Online snafu fouls college applications

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By Richard Perez-Pena / The New York Times

With early admission deadlines looming for hundreds of thousands of students, the new version of the online Common Application shared by more than 500 colleges and universities has been plagued by numerous malfunctions, alarming students and parents and putting admissions offices weeks behind schedule

"It's been a nightmare," said Jason Locke, associate vice provost for enrollment at Cornell University. "I've been a supporter of the Common App, but in this case, they've really fallen down."

Colleges around the country have posted notices on their admissions websites, warning of potential problems in processing applications. Some Minnesota colleges have created an optional partial application. The Georgia Institute of Technology has one of the earliest fall application deadlines, Oct. 15, but it was not able to start reviewing applications on a large scale until last week and has postponed the deadline for some supporting paperwork until Nov. 1.

The problems have sown worry among students like Lily Geiger, a 12th-grader at the Rudolf Steiner School in New York City, increasing the stress level in an already stressful experience. When she entered her essays into the application, what appeared on her computer screen was a garbled mess. Some words were mashed together; others were split in two by random spaces; there were swaths of blank space where text should have been; paragraph indentations were missing.

"I was completely freaked out," she said. "I spent the whole weekend trying to fix it, and I kept thinking, what if I can't fix everything by the deadline, or what if I missed something?"

For the nonprofit company, also called the Common Application, that creates the form, it has been a summer and fall of frantic repair work, cataloged on its website, and frequent mea culpas.

In an interview, Rob Killion, the executive director, readily acknowledged a wide range of failings. But he said that they were being fixed and that the number of applications was up more than 20 percent from last year, indicating that students were successfully navigating the system.

Problems became evident as soon as the application was released in August, including some confusing wording that was later changed. Students who thought they had finished the application found that it was incomplete because questions had been added after its release. As changes were made, some who had started their applications early found themselves locked out of the system.

A function that allows students to preview applications and print them sometimes just shows blank pages -- a problem that may be linked to which Web browsers they use. And, as Ms. Geiger discovered, the

system often does not properly format essays that are copied and pasted from another program, like Microsoft Word.

When a user pays an application fee with a credit card, the system produces a "signature page," where the cardholder's name must be typed to confirm the charge. But that page can take a day or more to show up, leading some users to try to pay multiple times. Worse yet, guidance and admissions counselors say that those who do not immediately see the signature page may be unaware of its existence and may never check back -- in other words, they may think they have submitted college applications when they have not.

"This software needed beta testing and needed vetting, and it probably needed to wait a year," said Nancy Griesemer, a college admissions consultant based in Fairfax, Va.

Hundreds of colleges use software from the Common Application that automatically delivers a daily batch of new applications directly to their computers. That software is usually delivered in mid-September, but this year's version arrived at the start of October. Many colleges are still testing it and have not yet put it to use, and most of those schools have Nov. 1 or Nov. 15 early admission deadlines.

The Common Application also had trouble meshing with software called Naviance, which high schools use to send documents like transcripts, recommendations and early-admission agreements to colleges. Until this month, colleges could not view any of that material on their computers, and some forms are still not accessible to them.

The Common Application, which began in the 1970s, allows a student to fill out a single application for multiple colleges. The number of schools accepting it has more than doubled in the past decade and includes nearly all of the nation's most prestigious institutions. The company now processes well over 1 million applications yearly.

This year's application was an unusually big piece of engineering -- the first in six years to be designed and built from scratch, in ways that were supposed to make it simpler to use, with a newly standardized supplemental form that can be adapted to each college.

The recent problems mean that college admission offices will have to work overtime to go through applications, and some plan to take on temporary extra staff. But they say they still intend to send out acceptance and rejection notices on time in mid-December.

With the kinks being worked out, they expect the larger regular round of applications -- usually submitted by January deadlines, with replies sent in the spring -- to go more smoothly.

"Any time you roll something out, there's going to be glitches, but this is the worst year by far," said Katy Murphy, the president of the National Association for College Admission Counseling and the director of college counseling at Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose, Calif.

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