

The Six Most Common Blunders of College Applicants

1. Missing Deadlines

The college admissions process is filled with deadlines, and missing a deadline can mean a rejection letter or lost financial aid. A typical college applicant has dozens of dates to remember:

- Application deadlines which vary from school to school
- Early action and early decision deadlines, if applicable
- Institutional financial aid deadlines
- Federal financial aid deadlines
- State financial aid deadlines
- Scholarship deadlines

Realize that some colleges will accept applications after the deadline if they have not yet filled their new class. However, financial aid may be much harder to obtain late in the application process.

2. Applying for Early Decision When It's Not the Right Choice

Students who apply to a college through Early Decision typically must sign a contract stating that they are applying to just the one college early. Early Decision is a restricted admissions process, so it is not a good choice for students who aren't really sure that the Early Decision school is their first choice. Some students apply through Early Decision because they think it will improve their chance of admission, but in the process they end up restricting their options. Also, if students violate their contract and apply to more than one college through Early Decision, they run the risk of being removed from the applicant pool for misleading the institution. While this is not the policy at Alfred University, some colleges share their Early Decision applicant lists to make sure students haven't applied to multiple schools through Early Decision. (Learn about the difference between early decision and early action.)

3. Using the Wrong College Name in an Application Essay

Understandably, many college applicants write a single admissions essay and then change the name of the college for different applications. Applicants need to make sure the college name is correct everywhere it appears. The admissions officers will not be impressed if an applicant begins by discussing how much she really wants to go to Alfred University, but the last sentence says, "R.I.T. is the best choice for me." Mail merge and global replace can't be relied on 100% -- applicants need to reread each application carefully, and they should have someone else proofread as well.

4. Applying to a College Online Without Telling School Counselors

The Common Application and other online options make it easier than ever to apply to colleges. Many students, however, make the mistake of submitting applications online without notifying their high school guidance counselors. Counselors play an important role in the application process, so leaving them out of the loop can lead to several problems:

- High school transcripts are delayed or never get mailed
- Letters of recommendation from teachers are delayed or never get sent
- The college admissions decision process becomes inefficient and delayed
- Applications end up being incomplete because the counselor can't follow up with the colleges
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5. Waiting too Long to Ask for Letters of Recommendation

Applicants who wait until the last minute to ask for letters of recommendation run the risk that the letters will be late, or they will not be thorough and thoughtful. To get good letters of recommendation, applicants should identify teachers early, talk with them, and give them as much information as possible about each program to which they are applying. This allows teachers to craft letters that match an applicant's particular strengths with specific college programs. Letters written at the last minute rarely contain this type of useful specificity. (Learn more about getting good letters of recommendation.)

6. Failing to Limit Parents' Involvement

Students need to self-advocate during the admissions process. The college is admitting the student, not the student's mom or dad. It's the student who needs to build a relationship with the college, not the parents. Helicopter parents--those who constantly hover--end up doing a disservice to their children. Students need to manage their own affairs once they get to college, so the admissions staff wants to see evidence of this self-sufficiency during the application process. While parents should certainly be involved in the college admissions process, the student needs to make the connections with the school and complete the application.