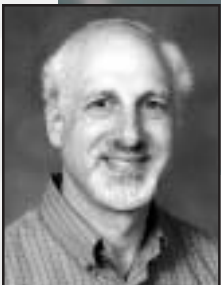
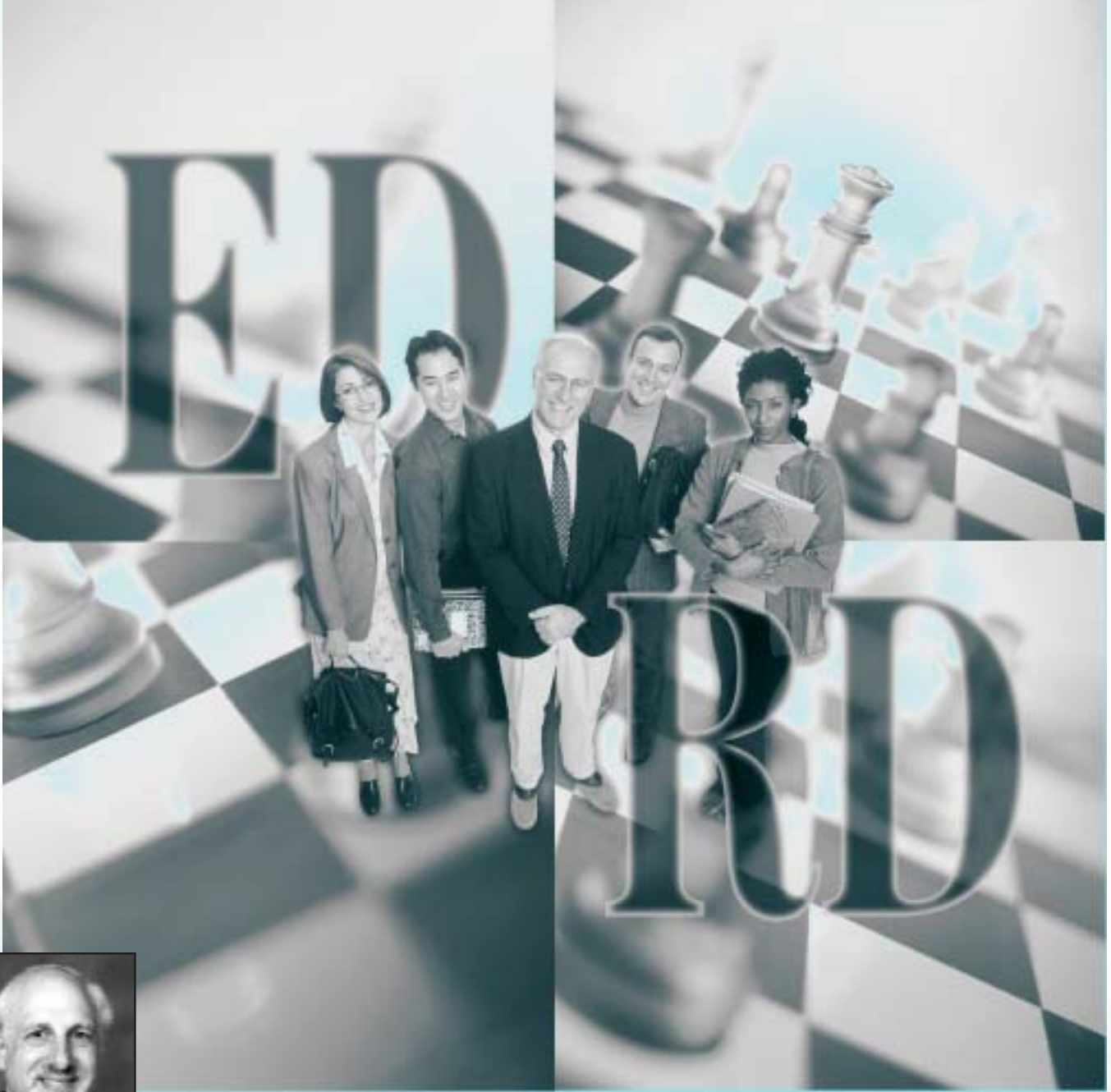


How to Humanize



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the College Admission Game

by Dr. David Reingold

Many high school students don't decide which college to attend by the fall of their senior year.

Nevertheless, many of these students are pressured by college advisors into applying to a school under an Early Decision (ED) program, in the belief that the chances of admission are better.

I believe that pushing students to make commitments before they are ready often leads to bad decisions and I am proposing an alternative that makes such pressure unnecessary.

Early Decision

Colleges and universities conceived ED as a way of decreasing stress for certain students. The idea was that *if* the student knew, in the fall, that school X was her top choice, she could apply ED. The school would notify her of her acceptance in December or January, saving her from several months of anxiety. In return, she had to promise to attend school X, saving the school the uncertainty of whether she would choose to go elsewhere, a win-win situation. The ED system was not designed as an easier way to get into school X. Indeed, as it was presented in the mid-sixties, getting in ED was harder than getting in during regular decision, because, just as the student had to be sure that school X was right for them, the school in turn wanted to be sure that student Y was right for them. If the college/university had any doubt, the student would be deferred to the regular application pool to be compared with all the other applicants.

This system, when used as directed, resulted in a higher percentage of applicants being accepted ED than Regular Decision (RD). When word got out, many admission advisors erroneously concluded that applying early was an advantage; that the same student had a greater chance of being accepted ED than RD.

Imagine Faber College, which decides to accept 1000 students for next year. Their goal is to accept the top 1000 applicants. They rate their applicants on a scale of 0–100, based on their desirability, using whatever factors they deem appropriate and, on this scale, they consider a student who rates 90 or above to be a perfect candidate for Faber. If Faber gets 1000 applicants for early decision and 250 of them rate 90 or above, these top candidates are admitted right away. The other 750 are not—after all, there might be another 750 students who rate 90 in the regular pool, so why accept a student who rates 89 now?

Come April, another 4000 students apply. Add these to the remaining 750 ED applicants who are not yet accepted and 4750 students vie for the remaining 750 slots. Out of these, only an additional 350 students rate 90 or above because most 90-rated students already applied to some other school ED and got in. Faber admits these 350, so they have 400 slots left to fill. They take the next 400 students in their pool, pulling from a rating of 88 or so. Of these 400, 75 came from the original 1000 ED applicants.

Statistics:

250 out of 1000 students got in early decision, a 25% acceptance rate.
750 out of 4750 students got in regular decision, a 16% acceptance rate.
Overall, 1000 out of 5000 students got in, a 20% acceptance rate.
325 of the 1000 who applied ED ended up getting in, a 32.5% acceptance rate.
675 out of the 4000 students who applied RD got in, a 17% acceptance rate.

So your chances were nearly double if you applied ED, right? Wrong! Not one student benefited by applying ED. Faber took the top 1000 students, the same students they would have taken if everyone had applied ED or if everyone had applied RD. Applying early gave no advantage or disadvantage. All students who applied early would have gotten in if they had waited. In fact, 75 students who didn't get in early did get in late, the standards being a bit lower in the late round. For an individual student on the border line, the chances were better of getting in RD than they were of getting in ED—400 students got in late who would not have gotten in early. If this is how real colleges work, the statistics would appear to show an advantage to applying early when in fact there is none.

A further wrinkle: *US News & World Report* rates colleges, using a bewildering array of statistics, including selectivity, defined as acceptances/applicants, and yield, defined as matriculants/acceptances. For rating purposes, low selectivity and high yield are good. Colleges know that ED provides a vehicle for inflating their numbers. The more students they accept ED, the higher the yield, since yield on ED

applicants is 100 percent. The more students they accept ED, the fewer slots they have left to fill RD, so they can accept fewer students and still fill the class. Accepting fewer students leads simultaneously to higher yield numbers and lower selectivity numbers. Colleges seeking to raise their ratings favor ED applicants, to the point where past misconception has become reality. At many schools, individual students now have a better chance of getting in ED than RD. Although some admission officers may deny this, high school admission counselors hear about individual applicants, "If only she had applied early, we might have been able to take her."

The system abuse is so bad that Richard Levin, president of Yale, recently advocated abandoning ED. Levin pointed out that the current system is so stacked in favor of ED that applicants are being browbeaten into applying ED by their advisors. Since most students are really *not* ready to commit to a first choice in the fall of their high school senior year, they end up having to choose too soon and often with too little information. In November of 2002, Levin acted on his convictions: Yale (and, the next day, Stanford) announced they would end their Early Decision programs in favor of an Early Action (EA) program. Sources: <http://www.yale.edu/admit/freshmen/facts/index.html#applying>; <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/uga/applying/SCEA.htm>

Early Action

EA is a variant of ED. Under this plan, the students admitted early are *not* required to attend the college. They can wait until May 1, the universal notification date, to tell the college if they are attending. This allows students to compare offers from many colleges and decide, when all the information is in, which school offers them the best value—this removes one of the big disadvantages of the ED program. However, students still need to apply under the early action label to receive an early answer—otherwise they must wait until April 1. Also, Yale, Stanford, Harvard, (Sources cited above; http://www.admissions.college.harvard.edu/faqs/admissions/app_pols/) and perhaps others, demand that the student apply to only one school under this program. Thus students can learn early whether they have been accepted, but only at one school. EA is a big improvement over ED, in removing the attendance requirement, but why prevent students from getting early decisions from other schools and why restrict these decisions to students who specifically ask for them?

Rolling Admission

Another system common among less selective institutions is rolling admission. Under this system, all applicants are evaluated and notified within a specified amount of time after they complete their application. This only works if the college has absolute rather than relative standards. In other words, if the college takes anyone whose qualifications are above a certain predetermined level, then it is possible to make a decision on nearly every application as soon as it is analyzed by the admission staff. Rolling admission is extremely attractive from the consumer's point of view, as the idea of getting an answer soon after you apply is appealing. On the other hand, if the decision depends on who else applies (as is true at most highly selective institutions), rolling admission can't work.

Early Notification

Early Notification (EN) is a new way to retain the benefit of an early answer without creating another Frankenstein monster manipulated to inflate rankings. Even at the best schools, some applications are clear yes's and some are clear no's, but most highly selective schools delay *all* notifications, even those they know right away, until the April 1 notification date, unless the student has applied under one of the special "early" programs. The reason for a school to sit on a decision that has already been made is unclear, yet most of them do it. Why not notify *all* applicants as soon as a decision can be made—a rolling admission system with a maybe pile? Many applicants (the maybes) will still have to wait until April 1; for them this system offers no advantage

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or disadvantage, but many others will hear either good or bad news as early as November. If the news is bad, this will give the student a chance to apply to less-selective institutions before deadlines pass—a healthy dose of reality, perhaps. If the news is good, many students will decide to end the process. Institutions will still receive a significant number of matriculations in the early stages of the process, so that they can have a sense of how many students from the "maybe" pool they need to admit. The difference is that those students who commit to a school early on will be doing so voluntarily and not because they are contractually obliged. They can weigh all the factors at their leisure and commit when ready. Students who land in the "no" pile would have the benefit of being rejected outright, instead of being told only that they did not get in early and still hoping that they might be accepted regular decision.

Such a system would stop colleges from favoring one group of applicants over another. Colleges would revert to accepting students on their merits. The selectivity would once again accurately reflect the proportion of admissible applicants at the college and the yield would once again reflect the proportion of students who voluntarily accept an offer of admission.

Could schools manipulate this system to inflate ratings? Certainly, they could reject perfectly admissible students they think will go elsewhere. Rejecting such students lowers the selectivity number and raises the yield (both good for ratings), but if rumor is to be believed, colleges are already doing this and the effect should be no worse with EN.

From the student's point of view, the EN system has no downside. The worst that can happen is that their notification arrives April 1. If the application is clearly a yes or a no, they find out sooner. Most importantly, students do not have to make a decision early in the fall of the senior year. A student can wait until she is ready to commit to a college. From the point of view of the institution, one potential problem is that a student, notified early at Faber College but deferred until later at Reba College, might choose Faber early on, when

he might have chosen Reba if the notifications had come at the same time. Faber wants this student more than Reba; doesn't he deserve to know? Even in the current system, colleges compete for students by offering varying financial incentives ("merit grants") to attend one institution over another. Students already know certain colleges want them more than others. They also know that, often, the more challenging college is better for them and don't always succumb to the incentives. Again, EN does not make this problem any worse than it currently is.

A second potential problem concerns financial aid. Under the ED system, accepted students are contractually obliged to attend, provided their federally-defined financial need is met. Thus colleges do not need to offer students anything more than financial stability to get them to attend. With an EN system, students can weigh all offers on the table before deciding which combination of price and value is right for them. Students who have genuinely decided that Faber is their first choice can still commit to Faber under EN as soon as they hear. However, students who have been coerced into applying ED under the current system will have more time and more information with which to make their decision under an EN system. From the schools' point of view, the problem is that they will no longer know which students will attend without the extra enticement of a merit grant. On the other hand, the most selective schools already claim to give no merit grants.

An EN system involves telling applicants what you know as soon as you know. The students benefit from knowing, as soon as possible, if they are accepted/rejected and this timeliness disadvantages neither party. Unlike many other reform proposals, this one does not require everyone to act together; a single school could adopt this system with no loss of competitive edge. The educational process shouldn't be a power-struggle, but a reward for the parties involved. EN sensibly allows both the students and the institution to make decisions when they are ready and no sooner.

