

Avoiding the Ten Most Common College Admission Mistakes

by Frank Burtnett, Ed.D.

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, a college-bound student can eliminate the common mistakes that tend to stifle your options or kill your chances of admission.

Education Now asked a group of college admission deans and directors at a cross section of American colleges and universities to describe the most common mistakes made by prospective freshmen and to identify ways to avoid them. Here is a list of the ten most common errors.

Mistake #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 challenging college preparatory curriculum. This fact has been supported by studies that have been repeated over time by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). While admission tests scores can produce an inordinate amount of anxiety, they are less important in the eyes of the admission officer than academic performance, including the rigor of courses taken.

An ideal college-prep curriculum includes the maximum number of English, science, mathematics, technology, social studies, and foreign language classes you can successfully manage. To be certain, other factors will enter into the college admission

decision, but nothing will have as much weight as your performance in these studies.

College-bound students also err in assuming that high grades are more important than the difficulty of the classes selected. Nothing could be further from reality. "A 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 the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

Mistake #2 YOU IGNORE GREAT RESOURCES

Limited information is the primary 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 that all too familiar "if-only-I-had-known" revelation at some point in the future.

Contact current college students (perhaps older friends who have moved on to college) for the inside scoop on your top-choice schools. Parents, family members, and friends can serve as sounding boards for all this newly acquired information. College web sites offer everything from general information about the institution and admission and financial aid requirements to virtual campus tours, interactive and downloadable applications and opportunities to pose specific questions for and interface with the admission

counselors. These web sites afford you a rich opportunity to gather valuable information without ever leaving the comforts of home.

Resources that will help you explore college options are everywhere, including countless publications, videos, and software available through nearby libraries. Last, but extremely important; take advantage of campus visits, college fairs, and counseling seminars to learn more about your options.

Mistake #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 eliminate 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, former Dean of Admissions at George Mason University in 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 less than

desirable offerings within so-called "top" ranked institutions. The best ranking is the one that you create for yourself.

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

Would you buy a car without taking a test drive or a pair of 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 visiting applicant eager to sit in on some of the classes in 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. co-ed). Be sure to tour your top-choice campuses to make sure the college's materials accurately portray the environment. Your campus visit is your one opportunity to try the college on to see how it fits.

Mistake #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 5 to 10 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.

Mistake #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 Wisconsin. “Some students and 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 or more 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.

Mistake #7 YOUR ESSAY OR INTERVIEW “BOMB”

A significant number of colleges require an essay or writing sample as a part of the admission application. Some even choose to meet the student face-to-face for an interview. Both of these matters need to be taken seriously and require the student putting forth a good effort.

College essay readers are looking for thoughtful and sincere content, creative expression and good writing style. Interviewers want to see enthusiasm, poise and maturity. One of the common essay and interview errors is writing or saying what you believe the college wants to hear. Be yourself and express your beliefs, opinions and views.

Most admission professionals have been reading essays and interviewing a long time. They know sincerity and enthusiasm when they see them. Do your best not to disappoint them.

Mistake #8 YOU LET YOUR DOG EAT YOUR APPLICATION

Your application and supporting materials (high school transcript, admission test scores, recommendations

and sometimes an interview report) are all that the admission officers have in front of them when they consider your candidacy.

Make sure your application is complete, accurate and neatly prepared. Your application is your voice. It should be a strong voice. Read the application carefully from beginning to end. Do all the things they ask you to do in the manner in which the college wants them done. This is not a time to play games or attempt to be overly creative. By the same token, don't just tell the admission committee what you think it wants to hear.

Make certain that everything is directed to the proper person or department, and don't send extraneous items (such as a video or music tapes) unless, of course, they are requested.

Mistake #9 YOU FAIL TO MANAGE TIME

From the beginning of the college exploration process to the time you send off your applications, time can be either your strategic friend or your very worst enemy. Take a look at all of the tasks that you need to perform, the help you're going to need from friends, family and counselors to get the job done and create a calendar that lays out all of the admission application work that lies before you.

College application deadlines are just that. Submit after the due date and late receipt---not your qualifications---can kill your chances of admission. Just as important is giving you sufficient time to put together a dynamite application, one that tells the college who you are and

why you want to enroll there. Don't let time kill your chances.

Mistake #10 YOU IGNORE COUNSELING ALLIES

School counselors and college admission and financial aid officers can be your greatest ally during this transitional period. Unfortunately, too many college-bound students don't use these valuable human resources or don't use them effectively.

Rusty Shunk, an assistant to the President at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania and former Dean of Admission at that institution, has talked about the perception of admission officers as "gatekeepers," individuals responsible only for admit and deny decisions. Rather, he would prefer that all admission officers and school counselors be viewed as "path lighters," individuals who present information and options and help each college-bound student navigate the exploration, decision-making and application process.

Make certain you squeeze all the help you can from the admission/financial aid representatives and school counselors that are there to help you. They can be incredible allies.

WATCH YOUR MAILBOX

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Frank Burnnett has been engaged in college and career counseling his entire career. He has developed counseling programs, trained counselors, created counseling tools and evaluated counseling services for more than 350 institutions, organizations agencies and corporate clients.

Frank is the president of Education Now, a consulting firm with offices in Springfield, Virginia and Rockport, Maine. He is the former Executive Director of the National Association for College Admission Counseling and Associate Executive Director of the American Counseling Association.

Frank has conducted classes in college admission and financial aid issues for students and parents and spoken before larger gatherings of people who are attempting to understand and navigate the school to college transition.

He has been awarded the National Certified Counselor (NCC) and the National Certified Career Counselor (NCCC) certificates of the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) and the Master Career Counselor (MCC) designation of the National Career Development Association (NCDA). He is a registered counselor (#2478) in the state of Maine.

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Education Now has produced a number of college and career counseling resources designed to aid or compliment the work being performed by counselors and educators. These resources include:

College Planning Profile

A series of 18 exercises college-bound students can complete to ensure they are engaged in quality exploration and decision-making. Puts your personal college and financial aid search on track. Individual copy - \$6.50

College Planning Portfolio

Organize your total college search and application process and keep all of your important notes and papers by using this sturdy portfolio. Printed on the inside of each portfolio are a number of admission and financial tasks with places for due and completion dates. Keep everything in one place. Individual copy - \$3.50

Destination: College

Answers to the 100 most frequently asked questions about getting into college. This is an excellent beginning resource for sophomores and juniors and a great review resource for seniors. Individual copy - \$7.50

Career Planning Profile

Learn more about yourself and the world of work by completing the series of 13 exercises contained in this special career guidance instrument. Individual copy - \$6.50

Career Planning Portfolio

Keep track of your resume, job applications and the other important papers you collect and use in the career exploration and job finding process in this sturdy portfolio. Printed on the inside of each portfolio are a series of tasks that will help you explore options and consider educational and career opportunities. Individual copy - \$3.50

Career & College Planning Package

All five of the resources and tools identified above (a \$27.50 value) for just \$21 prepaid. (Shipping & handling are included)

Send orders (with check made payable to Education Now) to: Education Now, PO Box 2832, Springfield, VA 22152-2608. Allow two weeks for delivery of requested items.

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