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Early-Decision Applications Are Up at Colleges, in Spite of the Economy

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#)

Given the current economic downturn, admissions officers at [Wesleyan University](#) thought there might be a decline in early-decision applications this year. But when the deadline passed last weekend, they found that the number had risen 40 percent.

“I was surprised, and I was pleased, and I don’t have an explanation,” said Greg Pyke, senior associate dean of admissions at Wesleyan, in Middletown, Conn. “It’s hard to believe that one group of 17-year-olds has become more decisive than the group you saw the previous year. So maybe it’s that in a time of economic uncertainty, people want something settled.”

This was supposed to be the year that early-decision applications took a dive. With a recession, the thinking went, selective colleges and universities that use binding early-decision programs to lock in part of their incoming classes would find fewer students ready to commit, and would lose many budget-conscious families to public universities. Indeed, state universities are seeing huge increases in applications.

But many selective private institutions are reporting large jumps in early-decision applicants. Dartmouth, Middlebury and Bowdoin are all up about 10 percent over last year; Haverford, 14 percent; Northwestern, 15 percent; and Pomona 20 percent.

“It might have something to do with last year, when some students stayed on the waiting list a little longer, and maybe told their friends, ‘If you apply early, you can find out in December,’ ” said Art Rodriguez, Pomona’s senior associate dean of admissions. “There’s just more anxiety among students and parents as they’re going through the process.”

The numbers vary from college to college, of course — with two of the most selective liberal-arts colleges, Williams and Amherst, near last year’s numbers.

Early decision has become controversial in recent years. [Harvard](#), Princeton and the [University of Virginia](#) have eliminated early decision, saying that it favored wealthy applicants who did not need to compare financial-aid offers.

Some need-blind colleges said that they had been working to publicize their generous financial aid packages — and that it seemed to be paying off in early-decision applicants from less-affluent settings.

“Our decisions are need-blind, so I haven’t looked, but anecdotally from the reading I’ve done so far, I’d say it’s a very diverse group economically,” said Maria Laskaris, Dartmouth’s dean of

admissions. “I’ve gotten many more questions from students and parents this year about financial aid, and I think our financial-aid messages have been resonating.”

At Wesleyan, which is also need-blind, Mr. Pyke said the proportion of early-decision applicants applying for financial aid was about the same as last year.

Early applications come in more varieties than they once did. While most selective colleges use early-decision programs under which students agree to enroll if accepted, others, like [M.I.T.](#), offer nonbinding early-action programs, or, like Stanford, single-choice early action, in which students agree to submit only one early application.

Stanford’s single-choice early-action applications increased 18 percent this year.

St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., eliminated its popular early-action program this year, pushed back the deadline for binding early decision from Nov. 1 to Nov. 15 — and had a 50 percent increase in early-decision applicants.

“We used to get the bulk of our pool in early action, but we found we were turning down some great students in the regular-decision pool, while taking some who were not quite so good in early action,” said Derek Gueldenzoph, the dean of admissions.

At M.I.T., applications for the nonbinding early-action program were up 25 percent this year — and officials said about half the increase was a result of a new partnership with Questbridge, a nonprofit group that connects low-income students with top colleges. Stuart Schmill, the dean of admissions, said about three-quarters of those admitted under the early-action program typically enrolled at M.I.T.

This week, students at Berkeley Carroll, a private school in Brooklyn, knowledgeably discussed the choices they had made.

“Last year, a girl I know told me that early action was the greatest thing she ever did in her entire life, and it seems very generous, like a kind of security blanket,” said Emma Belleo, who applied early action to both Goucher College, in Towson, Md., and the [State University of New York](#) in New Paltz.

Rebecca Ballhaus applied early decision to Brown. “I’ve been pretty sure for a while that I would apply there early decision,” she said. “I like the other schools on my list, too, but when I thought about where I most wanted to go, it was Brown.”

Brandon Clarke, Berkeley Carroll’s director of college counseling, said that not a single family this year had talked about changing their college plans because of finances.

“Maybe education is the last thing people are willing to give up,” he said.