



ELIMINATING EARLY DECISION DEADLINES

Many colleges and universities offer applicants multiple application deadlines. 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. Binding early decision deadlines, which require students to commit to attend an institution if admitted, offer advantages to students who are most likely to attend and benefit from college in the first place.¹

Applying early to a selective institution is equivalent to an increase of 100 points on the SAT.²

Students who apply via binding early decision deadlines are more likely to be admitted, especially at the most selective institutions.³ And some institutions are found to have lower admissions standards when reviewing 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.⁴

At some institutions, early decision admits can comprise more than half of incoming classes.⁵ While colleges may fill their classes via early decision deadlines to predict or increase yield (the share of accepted applicants who enroll), they are doing so at the expense of campus diversity. For example, Latinx and Asian American student enrollment declines at private institutions as they fill greater shares of their incoming classes via early decision and early action deadlines.⁶

Yet nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of private colleges and 43 percent of public universities with highly selective admissions offer early decision or early action deadlines.⁷ **By using early decision deadlines, these institutions boost the likelihood of admission for:**

Students with high test scores with a family income more than \$250,000 apply early decision 29 percent of the time, whereas similarly qualified students with a family income less than \$50,000 apply early just 16 percent of the time.⁸



STUDENTS WITH FINANCIAL RESOURCES TO COMMIT TO A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY, REGARDLESS OF FINANCIAL AID

Binding early decision policies require admitted students to commit to attend before knowing their out-of-pocket cost and without the benefit of comparing financial awards across institutions. While most institutions make exceptions to their early decision contract if students cannot afford to attend based on their financial aid award, understanding the rules and meaning of each type of deadline can be strikingly complex and confusing. Financial aid packages play a critical role in low-income students' enrollment decisions, so applying early decision is often not a realistic option.⁹



STUDENTS WITH THE SUPPORT NECESSARY TO SELECT A FIRST-CHOICE COLLEGE EARLY IN THEIR SENIOR YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL

Students learn about early decision deadlines in a number of ways, including through family members with college experience, expensive test-prep courses, private college coaches, or well-resourced high schools with adequate school counseling.¹⁰ Many of these information sources are available only to privileged students. Even when historically underserved students are made aware of early admissions deadlines, they may need the full admissions window to, for example, find the funds to cover standardized test or application fees.¹¹

OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: ELIMINATING EARLY DECISION DEADLINES

Creating a more equitable and just higher education system starts with implementing equitable admissions practices.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS SHOULD:

STOP OFFERING EARLY DECISION APPLICATION DEADLINES:

Binding early decision deadlines perpetuate privilege. Ending the use of these deadlines would provide students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation students a more equitable shot at admittance to selective institutions.

IF INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS CONTINUE TO USE EARLY DECISION, THEY SHOULD:

USE INSTITUTIONAL DATA TO BETTER UNDERSTAND HOW THEY IMPACT EQUITY ON CAMPUS:

Institutions can and should use their own data to examine who applies and is admitted via early admissions deadlines, uncovering the inequities that these practices can perpetuate. Enrollment managers should balance how many applicants are admitted from the early decision, early action, and regular applicant pools and ensure diversity across all three groups.

WHAT ABOUT EARLY ACTION?

Early action policies offer students the opportunity to apply and receive their admissions decision from the institution early. Unlike early decision policies, early action offers more flexibility and is non-binding, meaning accepted students are not required to make a commitment to attend the institution.¹² About one in five (21 percent) of selective public colleges offer early action.¹³

For full citations, please visit: www.ihep.org/mostimportantdoor/sources

1. Avery, Fairbanks, & Zeckhauser, 2003.
2. Avery, Fairbanks, & Zeckhauser, 2003.
3. Avery, Fairbanks, & Zeckhauser, 2001.
4. Avery, Fairbanks, & Zeckhauser, 2001.
5. Anderson, 2016.
6. Antecol & Kiholm Smith, 2012.
7. IHEP analysis of Databases Compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative.
8. Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016.
9. Long, 2008.
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11. Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016.
12. College Board, n.d.
13. IHEP analysis of Databases Compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative.

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