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Chapter 7: Application Decision Plans, Review Process, and Possible Outcomes

As you enter your senior year, the information gathering and list building are nearly finished. You've ideally compiled a manageable list of colleges that reflect your unique criteria and strike an appropriate balance between Challenge, Possible, and Likely schools. Every college on your list should be one that you'd be happy to attend if it is the only school to which you were admitted. Approaching your college list with this mentality will ensure intentionality and thoughtfulness.

Now begins the last and most crucial stage of the process: completing and submitting applications. Throughout the fall of your senior year, as you are completing the required steps of the application process, you may still be visiting colleges and sitting for interviews. Colleges will also be sending representatives to your high school to talk with you and other prospective students. All of these events occur during a fast-paced period of three or four months while you are still balancing your academics, extracurriculars, social life, and other responsibilities.

Organization is more important than ever during the fall of your senior year. Be diligent about keeping track of varying admission requirements, deadlines, events, visits, test dates, and other priorities. Some students find it helpful to have a calendar devoted to their college admissions process so that all of their important dates can be found in one place.

The following pages contain information on the timeline and terminology to know when you begin to submit your applications.

Be diligent about keeping track of varying admission requirements, deadlines, events, visits, test dates, and other priorities.

A Note on Application Fees

Many colleges charge a flat fee to submit your application for review. These fees typically range anywhere from \$35–\$120 per application, and are sometimes higher for international applicants. These costs can quickly add up as you consider applying to multiple colleges. High school counseling offices, colleges, and NACAC (via the *NACAC Request for Application Fee Waiver Form*) all offer processes to assist with application fee waivers if the fees would be financially burdensome to you and your family. Check in with your counselor about your eligibility and the best course of action for qualifying for application fee waivers.

Application Decision Plans

Now that you have a solid idea of *where* you're planning to apply and the components you need to complete in your application, the next step is to figure out when you're going to apply by selecting the application decision plan that makes most sense for your goals and workflow. Each college determines which decision plans and subsequent deadlines they want to offer, and those policies can shift and change from year to year. Below are the most common decision plans you'll encounter during the application process:

Open Admission: Some colleges do not practice selective admission and offer admission to virtually all students who apply.

Rolling Admission (RA): Applications are reviewed as they are submitted and admissions offices render and release decisions throughout the admission cycle. Typically, with rolling applications, the earlier you apply, the earlier you hear back. Some institutions may have a final cut-off deadline late in the spring or summer, but many institutions keep rolling admissions open and available until they have filled their incoming first-year class, sometimes up until the start date of the term for which you are applying.

Early Action (EA): Students apply by an earlier deadline—usually in November or early December—to receive a decision in advance of the college's Regular Decision notification date. Decisions for Early Action applications are usually released between December–February. Given the common deadlines, most Early Action applications will only include your grades from freshman, sophomore, and junior year. There are some exceptions where colleges may ask for mid-term or mid-semester grades from senior year with an Early Action application. If admitted under an Early Action plan, you will typically have until May 1 to make your final enrollment decision.

Restrictive/Single Choice Early Action (REA): Similar to Early Action, REA applicants apply by an earlier deadline—usually in November—to receive an admission decision in advance of the Regular Decision notification date. In addition to the earlier deadline, REA applications come with specific regulations and restrictions the applicant must abide by. The most common restrictions prohibit students from submitting either a) any Early Decision applications, b) any other Early Action applications, or c) both a and b. Given the application deadline, most Restrictive Early Action applications will only include your grades from freshman, sophomore, and junior year. There are some exceptions where colleges may ask for mid-term or mid-semester grades from senior year with an REA application. Very few colleges use REA plans and you should always consult their individual websites to confirm what their specific restrictions are. If admitted under a Restrictive Early Action plan, you will typically have until May 1 to make your final enrollment decision.

Priority Admission: Students submit their application by an earlier deadline—usually November or December—in order to be considered and prioritized for scholarship opportunities or admission to special academic programs, such as Honors Colleges. If admitted under a Priority Admission plan, you will typically have until May 1 to make your final enrollment decision.

Early Decision (ED): ED is a **binding** admission plan that requires you to commit to a first-choice college at the time of application and, if admitted, you agree to enroll and withdraw your other college applications. You, the student, a parent or guardian, and your high school counselor are all required to sign an Early Decision Agreement as confirmation that you understand the binding, restrictive nature of this decision plan and that you commit to the Agreement's components.

Colleges may offer ED I and II options with different deadlines. Most ED I deadlines fall in November and applicants will receive their decision by mid-to-late December, while most ED II deadlines fall in January and applicants will receive their decision by the end of February. You may only have one active Early Decision application at a time. If admitted under an Early Decision plan, your deadline to officially enroll will be approximately two to four weeks after you receive your acceptance letter.

Given the common deadlines, Early Decision I applications may only include your grades from freshman, sophomore, and junior year. It is more common for colleges to ask for mid-term or mid-semester grades from senior year with an Early Decision I application.

As stated in Chapter 3, given the binding commitment it requires, applying Early Decision is essentially the ultimate demonstration of interest for those schools that track it, and can sometimes (not always) come with an advantage as a result. That being said, you should not apply Early Decision for the potential advantage alone. **An Early Decision application should be the result of a thorough research process and thoughtful conversations with your family and counselor where you have determined that this particular school is indeed your first choice and that you are comfortable not being able to compare other offers of admission or financial aid packages.** If you are uncomfortable with a binding commitment, it is important to your family to be able to weigh different offers and financial aid packages, or you just simply don't have a clear first choice, Early Decision may not be the appropriate decision plan for you.

Regular Decision (RD): Students submit their applications by a specified deadline—usually in January or February—and are typically notified of their decision by the end of March or in early April. If admitted under a Regular Decision plan, you will typically have until May 1 to make your final enrollment decision.

How Applications are Reviewed and Decisions Are Made

As with most facets of the college admission process, there is not one set way that applications are reviewed and final decisions are made; those processes are unique to each individual college and university. Even so, there are some unifying themes when it comes to application review to be aware of as you begin submitting yours.

As mentioned in Chapter 6, some colleges and universities have explicit GPA and/or standardized testing (if required) thresholds that, if met, you will be admitted. These colleges may not require essays, extracurricular lists, or letters of recommendations; their review process is entirely quantitative. This is most common at large public universities that admit the majority of their applicants.

Conversely, colleges that are more selective in their application process often employ a practice called **holistic admissions review**. Holistic review tasks admission counselors with considering the whole student when reviewing applications. In a holistic admission process, decisions are not made solely based on grades and testing, rather, all of the qualitative factors mentioned previously, including essays, extracurriculars, interviews, letters of recommendations, etc., are considered as an admission decision

is weighed. Remember, college admissions offices are hoping to admit a class of vibrant and diverse students, and a holistic approach allows them to see and consider students beyond just the numbers and statistics associated with their application. If you are considering applying to selective colleges that have more qualified applicants than they do space in their admitted class, your application could be strong, compelling, and meet all of the college's criteria and you still may not be admitted.

There may also be different admissions standards and levels of competition for individual schools or programs within one university, in which case your application will be considered alongside others for the same college (i.e. business, engineering, arts & sciences, nursing, etc.). For example, it may be less competitive applying as a potential history major as it would be as a potential computer science or engineering major.

An additional factor that often plays a role in the admission review process include **institutional priorities**, which are goals and benchmarks typically set out by the university President, Board of Trustees, and other senior university administrators. The admission office is then tasked with meeting these goals as they determine who to admit from the current applicant pool. Institutional priorities are programmatic and strategic visions as the college identifies areas for growth in the coming years. Examples of institutional priorities could include increased enrollment in a certain major or academic discipline, increased racial, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, or geographic diversity, development and fundraising, athletic recruitment, legacy considerations, and more. Though they are first and foremost institutions of higher learning, colleges are also functioning businesses, meaning that part of the admission process for most colleges is securing the necessary tuition revenue to ensure the continued financial health and stability of the institution.

While You Wait...

The waiting period between when you submit your application and when you receive your admission decisions can sometimes feel endless. The good news is, there are tangible steps you can take while you wait to ensure your review process is as streamlined and smooth as possible.

Application Portals: After you submit your application, nearly every college will send you directions on how to set up your online application portal. These portals are specific and unique to each college to which you apply, and will serve as your homebase for the remainder of the admissions and enrollment process.

Admissions portals nearly always include a live checklist of which required materials the college has and has not received. It is crucially important to be patient with both your high school counselor and admissions offices during busy times of the process, especially around major application deadlines. It can sometimes take up to three weeks for required materials submitted by your counselor to be electronically linked to your application file in the admissions office. If items on your checklist are marked as missing, take a deep breath, ensure that you have followed the necessary steps laid out by your counselor to inform them you've submitted an application, and exercise patience. Chances are, the documents have been submitted and are enqueued to be linked to your file. If you are at all concerned, reach out to your counselor, but always from a place of respect and assuming best intentions. At most institutions, as long as the application itself is submitted by the posted deadline, supporting documents can trickle in after the deadline date, though always check the admissions website to confirm.

It is important to be diligent about regularly checking your email and application portals throughout this waiting period. These are the two primary ways colleges will communicate with you if they are missing anything from your application or need additional information from you. They will also typically post your actual admission decision on your application portal, and notify you via email when that happens. Building strong email etiquette as a high school student will only prepare you better for your college experience, where email remains the primary form of contact between you and your professors and administrators. Colleges will rarely communicate with your parents or guardians—since you are the applicant, you are the primary contact.

Stay Focused: Just because you have submitted your applications does not mean you get to check out for the rest of your senior year. All college acceptances are conditional on your continued academic performance, meaning they expect you to stay focused and keep your grades as consistent as possible. The college at which you enroll will receive a final high school transcript including your senior grades from spring. All colleges reserve the right to rescind your admission if your academic performance declines significantly. You have agency over whether or not that happens.

Possible Application Decisions and Outcomes

After submitting your applications and navigating the subsequent waiting period, you'll begin to receive the results—or admission decisions—of your applications. When you hear back will depend on the decision plan which you chose to apply under. Listed below are the possible admission decision outcomes you may receive. Make sure to update your counselor and other supporters with every decision you receive.

Admit: Congratulations! This is the news every applicant hopes for. Students admitted in the Rolling, Early Action, Restrictive Early Action, Priority, and Regular Decision rounds will not be required to make a final decision on enrollment until at least May 1.

Defer: If you applied Early Action, Restrictive Early Action, or Early Decision I and/or II, it is possible your application could be deferred. Unlike students who have been denied, deferred applicants receive another round of review during the Regular Decision round. Deferrals are usually an indication that the admissions office wants more information from an applicant before rendering a final decision, typically in the form of official senior grades from your first term or semester, which were not available during the early round of review. Always follow the explicit directions provided by the college as a deferred applicant, as you may need to opt-in to being moved to the Regular Decision pool and/or be asked to submit a statement of continued interest or additional application updates and materials. Let your counselor know of your deferral as soon as possible so they know to send your senior year grades.

Early Decision applicants who are deferred to Regular Decision are no longer bound by the Early Decision Agreement, meaning that if you are admitted after being deferred, you are no longer required to attend that institution and can weigh your other options before making a final decision. Additionally, if you are deferred as an Early Decision I applicant, you are free to apply Early Decision II to a different college.

Some colleges offer deferred Early Action applicants the opportunity to switch their application plan to Early Decision II. This should only be done if the college is truly your first choice and you have followed the guidance listed above under the Early Decision description.

Deny: This means your application process is over at that particular college or university. Most colleges and universities do not accept admission decision appeals, and those that do typically only do so if there was a tangible, clerical error made on behalf of the college, rather than a philosophical disagreement about the outcome itself.

In some cases, you may be disappointed, but don't let a college's admission decision have a negative impact on your life. There are a lot of colleges and many paths leading to the same objective. The important thing is to set goals and work toward them. If you are denied admission, don't take it personally or feel you've failed. Take a deep breath and turn your attention to the other options available.

Waitlist: A waitlist offer is a maybe, not an acceptance. By placing a student on the waitlist, an institution does not initially offer or deny admission, but extends to a candidate the possibility of admission in the future, prior to the conclusion of the institution's admission cycle. Waitlisted students are typically given the option of opting in or out of the waitlist. If interested in remaining on the waitlist, follow the specific instructions provided by the college. It is essential to understand that if you choose to remain on any waitlists, you should also submit an enrollment deposit at a college to which you were already admitted by May 1, as most colleges will not know if or how they will use their waitlist until after the May 1 deadline. For more information on admissions waitlists, see Chapter 10.

Spring/Special Program Admit: Some colleges may offer you admission to the spring term instead of the traditional fall start term. Usually it is not possible to appeal to start in the fall if you've received spring admission. Some colleges that offer spring admission may also provide you the opportunity to study in a special program, sometimes earning college credit, during the fall term prior to officially enrolling. These programs are often destination experiences abroad or in different cities throughout the United States and may or may not be directly affiliated with the university in which you intend to enroll in spring.

Guaranteed Transfer Admission: Some colleges may also offer you a guaranteed transfer pathway to their institution. This decision is essentially a denial for the term for which you applied, but gives you the opportunity to enroll elsewhere, meet a minimum GPA and credit requirement, and be guaranteed admission as a transfer student typically after your freshman year.

Conditional Admission: These are acceptances that come with certain conditions you have to meet in order to fully enroll as a degree-seeking student. Conditions may include participating in a specific summer or school-year program to improve English language, writing, or math skills, taking specific remedial courses, or simply sending your final senior year grades for confirmation that you successfully completed the year.

Timeline of the Application Submission and Review Process

With the above information in mind, included below is a general timeline for the application submission, review, and decision process. Since each college has the agency to set their own deadlines and release dates, this timeline is not representative or exhaustive of every college in the U.S., but rather a broad overview that captures the majority of institutions' approaches.

August: Most application platforms update and open for the rising senior class.

October: The two main financial aid applications—the FAFSA and CSS Profile—open for the current application cycle.

November: Early application deadlines fall most commonly on November 1 or 15.

December: Admission results from all Early Decision applications and many Early Action and Priority applications are released.

January–February: Most Regular Decision and Early Decision II application deadlines fall in January through early February, most commonly on January 1, 5, and 15.

Admission and results from remaining Early Action and Priority applications and Early Decision II applications are typically released from mid-January through late February.

March: Admissions results from nearly all Regular Decision applications are released throughout March, by April 1 at the latest.

April: Most colleges will host on- and off-campus programming for their admitted students.

May: May 1 (or the first weekday in May) is typically the deadline to confirm your enrollment at your college of choice, otherwise known as the **National Candidates Reply Date**. Many colleges will require a monetary deposit alongside your confirmation of enrollment.

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Chapter 9: Choosing and Enrolling in a College

The waiting period is over! You have submitted your applications, diligently stayed on top of your email and portals, and received your admissions results from all of the colleges to which you applied—congratulations! Take a deep breath and pat yourself on the back for successfully navigating the most challenging and overwhelming part of this journey. Now that you have your admission decisions and financial aid packages in hand, the ball is officially in your court. At this stage, instead of hoping colleges will see value in your application, colleges are hoping you see enough value in them to enroll. These pages will include information on your next steps in making a final enrollment decision.

Trust your instincts and return to the list of criteria that you put together throughout your search. Which school of the options you have meets that criteria most closely? You may have attended admitted student programming either on campus or in your local area that helped you narrow down your options as well. It can be helpful to chat with current students about their experience if you are having difficulty making a final decision. Do not be afraid to ask the admissions office to connect you to resources like students, professors, and support offices on campus if you have questions that will help you determine your decision.

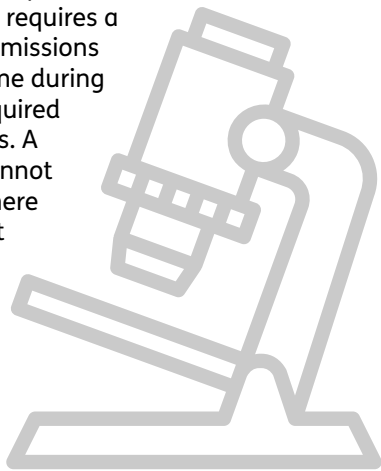
Confirming Enrollment: When you're ready to officially enroll, you will likely be required to complete a form via your application portal confirming your enrollment. This often comes with the requirement of submitting an enrollment deposit as well. The money (also known as an admission deposit, commitment deposit, or commitment fee) is usually applied to your tuition charges for the upcoming academic year. Colleges that are members of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) allow accepted applicants the opportunity to learn the decisions of all colleges they have applied to before requiring deposits, provided that all decisions are made before May 1. The student, in turn, is obligated to submit a tuition deposit to only one college before the required deadline (typically May 1).

Colleges view dual or multiple deposits by students as serious violations of trust. They may revoke a previous offer of admission from any student who is found to have sent tuition deposits to more than one college.

Withdraw Other Acceptances: Once you have officially enrolled, notify the other colleges to which you were admitted that you have decided not to enroll. If done in advance of May 1, this practice gives colleges the opportunity to more quickly assess if they will use their waitlist and in what capacity.

Stay on Top of Enrollment Requirements: After enrollment, be diligent about continuing to check your application portal or whatever system is available to enrolled students. Throughout May and June you will likely be asked to complete a series of tasks which can include housing applications, orientation forms, pre-registration for courses, and more. The last required supporting document to submit will be your final high school transcript, which includes your final senior year grades. Your counselor will send this to your college of choice once your grades are finalized. Remember, all acceptances are conditional on your successful completion of your senior year.

Deferring Enrollment: Many colleges offer an opportunity for a student who has been admitted to delay or defer enrollment for a year or a semester. Students who defer an offer of admission may choose to work, travel, pursue special programs, or complete required military service. Requesting a deferral usually requires a written explanation, to be reviewed by the admissions committee, of how you plan to spend your time during the deferral period. A deposit is also often required by the college to hold a place in the next class. A student who defers admission to a college cannot attend another college or earn credits elsewhere during the time off, unless the institution that extended deferred admission is notified in advance and agrees.



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Chapter 10: The Waitlist and Alternative Options

Each college has a yearly target enrollment number—a goal of how many incoming first year students will say yes to their offer of admission. If you receive a waitlist decision from a college or university, it means that the school believes you have the potential to succeed there, but they also had more qualified applicants than they were able to accept right away. A waitlist is never a guarantee—it is a “maybe, we’ll see.”

Colleges use waitlists as insurance. If enough accepted students enroll for freshman year, the college won’t accept anyone from the waitlist. If the college ends up with open spaces in the freshman class, it may admit a few or many students from its waitlist. Unfortunately, college admission counselors often can’t predict whether they will go to the waitlist or how many students from the list they will need, because they need to first see what the accepted pool of students ultimately decides.

You should never depend on a waitlist, but rather focus on the schools to which you’ve been admitted and allow the waitlist process to play out on its own timeline, which can sometimes extend well into the summer months. **Since many colleges will not know their waitlist needs until *after* the May 1 commitment deadline, it is critical that you enroll at a college to which you’ve already been accepted.**

You should never depend on a waitlist, but rather focus on the schools to which you’ve been admitted and allow the waitlist process to play out on its own timeline, which can sometimes extend well into the summer months.

Waitlist Frequently Asked Questions

What should I do if I'm waitlisted?

If you are interested in staying on the waitlist—follow the specific directions the college provides to waitlisted applicants and continue to check your email. Some may have you fill out a form to join the waitlist, others may have you fill out a form to remove yourself from the waitlist, while others may not ask anything of you at all. Follow directions, as each college has their own approach to managing their waitlist. If a college allows you to submit additional documents in support of your application (recommendations, updated grades and activities, a letter of continued interest), discuss this process with your counselor. The admission page on each college's website or application portal will more than likely have a section devoted to Waitlist FAQs as well that are more specific to their school.

Do I have to stay on the waitlist?

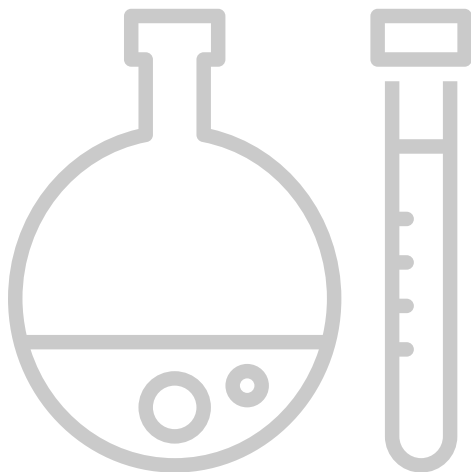
No! If you are not interested in waiting to hear back from a school where you've been placed on the waitlist you can simply decline your spot on the waitlist.

Do colleges always use their waitlist?

No. Sometimes a school hits their enrollment goal with the admitted cohort of students and does not need to use their waitlist to fill the incoming class. That will depend from year to year.

How do I find out how many students are on the waitlist?

Colleges will have their own individual policies about this, but many do not disclose how many students are on the waitlist.



The college is saying that waitlist decisions won't be communicated until after May 1, but that's the enrollment deadline for most colleges—how does that work?

The waitlist process is similar to a domino effect—colleges need to see how many admitted students say yes to them before they can determine what their waitlist needs may be. Since many admitted students wait until that May 1 deadline to say yes, most colleges will not have a sense of if or how they will use their waitlist until after that deadline passes. One domino has to fall before the other is pushed into motion. After May 1, when all admitted students have sent their replies, colleges will determine if they need to go to their waitlist or not, and if so, how many students they need to admit. At this point, colleges may begin admitting students from the waitlist.

What this means for you: all students should submit an enrollment deposit to a school at which they've been admitted by the May 1 deadline. You should not cross your fingers and depend on being taken off a waitlist without enrolling somewhere else. If you are admitted from a waitlist and choose to enroll at that school, you will typically forfeit your enrollment deposit at the other college.

There are instances, though rare, where colleges may be able to start their waitlist process before May 1. This should never be something a student relies on; it is always more safe to assume waitlist action will happen after May 1.

How likely is it that I'll be admitted off the waitlist?

Unfortunately, that's nearly impossible for colleges or counselors to predict. Waitlist use varies from year to year and school to school. Waitlist needs are entirely dependent on the decisions of admitted students, and it's difficult to predict that behavior ahead of time.

Are waitlists ranked? In other words, do I have a specific spot on the list?

It depends! Some schools assign students a specific place or number on the waitlist, so if you're #59 and they accept 60 students from the waitlist, you're in! More often, waitlists are unranked. Since many colleges won't know what their needs might be when delivering a waitlist decision, keeping the list unranked gives them flexibility to admit students who fill those unforeseen needs. For example, if the school doesn't enroll their target number of business students or international students or wants to increase diversity of any kind, they can then look specifically for those students on the waitlist without worrying about rank.

If I'm admitted from the waitlist am I still eligible for financial aid?

Yes, though this is something you should inquire about with each individual school, as the range of aid available may vary. Now is a good time to double check if you have all your required financial aid documents submitted (FAFSA, CSS Profile, etc.) so if you are admitted from the waitlist they have everything they need to build you a financial aid package. Usually, waitlisted students are not eligible for merit-based scholarships.

What should I NOT do as a waitlisted student?

Do not do anything beyond the directions provided from the specific college. Some colleges are very explicit in their advice of what not to do, so pay attention to the messaging you're receiving. This is another instance where more is not always better. Flying to campus, sending baked goods or mixtapes or flowers, emailing your admissions counselor daily for updates, etc. will not increase your likelihood of admission and may very well work against you in this process. Just follow the directions, take a deep breath, and really focus on the options that you DO have.

What If You're Not Accepted to College?

This situation is rare if you've approached your college application process with open-mindedness, responsibility, and realism and generated a list with strong balance when it comes to selectivity. But it can happen. The good news is that you still have options.

Late Openings

First, see your high school counselor. They may be able to help you debrief your admissions process and unpack how your decisions played out. Perhaps your aim was too high; you didn't include a Likely school; or just faced a more competitive pool of applicants than expected. Don't lose hope.

After May 1, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) maintains a list of colleges that still have openings, financial aid, and housing available. Your counselor can help you decide if applying to one or more of these colleges is a good next step.

A Year Off or Gap Year

If you're a bit unsure whether you're ready for college at all, consider taking a year off. You can use that time to work, travel, volunteer, or participate in any of the hundreds of education, leadership, and career exploration programs for young people.

If this option appeals to you, talk to your counselor and family about gap year options. As attractive as it may seem right now, hanging out in front of the TV gets old fast, and it doesn't help you with your college or career decisions. Your experience during a gap year may lead to a more compelling college application or change your mind about the criteria that is important to you.

For information about gap years, The Gap Year Association has a wide range of resources and a list of reputable programs: gapyearassociation.org

