

Early Action and Early Decision Admissions

It's hard to think of any aspect of college admissions that is more confusing than that of early admissions policies. Early admissions programs have become increasingly common, with approximately two out of three of the country's top universities and colleges offering some kind of early admissions program. However, the benefits and obligations involved in early admissions vary from one school to another. Adding to the confusion is the fact that different schools use similar language to mean completely different things. It is more important than ever for college applicants to make sure that they understand early admissions and early decisions options, in order to make informed decisions about whether or not it is in their interest to use them.

Early Decision vs. Early Action

Early admissions programs can be divided into two categories: **early decision (ED)** and **early action (EA)**. **Single choice early action (SCEA)** programs are a particular kind of early action program.

ED and EA programs both involve an earlier application deadline than the normal admissions process does, and (as their names imply) earlier notification of admissions decisions. Accepted applicants enjoy several benefits. A high school student who already knows that she has been accepted to her top choice college can take chances she might not otherwise. She might take a challenging college-level course that she would pass on if she were worried that her spring grades might affect her college applications. Another advantage, of course, is that she and her family have more time to plan for her move to college, and to arrange financial aid and housing.

However, the most attractive aspect of early admissions programs is that colleges and universities tend to admit a significantly higher percentage of the early applicant pool than they do of the normal applicant pool – in other words, there is the possibility that your chances of being accepted as an early admissions candidate are better than they would be as a regular applicant. The most selective colleges currently admit 25% to 50% of their total students from the early admissions pool. In recent years, as many as 40% of freshmen at Ivy League schools have been early admissions applicants.

There is, of course, a catch to all this: the issue of binding decisions.

Early Decision (Binding)

Early decision (ED) programs are usually binding. 'Binding' means that the applicant promises from the start that they will attend the school if their application is accepted. It is not an obligation to be taken lightly, since schools honor one another's binding decisions. If you renege on an early decision obligation to one school, it is unlikely that another competitive school will accept you. Students can seek release from an early decision obligation on the grounds of financial hardship, if the financial aid package they are offered is genuinely inadequate; however, the burden of proof in these cases is on the

student. (By the way, an important drawback to early decision admissions is that they leave applicants with no leverage to negotiate a better financial aid package – the school knows you can't go anywhere else.)

Early decision applicants are expected to submit only one early decision application to one school. They can submit applications to other schools under normal application procedures, but agree that they will withdraw all those applications if they are accepted to the early decision school.

Early Action (Non Binding)

Early admissions programs which do not ask applicants to commit to attending if they are accepted are generally known as Early action (EA) programs. In our view, these are a better deal for most applicants. They give students the benefits of early notification without the obligations of early decision. Even if accepted, students are free to apply to other schools and to compare financial aid offers. **Single choice early action (SCEA)** programs specifically require students not to make EA applications to other schools, although they are free to apply elsewhere under the regular admissions round. In recent years, several of the country's most selective universities (including [Yale](#) and [Stanford](#)) have adopted non-binding early admissions programs.

Our Recommendations

Early admissions programs can be very advantageous to college applicants, depending on their profile and situation. A high school student who is sure of what school they want to go to, and whose junior year grades, extracurricular activities, etc., are strong enough to secure admission, can benefit from early admissions. However, we do **not** encourage clients with any questions at all about their college preferences to seek a binding **early decision** from any school, regardless of how much better the statistical chances of acceptance may be under an early decision program. Keep in mind that you're not just being asked to indicate a school preference; you're being asked to forego all other options and to commit yourself to spending four years (and tens of thousands of dollars) at a particular institution. That's a big decision for anyone to make. It should only be undertaken with the best possible information and advice, and without undue deadline pressure.