

Be cautious when applying to college early

By Meredith Eastman/Columnist

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As the new school year begins, many high school seniors are narrowing their list of colleges and trying to decide where — and how — to apply. The number of students applying to college through Early Action or Early Decision increases every year — but is either one of these options right for you? Everyone talks of the admissions benefits to applying early, but are there any drawbacks? And is there really that much of an advantage for early applicants?

It is important to begin by understanding the different admissions plans. Early Decision (ED) is a binding agreement — accepted students are required to enroll at their ED school and withdraw their other college applications.

Early Action (EA), on the other hand, is an option to submit an early application and receive an early response — but there is no promise to attend and students are free to apply to other schools. Not all schools offer Early Decision or Early Action — each college decides which deadlines and policies will best suit their own needs.

Be cautious when applying under an Early Decision agreement. Many people find the idea of ED appealing for two reasons: 1) ED applicants usually find out their decisions in December and if accepted do not need to file other applications and 2) Most colleges with Early Decision programs admit a higher percentage of students ED than Regular Decision.

While this is often true, it is important to remember that Early Decision is a binding agreement and should not be taken lightly — sometimes in the rush to find an ED school, students end up applying early to programs for which they may not be ideally suited. While it is nice to learn early of an acceptance and to complete the college selection process, it is more important to find the right college fit, even if it means filing more applications and waiting longer to learn the results.

There are other reasons that Early Decision might not be the best plan for everyone. For students who have not always performed to their best in school, Regular Decision may be the better choice. Students who need colleges to see a full semester of strong senior grades (as opposed to just a good first quarter report card) should consider applying Regular Decision instead of ED.

Additionally, if affordability is a concern, Early Decision is probably not the right choice either. Although ED families will receive estimated financial aid awards when accepted, they will not be able to compare aid offers from other schools. For many families it is important to compare the cost and aid packages of several colleges in order to make the correct college choice.

Early Action programs are less complicated and are often a good way to ease the stress of the college process. Most colleges that offer EA as an option do not have a higher acceptance rate early. In fact, some colleges are even more selective during Early Action because they do not want to over-admit early and want to reserve room for strong Regular Decision applicants. These schools recommend that

students only apply EA if they are very strong applicants. Otherwise, EA can be a great way to learn early of a college acceptance (hopefully) and ease the fear of “not getting in anywhere,” without committing anywhere before a student is ready.

Early Action and Early Decision are terrific options for the right students at the right colleges. It is important to understand the details of the application programs at each school before committing to anything in order to avoid making the wrong decision.

As college is such a significant investment, rushing an application because of a perceived advantage could lead to disastrous results without proper guidance and knowledge. Be sure to seek out the resources necessary to make an informed decision.

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