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The Common Application: A Failed Launch That Keeps on Failing

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Some 500 colleges and tens of thousands of students have come to depend on the Common Application. For those unfamiliar with the Common Application, what it is and what it does, consider yourselves lucky. That means you are not dealing with the problems it is causing high school seniors this fall. The Common Application (informally known as the Common App) is an undergraduate college admission application that students may use to apply to any of its 517 member colleges and universities in 47 states and the District of Columbia, as well as a half dozen international countries. The Common Application, Inc. is managed by the staff of a not-for-profit membership association governed by a volunteer member board of directors drawn from college admission deans and college guidance counselors.

An overhauled Common Application version went live on Aug.1. The new platform was preceded by a full-blown marketing campaign and touted to offer many enhancements sure to please. Unfortunately, the Common App was beleaguered by opening day glitches and hobbled through its first week. As of this writing, issues continue to plague the system 79 days after its initial launch. As college counselors around the country work with panicked students, one name stands out among the rest as a beacon to guide us through the maze. Nancy Griesemer has been reliably and systematically addressing Common App issues from the launch date. Griesemer writes for the DC College Admissions Examiner and on Oct. 8 she offered tips that still make good sense today. They are summarized below along with some of my own advice:

1. "Don't procrastinate!" was always a good mantra for seniors applying to college. Now it is a survival strategy. Don't wait until the last minute to fill out the Common Application and avoid the 24 hours immediately preceding application deadlines. Of course, the deadlines are now a moving target since some (but not all) colleges are responding to student distress (bless them) by extending their deadlines. Check your college website for up-to-the-minute information - your college is your absolute best go-to source for reliable, timely and accurate information.

2. Check the Common Application system requirements which are found at the bottom of each page of the application and follow them.

3. Avoid editing your essays in the text box. Your essay should be prepared as a Word document using simple font, single-spaced with no indents. To do paragraphs, double space (make two hard returns). Once you are satisfied with the document cut and paste it directly into the text box.

4. Print Preview is your best friend, but it is at the end of the process. You must complete each section of the application and obtain 'green check marks' for each part of the application before you are permitted to Print Preview. This is when you can check your application and be certain all the information you entered appears as you intended, including how your essay survived being added to the text box. If anything doesn't look right, go back and try again.

5. If problems continue, reboot your computer, check system settings, and change browsers to see if that helps. If you still have problems, contact the Common Application Help Desk.

6. Documentation is important. Print out and date your Print Preview just prior to submission so you have a hard copy.

7. Avoid paying twice. If you pay and you don't get a signature page, do not pay again. In other words, do not enter your credit card information twice. If your signature page (the last step in the process) does not appear after you pay, wait 48 hours for the Common App system to clear and then try again. If you are still unable to get to the signature page contact the Help Desk. For those of you who have already paid twice, the Common Application is arranging for refunds.

8. Sign your application. It is not complete unless you sign it. Once you have paid, signed and submitted your application, you will receive a green check mark. This means you are able to submit part two of the app which is the

Writing Supplement. These additional writing prompts require time to complete and colleges value them highly, so leave time to do a good job. And be sure to generate and print a Print Preview before submitting your writing supplement.

Most importantly, don't despair and don't give up. Remember, even though you may feel like crying, screaming or throwing something (or all three), you are not alone with these problems. The colleges do understand and will remain flexible. They don't want to lose your application. Use the Common App Help Desk that is available 24 hours a day. Keep up with the Common Application issues and solutions by 'liking' the Common Application on Facebook, following on Twitter and/or subscribing to updates from the support team http://myemail.constantcontact.com/An-Update-From-The-Support-Team.html?soid=1102398051782&aid=UIrzlNjZq7Y.

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