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The Plague of ‘Early Decision’

Frank Bruni DEC. 21, 2016

As the moment of judgment neared, they barely slept, convinced that their very futures were on the line. Dread consumed them. Panic overwhelmed them.

I don’t mean Americans awaiting the Electoral College’s validation of Donald Trump.

I mean students (and their parents) awaiting actual colleges’ verdicts on early-decision and early-action applications.

One friend of mine canceled our dinner plan because he hadn’t realized that it fell around the time when his daughter expected word from her top Ivy League choice. He and his wife couldn’t leave her home alone in such a tremulous state, at such a terrifying juncture.

Another friend’s daughter, also vying to get into a highly selective school, repeatedly burst into tears as she berated herself for a 3.9 grade point average instead of a 4.0. What if the difference spelled her doom?

As I’ve written before, the college admissions process has become a dignity-ravaging frenzy, illustrated by the plot of a recent episode of the TV drama “Law &

Order: Special Victims Unit.” It asked whether a man assuming a fake identity to seduce women could be prosecuted for rape.

What identity do you suppose he chose as the most potent and irresistible? Not a Hollywood director who could make the women stars. Not a Wall Street titan who could drape them in jewels. He impersonated a dean of admissions who could give their kids slots at an elite university. And one after another, these helicopter moms whirled into the boudoir.

Early decision and early action, which are offered by some 450 colleges, are a special and especially disturbing part of the frenzy. They refer to a process by which, broadly speaking, a student applies in November to just one, most-desired school, which answers in December. If the school practices early decision and says yes, the student is obliged to go. Early action isn’t binding.

At least since 2001, when The Atlantic published a definitive article by James Fallows titled “The Early-Decision Racket,” there’s been fervent discussion of the downsides of the process. But it’s more prevalent than ever, with some selective schools using it to fill upward of 40 percent of their incoming freshman class.

The biggest problem by far: It significantly disadvantages students from low-income and middle-income families, who are already underrepresented at such schools. There’s plenty of evidence that applying early improves odds of admission and that the students who do so — largely to gain a competitive edge — come disproportionately from privileged backgrounds with parents and counselors who know how to game the system and can assemble the necessary test scores and references by the November deadline.

These students also aren’t concerned about weighing disparate financial-aid offers from different schools and can commit themselves to one through early decision. Less privileged students need to shop around, so early decision doesn’t really work for them.

“That’s just unfair in a profound way,” said Harold Levy, the executive director of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which has pushed to make elite colleges more socioeconomically diverse.

Early decision moves the admissions process forward on the calendar, so that high school students start obsessing sooner. They press themselves to single out a college at the start of senior year, when they may not understand themselves as well as they will toward the end of it.

“How many 17-year-olds know what they really want to do in life?” said Micheal McKinnon, an independent educational consultant in the Chicago area. The more time they have to figure it out, the better.

He added that students who win early admission often feel that “they can slack off for the rest of senior year,” rendering the last semester pointless.

But what worries me more is how the early-application process intensifies much of what’s perverse about college admissions today: the anxiety-fueling, disappointment-seeding sense that one school above all others glimmers in the distance as the perfect prize; the assessment of the most exclusive environments as, ipso facto, the superior ones.

That’s hooey, but it’s stubborn hooey, as the early-application vogue demonstrates. Marla Schay, the head of guidance at Weston High School, in an affluent suburb outside Boston, told me that while 60 percent of the seniors there submitted early applications seven years ago, it’s above 86 percent now.

And Williams College just admitted nearly 47 percent of next fall’s freshmen through early decision. That benefits the college, which has locked in much of the Class of 2021. Maybe it also benefits the students who were admitted and can now calm down, though I wonder how many felt rushed to identify Williams (or Duke or Vanderbilt or Colgate) as their truest love.

I wonder, too, how many came to regard higher education as one big board game that’s about attaining prestige rather than acquiring knowledge.

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