Ending Early Admissions: Guess Who Wins?

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WHEN Harvard was founded in 1636, there were no other colleges in the American colonies, and it would become the model for many of those that followed. When it began requiring applicants to take an obscure test known as the SAT in 1935, Harvard started another trend. Two years ago, after it announced an aggressive new financial-aid policy, it helped push social class to the center of the national debate over higher education and forced two of its main rivals, Stanford and Yale, to follow its lead.

Last week, Harvard embarked on another effort to mold higher education in its image. Its interim president, Derek Bok, announced that the college would abandon its early admissions program, which for decades has allowed high school seniors to apply in October and get an answer — yes, no or maybe — in December, shortly before the regular deadline for applications.

Harvard officials argue that the program gives yet another leg up to well-off students, who don't need to compare financial-aid offers from numerous colleges and who often attend high schools where counselors help put together applications. After the announcement, many people within education urged other colleges to take a similar step.

“We're thrilled,” said Laurie Kobick, a college counselor at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Va. “I think it's going to make admissions better in so many different ways.”

What, then, might a world without early applications look like?

It would indeed go a small way toward leveling the field among applicants, researchers say. But it would also have an effect on colleges, and the biggest winner would almost certainly be Harvard, a fact that may prevent many other colleges — perhaps all of them — from mimicking Harvard this time. Any college that does so will risk losing some of its best applicants.

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had they applied later. In exchange, the students generally promise to attend the college if they're admitted.

The colleges then save money on financial aid, because students accepted early have little leverage to negotiate a better package. Perhaps more important, admissions officers can populate a large portion of their freshman class without worrying that an applicant will end up being admitted to a more prestigious college and choose it instead.

The most prestigious college in the world, of course, is Harvard, and the gap between it and every other university is often underestimated. Yes, U.S. News & World Report ranked Princeton No. 1 this year, and colleges that emphasize teaching may well offer a better education than Harvard. But it still exerts a pull on teenagers that is unmatched.

A few years ago, a group of economists surveyed 3,200 top high school seniors at 500 schools across the country, asking them which colleges had admitted them and which one they would attend. With this information, the researchers could estimate how often students chose one college over another.

Among those who were admitted to both Harvard and Duke — sometimes called the Harvard of the South — and who attended one of the two, about 3 percent picked Duke, according to the economists' statistical model. Only 11 percent chose Brown, perhaps the trendiest Ivy League university in recent years, over Harvard. Princeton and Stanford win only about 25 percent of their battles with Harvard. Yale gives the stiffest competition, winning about 35 percent of the time, which in politics would be considered a crushing landslide.

For any college contemplating the end of early admissions, the implications are plain enough. “There are a lot of people who apply to Yale early or to Princeton early,” said Andrew Metrick, one of the economists who did the study and a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, “who might choose to go to Harvard if they got in.”

Dozens of other colleges would be even more vulnerable to losing their best applicants. Today, students often choose to apply early to a college where they think they have a good chance of being admitted, rather than to one that seems like a long shot. Understanding this, admissions officers are happy to admit so many students early. As Ellen Fisher, college adviser at the Bronx High School of Science, said, the officers often ask themselves, “Is this someone we might lose if we don’t take early?”

There are caveats to Harvard’s dominance. Every year, about 20 percent of the students it accepts turn it down, evidently deciding that prestige is not everything. If early admissions were to go away, some high school seniors would still find themselves able to resist the lure of a Harvard acceptance letter.

Already, M.I.T., Stanford and Yale allow a student who was accepted early to apply elsewhere, opening themselves up to competition from Harvard. These colleges, or others, may well decide that the larger good of a fairer admissions process is worth the cost. “There is no question about it: early admissions advantages the advantaged,” William R. Fitzsimmons, Harvard’s dean of admissions, said. “It’s truly tilted.”

Officials at Brown, Dartmouth, Penn, Princeton and Yale, for their part, suggested last week that they had no immediate plans to make a change. They all have more to lose than Mr. Fitzsimmons does.


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