**Early Decision Craziness**

Last year’s college application cycle was considered one of the most selective in history. At the same time, many thought that it was just an abnormal year as a result of the pandemic, with trends that would not happen again. However, with the decisions for the Early Decision and Early Action rounds coming out recently, this year’s application cycle seems to be similarly crazy so far, if not worse.

Early Decision/Action acceptance rates remained at a record-low and application numbers at a record-high for many schools, including Ivy League schools. Yale admitted 11% of their 7,288 applicants who applied early while Harvard admitted 7.9% of their 9,046 applicants. Columbia received a total of 6,035 applications while Brown reported an 11% increase in applications from last year.

Cornell University decided they will not release admissions data from their Early Decision round. Princeton University is also following suit as they also announced that they would not release data based on concerns related to how the data may be perceived by applicants.

“We know this information raises the anxiety level of prospective students and their families and, unfortunately, may discourage some prospective students from applying,” a statement from Princeton said.

While the selectivity was off the charts, the classes of admitted students that were taken in the early rounds brought some of the most diversity seen in years. For the University of Pennsylvania, 14% of students are first-generation students (students who are the first in their family to attend college) while 13% are estimated to qualify for a Federal Pell grant, a need-based financial aid awarded by the US Department of Education, to help eligible low-income students p​​ay for college costs. Additionally, 12% of the class are international students from 60 different countries around the world.

**Why have applications increased so much?**

A big reason for the high numbers of applications in this admissions round was due to the continuation of the test-optional policy from last year. Currently, 80% of colleges are not requiring SAT or ACT scores, which like last year, is incentivizing more students to apply to colleges. Since students do not have to submit test scores, it allows them to apply to schools that may otherwise have been out of reach for them. Though the test-optional policy was expected to be temporary initially, it is expected to continue in the future. This is already the case for Harvard, who announced that they would be going test-optional for the next four years, through the Class of 2030.

The greater financial accessibility of applying to college has sparked increased applications as well. There has been a greater availability of waivers for college application fees, making applying much easier. Many organizations have also been providing free or low-cost support or mentoring for the college process, giving students an avenue to avoid the incredibly expensive costs of college counselling.

In addition to more affordable application fees, there are many ways in which tuition at colleges has made progress in its affordability, which has also encouraged more applicants. Many schools have used money from the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, a policy that provided funding to colleges at the heart of the Pandemic, to provide increased financial aid for students in need. These changes have given first-generation, underrepresented, and low-income students greater opportunity when it comes to their college ambitions.

Along with the major increase in domestic applications, international applications have increased a lot as well this year. In the early application rounds, foreign applications went up a staggering 40% from pre-pandemic levels. For colleges, this is welcoming, since foreign students typically pay full tuition, without as much financial aid, on average, as domestic students. Local economies where colleges are located benefit significantly from an influx of international students. International applicants who were a significant presence in the early application rounds this year, have made it a lot more competitive for domestic students to get admission, and are expected to only continue increasing in the future.

Over the years, the significantly increased competition in college admissions has made it a very unpredictable and volatile environment, a trend that was only reinforced from the early application rounds this year. With decisions for Regular Decision applications yet to come, a lot of the potential craziness in college admissions this year is yet to be seen.