



FEWER SCHOOLS ACCEPT EARLY ADMISSIONS

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Some Ivy League colleges decided to stop offering early admissions this year, sparking debate over the program's impact on minority students and higher education's search for talent.

Could thick mid-December envelopes become a thing of the past for rising seniors?

In September, Harvard and Princeton reignited the "early admissions" debate by announcing an end to the decades-long practice of offering positions to select high school students who apply to colleges in the fall.

Colleges offer admission to some of these applicants in mid-December in hopes of locking in highly sought after students. About half of the 400 U.S. colleges with early admissions programs couple their offers with an "early decision" policy, which binds students to college from which they get an acceptance letter.

The other half have an "early action" policy: students may get an acceptance letter early, but they don't have to commit to the school until later in the spring -- after they've heard back from colleges in the regular application cycle.

Debating benefits and harms

The presidents of Harvard and Princeton said canceling the programs helps disadvantaged students and reduces college application anxiety.

"We think this will produce a fairer process, because the existing process has been shown to advantage those who are already advantaged," Derek Bok, the interim president of Harvard, told the New York Times.

Mr. Bok said students who were more affluent and "prepped" for college were the ones most likely to apply for early admission, when their chances of being accepted are nearly twice as high as regular admission.

In addition, many early admissions programs prevent students from comparing financial aid offerings from competing colleges.

Other schools continue to reconsider the admissions process.

At a June meeting, presidents of selective liberal arts colleges debated whether to change their policies, but could not make a decision, according to the Times. They opted to stick with early decision.

Other institutions have decided with little hesitation to keep early admissions. Yale, Harvard's Ivy League rival for student talent, simply rejected the decision from Harvard and Princeton.

Stanford University's dean of admissions and financial aid, Richard Shaw, the former dean of admissions at Yale, defended the programs, saying they benefit students with a strong sense of their first-choice college.

"I don't think it should be used as a strategic ploy," he said.

At Yale and Stanford, a "single-choice early action" policy permits students to apply early but exclusively to their school, though their decision can be made later in the spring, like other early action colleges.

Early admissions and discrimination charges

Yale president Richard Levin argued it wasn't clear that eliminating the programs would result in the entrance of more low-income students, often black and Hispanic.

"For early programs, when you come from a multi-generational college family, it's certainly true that you may have students that have stronger financial backgrounds [applying] early," said Stanford's admissions dean Shaw, but he added that the availability of information online is changing this trend.

Rates of minority early applications do seem to be increasing. The Harvard Crimson reported that in Harvard's last early applicant pool there were 13 percent more Hispanic applicants and 6.4 percent more black applicants than the year before. However those numbers were still far below minority applicants for regular admission.

Effects on colleges

Colleges with early admissions programs benefit because they can increase their "yield" -- the ratio of admitted students to accepted students -- which simplifies their admissions process.

And though statistics like yield and "selectivity" -- the percentage of students admitted -- are used in rankings such as U.S. News and World Report rankings, in the four years since the University of North Carolina dropped early admissions, they've seen little change in their ranking, moving from 28th in 2002 to 27th in 2007.

UNC's director of admissions Jerome Lucido said in a 2002 news release, "Binding early decision is much more in the college's interest than the student's."

Revisiting early admissions

Harvard's dean of admissions William Fitzsimmons said the university will look very carefully at the incoming classes and take note of any changes.

"If after several years with a single admissions deadline, we find ourselves needing to reinstate early admission to preserve the quality of our student body, we will return to early action," he said in a news release.

-- *By Adnaan Wasey, NewsHour Extra*

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