What Not to Do When Applying to College

**Admissions officers share their pet peeves.**

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For the class of 2017, [colleges and universities](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges) across the nation expect to see a record number of applications. As always, students are searching for an edge, looking for some way to stand out. Most do a good job of putting their academic records in the best light, but there are always some who make basic mistakes that drive admissions counselors crazy and (if applicants only knew) doom their chances of being accepted.

*U.S. News* asked a number of admissions officers around the country to share some of the common missteps by students during the application process. Excerpts:

**Tom Delahunt***Vice president for admission and student financial planning,* [*Drake University*](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/drake-university-1860)*, Des Moines*

**Being someone you're not:** I become leery about a candidate when I notice his or her list of extracurricular activities increase significantly during senior year. Shortly before application time, it seems the student has an immense interest in serving the poor, working with children with special needs, and protecting the rain forest—as well as participating in the chess club, drama club, the yearbook staff, student ambassadors, and pep club (all on top of the hours volunteered weekly at the Humane Society)! I don't necessarily doubt the authenticity of the student's list, but I do question the candidate's sudden dedication to multiple causes.

Instead of a laundry list of commitments, we admission officers want to know which one (or two) of these activities is truly a passion. We are trying to shape our university community to include a diversity of interests and getting a clear read on the student not only helps us—it helps the student find the right kind of environment.

**Kasey Urquidez***Assistant vice president for student affairs and dean of admissions,* [*University of Arizona*](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/university-of-arizona-1083)*, Tucson*

**Neglecting the personal statement:** While we do not specifically state that our personal statement is optional, we let students know the following: If you choose not to provide one, we will be lacking important information about you. If given the option, always take it!

There are times we have an academically borderline student who does not share a personal statement. This student may have worked 30 hours per week to help his/her family financially, or maybe a family tragedy contributed to a semester or year of below-average grades. Without the statement, we cannot consider additional circumstances.

On the flip side, when a school says it does not require recommendations or want supplemental materials, adhere to that. And we have received some wild supplements—from a music video made by a parent sharing why her son is so wonderful to a restraining order against the applicant (sharing why she needed to go to school out of state)! Yes, we looked at them, but I can't say they helped the applicants.

**Adele C. Brumfield***Director of admissions,* [*University of Wisconsin–Madison*](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/university-of-wisconsin-madison-3895)

**Writing about the wrong school:** There was an applicant who talked about our exciting school spirit, fun football games, and tremendous academic programs, all to mention that Ann Arbor would be a great town to live in. Definitely not good, since this is Wisconsin! This is a classic mistake, using a generic essay for similar schools and switching out the name. Instead, invest the time to know about each university and to demonstrate that knowledge.

**Suzi Nam***Director of admissions,* [*Swarthmore College*](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/swarthmore-college-3370)*, Pa.*

**Asking questions that make us go, hmmm…:** When I receive E-mails or calls asking me about deadline dates, whether or not we have a certain major, or what is required to apply, I can't help but wonder how the student will navigate the complexities of college life with all this information plainly stated on our website and all of our printed materials. Perhaps some students think they need to send E-mails or make a phone call to show "interest." As Oprah says, what I know for sure is that we do not want our inboxes cluttered with "just want to say hi" or "feigning interest" E-mails.

Instead, we want you to display, through your application, that you have a meaningful understanding of our institution and how and why you see yourself as being a good match. This kind of authentic, thoughtful engagement with the admissions office is what all colleges value most.

**Paul M. Cramer***Vice president for enrollment,* [*Elizabethtown College*](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/elizabethtown-college-3262)*, Pa.*

**Forwarding vague recommendations:** The best letter of recommendation is not the one from the teacher of the class the student "aced." Rather, it is the one from the teacher of the class in which the student had to work extra hard to succeed. The following recommendation did not tell us anything we didn't already know about Robert (not his real name), and so did not contribute to his candidacy: "Robert is an outstanding student in my class. He keeps a good notebook and is always well prepared."

On the other hand, the following recommendation gave us confidence in Mary's ability to weather the challenge of an Elizabethtown degree and suggested she would take advantage of the many resources we offer students to aid in their academic success: "Mary is a strong student at XXX High School. Midway through a difficult first quarter, Mary sought extra help in my optional study sessions. As a result of that extra help and concerted efforts on her part, Mary's grades improved in the first quarter and throughout the year."

**Bruce Latta***Dean of admissions,* [*U.S. Naval Academy*](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/united-states-naval-academy-2101)*, Annapolis, Md.*

**Being careless in social media:** Your presence on the Internet matters. We encourage our applicants to exercise due diligence when sharing pictures, posts, tweets, and videos with the public. We often interact with our applicants via Facebook and YouTube to provide information and answer questions.

Many of our applicants tag themselves in photos after they have visited the campus, so it's not hard for us to see what profiles are open to the entire world. We encourage our applicants to take a very close look at their privacy settings on Facebook and recheck them often.

My best advice is to remember that if your grandmother wouldn't be proud to see what you're posting online, it probably shouldn't be public.

**Robert McCullough***Director of undergraduate admissions,* [*Case Western Reserve University*](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/case-western-reserve-university-3024)*, Cleveland*

**Disrespecting staff members:** One of the cornerstones in the admission office is the frontline support staff who have been in their roles for 20, 30, or more years. You can imagine all the things that they've seen. They are people who love this work, and they love the students.

A few years ago, a student really just kind of laid into one of these staff members on the phone. He was so vitriolic—using foul language. What ended up happening was that we withdrew the application because that was just an outpouring of disrespect.

**Stephen Farmer***Vice provost for enrollment and undergraduate admissions,* [*University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill*](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/university-of-north-carolina-chapel-hill-2974)

**Trying too hard to curry favor:** Students can definitely go overboard. A few years ago a person I worked with had a strange experience: A student actually found out where he lived and sneaked around to the back of his house, left a cake inside his fenced backyard on his picnic table, and the cake was decorated in some way encouraging the guy to admit him to the school.

This all seemed kind of creepy—the student was sneaking into a gated backyard—and also not very smart, since if you leave a cake outdoors, you're going to make a lot of ants happy.

**Robert Blust***Dean of admissions and enrollment planning,* [*Marquette University*](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/marquette-university-3863)*, Milwaukee*

**Missing deadlines:** At Marquette we have one admissions deadline: It's December 1, and we hammer that point in every publication and every presentation we do. December 1 is almost like a mantra.

Several years ago, we had a huge snowstorm in Milwaukee, and the whole university was actually closed. I think we got about 15 inches of snow on December 1. And literally there were people who, you could tell by the footprints in the snow, were walking up the steps of our building, shaking the doors, you know, "Let me in! I have to drop off my application!" in a complete panic.

Our voicemail had hundreds of messages of people calling. So yeah, we did extend it one day, but waiting until December 1 was way too late.

**Eric Furda***Dean of admissions,* [*University of Pennsylvania*](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/university-of-pennsylvania-3378)*, Philadelphia*

**Disregarding directions:** Whenever I give advice to students, I want them to be aware that admissions officers take care to hear their voice and get to know them, but our time is limited—perhaps 15 minutes per application. Through the Common Application and the Penn Supplement, we know where to find certain pieces of information. When an admissions officer needs to get to that information, seeing the term "SEE ATTACHED RESUME" on the application means we need to spend time searching instead of learning.

This is a minor annoyance for officers, but more problematic for applicants. Focus our attention in the areas provided, and utilize the supplemental information question of the Common Application or arts, athletic, or other supplements to provide greater detail and context.