*Who goes early? A multi-level analysis of early decision and early action applicants*

**Project Abstract**

This project seeks to conduct an extensive analysis of college students admitted to college via early decision or early action policies. The study draws on an unprecedented national dataset that combines high school institutional characteristics, student attitudes and behaviors, and characteristics of the college attended by students. We propose to examine characteristics of students attending college due to being admitted via early decision or early action. Using cross-classified hierarchical generalized linear modeling, the project team will also identify which variables, including high school and college institutional characteristics, predict enrollment under early action/decision versus enrollment through normal admissions.

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**Project Narrative**

A. Research Description

The goal of this study is to conduct an extensive analysis of college students admitted via early decision or early action admissions policies. We plan to identify characteristics of students who are attending college due to being admitted early, as well as examine predictors of attending college due to applying early decision/action. By utilizing a unique database that combines high school institutional characteristics, student attitudes and behaviors, and characteristics of the college attended by students, we have an unprecedented opportunity to better understand the phenomena of early decision and early admission in college admissions.

Research on student enrollment via early decision/action is critical due to the policy's growing role in the college admissions process. The number of high school students applying to college through early decision or early action programs has increased steadily over the years: The percentage of students who reported that being admitted through early action or early decision was an important factor in them choosing a college increased steadily from 6.9% in 1999 to 10.9% in 2006 (Pryor, Hurtado, Sáenz, Santos & Korn, 2007). At the same time, early decision and action programs have attracted controversy because they may offer an advantage to students who have greater financial resources (Lucido, 2002). In order for students to apply early decision, they must sign an agreement stating that they will attend that particular institution if accepted. Thus, students who can afford to attend a college regardless of the financial aid package have a greater incentive to apply early. This argument has caused certain institutions, such as Yale University and Stanford University, to eliminate early decision programs in favor of early action. However, early decision and action programs remain at a number of selective, and even less selective, institutions. Such programs may

assist enrollment managers in making projections about yield rates (Ehrenberg, 2002), but at what cost to access and equity in higher education?

There has been little empirical research on early decision or action programs. In the most comprehensive existing study, Avery, Fairbanks, and Zeckhauser (2003) found that students who applied early to college under early decision or early action programs had a substantial advantage over students who did not apply under either of these programs, as applying through early action or early decision programs equated to approximately to a 100-point increase in a student's Standardized Aptitude Test (SAT). Although there is much speculation that prospective students who apply early are wealthier or come from wealthier high schools, no analyses have been conducted on a nationally representative population to empirically test this assumption. It is clear that applying early is beneficial to students, but we know little about who really applies early and why. Our study seeks to fill a void in the research literature by examining the characteristics of students enrolling in college via early decision/action out of a nationally representative sample, and the analyses will control for student demographics, contextual effects from students' high schools, and college characteristics.

Some work has already been completed on the project, primarily assembling a dataset combining respondents from the 2005 UCLA Higher Education Cooperative Institutional (HERI) Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey and the 2000 College Board High School Data File. The CIRP is the oldest and largest longitudinal study of American higher education. The CIRP Freshman Survey includes demographic information, high school experiences, and college expectations, as well as entering freshmen's academic and career aspirations. This survey annually collects data from approximately 350,000 first-year college students from over 600 institutions across the United States.

In 2005, college freshmen were asked to write in their high school, city, and state for the first time in CIRP survey history. Researchers gave each student a high school code from the College

Board High School Data File, which is thought to be the most current and comprehensive dataset on public and private U.S. high schools. The end result is an unprecedented database with not only detailed demographic and personal information on over 350,000 college freshmen and their respective colleges but also information from their high schools, including the Advanced Placement courses offered and number of college counselors. Thus, this dataset presents a prime opportunity to study the enrollment of students via early decision/action in admissions.

B. Research Design

This study includes two specific research questions. First, what are the demographic characteristics of respondents who indicated they enrolled in their college or university via early decision or early action programs? Second, what variables, including high school and college institutional characteristics, predict enrollment under early action/decision versus enrollment through normal admissions?

We will isolate "early decision or action" respondents by examining student responses to the question asking students if they chose their college because they applied early action or decision. Within this group of students, we will identify students who also mark that they are attending their first-choice institution to isolate respondents who are attending their first-choice institution and gained admission through early decision or action. Thus, our dependent variable for the study is dichotomous, with students who were admitted via early decision/action coded as 1 and students admitted through traditional admissions processes coded as 0.

In order to take advantage of the unique combination of high school level and student level variables, we plan to use cross-classified hierarchical generalized linear modeling (CC-HGLM) as an analytical technique. CC-HGLM is the most appropriate technique because our outcome (attending college due to early action or decision) is binary, and we are using multi-level, nested data. CC-

HGLM uniquely accounts for the two intersecting environments of students: their high school context and the college or university in which they enrolled. Using CC-HGLM for clustered data better accounts for standard errors than single-level statistical techniques, such as standard logistic regression. Furthermore, this advanced form of analysis enables researchers to consider the interactive effects of students' environment with their individual experiences and characteristics, a feature not available in standard logistic regression.

C. Planned Outcomes

We intend to disseminate our findings through both academic and policy channels. We plan to submit conference proposals to the Association for the Study of Higher of Education and American Educational Researcher Association conferences. We plan to submit any publications to peer-reviewed journals, such as the *Review of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, or *Harvard Educational Review*. We hope to use the guidance of CERPP to help disseminate our findings to policymakers, such as the National Association for College Admission Counseling. Our hope is to produce research that will be helpful to researchers and policymakers who are examining the sustainability and equity of early admission policies.

D. Proposed Timeline

We anticipate obtaining an IRB exemption for the project by April 1, 2008.

April to May 2008: Conduct descriptive analysis and research for literature review

May 2008: Submit proposal to ASHE conference

June to August 2008: Select final model of variables, run HGLM analysis

September to December 2008: Write paper, present at ASHE conference (if accepted) and receive feedback, submit final paper to peer-review journal

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## Project Bibliography

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