

Creating an Admissions Strategy: The Importance of Timing College Applications

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Strong grades, test scores and quality essays are essential for impressing college admissions officers, but experts say the timing of application submissions can also play a role in whether an acceptance letter comes in the mail.

The most recent data from the [National Association for College Admission Counseling](#) shows that between 2010 and 2011, the percentage of students applying to at least three colleges rose to 79% from 77%, and the percentage applying to at least seven colleges rose to 29% from 25%. By comparison, only 67% of students applied to three or more colleges in 2000, while 12% applied to seven or more.

With a larger competitive applicant pool, particularly at more selective colleges, students can explore different application options such as early decision, early action, rolling admissions and regular decision to create an effective strategy and determine financial aid opportunities.

“If they do their research well, they should have 10 to 15 first choice schools and try to maximize their chances of getting into the majority of those schools,” says Katherine Cohen, CEO and founder of educational consulting company [IvyWise](#). “They have to be honest about their profile, understand the demographic they’re applying from and then move on that way.”

Students should ensure all application materials are ready to go with a calendar system to time out submissions and stay on top of deadlines, recommends Sally Rubenstone, senior advisor at [College Confidential](#).

“Deadlines vary tremendously, not just from college to college but even within the same institution,” she says. “In addition to early action and early decision dates which differ from the school’s primary deadline, students may also encounter ‘priority deadlines,’ scholarship deadlines and deadlines for specific academic programs.”

To potentially boost admissions odds and aid availability, here’s what experts say students should consider when mapping out college application options.

Early Decision

Qualified students are twice as likely to be admitted by applying early decision versus regular decision, according to Cohen.

“[Only apply] if you know it’s your first choice school and you’ve done the research, you’ve been to visit and you know everything about what you want to do there and you’re not looking to compare financial aid packages,” she says.

The deadline for early-decision applications tends to be in early November, with decisions coming mid-December. If students are accepted, their commitment to the school is binding.

However, early decision applicants seeking aid can avoid the binding commitment if the school's award is inadequate, says Rubenstone.

“High-need students may even stand a better chance of being accepted in the early decision round at ‘need conscious’ colleges that consider financial aid requirements when determining admission outcomes, because that’s when college offers are often flushest,” she says.

Early Action

While an early action application doesn’t carry the same admissions-odds boost early decision offers, students generally have a higher chance of being accepted in the long run with the opportunity to compare merit aid and scholarship offers in the spring, says Rubenstone.

“Even though a borderline early action candidate may get bad news in December, the application does at least send a message that suggests, ‘I care enough about this college to have gotten my act together in time to meet your early deadline,’ and this may reflect well on the student when he or she is re-evaluated in the spring,” she says.

While students will need to submit completed applications by early November or December, early action allows students to present their case for admissions without a binding commitment.

“Let’s say you decide I’m not really sure what my first choice is right now and I need some more time but I still want to get a bunch of applications out early, you can send multiple early action applications at the same time--that’s a great strategy to use,” says Cohen.

Rolling admissions

Some colleges allow students to apply on a rolling admissions basis where the application process typically opens early fall and may continue through summer or as long as spaces are available, and applicants are usually notified of their acceptance or rejection within a few weeks of applying.

Submitting the application as early as possible can increase a student's chances of acceptance and receiving a better financial aid package, says Mio Perez, associate director of College Quest and Onward at [Harlem Education Activities Fund \(HEAF\)](#).

"We definitely tell students to apply early on because it just makes them a better candidate, there's just less competition than if they wait until the very end," she says. "They're filling up their seats and once their seats are filled, they won't accept any more students."

Regular Decision

While students have until early January or February with some schools to prepare their regular decision applications, submitting applications later can lower their financial aid options, particularly at need-based colleges, warns Cohen.

"If you're waitlisted at a school during regular decision and you need financial aid, that's a very tough position to be in because that is when their financial aid is going to run out and they will generally start looking at kids at that point who can pay," she says.

Students receiving multiple acceptance letters for regular decision can lay out all of their financial aid offers to decide what school they want to attend within their budget.

"Students [can] take financial aid offer A and go to B where they've also been admitted to and say, 'School A gave me this—can you match it?'" says Cohen. "Oftentimes if the school wants you, and they want you because they've admitted you, then they will try to do whatever they can to match the package."