

# Common College Application Mistakes

The college admission process can be a scary one, but it doesn't have to be. Armed with good information and a solid plan of action, you can eliminate mistakes that might stifle your options or kill your chances of admission.

We asked a group of college admission deans and directors from a cross section of American colleges and universities to describe the most common mistakes made by prospective freshmen and to explain ways to avoid them. Here is their list.

## 1. YOU MISS THE BOAT ACADEMICALLY

The single most important factor in gaining admission to the college of your choice is how well you perform in a college preparatory curriculum, according to a study by the National Association for College Admission Counseling. (Second and third in importance are admission test scores and class rank.)

An ideal college-prep curriculum includes the maximum number of English, science, mathematics, social studies, and foreign language classes you can successfully manage in high school. To be sure, other factors will enter into the college admission decision, but nothing will have as much weight as your performance in the classroom.

A related mistake is assuming that a high grade-point average is more important than the difficulty of the classes selected. Nothing could be further from reality.

"The most common reason we deny admission is because students have chosen easy elective courses instead of more demanding college-prep courses," says Dan Saracino, dean of admissions at Notre Dame University in Indiana.

## 2. YOU IGNORE GREAT RESOURCES

Limited information is the No. 1 cause of bad decisions. Many students fail to identify and use the resources (human and material) available to them during the college exploration and decision-making process. This often leads to the if-only-I-had-known statement at some point in the future.

Contact current college students (perhaps graduates of your high school) for the inside scoop on your top-choice schools. Seek out school counselors, admission counselors, and financial aid officers for specific information regarding the admissions process.

Parents, family members, and friends can serve as sounding boards for all this newly acquired information. There are also countless tools — guides, directories, videos, and software — available through your career/college resource center, guidance office, and school and public libraries. Finally, take advantage of campus visits, college fairs, and counseling seminars to learn more about your options.

## 3. YOU FOLLOW THE PACK

Don't choose College X because your best friend did. The reason a friend chose College X may have nothing to do with your educational objectives and ambitions.

Personalize your search so that you can apply your values and test many of the myths about colleges. (Examples: Small colleges are intimate and friendly. The best colleges are the expensive ones.)

"Some students think that if it's a large college, the classes must be large, too," says Patricia Riordan, dean of admissions at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, where the student body numbers 24,000, but classes can be as small as 20.

You should also define what you're looking for in a college (e.g., major field of study, location, size) and apply these personal criteria throughout the search. Don't make your decision based on the needs and desires of others.

Be just as wary of "ratings" and "rankings" guides. There are outstanding programs within average institutions and weak academic programs within sound institutions. Create a ranking of colleges that works for you.

#### **4. YOU DON'T TAKE THE COLLEGE FOR A TEST DRIVE**

Would you buy a car without taking a test drive, or new jeans without trying them on? Well, too many students choose their future college without conducting a thorough search, and end up making a haphazard decision at application time.

"Some students don't even know the programs at the schools to which they're applying," says Riordan at George Mason. "I had one applicant eager to get into our architecture program—we don't even offer an architecture major."

Proper exploration will result in a matching of your abilities, aptitudes, achievements, and interests with academic, social, and related offerings of the various colleges. Use the exploration period to learn about yourself and what you want. Why are you going to college? What are your educational and career goals? What do you want to study?

Also, think about the sort of campus setting in which you would be most comfortable (i.e., urban vs. rural, large vs. small, all female vs. coed). Be sure to tour your top-choice campuses to make sure the colleges' materials accurately portray the environment.

#### **5. YOU DECIDE THERE IS ONLY ONE "RIGHT" COLLEGE**

There is no single "right" college for you. There are probably several. Before you begin to narrow your options, do everything you can to expand them. Look beyond the colleges that are known to you.

Don't apply to colleges where you cannot compete academically. By matching your qualifications and personal characteristics with the profile of admitted students, you'll paint an accurate picture of your chances of being accepted.

Create a list of five to ten serious choices, using the three-tier approach. Your first-tier colleges are the extremely competitive or "reach" schools; second-tier colleges are those colleges that meet all your requirements but are not as selective as the first group; and the third-tier should include colleges that you're sure to get into, a.k.a. safety schools. Make certain you apply to some colleges from the latter two groups.

#### **6. YOU MAKE THE PRICE YOUR PRIORITY**

"You should not exclude colleges from your list of possibilities on the initial appearance of cost," says Steve Syverson, dean of admission and financial aid at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, where the cost is \$26,583 a year but the average aid package is \$18,110.

"Some parents lump all private universities together as too expensive compared to public schools. But compare the costs after taking financial aid into consideration and the real costs are often similar."

At many American colleges and universities, one-half to two-thirds of the student population is using some form of financial aid (scholarships, grants, loans, etc.) So, don't assume that your family makes too much money or has too many possessions to qualify for financial aid.

#### **7. YOU LET YOUR DOG EAT YOUR APPLICATION**

Your application and supporting materials (high-school transcript, essay, teacher and counselor recommendations) are all that the admission officer officers have in front of them when they consider your candidacy. Your application is your voice. It should be a strong voice. Read the application carefully from beginning to end.

Make sure your application is complete, accurate, neatly prepared, and submitted on time. (To meet deadlines, create an exploration and application calendar, and stick to it.) Also, don't just tell the admission committee what you think it wants to hear.

Follow all of the directions, make certain that test scores and transcripts are directed to the proper person or department, and don't send extraneous items (such as video or music tapes) — unless of course, they are requested.

If you conduct a smart search and avoid the mistakes mentioned, there is a strong likelihood that a letter of acceptance will find its way to your mailbox.