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## On Education

### Early Decision Dreamin'

By Elise Epner

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Parents, I know how you feel. You wish it would all be over. All this searching to find the college that's the right fit for your child. All the stressing about finals, SAT scores, class rank and AP results.

You're tired of trashing the brochures that arrive in your mailbox each day showing joyful students doing everything except studying. You can't even get past the produce section of the supermarket without neighbors grilling you about your daughter's college list.

Early decision may be sounding really good right now. Your son will dash off a couple of paragraphs about his community service project and sprinkle in a few meaningful reflections about his summer job. He'll ask that sweet English teacher for a recommendation. (She always loved his writing, after all.) Then, happy news will arrive at your door, all done in time for holiday shopping. Forget the 15 applications with 22 different essays. Bank the application fees totaling a thousand bucks or more. No more worrying! Oh, so tempting.

For some families, early decision is a godsend. A student applies by a November deadline to a college that's a comfortable academic and social fit. He promises to attend if accepted. The acceptance arrives in mid-December. The senior (and family)

can enjoy the rest of senior year.

And, early decision applicants may reap an admissions advantage. Some colleges, believing that students attending their top choice will be socially and academically successful, favor students who pledge to attend. Some colleges fill nearly half their freshman classes early; some even offer two early-decision deadlines, usually in November and January.

Colleges benefit, as well. Besides shifting some of the application reading work load to the fall, early decision brings predictability to college admissions. After all, everyone accepted will have to attend (except for a few who get out of the binding commitment due to financial circumstances). Colleges appreciate knowing that a critical pitcher's spot on the baseball team is definitely filled and that Nevada is already represented in the freshman class.

If, however, early decision looks attractive now simply because it seems like the happy ending to your student's admissions nightmares, please think again.

Despite deceptively high early-decision acceptance rates, there is a real risk of bad news for your child. Take a highly selective school like Dartmouth, for example. For the class of 2011, Dartmouth admitted 30 percent of early-decision applicants but only 15 percent of the regular-decision pool.

Looks like it's twice as easy to get accepted early-decision, right? Well, recruited athletes made up about 31 percent of early admits this year, according to the Dartmouth student newspaper. Now add in the early acceptances going to alumni's children qualifying for legacy status, development admits prized for their large financial contributions and minority and international applicants. The early

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decision rate for Fairfield County applicants without these hooks plunges.

Also, early decision plays some mean tricks on your teenager's mind. Focused only on one college, students picture themselves cheering at the homecoming game, acing the economics mid-term and partying at the frats next year. When rejection comes shattering those dreams, teenagers really hurt.

Even early-decision deferrals, whereby colleges delay decisions until the regular application pool is reviewed, are painful. Sure, deferral releases your student from her binding commitment to attend even if accepted in the regular round. But, deferral also lowers her chance for later acceptance because, after all, she's basically been passed up once. Many selective schools, after stringing these students along, accept few deferred early applicants.

An early, binding acceptance also can hurt your bank account. With only one acceptance, families lose the opportunity to compare need-based financial aid or merit awards. And yes, aid packages do vary. If cost will affect your child's college choice, stick with regular or non-binding early-action applications. In fact, recently some universities have abandoned early decision because of these inequities for students requiring financial aid.

Still, early decision can work well for the right students. The optimal early applicants have completed the bulk of their college research and standardized testing by summer. On their many campus visits, they've talked to students and faculty and attended classes. Their high school transcripts show three years of consistent performance, convincing colleges that anticipated senior year grades will be more of the same. Early applicants have a definite top choice within their

reach and are unlikely to suffer buyer's remorse come spring.

Even if early decision is right for your family, please don't let your student blow off completing other applications. Most early decisions arrive mid-December or later. Waiting until then to draft other essays is *way bad*. Disappointing results can put a student in a really bad mood. Not the best way to write a bazillion applications, especially when friends are busy trying on party dresses at Anthropologie because their applications are already done.

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