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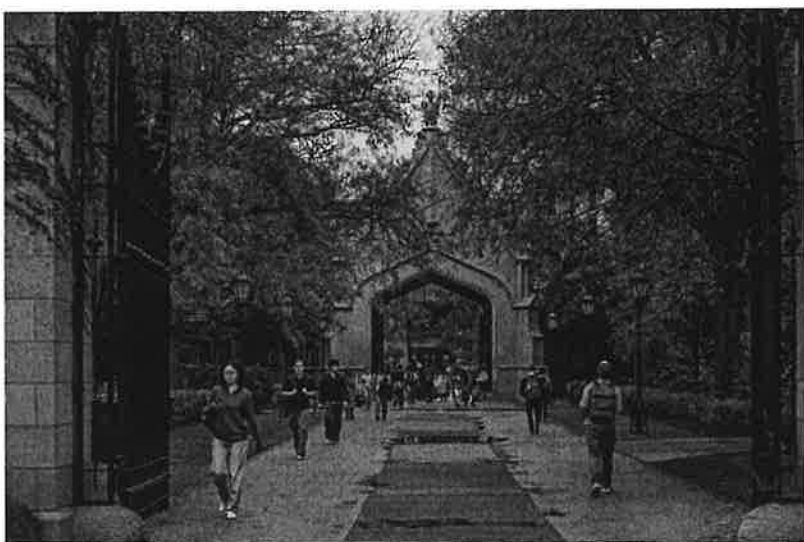
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The College-Admissions Chess Game Is More Complicated Than Ever

Students have to submit final decisions Friday after a byzantine cycle

By Roshan Fernandez

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The University of Chicago's yield rate, or percentage of admitted students who enroll, is among the highest in the U.S. JAMIE KELTER DAVIS FOR WSJ

Quick Summary

- Colleges are intensifying the admissions process by pushing for earlier commitments and adding new early-admission rounds to maximize their yield rates.

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For high-school seniors across the country, May 1 is the denouement of a college-admissions chess game that has become more complicated than ever.

Friday—the deadline for students to tell colleges their final decisions—marks the culmination of an admissions process whose intensity has accelerated in recent years. Schools are pushing to get commitments sooner, adding new early-admission rounds, and using wait lists aggressively. The tactics force students, in turn, to strategically optimize their odds.

“Some students have this mentality of being a shopper, being the buyer,” said Adam Nguyen, founder of admissions-consulting firm Ivy Link. “You’re not the buyer—you are at the mercy of these colleges.”

When 17-year-old Lauren Tyree plotted out her college-application plan, she shuffled pieces of cardstock around on her table, each labeled with a target school, its deadlines and application stipulations.



Lauren Tyree TY TYREE

She saw that applying to Princeton early, for instance, was limiting: Its “Single-Choice Early Action” option prevented early application to other private schools. Notre Dame’s “Restrictive Early Action” option, however, gave her more leeway.

She was able to apply regular-decision to the Ivies—and got into Harvard, where she committed. “We had a very clear strategy about maximizing the schools and the chance,” Tyree said.

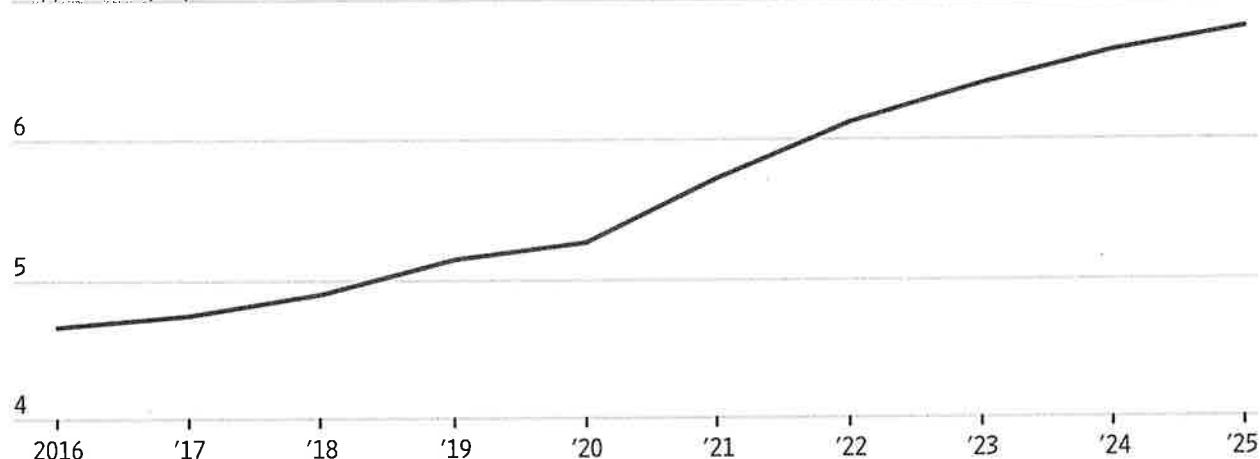
Schools are trying to maximize their yield rate, or the percentage of admitted students who enroll. That figure is important for optics, rankings, logistical planning and finances; bond ratings even use it to assess how in-demand colleges are.

At the same time, it has become harder for colleges to predict how many applicants will enroll because students are applying to more schools.

Students now submit an average of nearly seven applications each on the Common App, up 46% since 2015-16, according to a 2024-25 report from the provider.

Common App submissions per applicant

7 applications per person



Note: Dates are end of academic years.

Source: Common App

Many schools are leaning in to early application windows, filling more of their classes through early rounds. At Tulane University in New Orleans, about two-thirds of admissions offers to the Class of 2030 were extended via nonbinding early action, a spokesperson said. The school has also offered early decision since 2016.

At some schools, early-round acceptance rates are three to four times higher than the regular round, which is why many admissions consultants suggest applying early. Colleges say this reflects a higher-quality applicant pool.

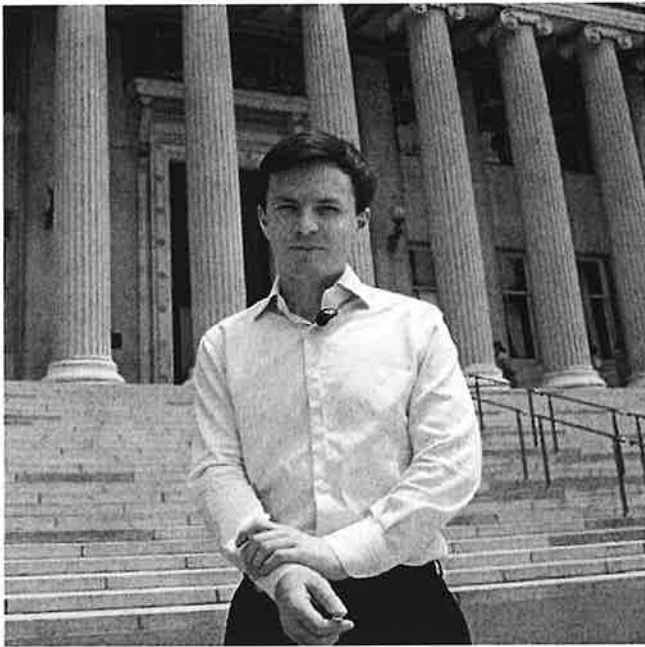
The moves come on top of a long-practiced yield-protection tactic: rejecting or wait listing applicants who seem overqualified and therefore unlikely to enroll.

At the University of Chicago, the yield rate has skyrocketed from about 40% in 2011 to almost 90% last year. One boost in recent years: an even-earlier application round—known as “early decision zero”—for already-vetted summer-program attendees.

The school has asked some students who applied for nonbinding early action if they would like to switch to binding early decision, college counselors say. Applicants worry that if they don’t switch, UChicago will think the school isn’t their first choice and reject them. Jamie Beaton, founder of admissions-consulting firm Crimson Education, said the firm advised most of its targeted clients to switch this year—and all who did, got in.

Financial-aid needs complicate that calculus: Applying early decision, which is binding, could limit applicants’ ability to compare aid packages. Students who don’t want to switch because they need more financial options should explain that to the school, advises Tom Campbell of College Essay Guy, which offers admissions counseling.

The loop can be self-reinforcing. “The more anxiety there is in the college admissions process, the more desire there is to alleviate the pain early—and that’s what these ED systems do,” Beaton said.



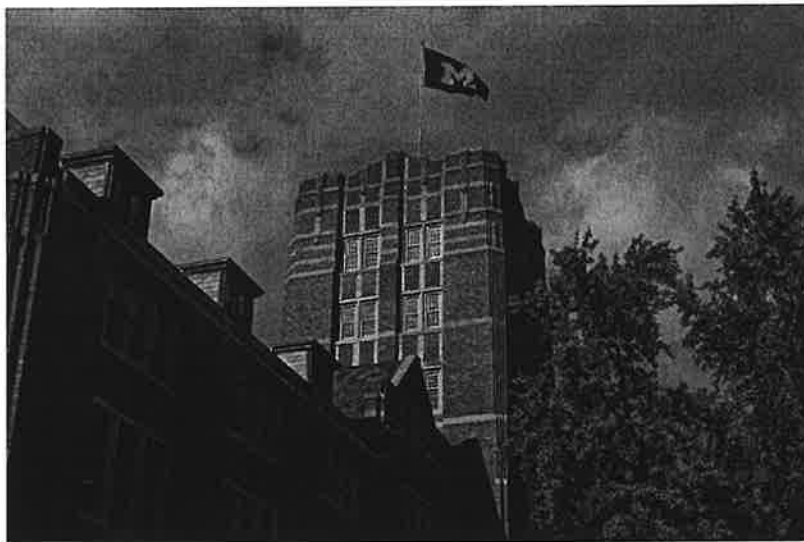
Jamie Beaton MADISON MALONE

A UChicago spokesperson said the high yield rates there reflect the many students who consider the school their first choice.

The University of Michigan added binding early decision as an option for the first time this year, a rarity among elite public schools. A spokesperson said the school, which also offers nonbinding early action, made the change partly to allow students to enjoy their senior

year of high school.

“Kids were absolutely frantic because they wanted Michigan to be an option, but they didn’t want to apply early decision,” said Tara Dowling, an independent college consultant. “Michigan was very strategic.”



The University of Michigan offers both binding and nonbinding early application options. ERIN KIRKLAND FOR WSJ

An antitrust lawsuit filed last fall against about three dozen colleges (not including Michigan) alleges early decision lets schools drive up tuition and

reduce financial aid by decreasing market competition. The suit argues early-decision isn't legally binding, even though applicants think it is.

It isn't just early-round applications that are getting more complicated. Vanderbilt this year launched a pilot partnership promising transfer admission to students who study abroad their first year, through a third-party company called Verto Education. The arrangement helps keep admit rates low—regular decision admittance was a record-low 2.8%—while effectively boosting yield.

“They’ve got these people in the waiting chambers,” Beaton said.

Verto Education works with about 70 schools to help them increase enrollment and address attrition, Chief Executive Mitch Gordon said. Students do a semester or year abroad through Verto and then are guaranteed admission to a partner school, typically contingent on meeting a GPA-threshold. The arrangement is nonbinding, but Gordon said that more than 90% of students end up enrolling with the partner school.

Vanderbilt’s dean of admissions said the Verto option was introduced because of increasing interest in the school, and is one of several transfer paths.

Some elite colleges also use “likely letters,” or advance notices informing students they will probably get in, to sway them into accepting a formal offer. Previously reserved mainly for student-athletes, the practice has spread to recruiting traditional academic students, Beaton said.

Johanna Duan, a high-school senior from New York’s Long Island, received a letter from Columbia indicating she was a “likely candidate for admission.” It changed her view of the school, which she wasn’t seriously considering beforehand.

“I felt like I was chosen,” she said. “It made me feel like I was special.”

She committed to Columbia two days before the deadline.