

College Choices

High probability schools-----Target schools ----- Low probability schools

Students often wonder how many colleges they should apply to, as well as what types of schools should be included in their list. How many schools a student applies to is a personal choice. School counselors will guide students in making sure that their list of colleges includes colleges that are academically a good match, colleges that are a reach given the student's academic record, and colleges that are likely to offer acceptance. In this way, students may include colleges that may have one or more features that appeal to the student and also colleges that, according to available data, are likely to offer admission.

Colleges that fit into categories of low probability schools, target schools, and high probability schools are going to be different for all students. Similarly, a student's list of colleges will be shaped by his/her interests in programs, environment, geography, cost, and appeal.

Sometimes it is helpful to think of college choices in three categories:

Category I – student's top selection of schools. This group may contain some colleges that are *lower probability of acceptance* (but may not).

Category II – student's selection of schools that possess characteristics and programs that are appealing, and that may *realistically* offer admission.

Category III – student's selection of schools that are desirable and are *likely* to offer admission to the student, considered *high probability of acceptance*.

TIP: Make a decision about which colleges to apply to; this is different than setting your heart on which college you want to attend. Until you are accepted, you do not have a decision to make. While much depends on your academic and extra-curricular record, there is also an element of happenstance, as some students who are qualified for a particular school may not be offered admission.

Early Decision vs. Early Action

Early decision is a binding application process in which applications are typically submitted in November. In most cases, students will then receive a decision from the college in December. If admitted, students are expected to attend that school.

Benefits to early decision:

- Frequently the acceptance rate is higher than it is for regular admissions.

- If you are not offered admission early, your application may still be considered with the regular applications.
- If you are offered acceptance, you are finished with the college application process and relieved of that stress.

Drawbacks to early decision:

- Early decision is binding, which means that you agree to attend that school if accepted.
- You may apply to only one college through early decision (although additional applications for regular admissions are allowed).
- When accepted, a student must withdraw all other applications to other colleges.
- You are deciding to attend that college before receiving a financial aid package. (Colleges do allow students to break the early decision contract if the student and family truly cannot afford the college.)

Students should apply to a college through the early decision process only if s/he is 100% certain with his/her decision to attend that school, if offered admission.

A few colleges such as Harvard and University of Virginia have decided not to offer the early decision option, because of the bias towards students of financial means who do not have to weigh financial aid support.

Early Action is also an application process that begins in November (sometimes December) with notification in December or January. Early action is not binding.

Benefits to early action application process:

- If you are not accepted early, your application is still considered for admission with the regular admission pool.
- The decision is not binding -- students are free to apply to other colleges.
- You do not need to make a decision until the May 1 deadline which allows time to determine and compare financial aid.

TIP: Applying to college through early action encourages you to get your application together in the fall and hopefully get an early offer of admission, resulting in lower stress levels. Only apply through the early decision process if you have made a decision that you will go to that college if given the chance. Carefully consider your financial situation first.