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U.S.

# The Decision That Hurts Your Chances of Getting Into Harvard

Dartmouth College expects early-decision admits to make up nearly half its first-year class in the fall



Harvard, like other elite colleges, admits a large proportion of incoming freshmen from the pool of early-round applicants. People walk past the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library at Harvard. PHOTO: M. SCOTT BRAUER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By *Melissa Korn*

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The odds of getting into Harvard and other elite universities are slimmer for students who apply in the regular pool than for those who apply in early rounds.

This harsh reality will be driven home when Harvard, Yale, Penn and other Ivy League institutions release their regular-decision admission notices Wednesday evening: Large proportions of their incoming first-year classes were locked in months ago under early-admittance programs.

High-school seniors desperate for a leg up in the brutal competition for spots at selective colleges have increasingly been applying through binding early-decision or more flexible early-action programs, rather than meeting Jan. 1 application deadlines and waiting until spring for an answer.

The admission rate for early-round candidates, who typically learn their fates in December, is often two or three times that of regular applicants. Harvard last year admitted 14.5% of early-action applicants and about 3.3% of regular-decision applicants. At Yale, those rates were 17.1% and 5%, respectively. Many institutions fill 40% or more of their incoming classes with early applicants.

Dartmouth College expects students admitted through its early-decision process to make up nearly half its first-year class next fall. The school received 2,270 early applications, compared with roughly 20,000 in the regular cycle. Early-decision applicants make up 53% of Northwestern University's current freshman class, and just over half at Vanderbilt University.

"It's staggering," said Brennan Barnard, director of college counseling at the Derryfield School in Manchester, N.H. This year, 62 of his 65 seniors submitted an application by Dec. 1 and about three-quarters of the class had an acceptance coming out of the early rounds. Many apply early not necessarily because they are attached to one particular school, but because they fear missing out on the chance to get in somewhere, he said.

Students see schools' single-digit acceptance rates, worry about their chances and apply early, perpetuating the rush for another year, says Stephen Friedfeld, chief operating officer at

Newton, Mass.-based admission-consulting firm AcceptU.

Early-round applicants are either accepted, rejected or deferred to be reconsidered in the general pool.

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College admissions officers generally say it isn't easier to get in by early admissions, but rather that the early applicant pool includes particularly stellar candidates who have shown commitment to the school. Early-round figures can also include recruited athletes, which skews the

numbers, they say.

Critics of early admissions say the system creates a disadvantage for students who aren't quite sure where they want to go, need to compare financial-aid offers or haven't received extensive counseling on the college-application process.

Officials for the schools said their deans of admissions weren't available for comment.

Harvard said in December it received a record 6,630 "restrictive early action" applications for the class that will enter next fall. Students who apply in the early round aren't required to enroll if admitted. While they can't apply to early-admissions programs at other private schools, they can do so at public or foreign universities.

In a press release announcing the previous year's early-action admits, the admissions dean at Harvard called early admission the "new normal."

Binding early-decision applications were up by double digits on a percentage basis this year at schools including Brown, Dartmouth and Duke.



Hannah Strauss, a senior at Edgemont High School in Scarsdale, N.Y., was admitted early-decision to Cornell University. PHOTO: COURTESY OF HANNAH STRAUSS

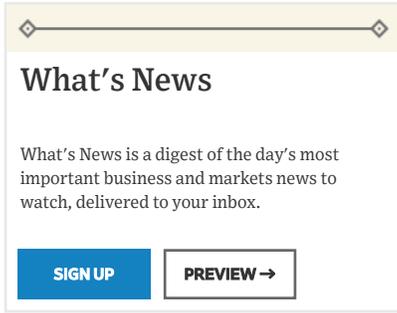
Hannah Strauss, a 17-year-old senior at Edgemont High School in Scarsdale, N.Y., applied early decision to Cornell University in part because a number of family members had attended and she was familiar with the school. She also worried her chances of getting in would decrease if she waited for the regular application cycle, she said.

"There's a lot of pressure to find a place to apply early because everyone wants to be settled," she said. She was accepted at Cornell.

Josh Coan, director of school counseling at Wheaton North High School near Chicago, says applying to a school early gives his roughly 500 seniors—and his office—peace of mind. "We don't want them to wait as their college or university fills the freshman class," he said.

Securing a big portion of the class early lets schools better plan their regular admissions decisions and predict yield, or the share of admitted students who actually enroll. At Colorado College, the number of students admitted through early rounds has doubled over the past decade, while the class size has been steady.

Newsletter Sign-up



The graphic features a yellow header with a diamond icon and a horizontal line. Below the header, the text 'What's News' is displayed in a large, bold font. Underneath, a smaller line of text describes the newsletter as a digest of important business and markets news. At the bottom, there are two buttons: a blue 'SIGN UP' button and a white 'PREVIEW →' button with a black border.

In 2006, Princeton and Harvard dropped their early-decision options, citing them as barriers for low-income and minority applicants. When peer schools didn't follow suit and continued snapping up top students early, they reintroduced slightly more flexible versions of the programs.

Last year roughly 50% of Common Application users applied to at least one school through early-decision or early-action programs. The rate for first-generation applicants was 31%, and 23% for applicants who received fee waivers.

College-access advocates say some of their concerns about early admissions and low-income

students were assuaged after a 2016 federal policy change allowed students to begin submitting financial-aid paperwork earlier in the admissions cycle. That makes it possible for schools to offer firm aid packages rather than estimates.

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