

Is Applying Early for You?

These days many students apply early to college. But before you make that decision, it's important to understand your options. Below I outlined the different "early" admission policies, with special attention paid to the types of students who might consider each option. Applying early to college, if done right, may increase your chances for admission, especially to more selective colleges. But before making that decision, educate yourself about your options and develop an admission strategy that suits your individual circumstances.

What are My Options?

Early Decision: Under this option, you submit your application by Nov. 1 or Nov. 15, depending on the college. When you apply Early Decision, the college promises to notify you of their decision (acceptance, rejection, or deferment) before the regular applicants, typically by Dec. 15. When you apply Early Decision, *you sign a binding agreement that you will attend the college, if admitted, and you will withdraw all other applications you have sent.* Students are typically notified by Dec. 15.

Early Decision II: This option is similar to Early Decision, in that *you must attend if admitted.* The deadline for ED II, however, is typically Jan. 1. Often this option is used by students who are not admitted early decision in the first round of applications due in November or who missed the first deadline. *If admitted, students will need to withdraw all applications previously submitted.* Students are typically notified by Feb. 15.

Early Action: Under this option, you submit your application by Nov. 1 or Nov. 15, depending on the college. When you apply Early Action, the college promises to notify you of their decision (acceptance, rejection, or deferment) before the regular applicants, typically by Dec. 15. When applying Early Action, *you do not promise to attend and you do not need to withdraw applications from other colleges.* You can also apply to more than one college early action, as long as the other colleges that you apply to do not have an Early Decision or Single-Choice Early Action policy.

Single-Choice Early Action (SCEA): Very few colleges offer this option, and those that do, are typically highly selective, such as Yale, Stanford, and Georgetown. Under this option, *you agree to file only one Early Action application, but you may apply to as many colleges as you desire under regular admission.* When you apply SCEA, the college promises to notify you of their decision (acceptance, rejection, or deferment) before regular applicants (typically by Dec. 15), and *you are not obligated to attend and do not need to withdraw other applications if accepted.*

Honors and Scholarships: Some colleges ask students interested in applying to Honors Programs or competing for certain scholarships to apply by an earlier deadline than regular applicants. *Students who apply early under these circumstances are not necessarily notified any earlier of admission than regular applicants.* Admission under these programs are typically non-binding.

Which Option, if Any, is Right for Me?

Early Decision is a great choice if you can say “Yes” to the following questions:

- Have I carefully researched my college options, including campus visits?
- At the end of my research, does only one school stand out as my first choice?
- Do I meet or exceed the academic profile of the college to which I am applying?
- Do my parents feel I do *not* need to apply for financial aid?
- Have I taken all required tests by October 1st?
- Can I complete a rough draft of the application by mid-September?

Early Decision II is a great choice if you can say “Yes” to the following questions:

- Have I carefully researched my college options, including campus visits?
- At the end of my research, does only one school stand out as my first choice?
- Do I meet or exceed the academic profile of the college to which I am applying?
- Do my parents feel I do *not* need to apply for financial aid?
- Have I taken all required tests by December 1st?

Early Action and Single-Choice Early Action is a great choice if you can say “Yes” to the following questions:

- Am I unwilling to commit to a college right now, preferring to keep my options open?
- Do I meet or exceed the academic profile of the college to which I am applying?
- Do my parents feel that it would be desirable to apply for financial aid?
- Have I taken all required tests by October 1st?
- Can I complete a rough draft of the application by mid-September?

But Wait, What About...

Will applying early greatly increase my chances for admission?

It really depends on the college and your candidacy. Applying early will not make up for other weaknesses in the application, but if you feel you fit the academic profile for the institution applying early could help your chances for admission.

With that said, applying Early Decision probably increases your chances more than Early Action. Because ED is a binding agreement, colleges are more likely to promise admission to qualified students, knowing that the student will be desirable to many other

colleges. Applying Early Action or Early Decision may also help if the student is deferred to Regular Admission. Admission officers see early applications as a way for students to say, “I really like your school, and I think I would fit in well there”.

For the most highly selective institutions, applying Early Action or Early Decision may be the best strategy. Any edge in admissions can greatly help applicants at these highly competitive institutions.

What if I apply Early Decision and then change my mind? Can I get out of my agreement with the college?

When you apply Early Decision, you are basically signing a contract with the college that you will attend and withdraw applications to other colleges upon receiving admission. Most colleges look poorly on applicants that do not hold up their end of the contract and can challenge your refusal to attend.

It can also get complicated if you change your mind because technically you promised to withdraw applications to other colleges, and those other colleges are supposed to honor your Early Decision contract. In other words, other colleges are asked to not admit students that did not fulfill the ED contract.

Does this mean that no one has ever gotten out of an ED contract? No. But it is not a pleasant experience and could leave you without a college to attend. *So your best bet is to only apply ED if you know you would attend no matter what.*

Is there a downside to applying early?

As long as you carefully research your options, then applying early can be a great choice. Over the years I have noticed, however, that the early application is often the first one, and sometimes most important one, submitted. Students must start early on these applications. Do not underestimate the time and energy it will take to complete the first application. Start over the summer and plan to submit the application at least two weeks prior to the deadline, giving you a cushion if you need to make any last minute changes.