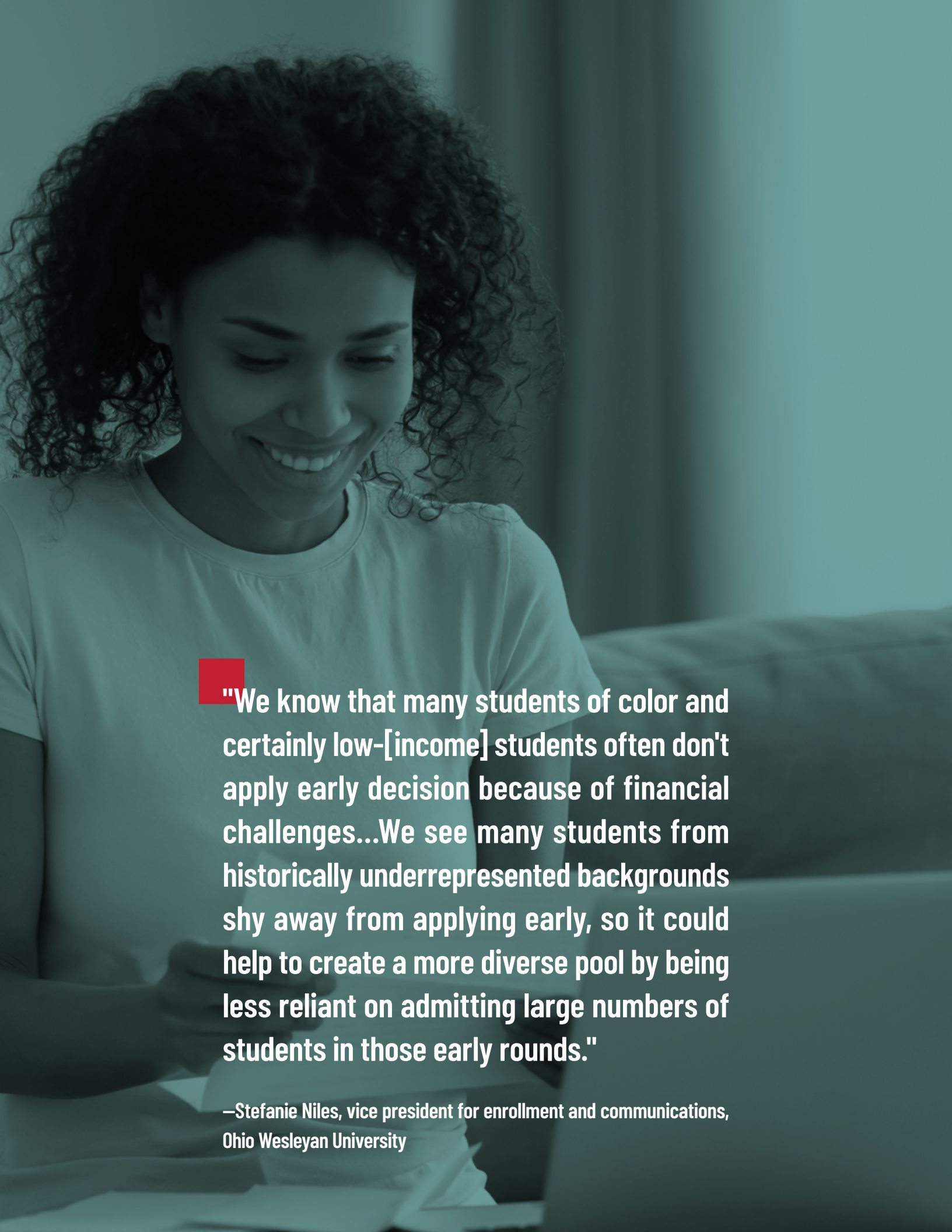


## CHAPTER 3

# ELIMINATING EARLY DECISION POLICIES

Applying to college is a multi-step process that requires applicants to make many decisions about where to apply and when they will submit their application. Many colleges and universities offer multiple deadlines to submit applications, including “early decision” or “early action” deadlines.<sup>1</sup> Through early admissions policies, institutions have created a tiered approach to their application deadlines that turns a positive unwritten rule—being an “early bird”—into a policy that advantages applicants with the most resources. Students who submit early decision applications receive a boost in their admissions chances simply because they can apply early in the admissions cycle to one institution—a luxury many students from low-income backgrounds do not have.<sup>2</sup>

A young woman with dark, curly hair is smiling and looking down at a laptop screen. She is wearing a light-colored t-shirt. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be a bed or couch. The entire image has a teal-colored overlay.

**"We know that many students of color and certainly low-[income] students often don't apply early decision because of financial challenges...We see many students from historically underrepresented backgrounds shy away from applying early, so it could help to create a more diverse pool by being less reliant on admitting large numbers of students in those early rounds."**

**—Stefanie Niles, vice president for enrollment and communications,  
Ohio Wesleyan University**



Students who apply via early decision are often wealthier than those who apply via regular deadlines, and they are more likely to be admitted,<sup>3</sup> especially at the most selective institutions.<sup>4</sup> Research suggests that some institutions have lower admissions standards when they review early decision applications, which means those who apply early—typically higher-income, White students—are judged more leniently than those who apply via the regular deadline.<sup>5</sup>

The use of early admissions policies is especially prevalent at the most selective institutions. In 2019, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of students who applied to highly selective public institutions via early admissions deadlines were accepted, compared with just more than half (55 percent) of students who applied via regular decision deadlines (Figure 3.1). In fact, *U.S. News & World Report* identified 10 institutions with significantly higher acceptance rates for early admissions applicants than for those who apply regular decision in fall 2019, with the average difference in acceptance rates approaching 50 percentage points.<sup>6</sup> Similar trends hold at Ivy League institutions: students who apply early decision or early action to the Ivies are accepted at a rate at least twice as high as all other applicants.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, research indicates that applying early decision or early action to a selective institution is equivalent to an increase of 100 points on the SAT.<sup>8</sup>

The use of early admissions policies is especially prevalent at the most selective institutions.

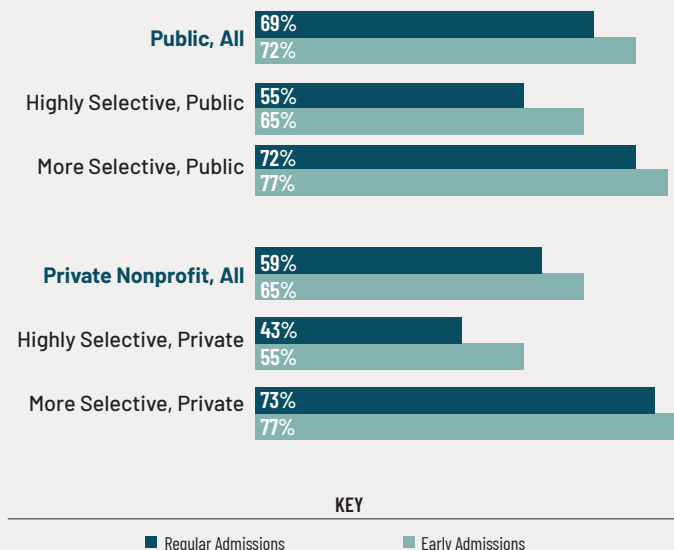
**Early decision policies offer advantages to students who are most likely to attend and benefit from college in the first place.**

Applying early decision requires students to commit to a first-choice college by agreeing to enroll if admitted and withdraw any other college applications (Table 3.1). Applying via an early decision deadline requires students to accept the college's offer of admission and financial aid award and submit a deposit prior to May 1.<sup>9</sup> In many cases, institutions will make exceptions to the binding early decision contract if a student cannot afford to attend based on his or her financial aid award, but these exceptions are not always clear to students and families and may require them to jump over hurdles to be released from the terms of the offer. For example, Duke University makes these exceptions but requires the student's family to discuss the matter with the financial support office and admissions office before releasing the student from the commitment.<sup>10</sup>

Early action policies are similar to early decision policies, except students who apply early action are not required to accept the college's offer of admission and withdraw their other applications (Table 3.1). While early action policies offer more flexibility, they can still be difficult for underserved students to use due to barriers in information or ability to complete an application before the earlier deadline. Further, understanding the rules and meaning of each type of deadline, as well as how they overlap from college to college, can be strikingly complex and confusing.

**FIGURE 3.1**

**Acceptance Rates by Application Type, Among Selective Four-Year Colleges**



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. Selectivity categories generated from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Somewhat and less selective colleges are not shown, because these schools are less likely to use early application cycles small sample sizes among these schools make these figures unreliable. See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

TABLE 3.1.

## How Do Admission Deadlines Compare?

**Early Admission:** An institutional policy that allows for an application deadline prior to the institution's regular admission deadline.

Type of Admission	Regular Admission	Rolling Admission	Early Action (EA)	Restrictive Early Action (REA)	Early Decision (ED)
Definition	Students apply and receive decisions by the institution's specified date. This is the most common type of admission deadline.	Students can apply at any time, and institutions review and render decisions at any time.	Students must apply by the specified early deadline to receive an early decision. Accepted students are <i>not</i> required to make a commitment to the institution.	Students must apply by the specified early deadline to receive an early decision but are restricted from applying EA, ED, or REA to any other institution.	Students apply early to one institution and commit to attending if accepted and offered adequate financial aid.
Commitment	Non-Binding	Non-Binding	Non-Binding	Non-Binding	Binding
Typical application deadline	December–February	No Deadline	November 1st or 15th	November 1st or 15th	November 1st or 15th
Typical receipt of admission decision	January–March	Ongoing	January or February	January or February	December
Restrictions	These policies are considered non-restrictive application deadlines and accepted students have until May 1 to consider their options and confirm enrollment.			Students may have restrictions when applying.	

Sources: College Board. (n.d.). Early decision and early action. Retrieved May 4, 2020, from College Board website: <https://professionals.collegeboard.org/guidance/applications/early>; Safier, R. (2019). Early action deadlines for every college with EA. PrepScholar. Retrieved from <https://blog.prepscholar.com/early-action-deadlines>.

## STRUCTURAL BARRIERS MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR LOW-INCOME APPLICANTS TO BENEFIT FROM EARLY ADMISSIONS

Researchers have found that wealthy students are more likely than students from lower-income backgrounds to apply through early admission programs.<sup>11</sup> Ways that wealthy students learn about early admissions programs include their college-educated family members, expensive SAT/ACT exam prep courses, high school counselors, or private college coaches hired to boost their chances of admission.<sup>12</sup>

**Early decision and early action policies benefit well-resourced students with the guidance to select a first-choice college early in their senior year of high school.**

Even if first-generation students or students from low-income backgrounds are aware of early admissions deadlines, they may not have the necessary resources to select a first-choice college early in their senior year of high school. For example,

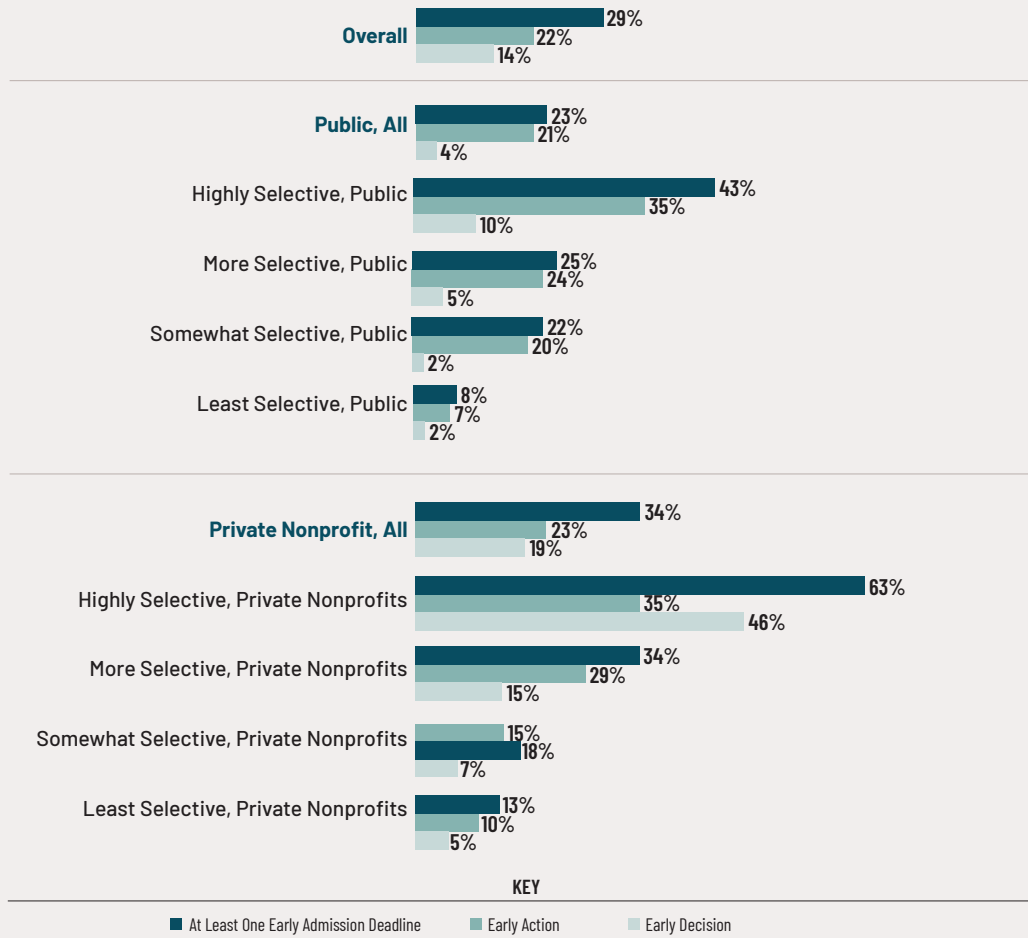
they may not have had the opportunity to visit one or multiple college campuses (due to inequities discussed in [Chapter 2](#)) or to find funds to cover standardized test fees or submit their application (further discussed in [Chapter 5](#)).<sup>13</sup> They may need more time to create and submit a competitive admissions packet, making it challenging to meet early deadlines that offer students the best shot at admission.<sup>14</sup>

**Early admission policies benefit well-resourced students who can commit to a college or university without comparing financial aid packages.**

Binding early decision policies are particularly problematic because they require admitted students to commit before knowing their out-of-pocket cost and without the benefit of comparing financial awards from other institutions. Even though many institutions make exceptions if students cannot afford to attend based on their financial aid award, these exceptions are not always clearly conveyed to potential applicants. Financial aid packages play a critical role in enrollment decisions for students from low-income backgrounds, so applying early decision is

**FIGURE 3.2**

**Institutions' Use of Early Decision and Early Action Programs, Among Selective Four-Year Colleges**



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. Selectivity categories generated from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). See [technical appendix](#) for detailed methodology.

often not a realistic option.<sup>15</sup> Research shows that students from affluent families apply early decision nearly twice as often as lower-income students, even if they have the same academic credentials.<sup>16</sup> For example, students whose families earned more than \$250,000 per year and who scored at the 90th percentile or above on the SAT or ACT tend to apply early decision 29 percent of the time.<sup>17</sup> In comparison, students with the same qualifications but whose families earned less than \$50,000 per year applied early decision just 16 percent of the time.<sup>18</sup>

**While seemingly innocuous, early decision and early action deadlines can jeopardize an institution's ability to build a diverse student body.**

While seemingly innocuous, early decision and early action deadlines can jeopardize an institution's ability to build a diverse student body by caring more about the point at which a student submits his or her application and ignoring the structural barriers that can prevent students from low-income backgrounds from applying early.<sup>19</sup> These policies can impact racial/ethnic diversity on campus as well.<sup>20</sup> Colleges and universities are more likely to experience enrollment declines of Latinx and Asian American students as they fill larger shares of their incoming classes via early decision deadlines.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the University of Michigan evaluated its data on early admission applicants by race and found that a larger percentage of students of color applied via regular admission than early.<sup>22</sup>

## INSTITUTIONAL BENEFITS OF EARLY ADMISSIONS POLICIES COME AT THE EXPENSE OF DIVERSITY

Nearly one-third of selective institutions offer applicants the option to apply either early decision or early action (Figure 3.1). Early admissions policies are more common at more selective institutions—schools with the lowest acceptance rates and the highest student test scores. For example, 43 percent of highly selective public institutions have an early action or early decision program in place, compared with just 8 percent of the least selective public institutions (Figure 3.1). The adoption of these policies has increased over the last decade, with the use of at least one of these deadlines rising by 7 percentage points since 2008.<sup>23</sup>

Institutions adopt these policies because they stand to benefit from enrolling high shares of their incoming classes early in the admissions cycle. And many do so. For example, the University of Pennsylvania admitted approximately 50 percent of its fall 2021 class through its first-choice Early Decision Program.<sup>24</sup> Early decision and early action policies are commonly used by admissions offices to manage their enrollment figures for the entering class.<sup>25</sup> Enrollment managers can assume that many applicants who apply via early admission deadlines—especially early decision—will enroll if admitted,<sup>a</sup> which reduces uncertainty about the final class size.<sup>26</sup> One study found that the percentage of students who enroll via early decision deadlines is significantly higher (87 percent) than the yield rate for students who apply through the regular admissions process (25 percent).<sup>27</sup> While the *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings no longer consider yield, favorable yield rates can increase an institution's prestige by cultivating the perception that it is a selective institution.<sup>28</sup>

There may also be financial incentives for an institution to offer early decision deadlines. Some assert that colleges are motivated to accept early applicants to stretch their limited financial aid budgets.<sup>29</sup> Essentially, since students who apply early decision are often from high-income backgrounds and are required to attend the institution if admitted, those accepted through this process may need less financial support. On the other hand, institutions may offer more generous financial aid packages early in the admissions cycle to persuade affluent students to apply early or to boost their yield.<sup>30</sup>

But research demonstrates that when institutions fill a large share of their incoming classes with early applicants, they are more than likely admitting an abundance of affluent, White students, hindering diversity on campus.<sup>31</sup> Institutions must understand the impact of their admissions policies and practices on students and campus diversity. Reviewing those practices with a focus on equity will require acknowledging that early admissions policies are rigging the system against students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and first-generation students.



- a. Research reveals that applying early action to an institution does not necessarily indicate that it is the student's top choice. For example, those applicants who apply via the less restrictive early action deadlines may have two or three top choices and wish to maximize their probability of being accepted at one or all of those institutions by applying early to all three. For more information, see Avery, Fairbanks, & Zeckhauser (2001).



## OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: ELIMINATE EARLY DECISION POLICIES

To realize equity in higher education, it is essential that institutional leaders have a clear understanding of how admissions policies like early decision and early action can—intentionally or unintentionally—stifle the development of a diverse incoming class. Institutional leaders can change their enrollment approaches to foster broader access, no matter students’ racial or socioeconomic backgrounds.

### TO FOSTER BROADER ACCESS, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SHOULD:

#### STOP OFFERING EARLY DECISION DEADLINES:

The research makes clear that early decision deadlines are at odds with equitably enrolling students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and students of color. Applying early decision can boost a student’s likelihood of being admitted to an institution<sup>32</sup>—particularly a selective institution—but it is difficult for underserved students to take advantage of this benefit.<sup>33</sup> Institutions that cannot eliminate all early admissions deadlines should, at a minimum, offer only non-binding early action deadlines. These enable students to compare financial aid packages from different institutions and therefore may be accessible to a more diverse group of potential applicants.

#### USE INSTITUTIONAL DATA TO BETTER UNDERSTAND HOW EARLY ADMISSION DEADLINES IMPACT EQUITY:

Institutions can and should use their data—disaggregated by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and first-generation status—to examine how application deadlines impact the diversity of their incoming classes. They should use these data to make informed decisions about early admissions policies. For example, the University of Michigan analyzed the demographics of early and regular applicants to make changes to the ratio of those it admitted from each admissions pool to ensure its early admissions policies were not unintentionally limiting access for underserved students, especially students of color.<sup>34</sup>



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