

College application deadlines: From Early Decision to Rolling Admissions Getting your application in early can help at some colleges

By Bill Morrison
myFootpath College Prep Columnist

"Do I have to apply early?"

This is a common question coming from students who are in the midst of the college application process. The answer to the question is: it depends. In some cases, applying early may give a student a competitive advantage at admission time. In other cases, it simply doesn't matter.

When we talk about "early" applications to colleges and universities, we mean one of two things. First, there is the idea of simply applying early in the process, getting your applications in by November. Second, there is the Early Action/Early Decision programs, which is an entirely different concept. We should address these two concepts separately.

Rolling... Rolling... Rolling

Applying early to schools with Rolling Admissions programs definitely gives you an advantage. Rolling Admissions is a process whereby schools review applications as they arrive, admitting or denying students as they see fit. Students who apply to Rolling Admissions institutions usually hear back within 4-6 weeks, sometimes even sooner. As the process goes on, the number of students admitted increases, thus, the number of available spaces decreases. As the number of spaces available in the new freshmen class becomes fewer, the admissions standards become more rigorous. Most Rolling Admissions schools will set a review date at which time they will check to see how many students have been admitted, how many spaces are left, and what the new requirements for automatic admissions will be. In these cases, common sense tells us that the earlier you apply, the better chance you have for admission.

Most of the large state schools operate on a Rolling Admission basis. Some schools will have priority filing dates for their in-state students; others will limit when out-of-state students can apply. The University of Illinois, for example, has an Illinois student priority deadline of November 15, meaning that they will look at students from Illinois only prior to this date. That's a good reason for Illinois students to get their application in early. On the other hand, the University of California system will only accept applications from out-of-state students during the month of November.

What makes a "regular" deadline regular?

For schools that do not use Rolling Admissions and have a deadline for application submission, it is not necessary to submit the application any earlier than the published deadline date. The application is not reviewed until the date arrives so submitting the application any earlier is not necessary. Schools that use deadlines and review applications in this manner generally have admission decisions in the mail by the end of March. This gives you a one-month window to make a decision about whether to enroll, as May 1 is the National Candidate Reply Date for all colleges and universities. In other words, no school can force you to accept their offer of admission before May 1, no matter if the notification came in October or April.

You need to be aware of the various deadlines and admission policies for the schools you are applying to. Knowledge is power and knowing the rules to the game may help you get into the college of your choice.

Early Action = early answer

The other, more commonly thought of, meaning behind applying "early" is Early Action/Early Decision. Early Action is a process by which applying early simply gets you an early answer. You agree to get the application in by a certain date and the college or university agrees to give you a decision by a certain date. This program is non-binding, meaning you do not have to attend if accepted.

For colleges, Early Action simply allows the school to spread out the applications it receives over a longer period of time. In other words, they can avoid getting a flood of applications in January. With few notable exceptions (such as Georgetown, Harvard, and Yale), you are allowed to apply to other schools under an Early Decision program. The advantage to applying Early Action is simply that you get to find out whether you are accepted sooner rather than later.

Early Decision = early answer + binding decision

The other type of early program, Early Decision, is completely different. Early Decision is binding. That means that if you apply and are accepted under Early Decision, you **MUST** attend that institution. Consequently, you may apply to only one school Early Decision. Students should apply to a school under an Early Decision program only if that school is their clear-cut, #1 choice. You should not, I repeat, you should not, apply to a school Early Decision to give yourself a competitive advantage in admissions, if that school is not your first choice. Every now and again, a student will apply Early Decision thinking that it will help them gain admission and figuring they won't be admitted to their first choice school. Lo and behold, they **ARE** admitted to their first choice, but cannot attend because they applied Early Decision to another institution.

If the school that is your first choice does have an Early Decision program, then applying Early Decision can be an advantage to you in the admissions process, particularly if you are a borderline applicant for admission. Many schools place a premium on these applicants because they know that they will attend if admitted.

When you investigate schools with Early Decision programs, look into the acceptance rates for students who apply under an Early Decision program versus the acceptance rates for those who apply in the regular applicant pool. Many times, the Early Decision acceptance rates are higher. Some schools place more of an emphasis on these types of programs than others, which is why you need to do your homework. The University of Pennsylvania, for example, accepted 36% of its Early Decision applicants in a recent admission year, versus 21% of its regular decision applicants. Washington University in St. Louis, on the other hand, admitted roughly the same percentage of students under their early program as their regular admission program, about 25%.

Remember that if you decide to apply Early Decision to your first choice school, you **MUST** attend that institution, which is why you can only make one Early Decision application. There can be dire consequences if you apply to more than one school Early Decision. The more selective schools share their lists of early applicants with each other to make sure they are not doubled up. If they discover a student has applied to more than one school Early Decision, his or her application will be revoked at both schools. The only exception to the rule is if you are unable to afford the school you have been admitted to due to financial constraints. In these cases, a student may withdraw their early acceptance. Once you make the decision to withdraw an Early Decision admission, you cannot change your mind and get that offer of admission a second time.

Remember that you should still apply to other schools while awaiting your Early Decision acceptance, either through regular admission or Early Action (if the program allows it). Whatever you do, don't put all of your eggs in one basket!

The moral of the story is to do your homework. It would be nice if the admission process was standardized and everyone did things the same way, but it's not, and they don't. As I said before, knowledge is power. Keep an eye on deadlines, find out what the college or university's admission policies are, and use them to your advantage. Do things in a timely fashion so that when it's all said and done, you will have a number of quality schools to choose from.

William "Bill" Morrison is a college counselor at a top suburban Chicago high school.