

Understanding the College Application Calendar

By Sue Biemeret

One of the key processes that affects your college choice is the timeline that colleges use to admit students. Generally speaking, there are three different college application timelines:

Regular admission. You apply by a midwinter deadline, hear from colleges in early April, and make your decision and notify colleges by May 1 (known as the Universal Candidate Reply Date) about whether you will attend. This was the norm until fairly recently.

Rolling admission. You apply and usually receive an admissions decision within two to six weeks from the time you submit your application. Most public universities and many private colleges use this timeline. It's by far the most widely used calendar today—and popular with students because it reduces the period of uncertainty.

Early application. Early application plans have been around for decades. However, they've only become "hot" topics among college-bound students and their families over the past 10 years and, today, they can be the driving force behind some students' college planning. To understand how early plans have taken center stage for some students, you need to first understand how the college application calendar works. Essentially, two types of early plans—one nonbinding and the other binding—are offered by several hundred colleges that also use the regular application calendar. Here's how they differ:

- **Early Decision (ED).** This is considered "binding," so it's essential that you be certain about wanting to enroll at that college. As with Early Action plans, you submit an application in early fall. Sometime between mid-December and the beginning of January, the college notifies you whether you have been admitted, deferred to the pool of regular applicants for a spring decision, or denied admission to the college.

By applying under an ED plan, you have made a commitment to attend that college and surrendered the right to wait until May 1 to make a decision. High school counselors and college admissions officers take that commitment very seriously. Reneging on your agreement after being offered ED admission could result in other colleges refusing to admit you.

Most ED plans share the following features:

- You may apply for Early Decision to only one college.
- You may also apply for Early Action, rolling admissions, or regular admissions to other colleges during the fall, but once you are admitted under an ED plan, all applications to other colleges must be withdrawn immediately.
- You are only released from an ED program if the college is unable to meet your need for financial aid, as demonstrated by the completion of a financial aid form. It is vitally important for you and your family to understand that "need," as used in the college admissions process, does not refer to a subjective determination of a family's willingness to pay, but rather to the federal and institutional financial aid methodologies used to determine a family's ability to pay.
- **Early Action (EA).** This is a nonbinding plan that requires you to submit your application in early fall (usually by November 1 or 15). The college lets you know whether you're accepted by early January, but you have the right to wait until May 1 before responding. This gives you time to compare colleges, including their financial aid offers, before making a decision, since an EA application doesn't commit you to enroll if offered admission. Some colleges have two "rounds" of Early Action, with deadlines in both November and December.

Over the past several years, some hybrid versions of the Early Action plan have been established. Colleges such as Harvard, Yale, and Stanford now use a *Single Choice/Early Action* plan (some colleges call this "Early Action with restrictions"). Under this new plan, they will accept an EA application, but students exercising this option may apply to only one school EA, and may not apply ED to any other college.

What are the advantages of utilizing an early plan? For students who have found their "ideal" college, applying early allows them to bypass the regular spring notification deadline, avoid the time and expense of submitting multiple applications, and reduce the time spent waiting for a decision. Students who have already completed their college search can accelerate the admissions calendar by

applying under an early plan. Being admitted under an early plan may sometimes be somewhat less competitive than competing with all other applicants in the spring, just as letting a college know of your intense desire to attend can be a positive factor in the admissions decision.

Colleges and universities, too, benefit from early plans. Under the ED plan, admitting committed students early in the admissions cycle is a great way to build a strong freshman class. Also, some colleges find that they can stretch their limited financial aid budgets by admitting students who are not only bright and committed to their school, but who also are “full-pay” students, i.e., ones who are not relying on financial aid.

So why are early plans such a controversial topic among admissions professionals today? There is a growing concern that the increased publicity about and the popularity of early plans are causing some students to make premature college decisions and some colleges to fill their classes with a disproportionate number of early applicants.

In fact, some students even feel compelled to apply early in order to take advantage of the perceived competitive edge an early plan offers. What was originally designed to be a stress-reducer has become a stress-enhancer, as students focus more on the *strategy* of early plans rather than the *opportunity* early plans offer to the very focused student. In another vein, some students who apply early might find themselves disconnecting from their academic work during their last semester of high school. This particular strain of “senioritis” has created a national concern among high school and college educators alike. Students are expected to remain engaged in their course work throughout their eight semesters of high school; applying early was never designed to lessen a student’s academic participation during the spring of senior year.

Simply stated, early plans are wonderful options for students who have found a perfect fit between themselves and a particular college. However, because of media or peer pressure, some students who aren’t absolutely certain that one college is the clear winner on their list may find it tempting to apply under an early plan—even if it isn’t right for them.

For students who aren’t ready to make a binding commitment, applying under a restrictive early plan is extremely inappropriate because it forces them to make serious decisions long before they’ve explored all their options. Another potential disadvantage is that students

are not able to wait until the spring of their senior year to compare financial aid packages among colleges that have offered them admission. Therefore, if financial aid is a priority, applying under a restrictive early plan is probably not a good idea because it might eliminate, or greatly reduce, aid possibilities.

If you’re just starting the college admissions search, we encourage you to keep a few points in mind:

- Remember that the best college for you is the one that fits you best. A good match between your academic, personal, social, and philosophical interests and a college or university’s environment is what you are seeking. Get to know yourself well this year, and get to know individual colleges well by reading about them, visiting them, and speaking to their admissions counselors.
- Applying under an early plan is not required or necessary, but simply an option. If you find one college that appeals to you more than any other and fits you like a glove, consider using an early plan as you begin the application timetable early in your senior year. However, if you want to take more time to explore a variety of options, that’s OK!
- Include your parents in your plan to apply early. It is imperative that your parents understand the financial ramifications of applying under a binding ED plan. Make sure your parents have discussed their financial need with the college’s financial aid office before you apply under a binding ED plan.
- Include your school counselor in the process. You don’t want to make such a weighty decision without the help of a trained professional who can be objective about this decision. Your counselor is your strongest advocate in the college search process!

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