

THE EARLY-BIRD DILEMMA

Some colleges want you to commit as soon as possible. But what if you need more time to spread your wings?

By Margaret Loftus

When Princeton, the University of Virginia, and Harvard announced last fall that they would drop their early admissions options because they gave an unfair advantage to affluent students, many college counselors held their breath. Would early decision go the way of keys in dormitories?

Not for now, at least. Early admission is still going strong at many colleges and universities, including many top-tier schools.

Early decision in particular—in which a student commits to a first-choice institution—is often touted as a plus for both schools and students. Colleges can lock up half of their class before January, and acceptance rates are typically higher than under regular admission (more than double at some schools).



Sound good? Not so fast. Deciding whether to apply early can be tricky. Some considerations:

Dotted line or bottom line? The major drawback of early decision is that it leaves students who are in the market for the best financial aid package out in the cold. By applying early, you must

enroll if accepted, so comparing awards with those of other schools is out of the question. Schools like that, of course, because it helps their bottom line.

But there is a possible end run: Ask if a school will release you from your obligation should its aid package fall short. In some cases, a school will roll you into the regular admission pool, allowing for comparison shopping come springtime.

While some schools admit almost the same percentage of applicants during early and regular admission, many favor the early pool. Columbia University, for example, admitted 23 percent of its early decision applicants for the class of 2011, compared with 7 percent of those who applied for regular admission. Lafayette College in Easton, Pa., took 61 percent of its early round, compared with 33 percent of regular applicants. And Johns Hopkins University took 44 percent from its early round and 24 percent from the regular pool. Early birds at Hopkins make up a third of this fall's freshman class.

Bill Conley, dean of enrollment and academic services at Hopkins, says the numbers reflect stronger students who

THE SIX FLAVORS OF EARLY ADMIT

Trying to make sense of what colleges call their plans—and what each really means? The National Association for College Admission Counseling wants to help you out:

Nonrestrictive plans

REGULAR DECISION. You submit an application, typically by early January, and receive a decision in early April. You can apply to other colleges and wait until May 1 to accept.

ROLLING ADMISSION. Applications reviewed when received. Decisions

made throughout admission cycle.

EARLY ACTION. You apply early, usually by November 1, and hear back between mid-December and February. You don't have to accept.

Restrictive plans

EARLY DECISION I. You commit to a first-choice institution. If you get in and the financial aid package is satisfactory, you are required to enroll. Colleges ask that you have only one early decision application pending at any time. If admitted early decision, you must withdraw any other applications. Applica-

tion deadline: usually November 1. Notification: mid-to-late December. In general, an enrollment deposit is due two to three weeks after acceptance.

EARLY DECISION II. Some colleges have two rounds of early decision. Second-round deadlines are in January, with mid-February notification.

SINGLE-CHOICE EARLY ACTION.

A few ultraselect colleges restrict early action applicants to a single choice. The expectation is that you do not apply early elsewhere until after you hear back (confusing exception: nonrestrictive early action programs at public colleges or universities). You have until May 1 to give your final answer.

America's Best Colleges

tend to apply early. Moreover, he says, early applicants send a clear message that the school is their No. 1 choice: "Your regular pool is full of shoppers. Your early decision pool are buyers."

Nonetheless, college counselors have seen borderline students get a boost by applying early decision. "If they aren't legacies, athletes, or an underrepresented minority, early decision may be the only hook that some students have," says Jim Conroy, chair of post-high-school counseling at New Trier Township High School in Winnetka, Ill. But you need to be realistic. "If a school is out of your reach, it's out of reach whether you apply early decision, early action, or regular admission," says Sarah Wilburn, a college counselor at Campus Bound in Quincy, Mass. "Move on and set some new goals."

La dolce vita. Advantage or not, applying early decision makes sense only if you're convinced that a school is a good fit for you. Erin Murray decided to apply to Dartmouth early despite the advice of her college counselor and others. They wanted her to beef up her transcript after she had spent a semester of high school in Italy. But the teenager from Cheyenne, Wyo., wisely played up her experience abroad (her 4.0 GPA and top-notch board scores didn't hurt, either) and was accepted. "I probably would have fit well at a number of schools," she admits, "but Dartmouth was the only place I could see myself walking across the greens. It was a gut reaction."

If you lack the same certainty but clinching a slot before New Year's is appealing, consider other early admissions plans. Early action is a nonbinding alternative that allows you to apply by November 1 and hear back before the regular application deadline. Some highly selective schools require that you submit only one early action application—called single-choice early action—meaning you can't apply early elsewhere. Another option is to apply early to rolling admissions, where an application that arrives in the fall may stand out more than one that arrives with most of the others in January.

But most seniors will gain the biggest edge by taking another crack at the boards and making stellar grades their fall semester. "It's better to apply with the strongest possible application rather than apply early," says Kristen Campbell, national director of SAT and ACT programs at Kaplan Test Prep and Admissions. "It's OK to wait." ●

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