

The Downside of Early Decision

Choosing Early Doesn't Always Mean Choosing Right

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For most high school seniors in America, choosing a college is the single most important—and most difficult—decision they've ever had to make. So why are we rushing them?

The increasingly popular option of applying “early decision” (ED) requires a student to make a binding commitment that, if admitted to a particular college, she or he will enroll. Early action (EA) applicants, in contrast, must declare their first choice without making a binding commitment. In both cases, applications typically are due one or two months before the regular-decision deadline, and the college communicates its decision to admit, reject or defer the student before considering the main pool of candidates.

Now offered by 184 U.S. colleges and universities, according to the College Board, ED is a highly effective—and therefore highly seductive—tool for managing enrollment. But it's not necessarily in the best interest of most students or their parents. In fact, our experience at Tufts University suggests it's not necessarily in the best interest of colleges either.

Not best for students or parents

Recent research by Harvard professors Christopher Avery and Richard Zeckhauser and former Wesleyan admissions officer Andrew Fairbanks suggests ED is equivalent to a 100- to 150-point boost in SAT score. Amid all the buzz about how hard it is to get into a good college and the purported advantages of applying early, many applicants fail to recognize that ED is a Faustian bargain. Sure, it's nice to have all the stress of the application process over and done with by November and to receive a decision before the winter holidays, but the allure of ED compels too many seniors to declare their commitment to one college before they're ready.

Most 17- or 18-year-olds simply have not had time to consider a broad range of alternatives before making a thoughtful decision about what's best for them. ED encourages students to act strategically. Because of the perceived admissions advantage of applying early, students who do not have a clear favorite still are encouraged to narrow their focus to one school and to set their sights higher than they might otherwise do. The pressure to apply early may come from peers, parents or even secondary schools seeking to optimize placement of their own students in prestigious institutions.

While most students can be happy at a variety of places, the early-decision process sends a very different message. When students do not get into their ED choice, they often feel like failures, and then must scramble to

complete applications for other schools. Anxiety increases.

Moreover, senior year of high school should be a period of intellectual discovery and maturation. But ED has a way of turning it into a relentless rollercoaster ride with students hurtling toward application deadlines and then coasting until graduation.

Even for students who have considered their options carefully and are ready to swear by their first choice, ED has drawbacks. A successful ED application commits a student to a particular school without knowledge of the likely financial aid package. The reality is that schools use different criteria to determine financial aid awards. Students who apply early sacrifice their ability to compare offers from multiple schools.

Not ideal for colleges either

From a purely economic perspective, ED is a splendid tool for colleges to manipulate the overall percentage of admitted students who choose to matriculate and thereby ensure high admissions “yields.” The larger the percentage of students admitted early, the greater the yield and the more selective the school appears to be in the eyes of *U.S. News & World Report*, for example. ED also allows a school to reduce uncertainty in its financial aid budget by admitting full-pay students who are certain to matriculate.

But ED is not all it's cracked up to be for institutions. Tufts has discovered over the past two years that its regular-decision applicant pool is stronger academically and more diverse ethnically, geographically and economically than its early-decision pool. As a result, we've made a conscious decision in recent years to roll back the percentage of each class that we've accepted during the ED process. In the 2000 to 2004 admissions years, ED admits made up an average 40 percent of Tufts' incoming freshman classes. In 2005 and 2006, we scaled that back to 33 percent, and we intend to keep it at or below that mark in the future.

In terms of academic prowess, the average combined SAT math and verbal score for Tufts regular-decision applicants in the last two years was roughly 30 points higher than for ED applicants. And 74 percent of the Tufts Class of 2009 ranked in the top 10 percent of their graduating class, up from 67 percent the previous year, when 42 percent of our freshmen came in through the ED process. Overall, average SAT scores for entering freshmen have increased by 90 points for enrolling students over the past five years. We could not have strengthened the class this much without cutting back on ED.

Q. Why is early decision so attractive to colleges and universities?

A. Because the more students an institution admits early, the more selective it appears and the higher its "admissions yield."

ED admits as percentage of entire class	Number of ED admits	Number of slots remaining for regular-decision applicants	Number of regular-decision admits*	Total admits (ED + regular decision)	Overall admissions rate (selectivity)**	Overall yield***
50%	750	750	2,273	3,023	20%	49%
40%	600	900	2,727	3,327	22%	45%
30%	450	1,050	3,182	3,632	24%	41%

For a hypothetical college with 15,000 applicants per year and a target freshman class size of 1,500 students.

Assuming yield of 33%; in other words, one in three students admitted will choose to matriculate.

*** Number of admitted students divided by number of applicants.*

**** Number of students who choose to matriculate divided by the number of admitted students.*

From a diversity standpoint, early decision also falls short. Students of color make up 18 percent of Tufts' 2006 ED candidate pool, compared with 24 percent of our regular-decision pool. For Tufts, and most other colleges, the vast majority of ED applicants come from wealthy and upper-middle-class suburban communities and private schools in the Northeast and Middle Atlantic states, where guidance counselors and parents tend to be savvier about early admissions strategies.

Meanwhile, ED combined with the electronic application is contributing to an admissions process that's less predictable overall. The growing popularity of ED

forces admissions offices to start processing applications much earlier in the year. The admissions cycle is necessarily compressed, and committees have less time to be thoughtful and deliberate if they are to respond by the ED deadline.

At the same time, the increasing ease of researching schools on the Internet and applying online—along with the peak of the echo baby boom—is fueling a dramatic rise in the number of applications filed. Applications to Tufts have more than doubled since 1990. Few schools, I suspect, have scaled their investment in admissions staff with the rise in applications, meaning that they are

probably spending less time, on average, considering each application. The result: less predictability about who's apt to get admitted and who's not. Given greater uncertainty, students are likely to apply to even more schools in order to feel confident about getting in somewhere. The number of applications rises at each school, and the cycle continues.


If we are sincere about broadening access to higher education for all, we need to lessen our reliance on early decision. Far from being a competitive game, college admissions should encourage students, parents and institutions to act thoughtfully and always in the best interest of the student. While any reform may require institutions to take on more risk, that's a risk well worth taking if it benefits our students.

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