

Early Admission: Elitist or Not?

| BY DR. RALPH G. PERRINO AND DR. FRED SIEGMUND |

During the fall of 2006, Harvard University announced plans to end its early admission policy. Harvard's Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid, William R. Fitzsimmons, stated, "Early applications tended to be disproportionately white and affluent, and there was a growing perception that early admissions was becoming an exclusive club, to which somehow only a few were invited. That worked against the whole idea of access." Given Harvard's visibility and reputation, other colleges may reevaluate their own early admissions programs.

Early admissions programs are not all the same. Some variations confuse students and parents alike. Generally, students seeking early admission apply in November and receive an answer within a month. In some of these programs, called Early Decision, applicants submit only one application to one school. Acceptance by the college is binding, meaning applicants promise to attend that school if accepted. Schools expect admitted students to honor their pledge. Colleges share their Early Decision lists and if a student does not honor an Early Decision, it is unlikely competitive schools will accept him.

Pros and Cons of Early Admission

Some students and parents think early admissions applicants have a better chance of getting into some of the most selective colleges. This notion is controversial. Part of the perception about Early Decision evolves from the small number of schools using Early Decision. Approximately 400 colleges offering 4-year degrees, roughly 3%, have Early Decision programs. These schools, concentrated in the Ivy League, are selective, expensive private colleges. Since Early Decision often applies to a group of schools that tend to be ranked among the "best" schools by U.S. News and World Report, the connection between Early Decision and elite schools may be enough for many people to see it as an advantage.

Christopher Avery and several others have examined the early decision process in their book *The Early Admissions Game, Joining the Elite*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003) Colleges that use Early Decision often argue that it is not an admission advantage. However, Avery's research indicates that applying for Early Decision increases a student's chances of being accepted as much as if his or her SAT scores were increased by 100 points. For some students, that doubles or even triples the chance of admission. Even vocal proponents of the fairness of Early Decision, like Princeton University, admit two to three times as many applicants under early admission as opposed to regular admissions.

Colleges like Early Decision programs because they are an expedient way to compete for the most talented students. Early Decisions also eliminate some of the guesswork for college admissions directors. Due to the fact that colleges lose half or more of their admitted students to other schools, Early Decisions help smooth out the budget process.

In an interview with writer James Fallows and Pomona College Admissions Director Bruce Poch, Mr. Poch reported that Early Decision becomes a measure of a student's commitment. "It's worth something to the institution to enroll kids who view the college as their first choice." He added, "Fewer people are whining about transferring from Day One. They turn out to be a lot of the campus leaders."

College admissions officers are less likely to discuss the annual U.S. News and World Report rankings of the nation's best colleges, but there is suggestion that Early Decision can improve a school's statistics. While the US News rankings procedures have changed over the years, the statistical measures associated with Early Decision that matter are a college's selectivity and its yield.

Selectivity measures how difficult it is to get into a school. A school that accepts one applicant out of four is more selective than one that accepts two out of three. A college's

yield is the proportion of students offered admission who actually attend. In practice, yield measures "takeaways." If one school gets a student who was admitted to several other universities, it scores a takeaway from each of the other schools. The higher the yield and the larger the number of takeaways, the more desirable the school is thought to be. Under this process, Early Decision provides a way to improve a college's selectivity and yield simultaneously, thereby elevating the school's national ranking.

Citing another disadvantage, The Chronicle of Higher Education states: "A common criticism of Early Decision programs is that they hurt students from low-income families, who often decide to forgo early applications so they can compare financial-aid offers from multiple institutions during the regular admissions process." In fact, Early Decision programs do limit choices for any family in need of financial aid. This perpetuates the association of Early Decision and selective, expensive schools.

A Final Thought

Despite Harvard's decision to drop their program, Early Decision programs are probably not going to disappear anytime soon. Possible reforms would assure more consistent aid packages and limit the number of students accepted. It would also help if schools would remember their mission is to educate students, promote the joy of learning, and not emphasize competition in grades, courses and resume building which creates stress rather than education. ❖

Dr. Perrino is Owner and Director of Northern Virginia Tutoring Service, LLC and an Associate Professor of Sociology at Northern Virginia Community College. Dr. Siegmund, a former Professor of Economics, works closely with Dr. Perrino in developing programs and policy at NVTS. They can be reached at 703-534-5779, via email at DrPerrino@nvtutoring.com or at nvtutoring.com.