

GUIDELINES FOR EARLY DECISION AND EARLY ACTION

DEFINITIONS

- **Early Decision**

Early Decision is binding. Students cannot apply to more than one college through the Early Decision route. If a student is accepted, he or she is “bound” to attend that school. If the student is not accepted, he or she can apply to other schools during the regular decision period. Most Early Decision application deadline dates are in November, and students are notified of the decision in December. This gives students plenty of time to apply for regular decision if they are rejected.

- **Early Action**

Early Action is non-binding. It is simply a process by which students can learn whether or not they have been accepted earlier than if they had applied during the regular decision period. Students can apply to multiple colleges during Early Action. It works exactly like Regular Decision, except that the deadlines are earlier in the school year. At some colleges, it may be a bit easier to be accepted by applying Early Action than by Regular Decision because during Early Action, colleges have all of their seats to fill. During Regular Decision, there are fewer seats available and many more applicants to fill them, so admissions committees can be very choosy.

- **Regular Decision**

This is the primary method by which most college applicants apply to college. Colleges will either call this process “regular decision” or else they won’t call it anything at all. In other words, if a college only has one application deadline date, it is using a Regular Decision process by definition.

Students can apply to as many colleges as they want through the Regular Decision process. If they are accepted to more than one college, they can choose which college they want to attend and simply decline the offers from the other colleges. In other words, it is a non-binding decision.

Some colleges use a “**priority deadline date**” during their regular decision process. This is NOT the same thing as Early Decision. This means that students who apply by that deadline date will be given full consideration for admission. After that deadline date, students can still apply but they may not get full consideration. In other words, everyone who applies by the priority deadline date will be considered at the same time, side by side. The applications received after the priority deadline date won’t be reviewed until after all the applications from the priority group have been evaluated.

Some colleges use “**rolling admissions.**” This means that colleges evaluate applications as they are received from students, rather than waiting for a particular deadline date to begin the process. Students applying to colleges with rolling

admissions should try to apply as soon as possible so that they can gain acceptance before seats run out.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF EARLY DECISION

Advantages of Early Decision

- By applying early, you are telling a college that it is your number one choice, which makes them more likely to look upon your application favorably, so long as you're a qualified applicant.
- Save yourself the time and expense of applying to five or more colleges during the regular decision process.
- Find out if you are accepted at your number one choice in December

Disadvantages of Early Decision

- It's binding. If you get accepted, you're obligated to go (more on this later), which means you can't compare different financial aid offers from multiple colleges.
- You're application needs to be completed and sent in by a very early application deadline date (often Nov 1 or Nov 15, depending on the college).

If you apply Early Decision, you can still apply to other colleges for the Regular Decision process, but if you then find out that you were accepted at the school to which you applied Early Decision, you are expected to rescind your applications at the schools to which you applied for regular decision.

If you are rejected by your Early Decision school, then you can continue to move forward on your regular decision applications to other colleges.

WHAT DOES "BINDING" MEAN?

Colleges cannot enforce the Early Decision Agreement in law. However, they take the process very seriously and consider it part of the honor code. Colleges use this process to make sure that students who are applying to their college and who really want to go there (as opposed to students who are applying but will end up going somewhere else) have a chance to lock in a seat before the competition gets too fierce. Whether you agree with this policy or not, you need to understand it.

If you are accepted Early Decision and then decide not to attend, you will be shunned at that college (meaning you can't apply there later, and you probably can't apply to graduate school there...you will have gone back on your word). The college also may contact other colleges and tell them that you've rescinded on your agreement to attend. While the college can't force the other colleges to not accept your application, many colleges will look unfavorably on an applicant who broke his or her word, both because it indicates poor character, but also because they themselves have Early Decision processes that they want to maintain the integrity of.

In A Student's Guide to College Admissions by Howard Unger, he writes:

Make no mistake about early decision: It is a contract that you must fulfill. No, it's not a legal contract, but it's a moral one, and if you violate it you're risking personal disaster. One student applied to several colleges for early decision, was accepted by two, and then withdrew one application. The college whose contract he violated immediately notified the

other college, which then rejected the student and warned his high school of possible repercussions if they ever permitted another to file more than one early-decision application. In other words, top colleges stay in touch with one another.

That said, most colleges are sensitive to students who need financial aid and might understand if a student needs to change his or her mind because their financial aid package didn't allow them to attend, as long as they can verify the reason. The problem is that a student might not hear about financial aid until March, which means he or she will miss the application deadline dates for many of the other colleges.

On the other hand, a highly qualified student who locks in scholarships even before the Early Decision application deadline, or who contacts the colleges and asks them to estimate their financial aid package based on last years tax forms, might be comfortable enough with their chances of receiving enough aid that they go ahead and apply Early Decision to their first-choice college.

WHICH COLLEGES OFFER EARLY DECISION AND EARLY ACTION

The list changes from year to year. You can access the current list by going to www.collegeboard.com/collapps/early/html/states.html

Check out the *Complete Guide to Colleges* at the library or in the Future Center of books we sent you.

For each college listing, you can look under the ADMISSIONS heading, and then look under Admissions Requirements. You'll see the deadline dates for early decision, early action, and regular decision. This information is also located on each college entry on ECOS.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There's no harm in applying *Early Action*. In general, students should try to apply earlier rather than later to ensure that they are given full consideration before the seats start to fill at selective and highly selective colleges.

As for *Early Decision*, students should apply only if:

- They are certain they have determined their number one choice
- They want to increase their chances of getting accepted at that number one choice
- They have determined that they will receive enough financial aid, or they are willing to borrow money to attend that college even if they don't.
- They understand the consequences if they go back on their word

For most DSF students, we don't recommend Early Decision. Students should apply to several colleges EARLY in the process (either Early Action, or before the priority deadline date, or early on in a rolling admissions process), compare financial aid packages, and choose accordingly. However, we don't recommend Early Decision unless they've already locked in a scholarship.