

There are multiple ways to apply to a college: early decision, early action, and regular decision. What do all of these options mean? Are there advantages or disadvantages to choosing one option over another? How you apply to a college is up to you, but I hope to explain the options so you can make an educated decision on how you should apply to the colleges you are considering.

Early Decision (ED)

For many colleges that offer early decision, students must submit their application and materials (transcript, test scores, recommendations, etc.) in October or November. Students will typically receive their admission decision within a month of submitting their application. **Students can only apply to one institution early decision**, but can apply to other colleges regular decision. If the student is accepted to the institution early decision, they must withdraw their applications at all other colleges and commit to attending the institution. Frequently, acceptance rates for early decision are higher than regular admission. However, this does not mean it is easier to get in. Many times, the students who apply early decision are students who are top students academically with stellar grades and test scores.

Before applying early decision, students must make sure this is the college they want to attend because it is a binding contract. The student, parent/guardian, and the counselor all have to sign a form that says they agree to these terms when applying for Early Decision. The only way a student can decline the offer of admission is if the financial aid award offer is not enough to make it possible to attend the institution. And, this does not mean you can withdraw if you see the total and do not like it. Most of the colleges will prepare financial aid awards and will meet financial need based on the information provided on the FAFSA and possibly the CSS Profile. You might not like your Expected Family Contribution (EFC), but that is what the documents believe you can afford. If you are accepted, you cannot continue “shopping around” for colleges. Research the cost of attendance and financial aid options before applying and only apply early decision if you know you will be able to afford attendance.

Early Action (EA)

Just like early decision, early action allows students to apply early and get admissions decisions early. Early action applications are non-binding and students can apply to multiple colleges. Some colleges do not offer early action, but have priority deadlines for certain programs instead. Essentially, these application types can be treated the same way. Apply early, get a decision early. Although students receive notification of their decisions early, they have until May 1 to choose the college they will attend.

You are free to continue applying to other colleges and can wait to make your final decision until May 1. This allows you to continue researching colleges, visit again (if necessary), and compare financial aid award offers.

Regular Decision

The application deadline for regular decision is usually later (often second semester) than early action and early decision deadlines. This later date gives students longer to prepare their applications for admission. While some colleges give decisions quickly, many do not send regular decisions until mid to late March. Students will then have until May 1 to decide the college they will attend.

Rolling Admission

Colleges that offer rolling admission usually open their applications in the fall and continue accepting applications as space permits throughout the summer. While students can apply whenever they want, there are priority deadlines for financial aid and housing. Therefore, students should still apply to colleges offering rolling admission early to improve their chances of admission, financial aid and housing. Most colleges offering rolling admission typically send out admissions decisions within a few weeks of receiving the completed application.

There are advantages and disadvantages to all ways of applying to college. Before making the decision, weigh these factors and choose the option that is best for you. The application and personal statements are very important in the decision process. Therefore, students should take their time with the application, no matter how they are applying. Remember, “college is a match to be made, not a prize to be won.”