

The Case for Universities and Colleges to Remove Early Decision Admission Practices

By Delgar Woodruff

According to the College Board, approximately 450, mainly selective and highly selective, institutions offer early decision or early action admission policies. Of the two policies, early decision is the most restrictive, as it is a binding commitment to the college, if admitted. Early decision is utilized at prestigious institutions like Cornell University, Brown University, and University of Pennsylvania and these institutions continue to see students apply through this process. Wealthy white students continue to benefit from the privileges afforded in society but in addition find a leg up in the benefits of the early decision process. Colleges and universities should eliminate early decision practices to reduce the advantages privileged students receive through the process.

There are advantages and benefits of early decision practices for students and institutions. A 2004 research found that students who apply early decision are 25% more likely to be admitted into the institution and applicants who apply early decision or early action have an advantage equivalent to 100-point increase in a student's SAT score. Students also receive their admission decision sooner and could help reduce some of the anxiety surrounding the admission process. The benefits are a great opportunity for students, if all students benefited equally.

The counterargument to early decision practices stems from the already existing inequities in the United States. The advantages of early decision practices mainly benefit white and wealthy students as evidenced by early applicant pools consisting of higher proportions of white and higher income students. Early decision applicants are locked into attending the institution before full financial aid considerations are presented. The wealth disparity in the United States affects educational opportunities and the ability for some families to take financial risks to benefit from early decision practices. Students from high socioeconomic status have fewer financial risks when applying early decision and thus benefit from greater chance of admission into these prestigious schools. Income inequality in school districts also contribute to less resources for students in low income schools and reinforces the existing inequities for students of color and low socioeconomic status. A 2011 study found that students who attend well-resourced high schools had a higher probability of enrolling through early admissions. Students who have limited knowledge of the admission application process and do not attend high schools with resources to help and guide them in the process miss the early decision opportunity.

Students from low socioeconomic status are unfairly punished in the early decision process because many need to shop around for the best financial aid package available to them. Students of color are also disadvantaged as wealth in the United States continues to be disproportionately tied to race. In 2016 white households had an average wealth of \$171,100 compared to Black and Latinx household average wealth of \$17,600 and \$20,700, respectively. In many cases, students of color and low socioeconomic status cannot afford to apply early decision due to price and

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available resources and could potentially be evaluated based on higher standards than white wealthy peers who applied early decision.

Early decision admission practices allow for institutions to attract and enroll highly competitive students as well as effectively managing enrollment predictions for the season. As a tool for enrollment management, early decision practices are beneficial for institutions but if we know that the practice disadvantages students of color and low socioeconomic status, can we continue this practice? Most institutions, even highly selective ones, promote and espouse missions of access and opportunity for qualified students to attend their institution. The question that institutions should ask is do the benefits of early decision practices outweigh their mission to attract all highly competitive students, not just wealthy white students? My answer to this question is no.

The elimination of early decision by higher education institutions will not provide an even playing field for minoritized students who apply to selective and highly selective institutions. The inequalities that exist in the United States based on race and income will continue to affect access and opportunity until systemic change can be made. The action to eliminate early decision in admissions can put a stop to providing an unfair advantage to students who already have all the advantages of our inequitable society. By removing early decision admissions, institutions can begin to work on removing additional barriers that hinder qualified students from gaining admission.

COVID-19 Update

The binding commitment of early decision could add unnecessary stress to families during this global pandemic as families are experiencing financial strain as well as institution's plans for online or hybrid learning are changing the agreement entered through the early decision process. We do not know how this pandemic will affect the financial wellbeing of families with students applying for the next admission cycle. We can guess that students who are disadvantaged in the early decision process highlighted in this piece will probably be affected by this pandemic disproportionately. Institutions across the country are being challenged to adapt their traditional residential models and implement new plans to keep students, faculty, staff, and the larger campus community safe and healthy. These considerations should also include re-evaluating and eliminating early decision practices for the next admission cycle to better support students and families in our new environment.