

Education

Early applications surge at prestigious colleges. So does early heartache.

By [Nick Anderson](#)

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Kate and Henry Sosland, twins from the District, were eager for a head start in the race to get into their top-choice colleges.

So they applied in October, more than two months ahead of the regular deadline, in hopes of winning early admission. She went for Barnard College, he for Washington University in St. Louis, joining a surge of others nationwide using the same gambit in hopes of gaining an edge.

For many college-bound seniors, the trend has lengthened and intensified the stress of what was already an angst-laden quest. Henry Sosland said he believed at least three classmates applied early to the university he coveted. “That was a nerve-racking thing,” he said. “All those students were very capable.”

Early applications have been expanding for years, but last month some big-name schools reported record-setting spikes. Totals were up 9 percent at Dartmouth College, 19 percent at Duke University, 21 percent at Brown University.

Some counselors worry the trend is widening the divide between haves and have-nots because early application programs often require those admitted to enroll. That proviso, known as “early decision,” tends to help the affluent.

Many students need to compare financial aid offers and weigh whether to take out loans. Jeff Levy, an admissions consultant in Santa Monica, Calif., advises them not to apply through binding early-decision plans. In addition, he said, huge numbers are late bloomers unready to apply in October.

The early-decision movement “further polarizes our high school population,” Levy said. “The big problem is social and economic inequity.”

Still, highly selective colleges and universities often fill a third to half of their first-year classes through early rounds — which makes the regular round even more competitive. To address equity concerns, schools typically pledge to give students in need the same financial aid they would have received if they had been admitted in the regular cycle.

The first major wave of admission decisions comes in mid-December, a couple of weeks before deadlines for the regular application cycle in January. That means some early applicants can relax during winter break after getting into their first choice.

Many others face the early heartache of rejection or deferral before they have to gear up to send more applications. Deferral means an early application will get another look in the regular cycle.

“We’ve seen a lot of students this year be deferred,” said Steve Goodman, a college admission counselor in the District. “Not that they weren’t solid applicants.” But so many strong candidates were aiming early this year to top-tier schools, he said, that “the numbers were just so overwhelming.”

Each year, the early odds seem to get longer, Levy said.

“Fewer admits and more deferrals. I mean, across the board. The most extraordinary applicants are getting deferred.”

The 18-year-old Soslands, seniors at Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, Md., were among those with early good news. Kate got her yes on Dec. 12, and Henry’s followed the next day. They didn’t flaunt it. They knew the numbers for many schools were brutal.

“You want to celebrate,” Kate said, “but you also want to be conscious of people who are extremely hurt and stressed out.”

Their search is done because the Soslands applied through early decision. Making an enrollment commitment tends to help applicants in the early round.

Simply put, colleges want students who definitely want them. It helps fill classes (and varsity sports teams). By contrast, students admitted during the regular round, who might have multiple offers, are less likely to enroll. More than 220 schools use early decision, according to the online Common Application. Some are highly selective, but many others are not and must work hard to meet enrollment and revenue targets. Colleges find the early decision method so valuable that dozens use it for a second round — dubbed “ED2” — for applicants willing to commit in December, January or February to a second-choice school.

But the admission edge for early-decision hopefuls diminishes when the applicant pool expands. Anxiety rises.

“Really, really disappointed,” one anonymous student with strong grades and test scores wrote on the online forum College Confidential after getting deferred by Barnard.

Early applications to Barnard, a women’s college affiliated with Columbia University, rose 24 percent this year. Washington University said its preliminary total for the first round was stable.

Some universities allow early applications without requiring those admitted to enroll — a process known as “early action.” They, too, reported record or near-record application totals: 6,958 to Harvard University (up 5 percent in one year); 6,016 to Yale University (up 5 percent); 7,337 to the University of Notre Dame (up 17 percent).

Many of those applicants were hoping for a slightly better shot at schools with microscopic admission rates.

The overall admission rate at Harvard was 4.6 percent for the class entering in 2018. But the rate for early applicants Harvard admitted last month was 13.4 percent.

At the University of Chicago, which allows students to apply early with or without an enrollment commitment, about 15,000 sought admission in the first round, according to James G. Nondorf, vice president for enrollment and student advancement. That was up more than 10 percent. Nondorf said early applications were once perceived as largely an insider's game for "highly sophisticated, wealthy kids," often from the East Coast. Now, he is seeing more early applications from the Midwest and West Coast.

"Everybody is aware of it," he said. "Everyone, everywhere uses all the rounds."

Kelly Fraser, an admissions consultant in Bethesda, Md., said all of her clients apply early. Those aiming for top-tier schools know there are no guarantees, she said. "The more selective the school," she said, "the more uncertain the process."


Duke, with a binding early-decision plan, offers a case in point. Its early applications have more than doubled in eight years, from 2,227 in 2010 to 4,852 this year. Its early admission rate has fallen over that time, from 29 percent to 18 percent.

Christoph Guttentag, dean of undergraduate admissions at Duke, said application totals have grown as word spreads among students that applying early is a viable pipeline into the school. He said Duke advertises widely that it will meet the full financial need for admitted students no matter when they apply.

Guttentag acknowledged that those denied or deferred in the early round face extra pressure over the holidays to meet January deadlines for multiple schools. "You can do everything right and do what you're supposed to do and still not achieve your goal because there are factors outside your control," he said. "That's a tough thing to learn in December of your senior year."

It makes for a "very challenging" two to three weeks, he said. "Fortunately, they only have to go through it once."

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Nick Anderson covers higher education and other education topics for The Washington Post. He has been a writer and editor at The Post since 2005. Follow 

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