’s a key enrollment management tool for colleges. Since it’s difficult for colleges to predict which students will accept an offer of admission, they use the waitlist as a backup plan when they don’t meet their enrollment target for the incoming class. In recent years, [the number of applications to college has increased](#), which makes landing on a waitlist even more likely for students seeking entry to certain selective institutions. However, it is challenging to explore what role waitlists play in college admissions because waitlist data is not collected at the federal level, and the most widely available public data on college waitlists is voluntarily reported at the institutional level on a form called the Common Data Set (CDS). This project aims to collect waitlist data for R1 universities from multiple years of Common Data Set forms and analyze it to: (1) determine trends in the size of waitlists; and (2) determine trends in the number of students admitted from the waitlist — with special attention given to how waitlist acceptance rates may have been affected by the pandemic.

1 INTRODUCTION

For some students, part of the college application cycle is applying to their “dream school” and settling for a place on the waitlist — rather than gaining an immediate offer of acceptance. Although the waitlist is typically not a desired outcome for applicants, it’s a key enrollment management tool for colleges. Since it’s difficult for colleges to predict which students will accept an offer of admission, they use the waitlist as a backup plan when they don’t meet their enrollment target for the incoming class.

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The Chronicle of Higher Education would like to better understand how R1 universities use their waitlists during the admissions process. With a data set built from specific data points extracted from the Common Data Set, *The Chronicle* could see what role the waiting list plays in the admissions process, which institutions see students opt to join the waitlist at high rates, and how the share of students admitted from the waitlist has changed over time.

The goals of this project are to: (1) collect waitlist data from the Common Data Set for 147 R1 institutions (Doctoral Universities – Very high research activity) for five consecutive academic years, ending with 2022-23; (2) analyze the data to determine what share of the applicant pool receives a waitlist offer; (3) analyze the data to determine the share of students who accept a spot on the waitlist; and (4) analyze the data to determine the share of students admitted from the waitlist — particularly during the early years of the pandemic when some colleges relied heavily on enrollment management tools (like waitlists) to meet their enrollment numbers.

2 BASELINE OR INITIAL ANALYSIS

Think about how to first understand the data.

3 FINAL ANALYSIS

Think about what the final analysis will entail in terms of code, visualizations, statistical models, and communication.

4 FINAL GOALS & EVALUATION

Detail the deliverable that will make a final project successful for the community partner.

- **Collect CDS waitlist data for five academic years: 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-2023 in an Excel file labeled waitlist data.** The easiest way to find the CDS for a college is to Google the name of the college and “Common Data Set.”

Six data points must be collected for the analysis:

1. Total number of first-time, first-year (degree-seeking) applicants
2. Number of applicants offered a place on the waitlist
3. Number of students who accepted a place on the waitlist
4. Number of waitlisted students admitted

This data can be found in the C2 and C21 sections of the CDS. Not all colleges have waitlists, but the college’s CDS will note that.

- Analyze the data to answer these four questions for each institution for each year:
 1. What percentage of the total applicant pool was offered a place on the waitlist?
 2. What percentage of applicants accepted a place on the waitlist?
 3. What percentage of applicants are admitted from the waitlist?
- Analyze the data to see whether there was an increase in the number of students offered a place on the waitlist/students accepted from the waitlist for the Fall of 2020 (when colleges were trying to manage enrollment for the first full academic year after the start of the pandemic), compared to Fall 2019.

5 RELATED WORK

Please cite research papers, reports, blog posts, projects, and other works you have consulted or plan to consult later. Please provide a sentence or two description that conveys the sources relevance to your project. You should have at least 5 sources.

6 DATA & TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

The names of the 147 R1 universities whose data needs to be collected and analyzed for this project are in an Excel file labeled waitlist_data.

The Common Data Set forms are standardized, but colleges make them available in different forms (mostly PDFs on their websites, but they might also be an Excel file).