Chapter 4
The college application process

Overview

This chapter, which describes each component of the college application process, focuses on the counselor's role in preparing and submitting the application form and related materials to colleges. No matter what your school's policy regarding responsibility for processing applications, you will have some involvement in helping students apply to college.

Counselors should advise students on how many colleges to apply to; five to eight is typical. If you multiply the number of college-bound seniors in your school by an average of five colleges for each student, you will get a sense of the paper that can flow through your office. The typical application includes the following materials:

- the application form (most students apply online)
- the transcript and the school profile
- standardized test scores
- recommendations (see Chapter 5)
- essays (see Chapter 6)
- supporting documents (if needed)

The counselor's role

Acquainting yourself with the counselor's main tasks in the application process can make your work easier:

- Be familiar with the application process (forms, related materials, and other requirements) of the colleges that are popular with your students.

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- Develop calendars and procedures to keep your students on task during the application process.
- Create a school profile that effectively describes your school to admissions personnel (see pages 4-8 and 4-9).
- Learn the application procedures for students who hope to play National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sports. (See Chapter 10: Counseling student athletes, for detailed information on this.)
- Explain to teachers the purposes of teacher recommendations and application essays (see Chapters 5 and 6); assist teachers in writing meaningful recommendations; give teachers useful advice on helping students prepare their essays.

Different approaches to handling applications

Schools have a number of approaches to marshaling all the pieces of the application from their students to the colleges. Online tools like Naviance and send.edu are great resources for schools that can afford them, providing a centralized system to manage the application process and transmit documents. For the many counselors who do not have access to these tools, here are the three most common approaches:

1. The school submits all the materials to the colleges (except official reports of standardized test scores, which must always be sent by the testing agency).

2. The school submits the transcript only; the student is responsible for sending the other materials.

3. The school submits the transcript, recommendations and school profile and/or secondary school report; the student is responsible for sending the other materials.

Some schools feel that with the increasing popularity of electronic applications, a division of labor in the application process makes sense: Students handle their part and the school does the rest.

Counseling offices may review application materials fully before sending them, but most do not have the resources to do so. If submitting materials by mail, many include a postcard with the school's address for the colleges to return, indicating that the institution received the materials. Generally, schools ask students

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TIP

"Using alphabetical order, we pull kids into workshops and **sit with them in the computer lab** in order to get their applications started. We organize workshops into four systems: state public, private, out of state, and international. In addition, we work collaboratively with our local community college, which administers on our school campus their placement test to *all* seniors. In this way, everybody is registered at a two-year institution in case they cannot go away for college."

— **Beatriz Zayas,** *Southwest High School, California*

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to give them *two or three weeks of lead time* to process their part of the application — whether they are responsible for sending all the documents or only the transcript. Two handouts for students will be useful. One can serve as both a reminder and a record of the process, and the other provides step-by-step instructions covering the basics. See **Handout 4A:** *College application checklist* and **Handout 4B:** *Tips for undertaking the application process.*

Many schools charge for sending transcripts — for example, some schools charge a flat fee of $2 or $3 per transcript; at other schools, the first few are sent for free, and each additional transcript has a fee. The transcript charge covers the cost of sending midyear reports and final transcripts as well.

The application form

Counselors should be very familiar with the applications and requirements of the colleges attended by the majority of their students. Many colleges update their applications over the summer and have current versions by September (if not earlier). Most colleges post their applications on the college website to be completed online or downloaded as a PDF.

If you or your students want paper copies, they can be obtained by calling or writing to the college admission office.

In Cary Academy's student information brochure, it says that "the actual application normally runs from two to six pages, depending on the information the school requests and the number and types of essays it requires. At larger universities and at many regional state or public universities, the application is purely factual, asking only for biographical information, addresses and other statistics. State-supported universities also ask for certification of address and other residency information. A college with personalized admission (e.g., where staff review each application carefully) is more likely to have a longer application and to request a more detailed list of activities and involvements."

A college may have different applications for different types of students (Early Decision, for example) or for different colleges within the university (College of Engineering, College of Architecture); students should be sure they complete the right application.

> **TIP**
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> "Every student has to attach a **college application check list** to every application, and this is submitted to the counselors. In this simple way we can quickly determine whether the student has fulfilled all their responsibilities before we begin all that we are required to do."
>
> — *Aimee Bronhard,*
> *B.M.C. Durfee High School, Massachusetts*

> **TIP**
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> "Never assume that any student has it all under control, not even those who appear, by their grades and their ambitions, to have things 'all together.' You need to specifically ask each and every student: Have you completed x? Have you sent out y? If you don't ask specific questions, you're **likely to get false positives** like, 'Sure, I've got everything under control.' "
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> — *Lisa Hallen,* Messalonskee High School, Maine

A handout provides useful information on the process from two experienced counselors. See **Handout 4C:** *College application FAQs: Students ask, counselors answer.*

Online applications

Most colleges are getting the vast majority of their applications online. Colleges prefer online applications as they cut down on processing time, but colleges do not give preference to applicants who apply online.

There are pros and cons to online applications. First, the pros:

- Some colleges waive the fee for online applications. An online application is processed more quickly than a paper application — sometimes more than a month sooner than the paper application. (On the other hand, the college has to wait to accurately match to the application the test scores, school transcript and letters of recommendation — items that might accompany a paper application.)

- Many online applications have electronic checks that ensure that the student has provided all mandatory data. If a paper application is missing mandatory information, processing of the application can be delayed by weeks.

- There is no problem reading the text in an online application, whereas handwriting can pose challenges for even the most experienced admissions committees.

On the downside, students sometimes apply electronically without having someone review their work and, even more problematically, fail to alert the guidance office about each college to which they have applied electronically so that transcripts and recommendations can be sent. See **Handout 4H:** *Online Application: dos and don'ts.*

The Common Application

The Common Application, sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, is currently accepted by nearly 500 colleges, and this number is growing every year.

The primary advantage of the Common Application is that it need be completed only once; it may then be submitted to any number of participating colleges. The same is true of the school report and the

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TIP

"It's hard to manage the application process when students go online themselves. It's easy for students to hit the Submit button—but it can be harder for us to track. We still ask students to fill out a one-page, paper-and-pencil form to **track what they do online**."

— ***Stacy Gidley,*** *Vanguard Collegiate High School, New York*

TIP

"We try to avoid paper applications. But some students don't have access to a home computer. In tough economic times, the Internet is often the first expense cut from a family budget. If a student **can't do online applications from home**, we get him or her into our office and do them there. If there are many students in that situation, we use other resources, like the computers in the school library."

— ***Ms. Dale Fornoff,*** *Dennis-Yarmouth High School, Massachusetts*

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teacher evaluation portions (those sections are automatically printed with the application).

Some member colleges of the Common Application group do require supplemental forms, which may include an additional essay. Students should research whether the colleges to which they are applying need such a form in addition to the Common Application. The Common Application can be obtained through the mail or by downloading it from www.commonapp.org. It may also be filled out online.

Other multi-use applications

Many states and large college systems have their own "common" applications for the colleges within their realms. These can save you and your students time. The Universal College Application (www.universalcollegeapp.com) is accepted by almost 60 colleges, a number that has decreased over the years.

See **Handout 4D:** *Some typical admission policies*.

The transcript

Grades in academic subjects are the single best predictor of success in college, and colleges look for evidence that the student has undertaken rigorous course work. The transcript must clearly indicate AP, IB or honors course, as these are key indicators of rigorous course work. So for most students, the transcript is the most important document in the college application process. Do what you can to ensure that the names of courses are clear to colleges. You don't want a college admissions committee wondering why a student took "Youth Conflict" in his senior year instead of English, when that happens to be the name of the English class he took.

GPAs

Most colleges recalculate GPAs. In her monograph *Admissions Decision-Making Models,* Gretchen Rigol explains:

> Because there is no uniformity in the way high schools calculate a student's overall grade point average (GPA), many institutions recalculate the GPA. In some cases, the GPAs are "weighted," with extra points being given for honors or Advanced Placement courses. In other cases, the GPAs are all "unweighted," with all courses treated equally and no extra points given for more challenging courses. Some institutions simply count the number of honors, AP, IB and other

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TIPS

"I think it's important to demystify the Common Application. To take the mystery out of the process, we hold a **Common Application workshop**, during which we show and explain to the students every step of the process."

— ***Ms. Dale Fornoff,***
Dennis-Yarmouth High School, Massachusetts

"Filling out the Common Application can be overwhelming: it's long, detailed, and intimidating. So **we print out hard copies** and review the process before students go online."

— ***Stacy Gidley,*** *Vanguard Collegiate High School, New York*

"Our **transcripts** are Word documents. We convert them to PDFs, upload them to the Common App, and then send them electronically. We also send them as PDFs to most colleges that accept online applications. Sometimes it happens that we have to send the transcript as a paper document."

— ***Lisa Sohmer,*** *Garden School, New York*

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advanced-level courses. And still others simply reorganize the transcript information so that it's easy to see coverage by subject and/or trends over the student's school career. . . . Although labor intensive, this customization helps institutions evaluate all applicants on a similar basis. It also has the advantage of making the information easily available for use in other forms, such as in an academic index and for placement reports for individual applicants, and for general summaries of the preparation of the applicant pool as a whole.

Transcripts and the law (FERPA)

Be sure to follow the law in releasing transcripts. Richard Rainsberger has written a book about the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), passed in 1974. According to Rainsberger, transcripts cannot be released to a "third party" (colleges or scholarship programs) without a written request from a student who is 18 or older, or from a parent in the case of students under age 18. Your school should have a method of distributing and then collecting release forms so that your office can send transcripts to colleges. Schools need to send a midyear report in January, and a final transcript to the student's selected college.

Some schools have parents and students sign a form that authorizes release of documents, waives the rights to see recommendations, and asks them to acknowledge their understanding of school policies. Here is the language used on a Student/Parent Authorization form used by a private school and signed by all students and parents:

- I authorize the release of my school transcript and other relevant school records to the colleges and universities to which I will apply.

- I understand that teacher and counselor recommendations are confidential documents and hereby waive access to them.

- I understand that it is the policy of (name of school) to inform colleges of serious disciplinary matters (i.e., those resulting in probation, out-of-school suspension, or dismissal) and authorize the release of that information.

- I acknowledge my obligation to be honest with my college counselor and with the colleges to which I am applying.

You might include some or all of these statements on your document release form.

TIP

"I create and **maintain a college folder for each student**. On the outside of each folder I can see at a glance the GPA data and the SAT stickers, and I can tell what colleges each student has applied to, whether payment was made, if there has been a decision, and the transcript info. Inside the folder I keep the college applications, a copy of all the recommendations, and a copy of all the correspondence with specific colleges. In addition, each student has a **digital college folder** that contains most recent transcripts, resumes, college essays and teacher recommendations. This gives us the ability to upload documents for college applications."

— ***Ms. Terry Quiros,*** *South Bronx Preparatory, New York*

A transcript release form is included in the handout section. See **Handout 4E:** *Transcript release form.* A FERPA overview is included in Appendix B.

Transcripts for student athletes

Students planning to play NCAA Division I and II sports must meet eligibility requirements and must have their transcripts released through the NCAA Eligibility Center. Students must register on the NCAA Eligibility Center website after the completion of their junior year in high school. At this time, a transcript, which includes six semesters of grades, should be sent to the center from the high school. (Note: The NCAA transcript release form is *not* required by the NCAA. It is provided as a resource to schools that do not have their own process for leasing the transcript.) Additionally, students should have their admission test scores forwarded directly to the center whenever they take the exam.

Each high school must assign a staff person to update the school's list of approved core courses and to submit transcripts to the NCAA. For information, go to www.ncaaclearinghouse.net and read the material under "High School Administration."

(See **Chapter 10** for more information on working with student athletes.)

The school profile

The school profile is the document that describes your school to colleges and that helps admissions staff put student transcripts in context. You should update your school profile annually, and while it's a good idea to post it on your school's website, you should enclose a copy with *every* application: Many college admissions staff read applications at home or while traveling and need your school profile in the folder.

The chart "Components of a Typical School Profile" on the next page outlines what a profile should contain.

TIP

"We require students to complete an **application-processing information list**, which asks for the names of colleges to which the students are applying, the application deadline, whether they are applying Early Decision or Early Action, and whether we need to send unofficial test scores to the college. There is also a space to note when our materials were sent, when the transcript acknowledgment was received, and what the eventual admissions decision was."

— *Tina Segalla-Grant,* St. Margaret's-McTernan School, Connecticut

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TIP

"If you have questions about FERPA, email the Family Policy Compliance Office at FERPA@ed.gov. They are prompt and thorough in responding to queries."

— *Scott White,* Montclair High School, Montclair, New Jersey

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Format of a school profile

Here are some suggestions from colleges on what the profile should look like (from discussion on the NACAC website):

- Make sure your six-digit College Board and/or ACT code is clearly indicated.

- Many colleges scan profiles for their imaging systems, so make sure that there is high contrast between ink and background color — preferably light background and dark ink. Dark backgrounds and low contrast do not image well.

- The profile should be 8.5 x 11 inches — either a single sheet or folded. Ideally, it should have no odd-size folds at the top or side.

Test scores

Colleges require official score results. Results are sent directly from the testing organizations. Some schools include copies of test results in the application packet in order to give an unofficial glimpse of a student's test scores, but these are indeed unofficial. Students can arrange for the scores to be sent to a certain number of colleges when they take standardized admission tests. Most schools make it the student's responsibility to have test scores sent, by the deadline, to the colleges to which they are applying.

The College Board provides Score Choice™ for SAT® and SAT Subject Test scores. This program gives students the option to choose which scores they send to colleges. For information, go to www.collegeboard.org.

Remember: If your transcripts contain other test scores, you need to secure permission to release them on the transcripts you are sending to colleges.

Other components of the application

Recommendations and essays

These components of the application are covered in Chapters 5 and 6 of this sourcebook. Your counseling office should have a policy covering whose responsibility it is to gather teacher recommendations

on time; while it should be the student's responsibility, schools that mail all parts of the application sometimes find that students assume that the office will follow up with teachers to obtain their recommendations on time. Colleges report that applicant files are more often marked as complete in the tracking system and moved along for review in a timely fashion when recommendations and the secondary school reports come in one mailing with the transcript.

Secondary school report form

Many colleges include a secondary school report form with their application, for the counselor's use in providing a recommendation and other pertinent information about a student. The form often requests information on which classes are included in the GPA, what is weighted, which courses were taken in each grade, and so on. Some counselors fill out the colleges' individual forms, but many have created their own standard school report, providing the information requested by most colleges, and submit that to all colleges.

Midyear report

Most colleges require a midyear report, which reflects senior grades at the end of the first semester or second trimester. This is not an official transcript, but it can help admissions officers reach a decision about a student. It is also required of the students who have already been accepted.

Some schools use a form that NACAC has developed, which can be found on www.nacacnet.org; others create their own form. (If you develop your own, be sure it is clearly labeled "Midyear report.") Some schools send a midyear report to every college to which a student has applied; others ask the students to tell them which colleges require a midyear report; still others ask students to let them know which colleges do not require the report. You may want to calculate rank and GPA at this time and put the information on the form, but doing so slows down the mailing of the forms.

Portfolio/audition

Some colleges accept a portfolio — of a student's paintings, poems, or other creative work — for admission. Portfolios are usually required for admission to a fine arts program. The best advice to give students thinking about applying to art school is to attend a National Portfolio

> **TIP**
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> "When students sign the original release to send transcripts and recommendations to colleges, the form also states that they are requesting a midyear report. This saves time and covers our responsibility to get a signature release."
>
> — *Carlene Riccelli,*
> *Amherst Regional High School, Massachusetts*

Day (see www.portfolioday.net). These events take place all over the country during the fall. Similar in venue to a college fair, students bring in their portfolios, and representatives from art schools look them over and give valuable feedback on how to improve them before submission. It's best that students attend in junior year, when their portfolios are still a work in progress; that way they still have time to incorporate the feedback received.

Students who are musicians or dramatic artists interested in a performing arts program should check the college websites to learn whether auditions are required either for admission or for a scholarship. It's important to be aware of the deadlines for auditions, which may be different from application deadlines.

Supplemental information

Sometimes, students wish to include supplemental information in their application, in order to strengthen their chance for admission. Advise students that the supplemental information must illuminate something that is not covered in any other part of the application, and not simply add bulk to the application. An extra recommendation may add an important dimension; a short letter may help explain a dip in grades or other weaknesses in the school record. Students should ask the college admissions staff if it will accept supplemental materials: Some simply will not, and the student should abide by that policy.

Early Decision (ED) and Early Action (EA)

At almost any meeting of school counselors, Early Decision and Early Action are topics of discussion, and at almost every one of these discussions, a counselor tells of the student who announces (usually in September): "I don't know where I want to go to college, but I know I need to apply for Early Decision!" Early Decision and Early Action plans can be beneficial to students — but only to those who have thought through their college options carefully and have a clear preference for one institution. The student who expresses both uncertainty about college choice and the necessity to be an ED candidate is probably either misinformed about ED or under peer (or perhaps parental) pressure. For students who don't understand

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TIP

"We never have the experience of having a student say: 'I applied online yesterday. I need all my supplemental info today.' It just doesn't happen. We **drill the schedule into their heads**. Near the end of the process, the school needs two weeks in order to write quality recommendations, etc. These expectations are also spelled out in written form to the students' parents."

— ***Ms. Dale Fornoff,***
Dennis-Yarmouth High School, Massachusetts

Tips for undertaking the application process

Getting started

- Set up a folder for each application. Keep all material relevant to each college in its own folder.

- Request letters of recommendations at least two weeks (a month is better) before the deadlines.

- Review all application requirements. Set up a schedule for completing them. You might want to put off this task as long as you can, but procrastination is risky. There is a lot to do, especially if you have several essays to write. You may not do the application (and yourself) justice if you leave it until the last minute. Remember: Leave enough time for correcting and revising.

Completing the application process

- Review each page of the application and its directions completely before you start to work on it.

- Be accurate, honest and neat. Spell correctly and use correct grammar.

- Don't type your essay directly into the application. Draft it separately, then upload the final, proof-read version.

- Request the testing organization to send your official test scores directly to the colleges. Do not send a photocopy of your own test score report unless requested to do so. Sometimes, a college accepts a photocopy as a means of obtaining preliminary information, but it will need the official report to make an offer of admission.

- When you have completed your application, ask someone to review it and check it for errors.

- Print and save to your hard drive the completed application before you send it.

- If you file an online application, be sure to tell your counselor when you have submitted the application and which materials the school needs to send to the college (such as recommendations or the transcript).

Tips for undertaking the application process
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Tips for online applicants

- Make sure a person whose opinion you trust reviews the application for errors before you send it.

- Use standard spelling and grammar — not email-ese: Treat this like a paper application.

- Spell your name the same way on the online application and on other components that are sent via mail; this will help the colleges match the components of your application in a timely way.

- Have your test scores sent to the colleges to which you are applying, if you haven't already.

- Print out a paper copy for your records.

- Do not apply electronically and send a paper copy in the mail: Wait for confirmation that the electronic copy was received (you should get that within three or four days, if not sooner).

- Tell your counselor of every online application you send, so he or she can send transcripts and letters of recommendation.

Source: *Susan Staggers, Cary Academy, North Carolina*

College application FAQs: Students ask, counselors answer

Do I have a better chance of getting in if I apply early?

This can vary from school to school and year to year and may depend on the applicant pool at the school to which you are applying. Check to see what percentage of students in the previous graduating classes at your high school were admitted as Early Decision to a specific college. Are you qualified to apply for Early Decision? If you are, and this is a school you really wish to attend, then apply for Early Decision.

How much time should I give my teachers to write letters of recommendation for me?

Teachers should always receive a minimum of two weeks' notice before the postmark date. Be sure to ask in a way that allows a teacher to decline comfortably if he or she does not have time to do an adequate job. For example: "Do you feel you know me well enough, and do you have enough time, to write a supportive letter of recommendation for me?" Give the teacher a stamped envelope addressed to the college, along with any recommendation form provided by the college.

How many times should I take the SAT®?

Some students are satisfied with their SAT scores the first time they take the test. Others believe they will benefit from taking it a second time. Most students will take the SAT in the spring of their junior year and the fall of their senior year. There is no evidence that taking the test more than twice results in significant score gains for most students.

My SAT scores are very low, and my grades are very high. Will this affect my chances of admission?

While SAT scores are an indicator of success in college, admissions staff look at many different factors when making a decision about whether to admit a student. One of the main things they are looking for is to see if your high school academic profile indicates that you have the potential for academic success on their campus. What kind of courses have you taken? Have you taken rigorous courses such as honors or AP® courses? Have you taken AP Exams so that there are scores to indicate how you may perform in a college-level course? That said, you should always check with the college or university you are applying to if you have questions on their score use policies.

My parents don't make a lot of money — will colleges hold this against me?

Colleges should tell you whether they have a "need-blind" admission policy. Those that do never consider ability to pay as an admission requirement. Other schools, which are "need conscious,"

may consider ability to pay, but only for a very small proportion of the admitted group. My advice is always: Don't worry about this.

How can I improve my chances of getting in from the wait list?

If a college is your first choice, let the college know that — although the college may not ask for this information. Write a letter to the director of admission expressing your continuing strong interest and updating the admission office with any new information that enhances you. In addition, you may wish to ask your counselor to make a call on your behalf. Many colleges keep track of these kinds of contacts, and students who are enthusiastic and persistent will get looked at first. Colleges want to admit students off the wait list who will accept the offer of admission.

Do colleges really care about your senior-year grades?

Absolutely! Many colleges will not make a decision until receiving seventh-semester grades. They expect to see a performance that indicates you are ready for college-level work. The college at which you make your enrollment deposit will ask for a final transcript at the end of the senior year. (Admission letters often say something like, "Your admissions is contingent upon your continued successful performance.") It is not at all rare for a college to withdraw an offer of admission when grades drop significantly over the course of the senior year. (I have a folder full of copies of these letters.)

Answers provided by Mary Lee Hoganson, a former counselor at Homewood-Flossmoor High School, Illinois, and Nadine K. Maxwell, a former coordinator of guidance services for Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia.

Source: *The College Board*

Online application dos and don'ts

Do create user names, PIN numbers and passwords that you'll remember easily. Write them down and keep them in a safe place.

Don't treat an online application casually — it's an important document that reflects on you. So never use abbreviations as if you were text messaging.

Don't be too quick to click. Take your time, follow all directions and complete each step with care. Scroll each page from top to bottom and read every pop-up to be sure you don't miss any information.

Don't forget to periodically save your work. You might get "timed out" if you don't enter anything for a while (usually 30 minutes). If you need to take a break, use the save/log-out feature to store your application, then log back in.

Don't compose your essay or personal statement in the space allotted online. Draft (and redraft) these separately in a word-processing application, such as Microsoft Word, then copy and paste the final draft into the online application.

Do print and save a hard copy of the completed application. Proofread it before you hit the "send" button — sometimes your information in text boxes can get cut off.

Do ask someone else to review the application for errors before you send it. Two sets of eyes are always better than one.

Do print and save a copy of the confirmation page that should appear after you submit the application, so that you'll have a record of your application ID number.

Do tell your school counselor about every online application you submit. Better yet, give your counselor a hard copy printout. This is critical because your application won't be complete until your counselor forwards your transcript and any other material the college may require.

Don't apply online and then send a paper copy in the mail. That will just confuse things.

Do call or email the college if you haven't received an email confirmation of receipt within 48 hours. Online submissions do get lost occasionally (that's why it's so important to print and save).

Don't apply online the week before the application deadline. Because of high volume, application websites tend to get slow and cranky at this time. It's also the most likely time for a system failure. If you're up against the deadline, it's safer to apply through the mail.

Source: Get It Together for College, 2nd ed. *The College Board, 2011*

Handout 4H