

THE EARLY-DECISION RACKET

Early-decision programs—whereby a student applies early to a single school, receives an early answer, and promises to attend if accepted—have added an insane intensity to middle-class obsessions about college. They also distort the admissions process, rewarding the richest students from the most exclusive high schools and penalizing nearly everyone else. But the incentives for many colleges and students are as irresistible as they are perverse

BY JAMES FALLOWS

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In 1978 Willis J. Stetson, known as Lee, became the dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania. The new job was quite a challenge. Penn at the time was in a weak position. In an era when big-city crime rates were still rising, its location in West Philadelphia was a handicap. Its promotional efforts took pains to point out that despite its name, the University of Pennsylvania was a private university and a member of the Ivy League, like Yale and Harvard, not of a state system, like the University of Texas. But within the Ivy League, Penn had acquired the role of backup or safety school for many applicants. "I would estimate that in the 1970s maybe forty percent of the students considered Penn their first choice," Stetson told me recently. For the rest, Penn was the place that had said yes when their first choice had said no.

Stetson's job, and that of the Penn administration in general, was to make the school so much more attractive that students with a range of options would happily choose to enroll. Through the next decade the campaign to make Penn more desirable was a success. As urban life became safer and more alluring, Penn's location, like Columbia's, became an asset rather than a problem. Stetson and his staff traveled widely to introduce the school to potential applicants. When Stetson first visited the Harvard School, a private school for boys in California's San Fernando Valley, he found that few students had even heard of Penn. The school is now coed and known as Harvard-Westlake, and of the 261 seniors who graduated last June, more than a quarter applied to Penn. The Lawrenceville School, in New Jersey, and Phillips Exeter Academy, in New Hampshire, have in recent years sent more students to Penn than to any other college. Colleges may complain bitterly about rankings of their relative quality, especially the "[America's Best Colleges](#)" list that *U.S. News & World Report* publishes every fall, but a college is quick to cite its ranking as a sign of improvement when its position rises. When *U.S. News* published its first list of best colleges, in 1983, Penn was not even ranked among national universities. Last year it was tied with Stanford for No. 6—ahead of Dartmouth, Columbia, Cornell, and Brown in the Ivy League, and of Duke and the University of Chicago.

Penn's improvement through the 1980s was due largely to its shrewd recruitment and marketing efforts. Then, in the early 1990s, like all other colleges, it encountered a "baby bust"—a drop in the total number of college applicants, caused by a fall in birth rates eighteen years before. Penn coped with that change by investing in its curriculum, faculty, and physical plant. It also made unusually effective use of the most controversial tactic in today's elite-college admissions business: the "early decision" program.

Early decision has helped not only Penn. It holds so many advantages for so many colleges that its use has grown steadily over the past decade and mushroomed in the past five years. But the advantages it gives these institutions are outweighed by the harm it does to most students and to the college-selection process. In the view of many high school counselors, it has added an insane intensity to parents' obsession about getting their children into one of a handful of prestigious colleges. Everyone involved with the early-decision process admits that it rewards the richest students from the most exclusive high schools and penalizes nearly everyone else.

The rise of early decision has coincided with, and may have contributed to, the under-reported fact that the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT, is becoming more rather than less influential in determining who gets into college—despite continual criticism of the SAT's structure and effects, and despite the proposal this year from Richard Atkinson, the head of the vast University of California system, that UC campuses no longer consider SAT scores when assessing applicants. The increased use of early decision shows the strong drive for colleges to make themselves look better statistically. The increased emphasis on SAT scores shows the same thing.

Today's high school students and their parents have no choice but to adapt their applications strategies to the way early decision has changed the nature of college admissions. Tomorrow's students should hope that the increasingly obvious drawbacks of the system will lead to its elimination.

HOW EARLY DECISION WORKS

High school college-admissions counselors often describe their work as a matchmaking process. What they mean to suggest is the great diversity of potential partners, the need to find a match that suits each student, and the reality that if things don't click with one partner, there are many other candidates.

Early decision, or ED, is an arranged marriage: both parties gain security at the expense of freedom. But the loss is asymmetrical, constraining the student much more than the institution. That is why many counselors view ED as a device promoted by colleges for their own purposes, with incidental benefits to other institutions and companies—but not to students. Seppy Basili, a vice-president of Kaplan, Inc., the test-prep firm formerly known as Stanley Kaplan, says that an emphasis on earlier applications and admissions has been a boon for his company. "We're seeing kids come to us earlier, prepare earlier, prepare more, and from a business aspect that's great," he says. The most experienced counselors at private schools and strong public high schools can also turn ED programs to their advantage, he says, because they know how to exploit the opportunities the system has created. "It would be naive to think we could ever come up with a system that would not allow someone to play games," Basili says, "but it seems like this one is *built* for people to play games."

Here is how the game is played. In the regular decision process, which most students still follow, students spend the first semester of their senior year deciding on the group of colleges—four, six, thirty-three in one extreme case I heard about—to which they wish to apply. Regular applications are generally due by January 1. The colleges take three months to consider the applications, and respond by early April. Students have until May 1—the single deadline in this cycle adhered to by most colleges—to send a deposit to the school they want to attend and a "No, thanks" to any other that has accepted them. The colleges tally the returns and adjust the size of their incoming classes by accepting students on their waiting lists.

In ED programs students start their senior year ready to choose the one college they would most like to attend, and having already taken their SATs. An early applicant is allowed to make only one ED application, and it is due in the beginning or the middle of November. The college has about a month to deliberate and responds by mid-December. If the answer is no, the student has two weeks to send out regular applications to schools on his or her backup list. If the answer is yes, the process is over, because by virtue of applying early, the student has promised to attend the college if accepted. How is this enforced? Mainly through counselors, who know when a student has been admitted ED and agree not to send official transcripts to other schools.

A similar-sounding but different program is called early action, or EA. The similarity is that students' applications are due in November and they get a response by December. The difference is that the EA agreement is not binding: even after getting a yes, the student can apply to other places in the regular way and wait until May to make a choice. Six years ago Yale and Princeton switched from early action to binding early decision, and Stanford, which had previously resisted all early programs, instituted a binding ED plan. For this fall's applications Brown has switched from EA to binding ED. The remaining major colleges that still offer nonbinding EA plans include Cal Tech, the University of Chicago, Georgetown, Harvard, MIT, and Notre Dame.

Below this formal structure lies a crucial reality, which Penn is almost alone in forthrightly disclosing: students have a much better chance of being admitted if they apply early decision than if they wait to join the regular pool.

For instance, when selecting its class of 2004, which entered college last fall, Yale admitted more than a third (37 percent) of the students who applied early and less than a sixth (16 percent) of those who applied regular. The most extreme difference among major colleges was at Columbia, where 40 percent of the earlies and 14 percent of the regulars were accepted. Amherst accepted 35 percent of the earlies and 19 percent of the regulars. Hamilton College, in upstate New York, took 70 percent of the earlies and 43 percent of the regulars. At the University of Pennsylvania 47 percent of early applicants and 26 percent of regular applicants were admitted.

These comparisons obviously count for something. The chance of being lost in the shuffle was presumably less among Princeton's 1,825 ED applicants last year, of whom 31 percent (559) were accepted, than among its 11,900 regulars, of whom about 11 percent got in. But these simple comparisons make the early advantage look larger than it really is. At very selective schools like Princeton students in the ED pool have better grades and higher test scores than regular applicants, so it could be called fair and logical that a higher proportion of them get in. Harvard admits more than a quarter of its nonbinding early-action applicants and only a ninth of its regular pool. William Fitzsimmons, Harvard's director of admissions, says that standards applied to its early and regular applicants are identical: the difference in acceptance rate, he claims, comes purely from the fact that so many students with a good chance of being admitted apply early, whereas the regular pool contains a larger proportion of long shots. "We put on our 'spring hats,'" he told me recently, "and if there is someone we are absolutely sure we will admit in the spring, we make the offer in the fall. We are very comfortable with these decisions."

The real question about the ED skew is whether the prospects for any given student differ depending on when he or she applies. Last fall Christopher Avery, of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and several colleagues produced smoking-gun evidence that

they do. The authors analyzed five years' worth of admissions records from fourteen selective colleges, involving a total of 500,000 applications, and interviewed 400 college students, sixty high school seniors, and thirty-five counselors. They found that at the ED schools an early application was worth as much in the competition for admission as scoring 100 extra points on the SAT. For instance, a student with a combined SAT score of 1400 to 1490 (out of 1600) who applied early was as likely to be accepted as a regular-admission student scoring 1500 to 1600. An early student scoring 1200 to 1290 was *more* likely to be accepted than a regular student scoring 1300 to 1390.

The equivalent of a 100-point increase in SAT scores makes an enormous difference in an applicant's chances, especially for a mid-1400s candidate. Indeed, the difference is so important as to be a highly salable commodity. A gain of roughly 100 points is what The Princeton Review guarantees students who invest \$500 and up in its test-prep courses. The Avery study's findings were the more striking because what admissions officers refer to as "hooked" applicants were excluded from the study. These are students given special consideration, and therefore likely to be admitted despite lower scores, because of "legacy" factors (alumni parents or other relatives, plus past or potential donations from the family), specific athletic recruiting, or affirmative action.

A counselor at a private school that has long sent many of its graduates to Penn showed me a list of the students from that school who had applied to Penn last year. The students were listed in order of their high school grade-point average—usually the strongest single factor in college admissions—with indications of whether they had applied early or regular and whether they had been accepted or not. Some students far down in the class who applied early were accepted; some students thirty or forty places above them in class rank who applied regular were denied. The counselor did not stop to calculate exactly how much an early decision was "worth" in terms of grade-point average, but it clearly made a difference.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR THE COLLEGES?

The more selective the college, the harder it is for outsiders to determine why any particular student was or was not accepted. Were too many kids applying from the same school? (At most colleges each admissions officer is responsible for screening applications from a certain group of schools: the advantage is that the officers become very sophisticated about the strengths of each school, and the disadvantage is that they inevitably compare each school's applicants with one another and send only the relatively strongest along.) Was the college recruiting for a certain athletic or musical skill? Was this boy admitted because of a legacy preference? Would that girl have gotten in if her parents had been more consistent donors?

When pressed for explanations, admissions officers usually avoid discussing specific cases and talk instead about the varied interests they must try to balance in "crafting" each freshman class. But under the unusually candid Lee Stetson, Penn has exposed some of the inner workings of the black box that is the admissions process. "We have had a policy in place for close to thirty years that legacy applications are given special consideration only during early decision," Stetson told me last spring. The reasoning, he explained, is that if a legacy candidate is not sure enough about coming to Penn to apply ED, then Penn has no real stake in offering preferential consideration later on. "Years ago many children of alums were not viewing Penn as their first choice, so they didn't apply early," he said. "We said we were willing to give them a measure of preference, but only if they were serious about coming." It made sense, he added, for Penn to extend the policy to applicants in general: if they are extra serious about Penn, Penn will make an extra effort for them. "We've been very direct about it," Stetson told me. "Everybody likes to be loved, and we're no exception. Everybody likes to see a sign of commitment, and it helps in the selection process." Bruce Poch, the admissions director at Pomona College, in California, is generally a critic of an overemphasis on early plans, but he agrees that they can help morale. "It's worth something to the institution to enroll kids who view the college as their first choice," he says. "Fewer people are whining about transferring from Day One. They turn out to be a lot of the campus leaders." This was part of Penn's strategy in pushing its binding ED plan. "I would say that these days eighty percent of our students view Penn as their first choice," Lee Stetson concluded. "You can't overstate what that does for the mood of the campus."

It does something else as well, which is understood by every college administrator in the country but by very few parents or students. The more freshmen a college admits under a binding ED plan, the fewer acceptances it needs from the regular pool to fill its class—and the better it will look statistically. That statistical improvement can have significant consequences.

The natural tendency to esteem what is rare—a place in, say, an Ivy League freshman class—has been dramatically reinforced by the growth of journalistic rankings of colleges. The *U.S. News* list ranks national universities from 1 through 50, national liberal-arts colleges from 1 through 50, and other institutions in other ways. It remains the best known of the rankings, but many other publications now provide similar features. (I was the editor of *U.S. News* from 1996 to 1998.)

College administrators dispute both the technical basis on which these rankings are compiled and the larger idea that institutions with very different purposes can be considered better or worse than one another. Cal Tech, for example, is so different from Yale that whether it is better or worse depends on an individual student's aims. But everyone involved with college admissions and administration recognizes that the rankings have enormous impact. They affect the number of students who apply to a school,

donations from alumni, pride and satisfaction among students and faculty members, and even the terms on which colleges can borrow money in the financial markets. Like getting to the Final Four in college basketball or winning a prominent post-season football game, moving up in the college rankings makes everything easier for a college's administrators.

When the *U.S. News* rankings began, they were based purely on a reputational survey, similar to polls of coaches for college-football standings: college administrators were asked to list the institutions they considered best, and from these figures *U.S. News* compiled its list. Year by year *U.S. News* added more variables to its ranking formula, such as financial resources, graduation rate, and student-faculty ratio. Most of these variables are difficult for a college to change over the short term. Indeed, the only ones guaranteed to change year by year are those involving the admissions office: the number of students who apply, the proportion who are accepted, the SAT scores of those who are admitted, and the proportion of those accepted who ultimately enroll. "Institutions of higher education are much more competitive with each other on a whole variety of measures than you would think," says Karl Furstenberg, the dean of admissions at Dartmouth. "Because it is an annual activity, admissions is one aspect of university life where you can have a more immediate impact on the character of an institution than you can in the long-term process of building academic programs."

The statistical measures that matter here are a college's selectivity and its yield. They are related, and both are taken as indicators of a school's desirability. Selectivity measures how hard a school is to get into. A school that accepts one applicant out of four, like the University of California at Berkeley, is more selective than one that accepts two out of three, like UC Davis. To the extent that college admission is seen as a trophy, the more applicants a given college rejects, the happier those it accepts—and their parents—will be.

A college's yield is the proportion of students offered admission who actually attend. If selectivity measures how frequently a college rejects students, yield measures how frequently students accept a college. In practice yield measures "takeaways"; if Georgetown gets a student who was also admitted to Duke, Boston College, and Northwestern, it scores a takeaway from each of the other schools. The higher the yield and the larger the number of takeaways, the more desirable the school is thought to be. "In a typical year Stanford would let in twenty-five hundred kids to get a class of fifteen hundred," says Jonathan Reider, a former admissions officer at Stanford who is now the college-admissions director at University High School, a private school in San Francisco. "One thousand would say no. Of them, about four hundred went to Harvard, a hundred and fifty to Yale and Princeton each—that's 700 right there. Fifty to Berkeley, fifty to UCLA. For a number of years we looked at that Harvard takeaway number and wanted it to go down, but it never did."

It is important to mention a reality check here, which is that American colleges as a whole are grossly *unselective*. Of the country's 3,000-plus colleges, all but about a hundred take most of the students who apply. Nonetheless, anxiety about admission to the remaining schools affects a significant part of upper-level American society. Without it the test-prep industry, private schools, and suburban housing patterns would all be very different.

From a college's point of view, the most important fact about early decision is that it provides a way to improve a college's selectivity and yield simultaneously, and therefore to move the school up on national-ranking charts. It will take a few paragraphs' worth of figures to explain how colleges weigh early and regular applicants and who therefore does or does not get in at which point.

Suppose a college needs to enroll 2,000 students in its incoming class. Suppose it receives roughly 12,000 applications each year in the regular admissions cycle—a realistic estimate for a prestigious, selective school. Suppose, finally, that its normal yield for students admitted in the regular cycle is 33 percent—that is, for each three it accepts, one will enroll. This, too, is a realistic figure for most top-tier schools. So to end up with 2,000 freshmen on registration day, a college relying purely on a regular admissions program would send "We are pleased to announce" letters to 6,000 applicants and hope that the usual 33 percent decided to enroll. A regular-only admissions policy would thus mean that the college's selectivity rate—6,000 acceptances for 12,000 applicants—was an unselective-sounding 50 percent.

Now suppose that the college introduces an early-decision plan and admits 500 applicants, a quarter of the class, that way. Suddenly its statistics improve. It is very likely to receive at least as many total applications as before—say, 1,000 in the ED program and 11,000 regulars. But now it will have to send out only 5,000 acceptance letters—500 earlies plus 4,500 to bring in 1,500 regular students. Therefore its selectivity will improve to 42 percent from the previous 50, and its yield will be 40 percent rather than the original 33, because all those admitted early will be obliged to enroll.

Finally, suppose that the college decides to admit fully half the class early, as some selective colleges already do. It will need to send out only 4,000 offers to get 2,000 students. Its selectivity will become an impressive 33 percent and its overall yield will be 50 percent. With no change in faculty, course offerings, endowment, or characteristics of the entering class, the college will have risen noticeably in national rankings.

That is how Penn used an aggressive early-decision policy to drive up its rankings—and not just Penn. Swarthmore's yield for regular applicants, the so-called open-market yield rate, is 30 percent. Because of its binding ED program it can report an overall yield of 40 percent. Amherst has a 34 percent open-market yield, but it can report a 42 percent yield because of binding ED. For Columbia the percentages are 41 and 58, for Yale 55 and 66.

The long-term financial viability of a college can be influenced simply by its reported yield. "I was flabbergasted when we were having our college bonds evaluated by Moody's and S&P," Bruce Poch, of Pomona, told me. "These bond raters were obsessing about our yield! They were chastising me because Pomona's yield was not as high as Williams's and Amherst's, because they took more of their class early. We explained that our regular-decision yield was quite high, and finally got a triple-A bond rating. Obviously there were other considerations, but this saved the college millions in interest." One admissions dean at a selective school proudly told me that his school's yield had risen from 50 to 60 percent in just three years. He didn't add what his college's own figures show: the yield for regular admissions had been steady in that time. The difference came from the school's having taken more students early.

The average SAT score of the admitted class is another important element in ranking. The admissions office can affect this directly, by giving SAT scores extra weight in its decisions—and surprising new evidence suggests that many offices are doing so. The main professional organization in this field, the [National Association for College Admission Counseling](#), reported last February that the one factor that had become *more* important in admissions decisions over the past decade was SAT scores. "College presidents see these *U.S. News* rankings," Mark Davis, a college counselor at Phillips Exeter Academy, told me recently, "and they tell the deans of admission, 'Keep those SAT scores up! Not because we think they're that relevant but because we don't want to slip in the rankings.'"

The most intriguing twist on the SAT emphasis is applied at Georgetown, one of a handful of schools still offering nonbinding early action. Whereas Harvard knows that nearly all the students admitted EA will enroll, Georgetown knows that most of the academically strongest candidates it admits early will end up at Yale or Stanford if they get in. Georgetown sticks with EA in part because Charles Deacon, its dean of admissions, is a prominent critic of the increased use of binding programs and the sense of panic and scarcity they create among students. (My wife, Deborah, worked for him in Georgetown's admissions office for two years.) But Georgetown also benefits from the fact that its nonbinding program attracts applications from some talented students who start out considering the university a "safety school" but end up deciding to enroll. Because colleges often highlight the average SAT scores of the students they admit, not just the ones who enroll, a policy like Georgetown's can make a school look better.

THE THREE AGES OF EARLY DECISION

Today's ED programs are relics of an entirely different era in academic history—actually, two eras. The first rough precursors of today's early system appeared in the 1950s, when Harvard, Yale, and Princeton applied what was known as the ABC system. Their admissions officers would visit Exeter, Groton, Andover, and the other traditional feeder schools. They would chat with students, talk with counselors, and look at transcripts, and then issue advisory A, B, or C ratings to the students. A was a likely admission, B was possible, C was unlikely. "It was a system that gave students from certain backgrounds a lot of access," Karl Furstenberg says. "It reflected the privileged relationships that existed."

By the late 1950s smaller New England colleges had come up with the first early-decision plans, as a way to make inroads with these same students. Amherst, Bowdoin, Dartmouth, Wesleyan, and Williams, allied at the time as "the Pentagons," offered what has become the familiar bargain: better odds on admission in return for a binding commitment to attend. "What's interesting is that from the start competitive considerations among colleges seem to have been the driving force," Karl Furstenberg, of Dartmouth, says. Soon after, other colleges began to adopt early decision.

The next distinct phase came during the baby bust of the 1980s, when binding commitments were a way to fill dormitory beds. With fewer students applying each year, even proud, strong schools found themselves digging deep into their waiting lists to fill their freshman classes. Smaller, weaker colleges could barely make their numbers and pay their bills—no matter how deep they dug. "It's not shameful to go to the waiting list, but you don't want to make yourself look needy," says Jonathan Reider, formerly of Stanford. "For an institution like Stanford, taking sixty would be a lot."

During the baby bust news swept through the small-college ranks that Swarthmore had not been able to fill its class without nearly using up its waiting list. "I think that got people really worried," says Edward Hu, who was then an admissions officer at Occidental College and is now a counselor at the Harvard-Westlake school. "If *Swarthmore* was having these problems ..." In the early 1990s the main computer in Brown's admissions office broke down: the office had been using a three-digit code for places on the waiting list, and anxious admissions officers were packing so many names onto the list that they had exceeded the 999-name limit in the database system.

In the mid-1990s Baby Boomers' children began applying to college, and the long years of prosperity expanded the pool of people willing and able to pay tuition for prep schools and private colleges. More bodies and more money were coming into the college

system at just the moment when American colleges were going through their version of economic globalization. Fred Hargadon, formerly the dean of admissions at Stanford and now in the same position at Princeton, says, "A generation ago most students stayed within two hundred miles of their home town when looking at colleges." Now, in education as in other fields, customers from around the country and the world were bidding for the same limited resources.

The economists Robert Frank, of Cornell, and Philip Cook, of Duke, have called this the "winner take all" phenomenon, in that it multiplies the rewards for those at the top of the pyramid and puts new pressure on those at the bottom. Frank has used the example of the market for opera. A century ago dozens of cities had their own opera houses, providing work for hundreds of singers. Now everyone buys CD recordings of the same few world-famous sopranos. Similar effects are visible in the college market. A worldwide sense that U.S. higher education was pre-eminent, and a growing perception within America that a clear hierarchy of "best" colleges existed, made top schools relatively more attractive than they had been before. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton became more sought after relative to other very selective schools. Harvard became clearly the first among equals, on the basis of the selectivity and yield statistics that are stressed in rankings. Harvard's open-market yield is now above 60 percent, which when combined with the near 90 percent yield from its nonbinding early-action program gives Harvard an overall yield of 79 percent. Few colleges have an open-market yield of even 50 percent.

Meanwhile, schools less well known or well positioned were applying a version of Penn's strategy, deliberately using the early option to improve their numbers and allure. "In general it's the smaller liberal-arts colleges that need to encourage applications, so that they'll remain 'selective,'" says John Katzman, the head of The Princeton Review. Katzman says that it's unfair to name any schools that pursue this strategy, because "it's like naming people who jaywalk in New York." But the counselors I spoke with volunteered some examples of smaller, mainly private schools that had placed increasing emphasis on early plans to lock up their freshman class. These included Brandeis, Connecticut College, Emory, Tufts, Washington University in St. Louis, and Wesleyan. The Claremont Colleges, in southern California, were often cited as an exception to the trend.

Tulane is one of several schools that have been inventive with early plans. It now offers both early-action and early-decision plans. Last year it sent a mailing to all students in Louisiana and to high-scoring students from across the country. The mailing included admissions forms already filled out with basic data about each student, which Tulane had bought from the Educational Testing Service and the College Board. Admissions fees were waived for students who used the form. Because of the new forms and other factors that made Tulane more attractive, applications went up by 30 percent. It therefore became more "selective."

THE HIGH ROAD

There is a case to be made for the rise of early-decision programs, and Fred Hargadon enjoys making it. Hargadon resisted early programs of any sort during the fifteen years he was the admissions director at Stanford; six years ago he oversaw Princeton's switch to a binding ED plan. He takes great and eloquent offense at the idea that admissions policies should be described as a matter of power politics among colleges rather than as efforts to find the best match of student and school. When I met with him at Princeton recently, I mentioned that high school counselors often describe the increase in early programs as an "arms race" in which no one can afford to back down. That night I got a lengthy e-mail from him saying that the analogy reminded him of "how narrow and shallow are the frames of reference often used by people in order to give an immediate response or reaction to one or another happening in higher education."

Hargadon's argument for a binding ED policy is in part positive: ED gives an admissions office the best chance to assemble some of the diverse talents, range of backgrounds, and personalities necessary to make up a well-rounded class. "If we need a quarterback for the football team and we've admitted two of them early, we don't need to take a third in the spring," he says. "If you're doing it in the spring, you have no idea who's actually going to show up." And his case is in part negative, or at least defensive. When it had a nonbinding early plan, Princeton could end up wasting its decision-making time and, worse, its scarce admission slots on students who were hoping to get into Yale or Harvard. "To put it as bluntly as I can," Hargadon said in a long note he had prepared before our talk,

Early Decision seems to me to be the most "rational" part of the admissions process these days. To be able to admit precisely the kinds of students we seek from among those who have decided that Princeton is where they want to be is far more "rational" than the weeks we spend in late March making hairline decisions among terrific kids without the slightest knowledge of who among them really wants the particular opportunities provided by Princeton and who among them could care less or, worse, who among them is simply collecting trophies.

Richard Shaw, the admissions dean at Yale, defends his institution's ED policy in similar terms. Under the old system, he told me, trophy-hunting students would "collect a lot of admissions from places that were not their first choice, and would take up the space that might have gone to other students." It was fairer, he said, to reserve the institutions' scarce decision-making time for students who really wanted to attend Yale.

High school counselors, most of whom take a dim overall view of early decision (but also master its nuances in order to get the right edge for their students), admit that for some students in some circumstances it can work just right. Yet not one of the more than thirty public and private school counselors I spoke with argued that because the early system is good for particular students, or because they had learned how to work it, it is beneficial overall. On the contrary, they had three basic complaints: that it distorts the experience of being in high school; that it worsens the professional-class neurosis about college admission; and that in terms of social class it is nakedly unfair.

Early decision distorts high school mainly by foreshortening the experience. With early applications due in the fall of senior year, students know that the end of junior year is the last part of their high school record that "counts." The other dates on the college-prep calendar must also be moved up. In the past five years the Kaplan company has seen a 60 percent rise in demand for its courses in the PSAT, the warm-up for the SAT. "These kids need to get started so they can get their SATs finished by the end of their junior year," Seppy Basili, of Kaplan, says.

"With this speeded-up process there's pressure on kids to be perfect from ninth grade on," says Josh Wolman, the director of college counseling at Sidwell Friends School, in Washington, D.C. "We've got colleges saying 'Well, we don't know, he had a C in biology in ninth grade.' I wish colleges had a better understanding of what it's like to work with ninth-graders. If they think all ninth-graders can get As—that all ninth-grade boys can get As!—they're crazy."

"A hallmark of adolescence is its changeability," says Cigus Vanni, formerly an assistant dean at Swarthmore. "To say that kids should be ready a year ahead of time to make these decisions goes against everything we've learned in the past hundred years." Tom Parker, the admissions director at Amherst, oversees an ED plan but nonetheless says that too many colleges are taking too many students early: "My own fundamental belief is that eight to twelve months in a seventeen-year-old's life is a very long time. For us it's a blink of an eye. Kids may begin the year with the idea of going to a large urban university and end up very happy to come to Amherst. They do so as a result of insight, growth, challenge, and family dynamics, and we really need to allow those things to play out. An awful lot of kids are making the decision too early because they feel that they can't get in if they don't."

I spoke with students at a variety of high schools about how the college-admissions process had affected them. By the end of the process most of them were battle-hardened and blasé, and not really interested in talking about what they had been through. The answer I remember best came from a sophomore at Harvard-Westlake, Tom Newman, a curly-haired, open-faced boy. How early did students start worrying about college? "Oh, yeah, for us as sophomores, it's here," he said. "Especially at a school like this, to a very large extent we start feeling the pressure of getting ready for college from ninth grade on. It's on our minds that tenth grade and eleventh grade count. So there's always the big stress level. They start talking to us about colleges before sophomore year starts—I think we had an orientation in late summer after our freshman year. They sat us down and said, 'This is it. The life you're going to be living for the next few years.'" I asked if he thought he would apply early decision when his time came. "Most people are for that, to be perfectly honest. They say you have a better chance. Most of the seniors I know have done early admission, and most of the sophomores are thinking about it."

Then I asked Newman if he thought the early focus on college had helped or hurt his high school experience. He laughed. "Are you *serious*? Maybe for a very small percentage it might help them do better. But for the great majority, no. It makes things more stressful, more painful. You go around the school and see the kids look tired. Very few students get enough sleep. They get either too much or not enough exercise. We don't go for moderation—you can't, because the hype is so high." He was saying this not in a whiny, tortured-youth fashion but as an observer of his culture.

Candace Andrews, a college counselor at the Polytechnic School, in Pasadena, California, says that she tries not to speak to freshmen or sophomores about college at all, but the parents are always at her. "I tell the parents, 'You want your kid to go to Stanford? Then let your kid have a real Poly life. Engage *here*.'" In theory that's how high school, not to mention life in general, is supposed to work. But Andrews says that the pressure to get kids on the college chute has become too great. (She is leaving the counseling business to enter a more relaxed field—nuclear-weapons control.)

At the schools I visited—strong suburban public schools and renowned private schools—half of all seniors, on average, applied under some early plan. Of those, typically half applied under binding early-decision plans, and half under nonbinding early action. All the counselors I spoke with said that if it were up to the parents alone, the overall total would be much higher. This was true even at Scarsdale High, in New York, where 70 percent of the seniors applied under some early program. "They're scared," Cigus Vanni says, referring mainly to parents. "The sense is that New York, say, has a lot of high-scoring, high-achieving kids, and if they wait for the regular pool, the students will eliminate one another." At Harvard-Westlake, Edward Hu and his colleagues keep the early proportion to 50 percent by insisting that students and parents work through a checklist. Sample question: "Have you visited the college that you like more than any other college? Yes or No. If Yes, continue. If No, stop. You are not applying early."

This question alone suggests the most glaring defect of the early programs: how much they are biased toward privileged students. It makes perfect sense that students should see a college before making a binding commitment to attend. A school like Harvard-Westlake, on the West Coast, can assume that its students will have made the East Coast college tour before their senior year. Counselors at the Los Angeles public schools cannot—that is, if they even have a moment to think about which of their students should apply early. At the typical private school or prosperous suburban public high school one counselor may serve forty to sixty students. At Redlands High, the public high school I attended in southern California, each counselor is responsible for several hundred students. Rich and poor students alike may be free to benefit from today's ED racket—but only the rich are likely to have heard of it.

"You can always argue for taking one more kid in the early stage," Jonathan Reider says, referring to his time as an admissions officer at Stanford. "There's always room to go from four hundred and fifty to four fifty-one. So you'd end up with four eighty. One year we went over five hundred. But you get to March, and you generally know what the yield on the regular kids will be, and you simply can't take another kid." Students who haven't heard of early decision are shouldered out.

Others who are left out are those whose parents wonder how they're going to pay for college, which is to say average Americans. A student who applies under the regular system can compare loans, grants, and work-study offers from a variety of schools. A student who is accepted early decision has to take whatever aid the college offers. Colleges swear that in making need-based aid calculations they don't discriminate against early applicants. That may well be true at the richest two or three schools. But even when that is the case, a student with only one offer on the table cannot know what might have been available elsewhere.

Charles Deacon, of Georgetown, says, "A cynical view is that early decision is a programmatic way of rationing your financial aid. First, the ED pool is more affluent, so you spend less money"—that is, give less need-based aid—"enrolling your class. And then there is absolutely no need to compete on financial packages. I am dealing with a very attractive candidate right now, admitted in our nonbinding program, who is comparing our aid package with"—and here he named a famous East Coast school that has a binding early-decision plan. That school, he said, had just come up with an offer that was all grant, no loan. "If she had applied there early decision, they wouldn't have had to do that."

"The whole early-decision thing is so preposterous, transparent, and demeaning to the profession that it is bound to go bust," says Tom Parker, of Amherst. "I can't think of one secondary school counselor who sees the benefit of the program."

THE RULES OF THE GAME—HOW TO WORK THEM AND HOW TO REFORM THEM

For students now entering their senior year in high school, and for their parents, changing the ED system is a moot point. The system exists, and it rewards those who are willing to play the game. The main strategy is this: a student who is in the right position to make an early commitment has every reason to do so.

For a student, being in that position means being absolutely certain by the start of the senior year that Wesleyan or Bates or Columbia is *the* place one wants to attend, and that there will be no "buyer's remorse" later in the year when classmates get four or five offers to choose from. It means having strong grades and SAT scores by the end of junior year and not thinking that one's record needs to be rounded off or enriched by senior-year performance. It means that one's family has enough money to be unaffected by the possibility of competitive financial offers. It means that one has decided not to apply for the extraordinary full-tuition "merit" scholarships—including the Trustee Scholar program at the University of Southern California and the Morehead scholarships at the University of North Carolina—that are increasingly being used to attract talented students to less selective schools. It means that one is emotionally prepared to deal with a rejection if necessary and then to rush regular applications into the mail right away.

Anyone so positioned should go right ahead. Those who aren't should take their time. There are, of course, nuances. Students hoping for but not confident of Princeton or Stanford in the regular cycle, for instance, should apply early to Georgetown—what is there to lose? Those thinking seriously of Harvard might as well apply early: there is no evidence that it's easier to get in then, but with most of the class being admitted early, it's a way to resolve uncertainties ahead of time. Anyone hoping to use legacy preference or athletic talent for an extra edge should apply early.

Those are some of the ways to work the system. What about changing it? One approach would be simple reform—accepting the inevitability of ED programs but trying to modify them so as to reduce the attendant pressure and paranoia. For instance, colleges could agree to abandon the practice sometimes called sophomore search, whereby the Educational Testing Service sells mailing lists of high school sophomores to colleges so that the schools can begin their marketing mailings in the junior year. High school counselors could agitate for a commitment from colleges that financial-aid offers would be consistent for early and regular applicants; the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) could carefully monitor trends to see that colleges honored the pledge. High schools and colleges alike could agree to report either more or less data than they currently do.

If more, then colleges would carefully distinguish between early and regular applicants when reporting their selectivity and yield rates. This would reduce the pressure to take more early applicants in order to improve statistics. *U.S. News* should ask for, and separately report, early and regular totals for selectivity and yield. If a school refuses to provide a breakdown, the magazine should omit selectivity and yield from the school's listing.

If less, then colleges could reduce the detailed information they release about admissions trends. Fred Hargadon, of Princeton, says he dreams of returning to the days when not even students were informed of their SAT scores and when colleges didn't advertise the median test scores of their entering classes. Barbara Leifer-Sarullo and Marjorie Jacobs, of Scarsdale High, have for years declined to give local papers lists of the colleges Scarsdale graduates will be attending. "If we did that," Leifer-Sarullo says, "the school next door would be under that much more pressure about its graduates—and school results are what keep up real-estate prices." Scarsdale's strong reputation means that it can afford not to be on lists of schools with the most Ivy League admissions.

To begin thinking about proposals for reform is to realize both how difficult the changes would be to implement and how indirect their effects might be. One such proposal could be called the "anti-trophy-hunting rule." At Scarsdale High students who have been accepted to very selective colleges under early action may submit at most one other application during the regular cycle. This avoids swamping the system in general and crowding out other applicants from the same secondary school. (In practice it largely keeps people with an early acceptance at Harvard from clogging the system at Princeton, Yale, and Stanford.) Edward Hu, of Harvard-Westlake, proposes another idea. He says that no student should apply to college until *after* high school graduation, with the expectation that most would spend the next year working, traveling, or volunteering. Great idea—good luck!

Two other proposals sound sensible but also indicate the limits of reform. One is that colleges voluntarily do what Stanford does now and hold early admissions to no more than 25 percent of the incoming class. "I really would find it problematic to give out more than a quarter of our admissions decisions early," Robin Mamlet, the admissions dean at Stanford, says, voicing a view different from Hargadon's. "Certainly I feel that when you pass a third, you limit your ability to maneuver as an institution, and it's not healthy on a national level." Some counselors told me they support such a ceiling because they support anything that will reduce the volume of early acceptances. Others think a widely accepted ceiling could actually make things worse, by enforcing the idea that early admission is a sign of super-elite status.

The other proposal is that Harvard be pressured to adopt a binding ED program. The logic here is that Harvard's current nonbinding program is de facto binding, and the fiction that it's not encourages trophy-hunting students to waste the time of admissions officers at half a dozen other schools. But Harvard has no intention of making this change.

The problem with reform, then, is that most measures would have a very limited effect, and those whose effect might be greater—for instance, a year's delay—are unlikely to be taken. This leads many counselors to dream about a different approach: a basic assault on the current college-admissions mania.

IMMEDIATE SUSPENSION

Today's professional-class madness about college involves the linked ideas that colleges are desirable to the extent that they are hard to get into; that high schools are valuable to the extent that they get students into those desirable colleges; and that being accepted or rejected from a "good" college is the most consequential fact about one's education.

Viewed from afar—or from close up, by people working in high schools—every part of this outlook is twisted. The U.S. higher-education network is remarkable precisely for how many people it accommodates, how many different avenues it opens, how many second chances it offers, and how thoroughly it is *not* the last word on success or failure. Obviously there are name and network payoffs from attending the "best" colleges and graduate schools. Four of the nine justices on the current Supreme Court have undergraduate degrees from Stanford. The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania has a powerful network in finance, the Harvard *Crimson* in journalism, the USC film school in Hollywood, Stanford's computer-science department in Silicon Valley, *The Dartmouth Review* among conservative writers, and so on.

But the positive effects of these networks are certainly far less than the negative effects of not attending the University of Tokyo in Japan or one of the *grandes écoles* in France. The longer a field is exposed to a continuing market test—of economic profit, of political approval, of performance or innovation—the less academic credentials of any sort seem to matter. The four richest people in America, all of whom made rather than inherited their wealth, are a dropout from Harvard, a dropout from the University of Illinois, a dropout from Washington State University, and a graduate of the University of Nebraska. American Presidents of the past half century have included two from Yale; two from the service academies; one each from Harvard, Southwest Texas State, Whittier, Michigan, Eureka, and Georgetown; and one (Harry Truman) with no college degree. Members of Congress are, on average, unusually wealthy but not from elite-college backgrounds. Rosters of Nobel laureates or top leaders in any industrial field demonstrate that admission to a selective school is not necessary for success. Twenty-fifth-anniversary alumni reports from Harvard, Yale, or Princeton make clear

that a degree from one of the Big Three is not sufficient for success or wealth or happiness. A counselor at Scarsdale High asks students to research and write about three to five people they consider genuinely successful—and then stresses to the students how little connection each success has to college background.

Other things being equal, a degree from a better-known college is a plus—as are good looks, white skin, athletic skill, being raised in an intact family, and other factors that skew the starting line in life. But more than these other variables, the importance of one's college background diminishes rapidly through adulthood: it matters most for one's first job and steadily less thereafter. The old grad who parades his college background does so because that's when he peaked in life. Yes, American parents wanting to give their child a fighting chance should make sure that he or she has some sort of college degree. The wonder is that getting through the admissions gate at a name-brand college should have come to seem the fundamental point of upper-middle-class child-rearing.

The drive to get children into one of the most selective schools may in fact be economically irrational if parents think that the money they spend on private school tuition will pay off in higher future earnings for those children. For years scholars have attempted to measure the economic impact of attending a selective college versus a less selective one. Isolating that impact has been difficult, because students who go to selective schools tend to have many other things working in their favor. But in a widely quoted 1999 [working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research](#), Stacy Berg Dale and Alan B. Krueger found that the economic benefit of attending a more selective school was negligible. (To be specific, they compared a group of students who had enrolled in the most-selective schools that admitted them with another group that had been admitted to similar schools but decided to enroll in less-selective ones. The selectivity of a school made no significant difference in the students' later earnings.) The same study found some payoff to attending expensive schools. But nearly all private colleges, selective or not, cost much more than nearly all public institutions—and there is only a vague connection between out-of-pocket expense for tuition and housing and perceived selectivity.

So although the pressure for places in the Ivy League and the exclusive liberal-arts colleges does not grow purely from economic rationality, it obviously has economic consequences. Preparing students for SATs and related tests is the basis of The Princeton Review's and Kaplan's success. Private schools remain crowded because so many parents view them more as valuable conduits to selective colleges than as valuable educational experiences.

Colleges, says Mark Davis, of Exeter, have achieved a miracle of marketing: "The miracle of scarcity. By making themselves harder to get into, they have made themselves 'better' in the public eye." Davis readily admits that elite prep schools like his benefit from this outlook. Many other things, too, are valued largely because they are scarce, but admission to an elite college is different from, say, beachfront property or original artwork, because it can't be bought directly. Thus the intensity with which parents approach the indirect factors that make admission more likely: prep schools, private tutoring for admissions tests, extensive travel, "interesting" summer experiences.

There is one other hope for dealing with the early-decision problem—a step significant enough to make a real difference, but sufficiently contained to happen in less than geologic time: adopting what might be called the Joe Allen Memorial Policy, suspending early programs of all sorts for the indefinite future.

Joseph P. Allen, a boyish-looking man then in his mid-forties, became the director of admissions at the University of Southern California in 1993, moving from the same job at UC Santa Cruz. USC, like Penn, was a private institution with an unenviable reputation, because of its location in a dicey part of Los Angeles and because it was seen as a safety school for rich but unmotivated students. Like Penn, USC waged an aggressive campaign to improve its image. Allen was the most visible public ambassador of the drive, traveling the country to recruit talented students, urging the creation of new honors programs, and raising money for scholarships that brought a wider racial diversity to what had been a mainly white student body. By the late 1990s USC had nine times as many applicants as places; the average SAT score of incoming freshman classes had risen by 300 points; and the university had moved up in the *U.S. News* rankings.

Allen, who had spent a year in federal prison in the early 1970s for refusing the draft for Vietnam, considered early programs economically unfair, and resisted using them as part of USC's recruiting drive. But as he watched their influence spread, he began to fear that no institution could avoid them in the long run. At a meeting of the [College Board](#) in February, 1998, he stood up and offered a "modest proposal." For years, he said, he had heard colleagues worry about the effects of early-decision programs. Many people thought that students had to make up their minds far too early. All of them realized that binding ED programs allowed schools to feign a level of selectivity they don't really have. But individual schools felt powerless to do anything about it. "We'd give it up—if everyone else did," Allen had often heard. Therefore, he suggested, why didn't everyone give up early programs altogether? Why not just declare a moratorium? He proposed a three-year ban on all ED and EA programs, during which time colleges and high schools would carefully observe the effects.

At that meeting some people supported the plan and others said it was impractical. Over the next few years Allen brought up the idea whenever his colleagues began complaining about the effects of ED programs. Then, in March of this year, Allen suffered a stroke while greeting a group of prospective USC students. He was fifty-three years old and apparently vigorous, but he died two weeks later.

Candace Andrews, of the Polytechnic School, who had known and liked Allen, told me, "In Joe Allen's memory we should give his proposal a try. No one wants to be the first one to take the step, so everyone needs to step back together." She tossed off this idea casually in conversation, but it actually seems more promising than any of the other reform plans. Not every college would agree to it, of course. Fortunately, though, the same hierarchy that skews the system could make a difference here. If the right few colleges agreed, that could be enough. When I asked high school counselors how many colleges it would take to change early programs by agreeing to a moratorium, their answers varied. A few thought that Harvard by itself was enough. "It's all about Harvard, it really is," Mark Davis, of Exeter, told me. "If they didn't have an early program, then others would feel comfortable following suit." Harvard's officials claim that no one college can afford to go it alone. "You've got to understand, the Ivy League is so hypercompetitive that I've heard our faculty members compare it to a loose federation of pirates," William Fitzsimmons says. "If we gave it up, other institutions inside and outside the Ivy League would carve up our class, and our faculty would carve us up." Tom Parker, of Amherst, says, "The places that would have to change are Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Penn. Those are the four. If they were to drastically reduce the percentage they take early, this would all change in a heartbeat." Joanna Schultz, the director of college counseling at The Ellis School, a private school for girls in Pittsburgh, says, "It might take the Ivy League. If those eight colleges made a decision, others at that level would have to follow." Other counselors and admissions officers had various ideas about the schools necessary to make the difference: Stanford, the University of Chicago, Swarthmore, Amherst, Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, Rice.

But whatever the difference in details, everyone I spoke with seemed sure that some small group of elite colleges could change the system. And almost all the high school counselors thought that high school students as a whole would be much better off, even if some of their own students would no longer have the inside track.

So here is my proposal: Take the ten most selective national universities and have them agree to conduct only regular admissions programs for the next five years. No early decision, no early action. Based on percentages of applicants who are admitted (early and regular combined), those ten are Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Stanford, Yale, Brown, Cal Tech, MIT, Dartmouth, and Georgetown. Collectively their image is secure enough that in the years it might take others to go along, they needn't worry about seeing their classes carved up from below. The desire to emulate them is great enough that other schools could eventually be either shamed or flattered into adopting their policy. These ten are all private schools, so no cumbersome delay would arise from the need for state approval. (The next ten most selective, which include some public universities, are the University of Pennsylvania, Rice, the University of California at Berkeley, Duke, the University of California at Los Angeles, New York University, Northwestern, Tufts, Cornell, and Johns Hopkins.)

Five years would be long enough to move today's eighth-graders all the way through high school under the expectation of a regular admissions cycle, and then to see how their experience differed. If most of today's high school counselors are right, early plans would soon be clearly seen for what they have become: a crutch for college administrations, and an unfortunate strategy for lower-ranked schools to make themselves look better. If after five years schools for some reason missed the early system, they could return to it with a clearer sense of why they were doing so.

"In an ideal world we would do away with all early programs," Fitzsimmons said when I asked him about the right long-term direction for admissions systems. "We'd go back to the days when everyone could look at all their options over the senior year. Students, parents, and high schools would be very grateful. Philosophically and in every other way it would be so much better if we all could make the change."

Because of Harvard's position in today's college pyramid, Fitzsimmons is the most influential person in American college admissions. His "ideal world" is significant news. What holds him back is the need to know that other schools will lower their guns if he lowers his. Are college students wondering what to protest next? The out-of-control ED system is my nominee. Today's students, who survived this distorted game, could do their younger brothers and sisters an enormous favor by pressuring those ten schools to do what they already know is right.