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Let's Set the Record Straight about Early College Applications

By Elizabeth LaScala, PhD



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Are There Advantages?

Some institutions maintain that there is a slight advantage in the admission decision if a student applies early. A very desirable applicant may be rewarded for showing an early interest in the college. Desirable candidates exhibit some combination of strong academics and extracurricular activities as well as other qualities that are highly sought after by the institution. These can include legacy, ability to pay, student match with the mission of the university, special talents or abilities. Other institutions have maintained that it is harder to be admitted in the early pool of applicants. The rule of thumb is to know how each school views early applications. Regional admissions officers are the best sources of information about this issue. Identify this person and ask about your chances for early admission based on your current profile. Then follow the advice you receive.

Other advantages include reduced stress during the senior year by early acceptance to one (or more) institutions and the opportunity to spend more time revisiting schools, and investigating opportunities that exist at schools where you have been admitted.

Are There Disadvantages?

Early admission procedures preclude the advantages of showing an additional full semester of coursework, submitting enhanced test scores from November or December test dates, and demonstrating other recent successes that may strengthen an application (for example, being awarded a team captain position or compiling data and results from a summer internship). Students develop at a rapid rate during the high school years and often show amazing growth in the senior year. That means many students can benefit from the extra time they need to build

Fall is the time of year when the hype about early admissions programs always begins to grow. There is so much confusion, misinformation and misuse of early admission programs that students, counselors and parents can begin to wonder whether it is wise to wait for the regular admission cycle. Let me assure you that applying regular admission is still a viable option and often preferable for the majority of students. My goal in this article is to explain the fundamentals of early programs and offer some suggestions to consider as you decide what is best for you.

There are three types of early admission programs: Early Decision (ED), Early Action (EA), and Restrictive Early Action (Restrictive EA). Most institutions that offer ED permit students to apply to only one ED program. Most schools will allow students to apply EA to other institutions, but with the agreement that if they are offered admission they will accept and withdraw their other applications. Generally, students can only be released from their commitment if the financial aid package offered by the ED school is not sufficient to attend. One problem students and their families sometimes encounter is an ED offer of admission without a financial aid award. Families are in a bind when they withdraw their other applications only to learn that they are unable to afford the ED school.

Early Action programs allow students to apply during their early admission cycle but are non-binding-EA programs do not require the students to accept admission, and applicants can apply to other schools during regular admission, but rules vary regarding whether or not students may apply to more than one EA school. It is best to carefully review each school's policy.

Restrictive Early Action programs go by various names, but essentially they permit EA applications with limitations. Some restricted EA programs only permit students to apply early to one school, while others allow early applications to other EA schools, but not ED schools. All restricted EA programs allow students to apply regular admission to other institutions. Students can consider all their admission options and financial aid awards and they have until May 1st to decide what college or university they will attend.

successes and consider their options more carefully. No matter how exciting it may seem to envision yourself at a particular university, it is not wise to underestimate the value of this time.

Taking these considerations into account, I strongly recommend that you consider applying early only if you meet the following conditions:

- You are a top student in that school's applicant pool
- Your first senior semester will not enhance your application (think about this carefully-why would highly qualified students not want colleges to see their performance for another semester? What message does this send to your colleges?)
- You and your family are certain you do not need to compare financial aid awards and you can afford to pay the bills

Early programs were originally designed for top students in an applicant pool to hear early from their top choice schools, leading to better, more informed decision-making in the spring. They were not created with the intent that all applicants would use the option (Boston College, 2010). Bear in mind these recommendations as you consider your application options.

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