



Big Decisions

Before you start working on your applications, there are two big decisions you should make in advance: (1) *where* you'll be applying and (2) *when*, if anywhere, you'll be applying *early*. We call them the big decisions because they are decisions that can have a big effect on your admissions outcomes.

These big decisions can also require some trade-offs, and that's why many people procrastinate in making them. (Nobody likes trade-offs!) But those trade-offs don't go away if you procrastinate; by putting them off, you just end up forcing yourself to make them when you're rushed and trying to get applications out the door, and by then you may have missed some very beneficial opportunities along the way. You'll maximize your options down the road—and your admissions success—if you make those big decisions before you start working on your applications rather than trying to muddle through and make them as you go along.

BIG DECISION #1: WHERE TO APPLY

A sensible list of colleges is often a work in progress, and that's entirely appropriate. It will morph over time as you get more information about *yourself* (new grades, new test scores, new classes you're excited about), about your *goals* (what

kinds of majors you might be interested in, what kinds of careers you imagine for yourself), and about your *college options* (selectivity, academic and nonacademic offerings, location, your reactions after visiting, and so on).

At some point, though, you need to treat your list as final so that you can commit with your whole heart (and your whole brain) to the task of producing standout applications for the colleges on your list. In the next chapter we'll go into much more detail about your ideal timeline, but for now, the most important thing to realize about timing is that you should have a final list of schools in front of you in the *July before you apply*.

Parent Tip: Helping with the Final List

You can make it easier or harder for your child to finalize his or her college list. Obviously, we encourage you to make it easier (and we assume that's what you want, too!), so here are our tips for how to do that:

- Do your best to call on your rational self when you have conversations with your child about the college list. Your rational self knows that your child's college choices should reflect your child's preferences, not yours, so your rational self would never insist that your child keep a particular college on the list when it really isn't the right fit for your child just because you fell in love with it on the tour and would have loved to go to college there yourself. And your rational self would allow your child to apply to colleges out of state, even though you hoped that your child would attend college within driving distance from home.
- Recognize that everything you say about any college, even in an offhand or joking manner, reverberates for your child as a personal commentary on your child or his or her choices. Your child is exquisitely tuned to all things college right now and has no capacity for objective distance. Imagine you are all at a family reunion and you teasingly say, "Hey, why is College X a reach on your list? It should be a safety because if Uncle Jerry could get in there, it can't be very selective." What do you think your child hears? Your child hears that you don't think much of College X or your child's credentials.

- Educate yourself about the colleges that your child is considering before offering an opinion about whether they should be on the list or not. Just because you have never heard of a college doesn't mean it wouldn't be an excellent choice for your child. Just because the college had a reputation for being a party school when you were in college doesn't mean it is a party school now. Just because you've heard from several people that a particular college is great doesn't mean it would be great for your child. You owe it to your child to educate yourself before you speak up.
- Engage with your child in researching the likelihood for admission to the colleges on the list. Set aside a couple of hours on a Saturday afternoon and work on it together. You both need to be realistic about your child's chances for admission, and the best way to form a realistic opinion is to look at the data. The numbers don't lie. An additional benefit of tackling this task together is that it makes you and your child allies in the enterprise rather than pitting you against each other. For example, rather than having a painful and tortured conversation in which you try to extract information from your child about why a particular college is not a realistic safety, you discover the information together, and the information speaks for itself. Tortured conversation averted!
- Have a full and frank discussion with your child about the affordability of the various colleges on the list. You'll have to do some preparatory work for this conversation including determining what financial support you can provide to your child during college and what the financial aid options are. Financial aid is a complicated subject, and it will take you some time and effort to research the options on each college's website, but it is important you do it now. You don't want your child to apply to colleges that he or she couldn't attend, even if admitted, because they simply aren't affordable.

How many schools should make it onto your final list? There are more than two thousand four-year colleges in the United States, and even though it is easier than ever to apply to multiple colleges, you aren't going to want to spend your time applying to every college out there. You want to limit yourself to a reasonable number of colleges; in our experience, that means your final list should have *no more than fifteen colleges* on it.

If you have more than fifteen colleges on your list, you need to revisit it and make some hard decisions about which colleges to cut, because your list is too long. Otherwise, you'll learn the hard way that *nothing wastes more of your time, energy, and money* than applying to too many colleges, especially if some of the colleges on your list aren't even really right for you.

How you go about selecting the right colleges for yourself is the subject for a whole book unto itself, but in a nutshell, a sensible college list is a list of eight to fifteen colleges that offer a range in terms of your likelihood of admission:

- Two to three colleges should be ones where you have a high likelihood of admission (usually called *safeties*)
- Four to eight should be colleges where you have a good likelihood of admission (usually called *targets*)
- Two to four colleges should be ones where you have a low likelihood of admission (usually called *reaches*)

There are a few classic mistakes to avoid when compiling your college list. First, be realistic when you assess your chances for admission and distinguish between low-likelihood and no-likelihood colleges. When it comes to getting a basic handle on your chances for admission, it is all about your *academic credentials*. Even if you have other standout credentials and a standout application, you have to have competitive academic credentials if you are going to have a chance. A *low-likelihood* college is a college where your academic credentials fall into the bottom 25 percent of those admitted, and a *no-likelihood* college is one where no one with your academic credentials was admitted. Take all no-likelihood schools off your list. (Okay, if you really *have* to apply to Stanford because you've always dreamed of going there, then leave that one no-likelihood college on your list, but let go of Caltech and Princeton.)



GPA AND TEST SCORE STATISTICS FOR SPECIFIC COLLEGES

You can look up statistics about the test scores and grades of applicants who have been previously admitted to a particular college. They are available on a variety of websites and in multiple books. However, you'll know you're getting the most current information if you go to each college's website and search for a link or tab called something like "profile of the incoming class." You can also find this kind of information on the College Board's website (www.collegeboard.org) or the Department of Education's College Navigator website (www.nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator). These two sources are completely reliable, but the data you find there may not be as current due to a time lag between when the college reports it and when it is posted.

You will find different formats for reporting the information, but the most common format reports it in terms of percentages. So, for example, you will find that test scores are generally reported in terms of the "mid-50." The mid-50 range shows the scores distributed by quartiles, and those scores in the mid-50 range are those that range from the 25th to 75th percentiles. From that mid-50 you can easily deduce how you stack up: are you in the mid-50 or in the bottom 25 (below the lower score of the mid-50) or in the top 25 (above the top score of the mid-50)?

For grades, the format is less standardized, with colleges reporting percentages in terms of class rank and GPA. For example, you might find that the college reports what percentage of admitted students were ranked in the top 10 percent, the top quarter, or the top half of their classes. Or you might find that the college reports what percentage of students had GPAs of 3.75 or better, 3.5–3.74, 3.25–3.49, and so on. (Note these GPAs are unweighted, and you can learn more about weighted versus unweighted GPAs in chapter 18. The College Board has a tool on its website that allows you to calculate your unweighted GPA on a 4.0 scale.) Once you know the percentages regarding grades, you can easily deduce how you stack up.

It is pretty easy to figure out whether your academic credentials are competitive. All you have to do is compare your grades and test scores to those of applicants that the college has admitted in recent years. You can find that information on many websites or directories, but the best place to get the most current and accurate information is on the colleges' own websites. Usually the college makes it easy to find by collecting it into a set of "fast facts" or a "profile of the incoming class."

Also, understand that you will not increase your chances of admission to a particular college simply by applying to more colleges. College admissions isn't a lottery. Your chances of admission to a particular college have nothing to do with the number of applications you submit overall. You are far better off using your time and energy to submit twelve *standout* applications than you are firing off twenty so-so applications.

BIG DECISION #2: WHERE (IF ANYWHERE) TO APPLY EARLY

One of the major changes in college admissions in the last twenty-five years is the proliferation of early admissions options. As of the writing of this book, the vast majority of top colleges in the United States offer one or more of these options (including Harvard and Princeton, who both reinstated the option in 2011 after doing away with it for a while). Because applying early will impose certain restrictions on you (when you must submit your application and where else you may apply), it is important that you decide where, if anywhere, you are going to apply early *before* you start working on your applications.

Should you apply early? There is no one right answer that applies to everyone, so we'll give you some pointers to make the best decision for yourself.

First, figure out what early options are available to you by looking them up on your colleges' websites. Early options are called a variety of things by the colleges, but all of them have *early* somewhere in the title, and they all fall into one of three categories: *Early Decision*, *Early Action*, or *Restrictive Early Action* (sometimes called *Single-Choice Early Action*). Don't be surprised if you discover that a college offers more than one early option.



EARLY DECISION VERSUS EARLY ACTION VERSUS RESTRICTIVE (SINGLE-CHOICE) EARLY ACTION

Early Decision (ED) options are binding—an applicant who applies ED is *bound* to accept that offer if admitted. At most colleges, an ED applicant may not apply early to any other college. However, some do allow their ED applicants to apply EA to other colleges or to apply early to public (state) colleges.

Early Action (EA) options are nonbinding—an applicant who applies EA and is admitted is *not bound* to accept that offer of admission. An applicant may typically apply EA to more than one college.

Restrictive Early Action (REA) options are *nonbinding*, but an REA applicant may not apply early (ED or EA) to any other college.

Now that you know your early options at each of the colleges on your list, you need to weigh the *benefits* offered by those early options against the *restrictions* that they impose. This, too, will require you to do a bit of digging into the fine print of each college's early options.

There are generally two primary benefits to applying early. First, if you apply early, you might also receive a final decision from the college earlier. Check the notification deadlines for each early option to learn exactly when you will receive a decision, and also check to see whether the college can choose to defer the decision to a later round of decision making.

Second, applying early can increase your odds for admission. How much it increases your odds of admission largely depends on the option itself. Early Decision increases your odds the most; Early Action increases your odds the least; and Restrictive Early Action falls in the middle. Why the difference? Without getting into too much unnecessary detail, colleges use these early options to increase their yield (the percentage of admitted applicants who accept their offers of admission) because a higher yield benefits the colleges. The more a particular option increases a college's yield, the more it will increase your odds for

admission. Early Decision increases a college's yield the most because it *commits* you to accept an offer of admission (if you receive one); in other words, the Early Decision yield is 100 percent.

To give you some sense of how much your odds of admission change if you apply early, consider these statistics for Harvard and Williams. For the class of 2016 (admitted in 2011–2012), Harvard admitted only 5.9 percent of its applicants overall. But if you break out the acceptance rates by early versus regular, you'll notice a dramatic difference: Harvard admitted only 3.8 percent of those who applied Regular Decision but admitted 18.2 percent of those who applied under its Single-Choice Early Action option. (Even better: Harvard deferred nearly two-thirds of the early applicants, so those 2,838 applicants got a second shot at admission in the regular round of decisions, with the benefit of an extra semester's worth of grades and accomplishments.) Similarly, Williams admitted 16.7 percent of its applicants overall but admitted 42.2 percent of those who applied Early Decision. That's quite a difference!

Given how much applying early can benefit you, you are probably inclined to apply early *somewhere*. But—and this is a big caveat—before you commit yourself to applying early, you must consider the restrictions. Typically, you will find that the restrictions concern *when* you must apply, *how many* colleges you may apply to early, and whether you must *commit* to attending the college if accepted (a so-called binding early option). You'll have to consult the policies for each college carefully because the restrictions can be a bit complicated, and there are often important details buried in the fine print. For example, many REA options (including Harvard's) actually allow you to apply early to other colleges but only if those colleges are public colleges. Also, now that many colleges have two ED options, you will discover that only the first ED round has an earlier deadline for submission of your application. So make sure to spend some time getting a handle on the details and understanding what the trade-offs are for the different early options.

Once you know the benefits and restrictions for each college on your list, you must balance them against each other. Not surprisingly, the early options that offer the biggest boost to your chances are also the ones that impose the most restrictions, so you have to weigh your choices carefully. Whatever you do, don't lose sight of your own true preferences as you make your decision.

There will be trade-offs no matter what you decide. Sometimes limiting your options can actually improve your odds, and there can be a penalty for leaving all your options open. Welcome to the world of grown-up decision making!

Because weighing the benefits against the restrictions can be quite difficult given all of the various combinations and permutations possible, we've developed two basic rules to help you as you are making your decision. Of course, like all rules, there are exceptions, and we have noted the most common exceptions along with the rules themselves.

Early Rule #1: If You Have a Top-Choice College and It Has an Early Option, Then Apply Early There

- *Exception:* You cannot fulfill the application requirements by the early deadline. For example, you will not have taken the required tests by then.
- *Exception:* You cannot live with the restrictions imposed. For example, this is your top-choice college, but you are not so in love with it that you are willing to commit yourself to accepting their offer of admission without knowing what your other choices are, or perhaps you want to compete for a merit scholarship at another college on your list, and you won't be able to do that if you apply early at your top-choice college.
- *Exception:* The early option is binding, and you are unsure whether you can afford to attend the college if accepted. Unfortunately, you will likely not have a firm commitment from the college about your financial aid package until mid-March (well after you have learned you are accepted and must withdraw other applications). However, you can often get a basic sense of what your financial aid package will be if you ask the college. So, before you back away from the early option, ask!
- *Exception:* Your top-choice college is a no-likelihood rather than low-likelihood college. Applying early is not a magic trick: it improves your odds of admission only if you are a competitive applicant in the first place. If you have a second or third choice that is a low-likelihood college, you might be better advised to use your early application chip on it, especially if you can apply early to only one college.

Early Rule #2: If You Are Not Applying Early to Your Top-Choice College or Your Top-Choice College Does Not Restrict Your Ability to Apply Early Elsewhere, Then Apply Early to Any College on Your List That Has an Early Action Option

An EA option is one that does not limit the number of colleges where you can apply early, and it does not bind you to accepting an offer of admission before the universal deposit date of May 1.

- *Exception:* You cannot prepare a standout application by the early deadline. As we said earlier, applying early is not a magic trick. Early application only helps if it is a “cherry on top of the sundae,” and the sundae is a standout application from a competitive applicant.

If neither of these rules fit your situation exactly, then you should consider the early options available to you in the spirit of these rules. Apply early when it boosts your chances at a college that is at or near the top of your list and you can live with the restrictions (early rule #1), or apply early when the restrictions are minimal and you have nothing to lose (early rule #2). If you don't identify early options that meet one of these rules, then applying early probably isn't in your best interests. It isn't for everyone, and you shouldn't apply early just because everyone says you should or the statistics suggest it. You should decide based on your own true preferences and best interests.

Whatever your final decisions are about where to apply and whether to apply somewhere early, the most important thing is that you make those big decisions *before* you get to work on your applications. We promise it's worth it because once you make these big decisions, you are ready to move on to the next step—making your plan.