

Early Decision Vs. Early Action

What's the difference? And when should you consider applying early to a favored school?

About 2/3 of universities offer some sort of early admission process. For some students, it's worth looking into...

For one, you'll find out quickly if you've been accepted. Find out soon enough, and you might not have to deal with applying to numerous schools later.

Also, many colleges accept a higher percentage of early candidates. Colleges recognize these students are motivated to attend – it's a clear declaration that your early admission school is your top choice. Early applicants also tend to be very strong students – they usually have good reason to believe they can get in.

But it's not for everyone.

Some schools require that you agree to attend, if you're accepted (and the financial package is a fit). If you aren't 100% positive about your choice of school, you shouldn't apply early – certainly not for early decision.

This might be a good time to clarify some of the rules that colleges use for the early admission process. Each school is different – and you should investigate any program before applying – but there are two broad categories that early applications fall under.

Early Decision

For early decision schools, you aren't allowed to apply to any other programs early. If admitted, you're required to attend. Although you're allowed to apply regular decision to other schools – often the results of your early decision won't be known before regular application deadlines – if you're accepted, you have to withdraw all other applications.

Of course, there are benefits. Your spring semester will be stress-free... you'll have plenty of time to get to know your new school... and you may even be given first dibs for some introductory programs.

On the other hand, though, your negotiating ability for financial aid basically disappears. No matter what the school provides in aid, you're still required to attend.

Some schools these days take the lion's share of their incoming class from early decision candidates as well – so, if you have a clear number one school, early decision may give you a leg up on other candidates. But if you aren't completely positive about your school, then early decision is most likely not for you.

Early Action

With early application schools, you're allowed to apply early elsewhere – and acceptance is non-binding.

You'd receive many of the benefits of early decision, but with the added flexibility of exploring other options as you see fit. Many students don't seriously pursue other colleges after getting into an early action school – but you're free to.

These days, there are a growing number of single-entry early action programs as well. These are non-binding, just as with other early action schools – but you aren't allowed to apply early elsewhere.

For students that know where they want to go, there's every reason to apply early, and no drawbacks. Even the workload is better – your applications are more spaced out.

If you like a school but aren't 100% sold, it still makes sense to apply early... if it's an early action school. But if it's early decision, make sure you understand all the pros and cons before committing yourself.