



The Top Five Myths and Mistakes about College Admissions

By **Karen Crowley**, Vice President, Educational Consulting, College Coach

March, 2012

The college admissions process has become an American rite of passage, albeit a stressful and confusing one. For many parents, college admissions — and the goal of getting their child into the “right” college — is the culmination of 17 years of child rearing. At a certain point, the topic becomes ever present among parents, the focal point of conversation, whether on the sidelines at a soccer game or after junior college night at the high school. Everyone has a strong opinion, a scary story, a conspiracy theory, most of them wrong. It’s almost impossible to avoid misinformation — and potential pitfalls.

As an admissions officer at the University of Pennsylvania and Boston University, I at one time read over 1,000 applications each year and made final decisions on the majority of them — mostly “nos.” It was a disheartening process that often left me wondering about the students’ thought processes and certain that, with the right information, they could have done a better job. Today with College Coach, I now have the opportunity to use that insider information to help students avoid making such mistakes, and to help them do their best with each application.





The Numbers Game

A look at admissions statistics over the last decade paints a distinct picture — and the challenge for applicants is clear. The number of students applying to college has been at an all-time high for about four years. While the number peaked in 2008 at 3.3 million high school graduates (up from 2.4 in 1993) it has not gone down enough to loosen the Ivy gates in any meaningful way.

The combination of a greater number of students submitting a greater number of college applications makes standing out from the crowd more challenging than ever (figure 1). Careless — and avoidable — mistakes can easily mean the difference between a thick envelope and a painfully thin one.

The combination of a greater number of students submitting a greater number of applications makes standing out from the crowd more challenging than ever.

Percent of Students Submitting Three or More Applications: 1990 - 2010

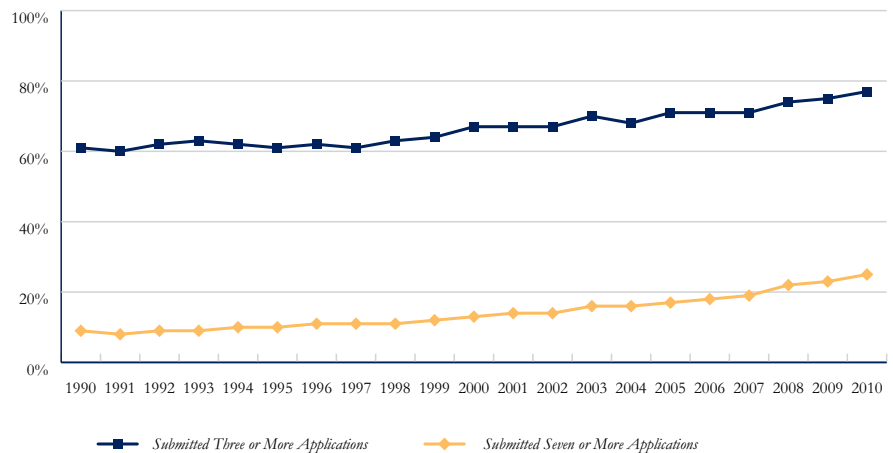


Figure 1: Tremendous growth in number of college applications submitted, from NACAC 2011 State of College Admission

Myth #1: Application Work Starts Senior Year

Fact: The work starts in ninth grade.

When families understand the impact of their decisions on the admissions process, they often make the right choices. But that requires thinking ahead.

One way to prepare is by creating the best possible roadmap at the earliest possible time. Such a roadmap should include course selection, extracurricular activities, summer programs, part-time jobs, college visits, standardized test-prep timing, and more. Each element will be a crucial part of your admissions package,

and each will have an impact on your selection chances. A well thought-out, detailed roadmap helps maximize your opportunities while managing unexpected challenges that pop up along the way. Something as simple as an Admissions Organization Chart (figure 2), begun in ninth grade, could help keep you on task when the fog of homework and extracurricular obligations threatens to envelop you.

Year	Task
9th Grade	1. Identify three goals — personal, academic, and extracurricular — and three steps to achieve them
	2. Road map course curriculum
	3. Visit three local colleges of different types
	4. Pursue summer job in area of passion
	5. Try three clubs to identify interests
	6. SAT word of the day
	7. Summer — college essay prewriting activities

Figure 2: Sample College Admissions Organization Chart – 9th Grade

Myth #2: Great Essays Are Solely About Great Writing Skills

Fact: Essays aren't as much about the quality of the writing as about the content and the message.

The National Association of College Admissions Counselors study in 2011 showed that the essay is the fifth most important factor in admission decisions, higher than extracurricular activities, recommendations, jobs, and the interview (figure 3, page 4). If you're thinking the essay is a fait accompli — either because your child simply isn't a great writer who could produce a “wow” essay, or because he's an excellent English student with a great English teacher — think again.

The essay isn't about technical writing prowess — it's about storytelling. It's about effectively communicating content and message. It's about illustrating who you are. Admissions officers are looking to understand the student — what she believes in, how he's grown, what she thinks about, cares about, and values. They're hoping to get a very real glimpse of who the student is. In short, they want to know about you. Common essay mistakes include writing something expository, something too list-like, in the third person, about future lives, or about a person who inspires them. Applicants should instead think of a reflective anecdote or story and then develop a 30-second “elevator pitch” — a term used in marketing to describe a short, strong, illustrative summary of an idea — before



A well thought-out, detailed roadmap helps maximize your opportunities while managing unexpected challenges that arise along the way.



The college essay is a very important piece of writing — one that requires a particular type of expertise.

writing. The finished product should show the reader the point or message, not tell it. It's not easy and it takes work, but students at all levels can do it.

While English teachers, family friends, and well-meaning writer acquaintances might help a student craft a good piece of writing, they're not necessarily adept at "college application" writing. They've never sat behind an admissions officer's desk, undergone admissions training, or been part of an admissions committee discussion. They're unfamiliar with this very particular form of writing, and as a result, are at a serious disadvantage. The college essay is a very important piece of writing — one that requires a very particular type of expertise.

Factor	Considerable Importance
Grades in college prep courses	83%
Strength of curriculum	66%
Admissions test scores (SAT, ACT)	59%
Grades in all courses	46%
Essay or writing sample	27%
Student's demonstrated interest	23%
Class rank	21%
Recommendations	19%
Interview	9%
Extracurricular activities	7%
Work	2%

Figure 3: Colleges' ranking of admission-related factors according to their attributed importance in admission decisions. Source: NACAC, 2011 State of College Admission

Myth #3: Load Up the Resume to Stand Out

Fact: One passionate pursuit adds up to more than 10 aimless hobbies.

I have never heard an admissions officer marvel at a long, seemingly unconnected list of disparate activities. In fact, a too-long list often communicates that the student couldn't really be committed to anything at all. Yet most families think they know the winning extracurricular formula: as many clubs as possible, at least one sport, and community service.

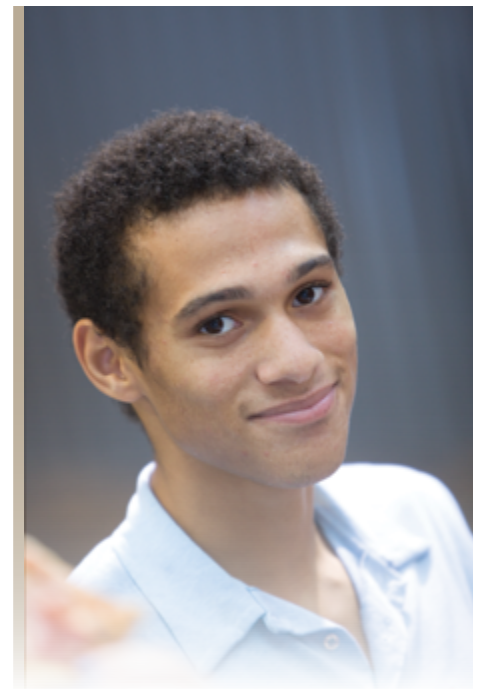
Despite what you may think, quality trumps quantity. And one thing that makes any one particular club or activity stand out is passion. Even so, the truth is some kids don't really feel true passion for their extracurricular pursuits. And that's OK. In the absence of passion, most students should be able to demonstrate a

connection to their pursuits in other ways — through their commitment, curiosity, leadership, creativity, initiative, talent or the activity’s link to academic interests. It’s important to note, however, that in more selective admissions circles, admissions officers are looking for the distinguishing excellence, or “DE,” that a student has cultivated in one particular area of extracurricular pursuit.

Myth #4: Guidance Counselors Know All

Fact: Guidance counselors know some.

Let’s be clear: this is not beat-up-on-your-guidance-counselor time. You need your guidance counselor. He or she is an important part of the process in many ways. Working to create a strong relationship with your guidance counselor will help you maximize opportunities at your school, and will help ensure a strong letter of recommendation (the guidance-counselor letter is often a key piece of the process). That said, a guidance counselor’s per-student time is limited. The average student-to-guidance-counselor ratio in U.S. public schools is 459:1. The ratio in U.S. private schools is 310:1 (figure 4).



Despite what you may think, quality trumps quantity. And what makes any one particular club or activity stand out is passion.

Public School Student to Counselor Ratio 2010

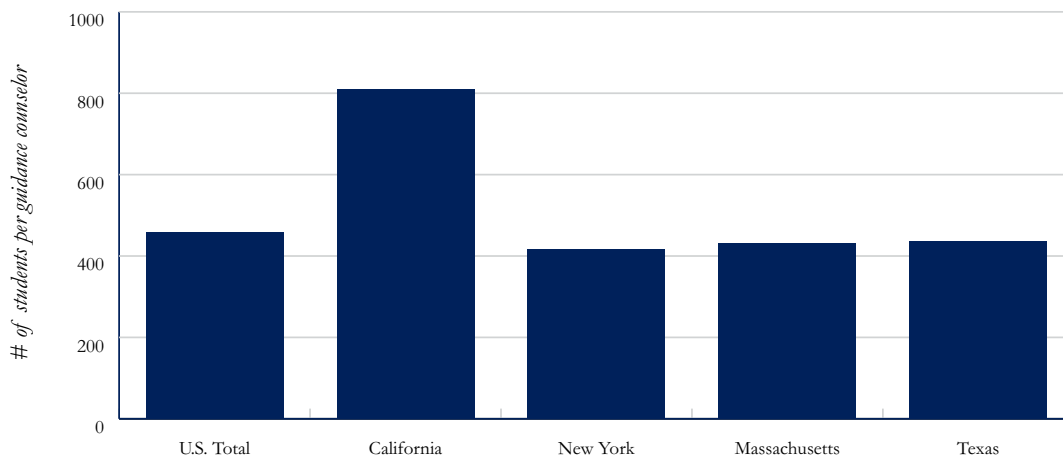


Figure 4: Public School Student-to-Counselor Ratio, source: NACAC, 2011 State of College Admission



A great guidance counselor will give you an hour meeting in the spring of your junior year devoted solely to college, and then another hour, maybe two, in your senior year. She also has to deal with scheduling, IEPs, behavioral issues — and the list goes on. Guidance counselors tend to be excellent problem solvers and great generalists with limited time. For something this important, you need a specialist: an expert with experience who can devote the time needed to give you the personalized advice and insider's insight that will reduce stress, eliminate confusion, and get you the right answers to the important questions.

Myth #5: I Will Be Fine Doing This On My Own

Fact: DIY applications can have catastrophic results.

The college application process is complicated, nuanced, and confusing. In many ways, it reminds me of our legal process. In the United States, it is legal to represent yourself in court, but, for good reason, most people don't. They recognize that they don't know the process, the language, or what goes on behind the scenes. They don't have the training, the time, or the expertise to get it right, and they know there are potentially significant consequences to the outcome. The admissions process is exactly the same. And when the stakes are high you want to get it right.

In the past, we've met families at College Coach who made common and serious do-it-yourself mistakes before coming to us. One family came for guidance after submitting several early action applications with an essay that was all wrong. The word count was more than four times the recommended length and the applicant used a tone and approach that did not highlight some of the most interesting things about him and would not help him. Similarly, his activity sheet was formatted incorrectly and made it difficult for an admissions officer to quickly find important information.

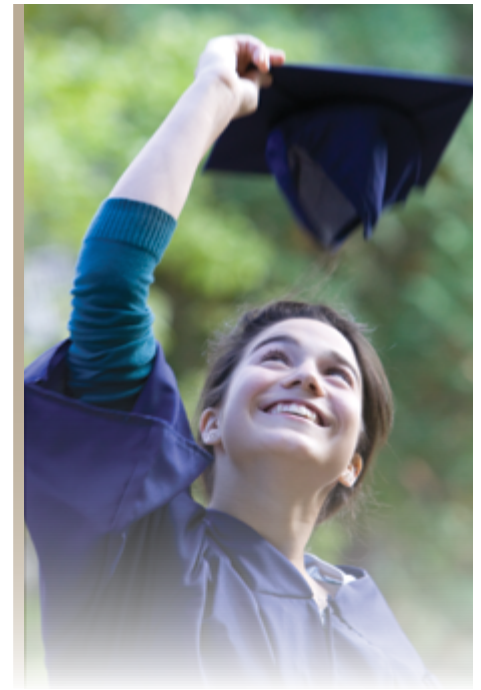
Thankfully the schools that he applied to in the early application process were safeties, and we were able to help him revise his essay substantially before submitting to the rest of his schools. He ended up getting accepted to and attending his top choice.

Another student contacted us after being deferred by her early decision school. She had already submitted applications to the remaining six schools on her list and, when she came to us, had just the supplementary pieces left to finish. The deferral had taken the student by surprise. She had been confident about her application and her father wondered if we could both help them understand the decision and improve the application for her remaining schools. The essays, while showcasing the fact that the student could write, missed the boat. They focused on the wrong things and didn't tell an admissions officer anything important about the student. Because her applications had already been submitted, the best we could do was to help her with her supplemental pieces.

Closing

While there are more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States, the process of gaining entry to many of them has grown much more difficult. In this hyper-competitive environment, myths surrounding college admissions abound. As parents, we spend our lives prepping our children for what lies ahead, readying them for the challenges we hope they'll surmount. But what do we do when we are on such unfamiliar ground?

At College Coach, we know that December (before the early decision notifications) and March (regular decision notifications) of a student's senior year can be riddled with anxiety. Every email is a potential decision, every letter delivery permeated with the prospect of elation or dejection. It's our mission, our goal, to separate myth from reality and to guide families through a road we have already walked, a road we have actually paved. We take seriously our role helping families avoid the common mistakes that can diminish a child's chances of admission. Through goal-oriented strategies, personal one-on-one advising, and expert assistance from start to finish, we work to guide families through the process and maximize a student's chances for success.



The college application process is complicated, nuanced, and confusing. When the stakes are this high, you want to get it right.



By Karen Crowley
VP, Educational Consulting, College Coach

*Former Senior Admissions Officer,
Boston University & University of Pennsylvania*

With contributions from:



Zaragoza Guerra
*Former Senior Admissions Officer,
MIT & Caltech*



Elizabeth Heaton
*Former Senior Admissions Officer,
University of Pennsylvania*



College Coach[®] (www.getintocollege.com) is the nation's leading provider of college advisory services to high school students and their families. Founded in 1998, it became part of the **Bright Horizons**[®] suite of work/life solutions in 2006. Today, College Coach assists thousands of families each year through corporate-sponsored relationships and private advising. The expert team of former college admissions and financial aid officers deliver individualized services in 16 offices nationwide, and to hundreds of students remotely both domestically and abroad, resulting in college acceptances to over 500 colleges each year.