

Should You Apply Early Action? by Rob Franek of *The Princeton Review*

Many colleges allow applicants to submit their materials for an early deadline (some time in the fall) that falls before the regular deadline (usually sometime in January or February). Here's what you need to know.

Advantages of applying early

- First, applying early lets your favorite school (or schools) know that you are serious about attending. Schools track how many applicants accept their offers of admission and release those numbers to the public. A school looks good when a high percentage of accepted applicants choose to attend. So if they think you're likely to accept their offer of admission, it may give your application a leg up.
- Second, if you are accepted to your dream school, you won't have to bother with the time and expense of applying elsewhere. You can put your focus back on right now instead of one year from now.

Some students and high school counselors believe that applying early decision gives a student better odds of acceptance, but the truth is early acceptance rates and admissions standards vary from school to school. You can find early decision application numbers and acceptance rates for many schools in our *Best Colleges* book, and don't be afraid to ask an admissions counselor at your dream school directly about their early admission practices.

There is a (potential) disadvantage to applying early, however. You may not have the opportunity to compare financial aid packages offered by other schools.

Early Action vs Early Decision

Most schools allow you to apply early in one of two ways: early decision or early action.

Early decision

Early decision is binding. This means if you are accepted through early decision, you are committed to attending that school, and will withdraw any applications you may have submitted for the regular deadlines at other schools. You may not apply to more than one college under early decision. If you are not accepted, you will either be rejected or deferred. Rejected applicants may not apply again that year. Deferred applicants will be reconsidered during the regular admission period, and are free to apply to other schools.

Early decision deadlines are often in November, and students are typically notified of the decision in December.

Early action

Early action is non-binding. This means you are not bound to attend if you are accepted. You may also apply early action to multiple colleges. Early action deadlines usually fall at the same time as early decision.

The obvious advantage of early action over early decision is the opportunity it gives you to apply to, and ultimately compare financial aid packages from several schools. If you are accepted early decision, you risk missing the admission deadlines of other schools while you wait for your award package to arrive. If that award is lackluster, your options are fewer.

Our Advice

If you're sure that you've found your best-fit school, you know it's one you want to attend, you're a strong candidate for admission, and you know that you can afford the tuition, go ahead and apply early decision.

That is a whole lot of research and comparison to have done by fall of your senior year, though, and if you're uncertain about any of those factors, you're not alone! Keep your options open by applying early action, or by the regular deadline.

Check out our [online college profiles](#) to see the early action and early decisions deadlines for the schools on your list.

Priority Deadlines

Some schools offer a priority deadline. This works very similarly to early action, and really, you can think about it in the same way. **You apply by a certain date – earlier than the regular deadline – and find out early.** Often there's a benefit to applying by priority deadline, usually in the form of merit scholarship consideration. Check with each university to understand the implications of filing by the priority deadline or Early Action.

- See more at: <http://www.prepmatters.com/blog/does-early-bird-catch-worm-college-admissions-only-sometimes#Priority>

If applying Early Decision (ED)...

Accepted: You're in, and you're obligated to attend because you made that commitment when you opted to apply early decision.

Rejected: You will not be offered a spot in the incoming freshman class, and your application is not eligible for reconsideration. Time to focus on the other schools on your college list.

Deferred: The school just isn't ready to make a decision about you based on your current application, so they'll move it to the regular decision application pool to consider again later. **Deferral does not mean rejection – you've still got a shot!** If you are deferred, you are no longer committed to attending that school based on your early decision agreement; in other words, if you are accepted here, you can choose to go there – or choose to go somewhere else.

It may seem obvious, but it's worth repeating: you can apply early decision **to only one college** because you will have made a commitment to go that school if you're accepted. **It's a binding agreement signed by you, your parents, and your school counselor.** You're free to apply to other colleges with non-binding options, but if your early decision school accepts you, you must withdraw those other applications, sometimes even before knowing the decision at those other schools.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of ED is a somewhat higher chance of admission. Because schools know that a) they're your first choice and b) that they're guaranteed to get you if you apply early decision, the admission rate often leans a little more in your favor. Notice that I said 'often' and 'a little' because it's not always the case, and some colleges and universities outright refute that point.

A few schools post their early decision acceptance numbers separately from regular decision numbers and the difference in acceptance rates, for example, might be a few percentage points, but sometimes much more. An early decision application isn't an automatic ticket to admission but does provide an additional incentive for the school to approve your application. For some, that edge makes the difference.

If there's a downside to applying early decision, it's that you have to commit before knowing what need-based financial aid package you may be offered. You're allowed to break your commitment to enroll if the financial aid package doesn't meet your demonstrated need, but that's calculated by the college and is based on your FAFSA, not based on what you or your parents say you can afford or hope to get. Merit-based aid (scholarships given to you for good grades and scores) is another story.

Single-Choice Early Action (SCEA)

Tulane, Princeton and Yale are examples of schools that offer Single-Choice Early Action. **It means that you are applying early only to a single school – whether it's early action or early decision.** So if you apply to Tulane under single-choice early action, you cannot apply early decision or early action anywhere else. It's different terminology but is the same way of showing a school you mean business. There are some extra rules and some exceptions to this option, and those vary school by school. For example, often you are allowed to apply to another school's early (non-binding) deadline if it's a public institution in your home state. Always check with the specific school to be sure of its application deadline policies.

Both restrictive early action and single-choice early action are still early action, so they are also non-binding. You'll have until May 1, the National College Decision Day, to decide whether you want to enroll there.

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