

College Applications: How Many is Too Many?

By Holly Lazzaro October 27, 2019

Let's face it: getting admitted to college is hard. Admissions are competitive, and even if you're a top student with tons of extracurriculars, getting into your first or even second choice school is not even a close to guaranteed. Therefore, most college advisors will recommend mitigating the risk by applying to several different schools. But while "several" might have once meant 3 or 4, you now hear stories of students submitting 10, 15, even 20 applications. Is that crazy, or is that the new normal?

There is no question that the number of applications a student submits has risen substantially over the years. Based on data collected by The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, approximately 71% of students were submitting applications to 3 or more schools already back in 2005. By 2014—almost a decade later—that number increased to 83%. Now, even if that increase seems reasonable—after all, more students are applying to college, so competition is arguably fiercer—consider this: in 2005, just 17% of students were submitting 7 or more applications. By 2014, that figure more than doubled.

So 35% of students are submitting 7+ applications, and 83% of students are submitting 3+, but those are just numbers. Ultimately, what you want to know is: Is there a magic number of applications you should be submitting?

There does seem to be a magic range: 6–8. Submitting six to eight applications will ensure that you can apply to a range of schools based on how likely you are to get in. A good mix is to split it into approximate thirds: 2–3 safety schools, 2–3 match schools, and 2–3 reach schools.

But maybe you need to be convinced. After all, while that 6–8 applications strategy might sound logical, *why shouldn't* you apply to more schools? Isn't more better? Or what if you do apply to fewer schools? What, really, are the consequences?

If you apply to too few schools

This one's easy. Take the most extreme example, where you only apply to one college. Maybe it's your first and only choice, or maybe you are 99.9% confident you'll be accepted. But then that letter arrives, and that 0.1% chance becomes reality. You didn't get in. Now what? You have no other choice of schools, because you didn't apply anywhere else. At this point, you can take a gap year to travel, or enter the workforce, but if your sole post-graduation plan was to go straight to college, you're going to be out of luck.

If you apply to too many schools

On the other side of the equation, it may seem counterintuitive to limit the number of schools you apply to. After all, applying to multiple schools is easier than ever with the Common Application. Why would you limit yourself?

Well for starters, applications can get expensive. College application fees can run as high as \$100, and if you start multiplying that fee by ten, twelve, fifteen applications . . . that's money you could be saving to buy books your first semester!

But even if application fees are not a barrier, consider the tension that so often exists between quantity and quality. If you're applying to just a handful of schools, you can spend more time and attention on each of those applications. When you aren't trying to push so many applications out the door, you can afford to customize and personalize each application, and that extra time and care may very well be the difference between being accepted to and being rejected from your school of choice.

There is one final and very good reason not to apply to schools en masse. Often, students find themselves applying to a ton of schools because they don't know where they actually want to go. This seems innocuous until, come April, you've been accepted to most or all of them but still have no idea which one you want to attend—only now you're down to the wire. You have to make a decision.

Ultimately, you're better off doing your research early in the application process, narrowing down your college selection, and then spending the time and attention it takes to create a really outstanding application for each individual school.

Having trouble narrowing your choices?

Consider these eight factors when reviewing your schools of interest:

1. Size (student body, average class size, campus size)
2. Location (including weather, proximity to home)
3. Rankings & reputation
4. Cost/financial aid
5. Campus culture
6. Majors offered & curriculum
7. Local internship and job offerings
8. Study abroad opportunities

If you really put in the time and effort to weigh these factors, your list will almost certainly shrink to a manageable size. And do you really want to waste time applying to schools you never intend to attend?