

Early Decision lawsuit spotlights college wealth bias

Long-time admissions counselor details experience working in admissions wealth inequality gap

There is a six-month stretch every year where high school seniors across the country collectively lose sleep, sanity and their social lives making the biggest decision of their lives so far: their college choice. Well, that applies to most seniors, many of those who originate from wealth have a different track to university, a track which has now been put under a spotlight through a recent class action antitrust lawsuit.

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- Allyson Milot

The case, *D’Amico et al v. Consortium on Financing Higher Education et al*, names 32 universities and colleges, as well as the Consortium on Financing Higher Education, Common App, and Scoir, a college search site. *Tribal Tribune* reached out to all defendants named in the suit; they did not respond for comment.

While the lawsuit itself focuses on Early Decision, a closer look at it shows that it is only focusing on one part of the overall process; private college admissions counselor Allyson Milot has firsthand experience with the entire process.

“It has to do with the amount of aid that they’re getting, and the lack of transparency in... what you’re paying for... so it’s a little bit of smoke and mirrors ... let’s say college is \$25,000 ... and they’re saying to you, ‘But we’re gonna’ give you a certain scholarship that’s gonna’ bring it down to 17,’ But then you apply for ... need-based aid. ‘Okay, we’re gonna give you 10, but ... they’re gonna’ up the cost,” Milot said. “It’s kind of like... when you go into Publix and ... the strawberries were \$5, but then the next week they’re buy one, get one free, but all of a sudden ... they’re \$7.50.”

Milot has 20 years of experience in aiding high school students and families with getting into college. Through this experience, she has gotten behind-the-scenes peeks into the admissions process.

“I was at Fordham ... you know, me, I had a little chat ... we had a couple glasses of wine, and so [the admissions counselor] started talking... and before we knew it, I was like ... ‘Oh, so you’re not reading the essays?’ ‘Oh, no, they get put through a screen.’ Oh, yeah. ‘Like, we check for grammar, plagiarism,’” Milot said.

“I’ve had admissions counselors ... and off the record, they’ve said to me, ‘Yeah, we’re ... paying our bills ahead of time [with Early Decision].’”

Schools can guarantee a large financial payout with Early Decision because of the terms within its contract.

“It’s really tricky because you signed a contract saying, ‘If we let you in, you agree to go, we may or may not offer you a scholarship.’ That’s on us. It’s gonna’ be on your merit. It’s gonna’ be merit-based only. Your FAFSA (Free Application for Federal

Student Aid) hasn’t been submitted yet, [neither has] your tax return ... It’s even worse. I mean ... your parents can submit the FAFSA and have it retroactive, but ... they’re not even done, they don’t even have their W-2s back,” Milot said. “Your parents signed a contract saying, ‘We can afford this’ ... the college admittance counselors will say, ‘Oh, we give scholarships’... they don’t have to, you signed a commitment saying, ‘I’m gonna come here no matter what, I know what the tuition is.’”

For the families that can afford Early Decision, acceptance rates increase drastically, especially at high-tier universities.

“I would say, if you’re an Ivy League school, and your acceptance rate’s below 10%] ... In the ED branch, they don’t like to disclose those [acceptance] numbers, because otherwise ... it’s like a [give-away],” Milot said. “It’s like ... they’re basically saying ‘if you could pay, you could get in.’”

In an example of its power, Early Decision was able to play a major role in Milot getting her niece into the University of Miami, which has an Early Decision program; the only reason they were able to afford it was because of a wealthy family member’s college fund.

“The acceptance rate at that time was between 8 and 14% of applicants ... when we started looking at Early Decision ... the acceptance rates jumped up to 42%,” Milot said. “They were basically told, like, if she had applied regular decision, she wouldn’t have gotten in. I mean, she wouldn’t. So she knew the only way ... for her to go to her dream school was to do Early Decision.”

A key motivator for universities to continue this process of Early Decision wealth-focused admittance is that it allows them to control their yield, or what percent of students accept their admittance.

“It’s not enough these days [to be] in the regular decision pool, because there’s so many people. So that college can now say, let’s say, 30% came from Early Decision, which is 100% yield or 99% ... [In regular decision] they only got like, a 30% of people they accepted are coming. They add the 100% to the 30% [from early decision], and all of a sudden, it looks like every student we admitted has chosen to come here,” Milot said. “It changes their yield, which affects how they can say, ‘This is our acceptance rate,’ because it makes them look harder to get into than they really are, it’s manufactured numbers, in my opinion.”

This process reaches beyond the original eight Ivies and into strong academic schools across the country.

“The potted Ivies, they’re really big into ... their endowment. It’s huge. We’re talking billions of dollars in some of these schools ... Endowment

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- Lisa Carroll

ment is money that was given to them ... which is why ... they take all the Early Decision students, pay for everything for the year,” Milot said. “They use their endowment to get the students they really want ... they want the young kid that’s going to really shine and thank them later [financially] ... for taking a chance on them.”

The trend of finance-based early acceptance is longstanding enough as to where Milot experienced it in her high school graduating class in the 1980s.

“People started talking ... on campus when we were graduating. ‘Oh, well, I’m gonna’ apply to Harvard ... but I’m gonna’ do it early, my dad said I’m guaranteed to get in,’” Milot said. “I was thinking, ‘How are you guaranteed to get in?’ ‘Well, I’m gonna’ do this thing.’ They didn’t call it Early Decision ... if you applied early ... and this was mostly just to the elite New England schools

that I knew of at the time, you were pretty much, like, [in].”

Lisa Carroll, the head of Wando’s guidance department, did not know about alleged Early Decision fraud until this case, impacting her opinion on admissions.

“I think that it really ... hurts students. I mean, it’s ... not what we want to see for all students, and they’re not going to all be on the same playing field ... if that’s the ... way that the colleges are doing the Early Decision, based so much on their financial ability,” Carroll said.

With universities admitting students based on their capacity to pay full tuition and family’s potential to donate to their endowment, for Milot, the “nonprofit” tagline many universities hold does not ring true.

“College is business,” Milot said. “We’re paying for a commodity. You’re a consumer. They have a product ... you want their product. You want that experience, you’re gonna’ pay for it.”

Colleges with the highest Early Decision advantages

- Tulane University: 59% ED vs. 5% RD
- Northeastern University: 43% ED vs. 4% RD
- Colby College: 25% ED vs. 5% RD
- Brown University: 18% ED vs. 4%RD
- Barnard College: 26% ED vs. 6% RD
- Dartmouth College: 17% ED vs. 4% RD
- Trinity University: 48% ED vs. 11% RD
- College of the Holy Cross: 67% ED vs. 17% RD

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Student Q&A

Senior Sam Treptow, Yale admittee, gives student take on Early Decision, inequality

Q: How do you feel about the universalization of Early Decision and its growth from finance-based admission in the 1980s?

A: “I think as a whole, early decision kind of favors the wealthy and people who know that if they get in, no matter what, they can go. And so that’s kind of the problem I have with it. I get the having a student be 100% willing to commit, of course, makes it easier to accept them for yield protection measures and all of that, but I still think that it should be a more even playing field and that every student should kind of get the same chance and have the same shot of getting ... evaluated by the same metrics.”

Q: How do you feel about money’s role in the college admissions process?

A: “I hate how much of an influence wealth [has] in college decisions. I understand that it, obviously, [is] something that college cares about, because from my perspective, I got in and I actually had to pay \$9,000 a year. And that wouldn’t be possible if other students weren’t paying full price.”

Q: What do you think about the “nonprofit” title many private institutions give themselves in the context of their focus on endowment growth?

A: “I think that ‘nonprofit’ is definitely a very generous term. In the context of a college, however, I do see like, from my point of view, they were able to admit me and give me a very generous financial aid package, and so I do think that they kind of, to some extent, they need an endowment so that they can help lower income kids.”

“However, it’s definitely not being used completely fairly ... of course, the deans and presidents of universities are gonna be making copious amounts of money. And there is definitely something to be said about colleges, hoping to gain money.”