

# The Case for (and Against) Early Decision

By Kathleen Carmichael, Ph.D.

College planning can be stressful for both students and parents. Long before they face the challenge of finding college funding, students face an equally important challenge - **the college admissions process**. Filling out college applications and waiting to hear from admissions committees can make for a nerve-wracking senior year.

But now schools are taking steps to alleviate student stress by instituting early admissions programs. This means that high school students who already know their top college pick can now send in their applications as early as September of their junior year and find out whether they'll be accepted at the school of their choice.

A great deal? Some students think so. Early admission can take the pressure off senior year, allowing students to finish high school secure in the knowledge that they have a spot reserved in the school of their choice.

But be careful. Because while early decision can secure the student's place, it can also limit his/her options. While statistics indicate that the odds of admission improve for early applicants, students who apply early face a much more competitive applicant pool. Likewise, schools have less incentive to offer extensive financial aid packages to early applicants, reasoning that such students are more likely to make up the difference on their own.

Finally, students can change their minds a lot between junior and senior year. A student who had his heart set on a school out east might well change his mind when he sees his friends migrating to California. But if he's opted for early decision, he'll be required to attend his first choice.

## How It Works

Early "decision" and "early action" are two standard options. Both allow the student to apply early, usually in November before the regular pool of candidates send in their applications. In return, the school lets the student know whether they've been accepted long before the usual acceptance date - often as early as December, before other students have even applied.

- **Early Decision**

Early decision is binding, which means if the student applies he or she must attend that school if accepted and given a reasonable financial aid package. Additionally, the student must withdraw any applications they sent to other schools.

The student should apply for early decision only if they are absolutely sure about where they want to go to college, if their profile suggests that they will be accepted and if financial aid is not an overriding factor in their college decision. Generally the student should not just be interested in the school, but in specific majors, programs or faculty at the school.

It is inadvisable to try to beat the system by applying for early admission at more than one school. Top schools often share lists of early applicants. If a student's name appears on more than one list, he/she may be barred from all his/her top-pick schools.

- **Early Action**

Unlike early decision, early action usually isn't binding and the student can apply to a number of schools and compare all admissions and financial aid offers. Most of the time, the student can wait until the late spring before having to make a decision. But college's guidelines vary, so a student should be careful.

As with early decision, a student should apply only if they are sure they can compete with other early action applicants. Students with weaker applications may wish to use their junior and senior years to bolster their grades and activities.

### **The Pros and Cons of Early Decision and Early Action**

It's important to weigh the pros and the cons of these programs. Everybody is different: Early decision and early action might be right for one student, but could be a mistake for another.

#### **Pros**

- If accepted, the student can bypass all the admissions stress that comes with senior year.
- If the student isn't accepted, the application is deferred until the final acceptance decisions are made - so they will have more than one chance to get in. Additionally, the student will have more time to thoroughly explore other schools.
- Applying through one of these plans is a good way for students to communicate their interest in a school - which might convince admissions officers to consider the application more seriously.

#### **Cons**

- Students will have less time to make educational and financial decisions and less time to explore their options. Also, by committing to one school, a student rules out other schools that may offer more attractive financial aid packages.
- The student won't be able to improve his/her profile with senior year grades and activities.
- Early decision and early action candidates are usually very qualified, so it's harder to make an application stand out.

If the student is interested in early decision or early action, he or she should speak to guidance counselors, ask the prospective school for more information and read the guidelines carefully. Then decide if early decision or early action is right for them.