

TOP PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES OFFER ‘GUARANTEED’ TRANSFER OPTION

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Heading into the fall admissions season, students understand the potential results of their college applications: get in, get deferred (if applying early), get waitlisted, or get rejected.

But few students know there’s another possible outcome — the “guaranteed” or “preferred” transfer option. Under certain circumstances, an admissions office will tell a student to spend a year studying elsewhere and apply as a transfer student. Assuming they do well, they’ll likely get in.

How widespread is guaranteed transfer, and how does it benefit both the university and the student? A few former admissions officers shed light on this little-known practice.

What Is the Guaranteed Transfer Option?

Instead of accepting students outright, some private universities will instead offer a “guaranteed” transfer spot, promising to admit students for sophomore transfer provided they perform satisfactorily during their first year of college.

Given the accompanying stipulations, the offer isn’t exactly “guaranteed.” Some prefer to call this option a “preferred” transfer.

Then again, universities themselves aren’t really calling it much of anything. Admissions websites generally don’t broadcast this option, and most of the intel on the topic can be found on Reddit threads and on college chat boards, where applicants share their stories.

So which universities offer this transfer option?

At the very least, Georgetown University, Cornell University, Boston University (BU), the University of Southern California (USC), and Northeastern University do, though former admissions officers who

spoke with BestColleges claim the practice is more widespread than students might suspect.

“It would not surprise me if there are, and there likely are, more private universities that, on a case-by-case basis, may offer a guaranteed transfer, or perhaps call it a preferred transfer,” said Robin Miller, a counselor with IvyWise, an admissions consulting firm.

Miller is a former senior assistant director of admissions at Georgetown and worked in admissions at Vanderbilt University as well. She said that during her tenure at Georgetown, guaranteed admission was offered “only a very small number of times.” The university declined to comment on its policy, instead sharing a link to its transfer admissions page, which doesn’t mention anything related to this transfer option. Cornell, BU, and Northeastern didn’t respond to similar inquiries.

Within the Ivy League, the University of Pennsylvania doesn’t have a guaranteed transfer option, Jayson Weingarten, a former Penn admissions officer and a senior consultant with the firm Ivy Coach, told BestColleges.

But Cornell does. In fact, Cornell provides public information related to its “Transfer Option,” which is “offered to a select group of first-year applicants to encourage them to apply to enter the College of Arts & Sciences as sophomores after completing one year of full-time study at another institution.” Cornell’s website makes it clear that this transfer option “is not an acceptance to Cornell” and that “although successful completion of the requirements outlined below makes one a highly competitive transfer applicant, doing so is not a guarantee of future admission.”

What are those requirements? Earn a GPA of at least 3.5, with no grades below a B, and take a variety of liberal arts and sciences courses, including composition.

While Cornell applicants may be aware of this policy, most students applying to these other private colleges are often caught off guard by this tactic, Miller said.

“I would say students are very often a little surprised and taken aback when that is presented as an option,” she said.

That was the case with one of Miller’s recent clients, who was rejected by Northeastern but offered this transfer option.

“He was very much surprised,” she said. “In fact, he sent me an email with a screenshot of the notification, asking me, ‘What, exactly, does this mean?’”

USC’s Trojan Transfer Plan Sparks Controversy

Students applying to Southern Cal might encounter similar confusion. Some applicants may be familiar

with the university's "Trojan Transfer Plan" thanks to social media and a few articles referencing the program, though they won't find details about it on the university's admissions pages.

Originally designed as an advantage for legacy students — children of alumni — the program has since broadened its mission, explained James Fisher of IvyWise, who recently joined the firm following a stint as senior assistant director of admissions at USC.

That initial focus on legacy preferences hasn't been lost on students critical of such advantages afforded a chosen few.

Writing last year in the Daily Trojan, the student newspaper, Jayna Dias described her experiences at The American University of Paris (AUP), where she "encountered one of the manifestations of USC's intense focus on legacy and connection."

The AUP has a formal arrangement with USC whereby students spend one year in Paris while preparing to transfer to Southern Cal. Since 2014, more than 700 students have followed this pathway from the City of Light to the City of Angels.

All of the future Trojans Dias met while in Paris were legacies, she noted, reinforcing the "concept that USC is an institution backed by connections and personal ties."

Another former AUP student, Lucas Palmer, shared language from his USC rejection letter, which explicitly referenced legacy preferences.

"This decision was especially difficult for us given your ties to the Trojan Family," the letter read. "Your eventual enrollment at USC is of great interest to us, so I invite you to consider the Trojan Transfer Plan, which will assist you in gaining admission to USC as a transfer student within the next two or three semesters."

Cheung-Sil Kim, a USC legacy who entered the university via the Trojan Transfer Plan, said the program "does sort of feel like an unfair advantage to legacies" and decried the lack of transparency.

"There's really not a lot of information about it whatsoever," he told USC Annenberg Media. "Your best resource, both before and during the process, is actually a College Confidential forum. It definitely was very frustrating because of the lack of communication, and then you're making this investment where they're telling you some stuff but not really telling you some stuff."

Not everyone offered the Trojan Transfer option heads off to Paris, of course. In fact, USC prefers that students spend a year at a community college, Fisher said.

In that sense, the pathway resembles more traditional transfer routes governed by articulation agreements in which community colleges and, typically, public universities map out criteria enabling

students to march seamlessly from one level to the next. In most cases, these are truly “guaranteed” transfer programs, and the criteria are quite transparent.

Fisher said the university finds it easier to work with students at community colleges, “curating their schedule” to align with what USC recommends. Ultimately, though, students are free to attend any college before applying as a Trojan Transfer.

“For those students, it’s like, ‘Oh, we don’t see it right now, but maybe if you have a little bit of coaching, a little bit of guidance, and we can actually get you to a space where you’re highly competitive within our pool,’” Fisher said.

Over Fisher’s four-plus years at USC, he said, the university doubled the number of Trojan Transfer offers, increasing from 600 to about 1,200 in light of the overall growth in applications. About 60% of those students would demonstrate interest in the program, Fisher said, and, of those, roughly 40-50% would eventually transfer.

The university provides one-on-one consultations with USC officials to guide students along the way, though some decide to stay at their initial institution, especially if they’re doing well academically and immersing themselves in campus life.

And that’s fine with USC, Fisher explained.

“We looked at that as a win-win because our main goal was for you to have the collegiate experience you want,” he said, “and if you were getting that someplace else, we were happy, too.”

How Guaranteed Transfer Benefits Both Students and Universities

For students pining to attend their dream school, receiving a transfer option constitutes a ray of hope.

It’s a far stronger “maybe” than a waitlist offer, Miller said, because highly selective colleges today are experiencing greater yields — the percentage of accepted students who choose to matriculate — and are less frequently dipping into their waitlist pools.

According to her firm’s website, waitlist acceptance rates for some colleges are in the low single digits. So the transfer option provides students a much more likely positive outcome.

“If this truly remains the school you want to attend,” Miller said, “you go through the transfer process, you meet those parameters, and you should be all set.”

The benefit to students remains clear, but what’s in it for the university? Why not just accept or reject a

student outright?

Weingarten posits it's a tactic schools use to "admit students they want in a way that won't upset numbers that would be reported to the rankings agencies." In other words, the rejection lowers the acceptance rate while keeping a desirable student in the mix.

In a similar vein, Miller suggests universities employ this option to "manage relationships" with students who fell just shy of making the cut and for whom guaranteed transfer might be a better compromise than a spot on the waitlist. It's part of an overall enrollment management strategy that aims to hit admissions targets and construct the optimal entering class and student body.

"I think part of the thought process is rather than risk losing a student who is pretty close to meeting our threshold or is already there but we just don't really have space right now," she said, "let's try to factor this student into our transfer enrollment for the following year."