



THE INS & OUTS OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

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College admissions and health care coverage: Something in common?

In recent weeks, much of the news on the national level has focused on the technical glitches in signing up for health insurance under the

Affordable Care Act. A political firestorm has swept over President Obama, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and all those associated with the passage of the act and the rollout of the healthcare.gov website. But there is another segment of the American public that recently has been plagued by Internet snafus quite different – yet similar – to the health insurance sign-up imbroglio, i.e., high school seniors and their parents.

The Common Application (Common App) often has been billed as the panacea for students applying to college. After all, what could be simpler than a one-stop shopping approach, where the completion of a single application can be used to apply to multiple schools? In fact, perhaps until this year, colleges loved the Common App because it serves to increase the number of applications they receive, almost all with a fee attached. Ah, but the devil is in the details. The Common App is now accepted by well over 500 colleges and universities. Last year, nearly 750,000 students used it to send in over 3 million applications, over four per student. On Aug. 1, the Common App folks rolled out a “new and improved” version (written with my tongue placed firmly in cheek); problems and flaws immediately reared their ugly head.

Quite frankly, I am a far cry from a techie, but my readings tell me that whenever a new, interactive website is launched or significantly revised, it is best to use the “canary in a coal mine” process and initially test it on a small fraction of its potential users. By doing so, bugs can be identified and corrected, thus saving the larger public from frustration and downright anger: It can now safely be said that neither healthcare.gov nor commonapp.org underwent such testing. Both entities have been forced to correct the problems live and in real time, thus raising the ire of all their customers.

How bad have the Common App's problems been? Here is a

very partial list: inability to log on, non-recognition of valid passwords, “saved” information lost, experiencing the “spinning wheel of death” while navigating, difficulties with uploading and formatting essays, being kicked out of the application for no apparent reason, problems with paying application fees and affixing the electronic signature, etc. In the admissions application cycle, Nov. 1 is a key date, in that it is the deadline for the submission of many colleges’ early (Early Decision and Early Action) applications. Nevertheless, up to 60 schools were forced to extend their deadlines due to the problems applicants were (and still are) encountering. The Common App’s glitches have been so numerous that it actually has launched a link on its website which identifies the problems, states whether they have been fixed or scheduled to be and even has issued an apology (euphemistically called a “Statement of Commitment”). Some schools that were planning to join the Common App have now changed their minds and others have announced their intentions to drop out. A competing college application system, the Universal College Application or UCA (see universalcollegeapp.com), has gained new members and schools as prestigious as Princeton University and Washington University in St. Louis announced in “mid-stream” that they would accept the UCA in lieu of the Common App.

The problems with the new Common App have not been the exclusive domain of high school seniors and their parents. College admission offices have been swamped with phone calls from stressed-out students and parents, thus exacerbating their workload during their busiest time of year. (The Common App has no help line of its own.) High school counselors depend upon linking students’ Common App accounts with their software systems (Naviance, Family Connection, Skyward Access, etc.) in order to send out transcripts, school reports and letters of recommendation, yet the new Common App has made these linkages problematic. This has engendered uncertainty on the part of high school counselors, students and parents, thus leading to additional phone calls to colleges to see if required application materials actually have been received.

It should be noted that the University of Wisconsin System does not participate in the Common App. Nevertheless, it has no reason to be smug. The UW System has its own uniform application (apply.wisconsin.edu) that allows students to save information and apply to multiple institutions, and it too has been afflicted with some of the same problems as the Common App, especially the inability to log on, the aforementioned “death

spiral” and other challenges posed by high server traffic.

What are students caught in this technological morass to do? It may be easy for me to say, but try to relax. Indeed, the Common App is making progress on remedying its problems. With the passing of the Nov. 1 early “choke point” referred to previously, the demand on the Common App’s servers has been spread out a bit. (Be conscious, though, of the potential for similar problems when the regular decision deadlines come due.) Admission offices are all too aware of the problems and will likely be flexible when viewing application errors that smack of technical breakdowns. Try working on the Common App and the UW System’s application during non-peak hours, shying away from school-night evenings and Sunday afternoons. (Friday and Saturday evenings are especially good, since what self-respecting high school kid stays home at those times?) Be sure to familiarize yourself with how to navigate through the Common App’s various sections and how to insert edits or changes and utilize the “Help” comments that appear to the right of most questions. Very importantly, be aware that many colleges have “Supplement” sections on the Common App with their own set of questions and writing/essay assignments. These supplements must be completed and often submitted separately from the main, generic Common App itself. The Activities section must be completed carefully, making sure to prioritize entries and providing as much background information as possible. The Essay/Writing section, where an applicant must respond to one of five prompts in 250 to 650 words, can be especially vexing. Formatting issues likely will arise, but can be minimized by structuring your paragraphs in a block style as opposed to indentations.

I could go on and on, but I will give it a rest here. Just keep plugging away at your applications. In almost all cases, think “the earlier, the better.” As is often said, “This too shall pass.” Both the healthcare.gov and commonapp.org websites are currently painful, but at least the latter is showing signs of recuperation and your mental health will improve significantly once your applications are complete.

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