

By [Maya Prakash](#) _ Sept.8, 2025 _ *The Washington Post*

Colleges love this unfair admissions process. Eliminate it.

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College admissions in the United States have become divorced from merit. I'm not referring to contentious arguments over legacy admissions, affirmative action or athletic recruitment. I'm talking about early decision. Under early-decision admissions, an option that many private colleges and universities offer, students apply to one school — and one school only — by an early deadline and then must attend if accepted. In that respect, early decision differs from other application routes: It is binding. If you back out, there can be serious consequences that limit your ability to attend other schools and damage your high school's relationship with the college and you. And therein lies the anti-meritocratic rub.

10 Certainly, early decision can be the right choice for some applicants, particularly those who know where they want to go. But that doesn't vindicate the process, which rests on the flawed and unfair assumption that a student's early commitment makes them a stronger applicant. Admission decisions should reflect a student's qualifications, plain and simple — not their willingness to commit early.

15 The problem is at the heart of a recent class-action lawsuit calling for the elimination of early decision. Brought on antitrust grounds by four current and former college students, the suit accuses 32 highly selective colleges and universities of "price-fixing" by prohibiting early-decision applicants from comparing financial aid offers. It's a novel legal argument, but it underscores the unmeritocratic nature of early decision, which gives students with the ability to pay that premium an advantage and disfavors anyone who can't. In other words, early-decision admissions primarily benefit the wealthy and are like handing out trophies for showing up early to a race.

20 This advantage is an open secret. Savvy high-schoolers know that the binding commitment they make dramatically boosts their chance of admission. In fact, applying early decision has been found to be the equivalent of scoring an extra 100 points on the SAT, with acceptance rates that can be more than double those during regular decision. The edge is strongest at top universities: In recent years, schools such as the University of Pennsylvania and Dartmouth have admitted roughly half of their students through early decision. Colleges and universities can use early admissions to lock down more affluent admits such as athletes, legacies and students with no financial aid, while students from lower-income families often forgo the advantage of early decision altogether.

25 Early decision also allows colleges to increase their yield rates, the "most important data point" in college admissions. Yield rates, or the proportion of admitted students who ultimately attend a particular institution, directly impact rankings — and perceived prestige — on the U.S. News & World Report and other lists.

30 There is no righting an inherently wrong system. Early decision is unfair and potentially illegal. Eliminating it would be a good first step to improving the skewed college admissions process. But more steps are needed: The broader practice of early admissions — including nonbinding early action — deserves scrutiny, too. Any two-tiered admissions system in which those who can commit early are rewarded, and those who don't — or can't — are penalized, 35 introduces an anti-meritocratic bias. (511 words)