

The Waitlist—a Happy Problem

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Talk to any Four Winds alum or parent for a while, and at some point the topic of the waitlist is likely to come up. Camp has consistently filled and had a waitlist for decades. It's a good thing for Four Winds to be so supported. Frankly, many camps have to hustle for every last camper, and sometimes it seems like they have to compromise what they perceive as creating the best possible experience for children in the service of catering to what the market wants. Since we fill every year, we can spend our time finding the families that understand and value what we offer at Four Winds, not changing what Four Winds offers to help us make our enrollment goals.

Still, there's no doubt that when it's your child who is on the waitlist, it's hard to see it as a positive. Particularly for the people reading this newsletter, who are likely to be alums, if Four Winds was one of the most influential experiences of your childhood, and now it's time to give that experience to your own child, being confronted with the waitlist can be devastating, particularly when your child has to be on the waitlist for a couple of years.

I understand this frustration. I've had many conversations with alumni who are in exactly the situation I described above. We've looked at this happy problem from many angles, considered lots of things we could do to change the dynamic, and implemented a few of them. In a recent conversation with a board member, we came up with the idea of writing this article. I'm mostly hoping to reach alumni parents of children that are a few years out from Camp. The reality is that enrolling your child at Four Winds at this stage of Camp's history takes either planning a couple years in advance or a bit of luck. As opposed to the latter, the former can be controlled, so I'm hoping to arm some of you with the information you need to best navigate the situation. I'll start with some history, I'll explain the details of how enrollment and the waitlist work, and lastly, I'll give a little advice. This article is a bit long, and for that I apologize, but it's really those that are genuinely interested, so I'm not going to spare the details.

History: When people refer to our waitlist, it's often spoken of in a monolithic way, but the reality is that the waitlist situation changes over time. I've been with Four Winds since 2005, and just since then, there have been four distinct phases of the waitlist. When I first came to Camp, it seemed that Four Winds filled pretty regularly, almost automatically, sometime between mid-January and mid-February.

Then, of course, the financial crisis hit. We started to feel it in 2009, and our worst year was 2010, when we filled just before summer. After that, like the rest of the country, we got a little better every year. In those days, I was watching enrollment very carefully, and we filled earlier and earlier every year until we returned to our pre-recession normal, filling within a couple weeks of the start of February, in 2013.

Throughout this period, any parent who signed up their child before Thanksgiving was essentially guaranteed enrollment, and that's what I would tell families. Sure, if you called us up in April, you were likely to have wait until the following year, but didn't seem too onerous, as waitlists go.

The next phase caught me off guard. I had regarded our pre and post recession normal as some sort of equilibrium, but it wasn't an equilibrium at all. We continued to fill earlier and earlier. In 2015, Second and Junior Session filled on December 1st, the day we open enrollment to new families (more on that in a minute). In 2016, First Session followed suit, and this is where we find ourselves today. For the last three summers, including summer 2018, on the day our returning camper enrollment guarantee expired, all three sessions filled with new campers who have signed up prior to that. It's quite common to be on the waitlist for two, or even three years now, before getting enrolled. Some families are lucky and get in sooner. Some end up withdrawing from the waitlist, and don't ever attend.

How Enrollment Works: As I briefly mentioned earlier, returning campers are guaranteed enrollment as long as their families sign them up before November 30th. On December 1st (and I should say here that it actually takes us a couple of days to process everything), we enroll as many new campers as we can that have signed up prior to that day, in the order that they originally completed our camper application and gave us a deposit. It's a first come, first served system for new campers. That's the short version, but I know from many conversations with parents that most families need a few other pieces of information to really wrap their heads around the situation.

The first is that while we often refer to the waitlist as though it's one thing, it's really 44 different waitlists, one for each session/gender/grade combination. Or, to put it another way, we have enrollment targets for each session, gender, and grade, and when a First Session 7th grade girl withdraws from Camp, we need to replace her with another camper in the same category. It doesn't matter if the first First Session 7th grade girl on the waitlist enrolled last week, and there's a Second Session 8th grade boy that's been waiting for a couple of years. That's of course frustrating for families on waitlists that don't seem to be moving, but most people can understand it.

If a family is on the waitlist and does not get in for that summer, they have the option of rolling over to the next summer. We simply retain the deposit, and our office staff will prompt the family to fill out a new camper application for the following year. The family's effective date on the waitlist remains the original date that they first filled out the camper application and put down a deposit. If at any time a family on the waitlist would like to be removed from the waitlist, we refund their entire deposit.



Given that there's a guarantee of enrollment to returning campers, and we're dealing with a situation of scarcity, we've had to get down to the nitty gritty of our definition of returning camper. Through many conversations, we've decided to go with a fairly expansive definition. Siblings of returning campers count as returning campers, and you can skip a year or change sessions without losing returning camper status. An immediate family should only have to deal with this frustration once.

A question we often get is why we don't give an enrollment advantage to children of alumni. It's a totally fair question, and one we've considered at length. There are two reasons, a logistical one and a philosophical one. The logistical one is in today's environment, if we did advantage legacy campers over brand new families, it would become a requirement to be a second (or third or fourth) generation camper to be a new camper at Four Winds, and we still could not accommodate all the alumni families who want to come. The philosophical reason is that Four Winds has always attempted to avoid elitist airs, and we think it's healthy to have a mix of both first generation and legacy campers. A few alumni over the years have suggested that while this makes sense, we could give some alumni an enrollment advantage without giving all alumni such an advantage, recognizing that some families have a longer connection with Camp than others. While I respect this view, I don't want to engage in the exercise of ranking one family's connection to Four Winds over another. It's just not who we are. We take great pains in the summer to make sure that a first year camper has the same value to our community as a 7th year, second generation camper. That's an important part of who we are, and our actions need to match our values.

The last caveat I'll mention is that everything I've written about so far is in reference to our enrollment situation for families paying full tuition. Our commitment to our Financial Aid program, reserving 20% of our camper spots for families that need some help paying for Camp, remains as strong as ever. That program has a different application timeline and enrollment track, with Financial Aid applications due on February 1st, and our Financial Aid committee making decisions (based on financial need) by the middle of March. We commit to our Financial Aid families for three years, though their award may change if their financial situation changes.

Advice: The main piece of advice I can give families interested in having their child attend Four Winds is to think a few years ahead. Normally families have a sense a few years in advance that their child is approaching readiness for Camp. That's the time to call Mariah in our office, check in, and get a sense of things.



I do want to caution families against signing up their child before they're ready just to game the system, or get the earliest possible waitlist date. Obviously, sending a child before they're ready can lead to a bad experience, and sour Four Winds in the child's eyes for later, when they might have been truly ready. It's best to think of Camp readiness as a window, rather than a specific date. If, in a world in which you could call Camp and enroll anytime, you'd sign your child up as a 6th grader, then perhaps 5th grade would be a possible stretch, and 7th grade would probably be fine too.

If you have more than one child, it's important to think a bit about how to navigate that extra variable. The reality is that it's hard enough to get off the waitlist with one child. Asking that two or three spots open up simultaneously in exactly the right session/grade/gender combinations reduces our chances of success dramatically. So, it's worth considering whether having one child be the trailblazer, and then in subsequent years, you can sign them up along with their siblings using the returning camper guarantee. Obviously, most families want that trailblazer to be the oldest child, but sometimes the spot that opens is the one for a younger sibling. Each family has to make that call for themselves.

The last bit of advice is to understand that this situation is fluid. Earlier, I told you that in my 14 summers at Camp, we've gone through four distinct phases with our waitlist dynamic. I'm asking you to think ahead, but if we're talking about a 3 or 4 year old, it's pretty likely that that dynamic will change again before they're ready for Camp. Stay in touch. Most alumni tend to lose engagement with us a little bit in the years that they've moved on from their summer staff experience and don't yet have Camp aged kids. That makes a sense, but in this waitlist dynamic, staying in touch and thinking ahead gives you the best shot at having your child come to Camp when they, and you, are ready.

Final Thoughts: Ultimately, the situation we're in right now is one of trying to allocate a scarce resource fairly. The market would tell us to either raise tuition very aggressively until the waitlist started to wane, or expand Camp. The former betrays our values, and the latter has significant logistical challenges and risks changing the community that we all have grown to love. Our Board, at least for the moment, has rejected both of those choices as inconsistent with Four Winds' mission and instructed me to do my best to manage this situation thoughtfully and fairly. I think we've done a good job of that, but the frustration of the families on the waitlist is still very real. I ask for their patience, and I'm happy to talk. If you're still a couple of years out from Camp, perhaps a little more knowledge will help you to navigate this dynamic a little better. Thanks for reading, and I hope to see many of you on Orcas soon.