

MEMORANDUM

April 3, 2019

To: Interested Parties
From: Michael Dannenberg, Education Reform Now
Re: Elite college admissions

Below is background data for a potential college admissions proposal targeting early decision and the legacy preference.* In short, early decision and the legacy preference systematically and structurally benefit students that are overwhelmingly white and upper income.¹ Some 50 percent of elite college and university enrolled-students benefit, and the value of the benefits are sizable.

- * At highly selective schools, the early decision pool is more than three times as white as the regular decision applicant pool.²
- * Early decision students are less likely to be low-income, because early decision prohibits students from applying to other schools in search of the best financial aid package possible.³
- * Applying early is worth the equivalent of 100 added points on the SAT.⁴ Applying as a legacy student is worth the equivalent of 160 added points on the SAT.⁵
- * At elite colleges, over 40 percent – in some cases over 50 percent – of incoming classes are admitted early decision.⁶

Because schools are reluctant to disclose the extent or impact of alumni child preferences, there are limits to legacy admissions research. But examinations of groups of schools and individual institutions suggest that like “early decision,” the legacy preference also significantly undermines racial and economic diversity as well as achievement-based admission.

- There have been more white students admitted to top ten universities who have benefited from an “alumni preference” than Black or Latinx students admitted after having benefited from affirmative action policies. In some cases, there are more white legacies than Black and Latinx students combined. Virtually no elite college legacy student is low-income.⁷
- Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen show that legacy students that have SAT scores lower than the institutional mean tend to earn lower grades once in college as compared to their non-legacy counterparts.⁸
- Legacy admissions take up 10 to 25 percent of available slots at top universities, taking spaces away at elite schools from talented students of all races and income levels.⁹
- In a study of the 30 top colleges in the United States, legacy students had about 45 percent greater chance of being admitted. The odds of admission for legacy students are three times

* For a detailed history on the last major legislative effort to roll back use of the legacy preference and early decision led by the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), contact this memorandum’s author at Michael.Dannenberg@edreformnow.org.

that of their counterparts.¹⁰

I. Early Decision/Early Action

There are two types of early admission options. Under the early decision (ED) system, in November of their senior year students make a *binding* decision as to where they will attend college if accepted. As matter of policy, therefore, students who are accepted early decision may not apply to other schools in search of a better financial aid package.

Under the early action (EA) system, however, between October and November of their senior year students submit a *non-binding* application to a preferred school, receive an answer by mid-December, and are free to apply to other schools in the spring. Institutions differ in whether they will allow students to apply early action to more than one school.

How Diverse?

A 2011 Columbia University study found that overwhelmingly “those who enroll through early deadlines tend to be white, with higher family incomes and parents with greater levels of education.”¹¹ Early applicants admitted to Georgetown University’s Class of 2022 were 67 percent white, 10 Black, 15 percent Asian, and 11 percent Hispanic/Latinx.¹²

Only 3 percent of students in highly selective schools in the United States come from families in the bottom quartile of income, while 72 percent of students at highly selective schools come from families in the top income quartile.¹³ Low-income students are less likely to apply early decision. Among high-achieving students, 29 percent of students from families with incomes over \$250,000 applied early decision, and less than 16 percent of students from families with incomes under \$50,000 applied early.¹⁴

How Much of an Advantage?

Applying early decision is worth the equivalent of 100 extra points on the SAT.¹⁵ Admission officers from a variety of schools routinely tell students applying early improves their chances of acceptance, according to the National Association of College Admission Counselors (NACAC).

How Widespread?

Approximately 450 schools offer early decision, early action or both.¹⁶ That’s up from about 100 in the 1990s. At the most elite colleges, over 40 percent—and in some cases over 50 percent—of an incoming class is admitted early decision.¹⁷ For example, in recent years, Vanderbilt, the University of Pennsylvania, and Northwestern all filled some 55 percent of their incoming classes with early decision applicants.¹⁸ According to NACAC’s 2016 Admission Trends Survey, almost half of highly selective schools (those that turn down more than half of applicants) participating in the survey offered early decision as an application option. Private colleges were more likely to offer early decision than public universities. Thirty percent of private colleges offered the option compared to only five percent of public universities. While only 6 percent of the applicant pool in Fall 2016 were early decision applicants, colleges that had the early decision option admitted 60 percent of these students compared to just 48 percent of all other applicants. Similarly, colleges

that had early action options accepted 71 percent of students in the early action applicant pool versus 65 percent from the overall applicant pool.¹⁹

Early decision's and early action's popularity continues to grow. Early decision applications have increased by 5 percent from Fall 2015 to Fall 2016, while early action applications increased by 15 percent in the same time frame.²⁰ There are students who apply early because the targeted school is their true first choice. However, according to a review from the Washington on 2015 admissions survey data, students apply early because they know there is a better chance of being accepted early.²¹

Sample *non-binding* Early Action Schools

U Maryland
Harvard
MIT
Boston College
U New Hampshire
Georgetown
Howard
Princeton
UVA

Sample *binding* Early Decision Schools

NYU
U PENN
Brown
Amherst
Dartmouth
Assumption
Rice
Columbia
Cornell
Carnegie Mellon

Vanderbilt University's Class of 2022 had an early decision admission rate of 21 percent, while the regular admissions pool had an admission rate of 7 percent—2,199 regular admission students were admitted from a pool of 30,146 applicants.²² Across the Ivy League for the Class of 2020, the regular decision admission rate was 6.8 percent. The early decision rate was 20.3 percent – almost three times as high. At Harvard the rates were 3.3 percent for regular admission and 14.9 percent for early action. Harvard and the University of Virginia eliminated early decision in 2006, but reinstated a variation years later after competitors failed to do the same.

According to the Directors of Admission at Amherst, UNC, Yale, and Stanford as well as NACAC, there is a direct correlation between yield incentives, financial need, and early decision. None of the institutions, however, would make aggregate financial data available.

Of note: recently, the U.S. Justice Department began investigating some colleges' early decision admissions policies and their possible violation of antitrust laws. It appears institutions may have agreements with each other or share information about accepted applicants.²³

II. Legacy Preferences

How Diverse?

More white students are admitted to top ten universities under an alumni preference bonus than the total number of Black and Latinx students admitted under affirmative action policies.²⁴ In 2017, a former Princeton admissions officer acknowledged that the legacy preference is “one deliberate and robust admissions policy used in many college that in effect constitutes white affirmative

action.”²⁵ By definition, zero students benefiting from an alumni preference are first-generation college applicants. Virtually no legacy student attending an elite institution is low-income.²⁶

Although, the number of students of color enrolled at elite schools has grown in recent years, legacies remain overwhelmingly white. At Georgetown University, the 2017 admission cycle admitted 30 percent of legacy student applicants in comparison to 15 percent of all applicants.²⁷ The Dean of Undergraduate Admissions claims the legacy pool is similar to the overall pool of all students admitted to Georgetown, which is 12 percent Black, 19 percent Asian and 16 percent Latino, but that’s a broad and very favorable generality based on the most recent cohort of alumni.²⁸

The Class of 2021 at University of Pennsylvania breaks down as follows:²⁹

Total Admits:	3,757
Legacies:	16% ³⁰
Early Decision:	36%
Regular Decision:	64%
International Students:	16%
First-Generation Students:	12%
Self-identify as students of color:	48%

The Class of 2021 at Princeton University breaks down as follows:³¹

Total Admits:	1,990
Early Action:	41%
Legacies:	13%
All Minorities (including Asians):	47%
African American:	8%
American Indian:	<1%
Asian American:	22%
Hispanic/Latino:	11%
Multiracial (non-Hispanic):	5%
International Students:	13%
Regular admits in none of the above categories	
First-generation students:	17%
Qualify for Pell grant:	22%

University of Virginia education researcher Cameron Howell estimates that assuming the continuation of affirmative action policies it will take another near 20 years before UVA's legacy population approaches the racial diversity of its current student body.³²

How Much of an Advantage?

According to a 2010 study by Michael Hurwitz of 30 selective colleges, legacy students are three times more likely to be admitted than non-legacy students with similar academic backgrounds.³³ However if applying to a different school, legacy students would be less likely admitted to a school where they are not a legacy student than the other non-legacy students.³⁴ According to a former

Princeton admissions officer as stated in a letter to the *New York Times* “5 to 10 percent of admitted students were legacies who would not otherwise have been admitted.”³⁵

For years, the University of Virginia’s advancement office has flagged “VIP applicants,” those who are children of wealthy alumni for “special handling,” watching and taking notes on these VIP applications and any special steps taken to assist applicants that may have been rejected.³⁶

Schools such as the University of Virginia have responded to press inquiries on alumni preferences by noting that legacy admits score only moderately lower on the SAT than non-legacy admits. But the average hides the outlying low scoring legacy admits, masks the impact of low scoring athletes and minorities on the non-legacy admit average, and ignores the number of rejected students whose qualifications may exceed the average admitted legacy student. For example, of the 1,603 valedictorians that applied for the Class of 2020, Brown University accepted only 19 percent of them.³⁷

How Widespread?

Virtually all top 100 private institutions have express alumni preference policies. Public institutions, however, vary in express use of alumni preferences with the more prestigious more likely to employ a preference policy.³⁸

Typically, at elite private institutions, legacies compose between 10 percent and 15 percent of a freshman class.³⁹ Below is a sample of the percentage of enrolled students at selected institutions who have benefitted from a legacy preference for the Class of 2021.⁴⁰

Cornell: 17% Princeton: 13% Yale: 12% Notre Dame: 24%⁴¹

While legacies appeal to institutions for their higher giving rates, some institutions, including Texas A&M and University of Georgia, have stopped legacy admissions altogether. Yet, they have been able to increase selectivity as well as raise funds for such things as constructing new dorms, libraries and sports complexes.⁴²

Conclusion

Individual elements of the admissions system that have a disparate racial or class impact combine to have a cumulative effect that limits access to the most prestigious institutions of higher education. Wealthy high school students are disproportionately likely to take commercial test-prep courses. They are disproportionately likely to apply early decision. They are disproportionately likely to receive legacy preferences.

In the competition for access to the most elite institutions, low-income students face not only financial, but structural admissions barriers. One college official referenced that for an “unhooked” applicant (one without ties or resources to supplement their admission into a university) to be admitted into an elite institution, the applicant “has to walk on water.”

The practice of early action and legacy admissions is widespread, enough so to catch the attention of the Department of Justice. Now is the time for reform college admissions to better ensure equity

for all students.

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