

Applications: A Parent's Role

Your challenge as a parent is to support your student as she applies to college but let her do the work.



By The College Board

Do I give up now in despair or just do it myself? This is the question many parents ask during the college application

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process. The challenge is to be supportive while doing neither. The application is a source of much anxiety for students, and understandably so. This is the package that will seemingly decide their hopes and dreams.

But parents can reassure students that things are not that dire. Thousands of schools are looking for qualified applicants, and the vast majority of students who want to go to college will get in. As expert Charles Shields points out in *The College Guide For Parents*, nine out of 10 students who apply to two or more schools get in to more than one.

Getting Organized

So, take a deep breath and relax. This is not rocket science, at least, not yet. In fact, the most challenging thing about the college application is being organized enough to get the required pieces in by various deadlines. Here's where your itch to take over might be strongest, because lots of students express their anxiety by putting things off.

Of course, you can't do it for them. You can, however, empower your child with tools to conquer the paperwork. Suggest your child dedicate a folder to each college. At the front of each folder should be a checklist of required materials and the date each is due. Now you can both see at a glance what's been taken care of and what still needs doing.

Warming Up

Most applications request a list of activities your child has participated in and a list of honors and awards. Some may ask for additional information such as career interests, and some may even ask for a statement from parents. You can help gather details on four years of activities and honors. Your child should also have a copy of her high school transcript and know her social security number and high school code. Now the details will be at her fingertips.

It also helps to brainstorm with your student before getting started. Ask her which activities were most significant to her and why, or whether a particular award or honor stands out in her mind. Ask her what she thinks she might contribute to the college that no one else would. This will prepare her to highlight the most important items and will help her stand out as an individual.

Just the Facts

While students understandably want to impress, the old rule applies: Honesty is the best policy. Admission officers can sniff exaggeration a mile away. Schools prefer to see a sincere picture of individual interests over a scattershot list of brief forays jotted down just to beef up qualifications.

More than Just the Facts

On the other hand, the "supplemental information" category is a chance to explain special circumstances or detail unique abilities. Not all applications provide such an opportunity. If not, you can contact the admission office and inquire about including such materials. Aspiring artists or dancers might wish to send slides or a videotape. Be sure your child labels such materials and indicates on the application that it is included.

To Whom It May Concern

Even if not required, letters of recommendation help give a more complete picture of your child's strengths. But use common sense when including these materials. Andrew Flagel, dean of admissions at George Mason University, says he once received 34 letters of recommendation for a single student! This is way too much material for overworked admissions officials and won't add much to an application.

Teachers who know your child well and can speak in detail about one aspect of his achievements are often the best choice for recommendation writers. Some colleges may also ask for recommendations from peers or alumni and other adults. Seek out individuals for their relationship with your child, not for their credentials. A detailed, well-written letter by the next-door neighbor is worth more than vague generalizations from a well-known figure.

Encourage your child to ask for letters well in advance and provide the writer with a firm deadline. She might also suggest the writer focus on a single area of achievement. A drama teacher should write about your child as a drama student, not as an AP math student and athlete. Since college course work requires intensive writing and reading, a letter from an English teacher is always a good idea. Finally, your child should be sure to provide the writer with completed recommendation forms and a stamped, addressed envelope for each school.

Déjà Vu All Over Again

Applications all have similar requirements, and it is perfectly permissible to use the same materials for different schools. In fact, the Common Application is used by more than 130 private colleges, from Dartmouth to Harvard. The form is available from high school guidance counselors. But your child should order application packets even if he is using the Common Application form, because some schools require additional information. Your child can apply online to hundreds of schools with our Next Stop College service, available in Student Tools.

Should Your Child Apply Early?

Some schools allow students to apply early. Such [early decision or early action](#) programs often inform students of admission in the first part of senior year. This can reduce the stress of waiting, but there's a catch: early decision plans require the student to attend that college if accepted with an adequate financial package. This option can be ideal for students who are sure of the school they want to attend, but it doesn't work for those who want to compare their options. Help your child do careful research on all the details if he goes this route.

George Mason admissions dean Andrew Flagel says perhaps the most important advice for parents is to avoid putting too much emphasis on the process. "The less stress a student can have during the application process, the more they will get out of junior and senior years — a crucial time — and the better they will do on standardized tests. When the application process becomes more important than the education they are receiving, there is a problem," he says.

At last, the envelopes will all be sealed and ready to mail. You might want to help your child send the packets certified mail, so she gets confirmation and a record that they were delivered on time. You and your child can celebrate this accomplishment; it's one more step on the road to independence and adulthood.