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Early Decision & Early Action

The benefits and drawbacks of applying early

Early decision (ED) and early action (EA) plans can be beneficial to students — but only to those who have thought through their college options carefully and have a clear preference for one institution.

Early decision versus early action

Early decision plans are binding — a student who is accepted as an ED applicant must attend the college. Early action plans are nonbinding — students receive an early response to their application but do not have to commit to the college until the normal reply date of May 1. Counselors need to make sure that students understand this key distinction between the two plans.

Approximately 450 colleges have early decision or early action plans, and some have both. Some colleges offer a nonbinding option called **single-choice early action**, under which applicants may not apply ED or EA to any other college.

ED plans have come under fire as unfair to students from families with low incomes, since they do not have the opportunity to compare financial aid offers. This may give an unfair advantage to applicants from families who have more financial resources.

ED applicants

- Apply early (usually in November) to first-choice college.
- Receive an admission decision from the college well in advance of the usual notification date (usually by December).
- Agree to attend the college if accepted and offered a financial aid package that is considered adequate by the family.
- Apply to only one college early decision.
- Apply to other colleges under regular admission plans.
- Withdraw all other applications if accepted by ED.
- Send a nonrefundable deposit well in advance of May 1.

EA applicants

- Apply early.
- Receive an admission decision early in the admission cycle (usually in January or February).
- Consider acceptance offer; do not have to commit upon receipt.
- Apply to other colleges under regular admission plans.
- Give the college a decision no later than the May 1 national response date.

Who should apply early?

Applying to an ED or EA plan is most appropriate for a student who:

- Has researched colleges extensively.
- Is absolutely sure that the college is the first choice.

- Has found a college that is a strong match academically, socially and geographically.
- Meets or exceeds the admission profile for the college for SAT® scores, GPA and class rank.
- Has an academic record that has been consistently solid over time.

Applying to an ED or EA plan is not appropriate for a student who:

- Has not thoroughly researched colleges.
- Is applying early just to avoid stress and paperwork.
- Is not fully committed to attending the college.
- Is applying early only because friends are.
- Needs a strong senior fall semester to bring grades up.

Encourage students who want to apply early to fill out NACAC's [Early Decision Self-Evaluation Questionnaire](#), in the Deciding About Early Decision and Early Action handout. You may want to share this with parents as well.

The benefits of applying early

For a student who has a definite first-choice college, applying early has many benefits besides possibly increasing the chance of getting in. Applying early lets the student:

- Reduce stress by cutting the time spent waiting for a decision.
- Save the time and expense of submitting multiple applications.
- Gain more time, once accepted, to look for housing and otherwise prepare for college.
- Reassess options and apply elsewhere if not accepted.

The drawbacks of applying early

Pressure to decide: Committing to one college puts pressure on students to make serious decisions before they've explored all their options.

Reduced financial aid opportunities: Students who apply under ED plans receive offers of admission and financial aid simultaneously and so will not be able to compare financial aid offers from other colleges. For students who absolutely need financial aid, applying early may be a risky option.

Time crunch for other applications: Most colleges do not notify ED and EA applicants of admission until December 15. Because of the usual deadlines for applications, this means that if a student is rejected by the ED college, there are only two weeks left to send in other applications. Encourage those of your students who are applying early to prepare other applications as they wait to receive admission decisions from their first-choice college.

Senioritis: Applicants who learn early that they have been accepted into a college may feel that, their goal accomplished, they have no reason to work hard for the rest of the year. Early-applying students should know that colleges may rescind offers of admission should their senior-year grades drop.

Students and parents can use our [Pros and Cons of Applying to College Early](#), in the Deciding About Early Decision and Early Action handout, to weigh their options.

Does applying early increase the chance of acceptance?

Many students believe applying early means competing with fewer applicants and increasing their chances for acceptance. This is not always true. Colleges vary in the proportion of the class admitted early and in the percentage of early applicants they admit.

Higher admission rates for ED applicants may correlate to stronger profiles among candidates choosing ED. Students should ask the admission office whether their institution's admission standards differ between ED and regular applicants, and then assess whether applying early makes sense given their own profile.

The ethics of applying early decision

The Common Application and some colleges' application forms require the student applying under early decision, as well as the parent and counselor, to sign an ED agreement form spelling out the plan's conditions.

Make it clear in your school handbook and at college planning events that your policy for early-decision applications is to send the student's final transcript to one college only: anything else is unethical.

Keep in mind

- ED and EA program specifics vary, so students should get information as soon as possible directly from the admission staff at their first-choice college.
- ED and EA applicants must take the October SAT or SAT Subject Tests™ in order for these scores to make it to the college in time.

Print out and share the [Early Decision and Early Action Calendar](#) with students and parents to be sure they are aware of all the required steps for applying early.