College Admission

Early decision: Is it right for you?

By Laura Raines
For EDU Atlanta

It's September and early decision deadlines for college admission are looming in October and early November. Is this an option prospective college students should consider?

Only if you have absolute clarity about your first choice for college, said John Latting, assistant vice provost for undergraduate enrollment and dean of admission at Emory University.

Students are allowed to apply for early admission to only one college. If accepted, they must enroll (provided they receive an adequate financial aid package), pay an early deposit and withdraw applications from other schools.

"Early decision is an application that allows a student to raise his hand, figuratively speaking, and tell us, 'I've done my research and I've thought about my college decision, and Emory is my clear first choice,'" Latting said. "It's a chance to get your hat in the ring early, but you should never force a decision. Not everyone has a clear first choice early in his senior year, and there's nothing wrong with that."

Emory University offers two early decision plans (ED I and ED II) that allow students to apply by Nov. 1 or Jan. 1 and receive a decision by Dec. 15 or Feb. 15, respectively. Both acceptance dates fall before the normal April admission letters are mailed.

"Having a second deadline gives seniors a little more time to think about their decision, and it allows the admission team to build the character of our freshman class in stages," Latting said. "We aren't just filling seats. We're trying to choose students from a range of backgrounds, strengths, talents and interests."

High school seniors applying for ED II status may submit their first semester grades and most recent SAT or ACT scores for consideration.

"Students always want to know if an early decision application gives them a more favorable review, and the answer is yes and no," Latting said. "We judge early decision candidates by the same criteria as regular applicants. You'll need to meet the normal admission requirement, but your enthusiasm and preference will give you a slight bump. Of course that bump is only an advantage if you know this is really your first choice."

This year Emory admitted 48 percent of its freshman class from early decision applicants, Latting said. Because Emory wants most of its slots available to regular admission applicants, that number won't grow, he added.

Being accepted to your first-choice college early during senior year might be a great feeling, but there are some drawbacks. If students are not admitted, they'll have limited time to complete applications to other colleges, so it's best to prepare and/or submit them just in case.

Students who are accepted early also lose the opportunity to compare financial aid packages from different schools.

"We offer the same need-based financial aid package to a student, regardless of how he applies, but if budget is a factor, early decision may not be your best option," Latting said.

At most schools, students accepted by early decision are still considered for the normal admission requirement, but if budget is a family consideration, early decision may not be your best option," Latting said.

There's also the chance you won't be accepted. A school may deny admission or defer an applicant to the regular admission process for a second review.

"It's always hard when our expectations don't meet reality, but you need to be prepared that you might not get the answer you want," Latting said. "We don't like to turn people down, but colleges only have so many spaces. My advice is to keep it in perspective. Be thankful you are going to college and go do a great job wherever you are."

When starting a college search, Latting encourages students to ask themselves these questions: Do I go to college? What do I do when I get there? Where do I go to college?

"The last question is the least important. The most important question is what will you do there, and whether you'll make the most of the opportunities available," he said.

Deciding where to apply begins with introspection, he said. "Think about why you are going to college and what you want to accomplish there."

First, prospective students should research schools and compare them based on academic, geographic, financial, cultural and social factors. Then, it's prudent to think about personal goals and determine if you can see yourself as part of a school's community, Latting said.

"Too often, students base their college application decisions on general school reputation or rankings rather than by drilling down to the program or experiences they specifically want," he said. "Make your own rankings based on what you care about. There are so many incredible choices out there."