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STRATEGY | EARLY DECISION

You're In. Can You Back Out?

By [KAREN W. ARENSON](#)

The Reality

There is one important condition to binding early decision programs, in which students apply by November and get a verdict by mid-December. If you have been accepted, you must attend.

But with the recent elimination of early admissions at [Harvard](#), Princeton and the [University of Virginia](#), students may be tempted to apply early elsewhere and try to wriggle out if one of those three comes through later. Eric J. Kaplan, interim dean of admissions at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), warns: "We still are going to have the expectation that if someone applies early and is admitted, they are committed to Penn. There is no leeway just because Harvard and Princeton have eliminated their early admissions programs."

How To

The most acceptable excuse officials cite for backing out of an early decision commitment is a financial aid package that a family considers too low. The financial aid letter is often the first time a family sees all the costs lined up, says Eric Maguire, director of admission at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa. "Some families are finding their aid packages are not aligned with their expectations. If so, we certainly enable them to break their commitment."

Officials occasionally bend rules for other reasons, too. If he senses a student has applied under parental pressure and doesn't really want to attend, "we back off," says John F. Latting, director of undergraduate admissions at Johns Hopkins. Barbara Hall, associate provost at [New York University](#), will also set unhappy students free. "They are, after all, 17 years old," she says. "This is not a legal agreement they have signed. If a student says to us, 'This is really where I thought I wanted to be, but I can't see myself there now,' we release the student. It doesn't make sense to have students who don't want to be here."

Caveats

Early decision commitments operate on the honor system, but there are safeguards to discourage students from going back on their word. High schools often sign off on applications, and they don't want to lose face. "They know their actions can impact future classes," says Ms. Hall, who contacts the school if an early student fails to enroll at N.Y.U.

Many colleges rescind acceptances if they discover bad faith. "If we find that you lied to us and applied to our regular action process holding an admission from an early binding place," says Marlyn McGrath Lewis, admissions director at Harvard, "we would either not admit you or we would withdraw our offer."

Some colleges, like Franklin & Marshall, exchange early-admit lists. Ms. Lewis says she throws away the lists sent to her. Who tips her off then? "We usually find out from alumni, classmates, lots of different ways. We have a couple every year and we withdraw their admission, not because we are enforcing some rule at another college, but because we can't trust the student."

In the End

Most students who are admitted early — at least 97 percent at the most selective colleges — actually enroll. But even good schools come up short. At N.Y.U., Johns Hopkins and [Syracuse University](#), for example, typically 10 percent don't enroll. Financial aid is often to blame, officials say. At Syracuse, about half the no-shows decline because they didn't get into the academic program they wanted, says Donald A. Saleh, its vice president for enrollment management.

Officials advise students who want a fallback lined up before January to apply to colleges with nonbinding early action programs. But expect a lot more competition in those programs now that Harvard and Princeton are out of the game. Richard H. Shaw, dean of admission and financial aid at Stanford, anticipates a “bump upward” this fall in applications to its nonbinding program. Together, Harvard and Princeton fielded more than 6,000 early applications last year.

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