

Introduction

What causes stress in the college admission process? Like many reading this article, we have multiple years of admission experience, both as admission officers and independent counselors. While we know anecdotally that the college admission process tends to generate anxiety for applicants, we had not asked students what, exactly, caused their stress.

We had hypotheses about stressors in the college choice, application and decision-making process, but wanted to hear from students themselves. In August 2013, we distributed a brief questionnaire about admission stressors to our networks of rising and current college students, and encouraged them to share the anonymous questionnaire link with their peers. While this exploratory data collection strategy did not necessarily result in a representative sample, we received 42 responses in two weeks.

Nearly three-fourths (74 percent)¹ of the participants are rising college freshmen or sophomores, while the others are rising juniors or seniors. (Two students just graduated from college.) The participants represented various institution types in terms of selectivity: slightly more than half (52 percent) identified their college as “most selective,” and another third (33 percent) indicated their college is “highly” or “very” selective. Five students responded that their college is “selective,” and one indicated his² college is “less selective.” Sixty percent of participants claimed their high school was “highly” or “very” competitive; 26 percent attended “competitive” high schools, and 15 percent attended high schools that were “less competitive” or “not competitive at all.”

Admission Stress: Why, What and How

As many admission officers and school counselors may predict, the college choice, application and decision-making process can be quite stressful for applicants. On an “overall stress” scale of 1 to 7 (“not stressful at all” to “incredibly stressful”), the average rating from our participants was 4.95, with 71 percent choosing 5 or higher. This indicates that while the process is not stressful for all, it is certainly stressful—and potentially very stressful—for many.

In challenging our assumptions about admission stressors, we asked the students to tell us, in their own words, *why* the process was stressful, *what* exactly was stressful about it and *how* they would advise fellow applicants, as well as school counselors and admission representatives, to manage college admission-related anxiety.

Why is the admission process stressful?

We first asked participants to reflect on why their admission process was stressful (if at all). Of those students who indicated the process was “incredibly stressful” (7 of 7), one wrote: “[The admission process] was going to determine my entire future. I felt like making the slightest mistake would mean total failure.” Another student held a similar sentiment: “I think what [was] most stressful [was] worrying that [I was] doing something wrong.” A participant who rated the process as “very stressful” (6 of 7) wrote: “I viewed college admission as both the pinnacle of my life up until that point and as an integral part of my life in the future.” Another student, though, had a more balanced outlook: “It was one of the most stressful time periods in my life, but I did... know that... my college admission was not what would define my life.”

Some participants expressed a lack of information as a source of stress in the admission process. In the words of one student, “It was quite a lot of work for something I was very inexperienced at.” Another stated, “I felt under-informed of the college process beforehand.” Others pointed to the workload in the fall semester of senior year as compounding their stress.

Several participants named the application essays as a specific source of stress. As one student noted, “The essays and such

weren't hard to compose but the editing and revisions took a long time and were stressful." Another added, "I procrastinated on my applications to the point that I was writing essays the night before the deadline. It was extremely stressful."

Notably, those participants who received early admission to college tended to report lower stress levels. One student wrote that he was admitted to "my top choice school Early Decision in December, thus making the rest of the year stress free from applications." Another student, who ranked her stress level at 4 of 7, indicated: "I applied to three schools, all early, and got into all of them. I was done very quickly."

What is so stressful about the admission process?

The second segment of our questionnaire focused on what, specifically, was stressful about the admission process. We offered the options below (Table 1) and asked participants to check all that apply, as well as provided space to include other ideas³.

Table 1. Options for Stressors in the Admission Process

Application essay(s)	Deciding where to apply	Peers/friends
Application was deferred	Deciding where to enroll	School counselors
Application was waitlisted	Early Decision/Early Action deadlines	Standardized tests (SAT, ACT, AP, etc.)
Asking teachers for letters of recommendation	Financial aid applications and deadlines	Teachers
Athletics recruitment	GPA	Time needed to complete applications
Choosing a major	Parents/family members	Waiting for responses from universities
College reputation/ranking	Paying for college	

The most and least frequently selected stressors from Table 1 are displayed in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Most Frequently Selected Stressors in the Admission Process

Factor	Response Percent
Application essay(s)	71%
Standardized tests (SAT, ACT, AP, etc.)	64%
Waiting for responses from universities	60%
Parents/family members	57%
College reputation/ranking	50%
Deciding where to apply	50%

Table 3. Least Frequently Selected Stressors in the Admission Process

Factor	Response Percent
Athletics recruitment	10%
Application was waitlisted	12%
Asking teachers for letters of recommendation	12%
School counselors	12%
Application was deferred	14%
Teachers	14%

Though not included in Table 2, Early Action and Early Decision *deadlines* caused stress for nearly half (48 percent) of the participants; however, as described earlier, those students who were *admitted* early tended to have overall lower stress levels when reflecting on the process. While we hypothesized that there may be common stressors for students applying to institutions with similar selectivity, there were no evident patterns in the data.

Based on the questionnaire responses, we wanted to consider the effects of financial need, if any, on admission stress (though we recognize the relative homogeneity⁴ of our sample size with respect to estimated household income, as well as the overall small sample size of participants). As described in education media⁵, financial aid is often an application and enrollment driver, particularly for lower-income applicants. Thus, we examined the responses to "what produced stress or anxiety in the college admission process" (i.e., options in Table 1) in light of participants' self-reported household income (see Table 4).

With respect to stress produced by potential financial need, of note are two findings from Table 4. First, "Financial aid applications and deadlines" and "Paying for college" were ranked higher by the lower-income participants, with 57 percent⁶ indicating these elements were a source of admission stress. We anticipated seeing these stressors for participants with <\$50K household incomes, though assumed they would rank higher (i.e., we assumed 100 percent of the lower-income participants would identify these elements as admission stressors). Possible explanations for why "Financial aid applications and deadlines" and "Paying for college" were not ranked more frequently as stressors for participants with <\$50K household income include limited/lack of information about college costs; an assumption that they would take on loans and/or incur debt; or anticipation of significant need-based aid.

The second noteworthy finding was that 16 percent of the higher-income students (>\$150K) ranked "Financial aid applications and deadlines" and "Paying for college" as admission stressors. This indicates that college costs may also generate

anxiety for students with more financial security, and that consideration of college cost/aid availability is potentially stressful for applicants across income bands—though potentially more influential for lower-income candidates. This is an important factor to consider for school counselors, admission officers and even policymakers.⁷

In the next segment of our questionnaire, we asked participants to indicate which items, among those checked, were *the most* stressful and why. Not surprisingly, many of the factors that emerged most frequently (see Table 2) also surfaced as the highest cause of stress (i.e., “most” stressful): application essays, standardized tests and waiting to receive admission decisions. With regard to essays, students expressed concern over writing about or “promoting” themselves. In the words of one participant, “I had a lot of trouble writing the essays since I was definitely not used to writing about myself and trying to promote myself in that way.” Another posed a question that may cross the minds of every college applicant: “How could I show these [admission officers] who I was in a small essay?”

Based on our own professional admission experience, we were not surprised to see standardized testing emerge as one of “the most” stressful elements (“I was never any good at them;” “my scores were not reflecting my grades nor my ability;” “I am not that great at testing”), mentioned by 21 percent of participants. We were also not surprised to see that the anxiety of waiting for admission decisions was a main source of stress, mentioned by 17 percent of the participants. In the words of one student, “Waiting for responses was the most stressful, the anticipation [of] waiting for my deadline to hear back from places was very hectic.” Deferral from an Early Action or Early Decision program was the main source of stress for several participants, though its overall frequency was low (see Table 3).

Expanding on an earlier point, several participants referred to the pressure of feeling like a failure in response to what was most stressful about the admission process—especially self-reported academically successful students who expressed that others’ expectations created anxiety. One participant wrote: “[They] all knew I was applying to Ivies and blindly assumed I would get in wherever I wanted.” Others described pressure from family members; for example, one student noted that his parents “added an unnecessary amount of stress to the college process. I know it was because they cared, but they made it harder.” Another stated: “I worried my parents would be disappointed in me if I didn’t get into a good enough school or if I didn’t get enough scholarships.”

Table 4. Stressors Indicated by Participants with Self-Reported >\$150K and <\$50K Household Incomes

Stressors for students >\$150K (n=19) ⁸	Response Percent	Stressors for students <\$50K (n=7)	Response Percent
Deciding where to apply	58%	Parents/family members	86%
Standardized tests (SAT, ACT, AP, etc.)	58%	Application essay(s)	71%
Application essay(s)	58%	Standardized tests (SAT, ACT, AP, etc.)	71%
Parents/family members	53%	Waiting for responses from universities	71%
Waiting for responses from universities	47%	Financial aid applications and deadlines	57%
Peers/friends	42%	Paying for college	57%
College reputation/ranking	42%	Asking teachers for letters of recommendation	43%
GPA	42%	Choosing a major	43%
Early Decision/Early Action deadlines	32%	College reputation/ranking	43%
Asking teachers for letters of recommendation	21%	Deciding where to apply	43%
Financial aid applications and deadlines	16%	Early Decision/Early Action deadlines	43%
Paying for college	16%	Peers/friends	43%
Deciding where to enroll	16%	Time needed to complete applications	43%
Time needed to complete applications	11%	School counselors	29%
Athletics recruitment	11%	Application was deferred	14%
Application was deferred	11%	Athletics recruitment	14%
Choosing a major	11%	Deciding where to enroll	14%
Application was waitlisted	5%	GPA	14%
School Counselors	5%	Application was waitlisted	0%

Lastly, for a few participants, teachers and counselors were deemed “most” stressful—though that stress was coupled (and perhaps exacerbated) by other factors. As explained by one student, “Asking teachers for letters of recommendation was really stressful because I once had a teacher say no... and they were really mean about it and I cried for hours.” Another participant added: “My school counselor was one of my worst problems. ...I hate to think what my recommendation letter looked like. She also discouraged me from entering the field I am interested in, engineering, because it is traditionally for males.”

How can we help reduce stress and anxiety in the admission process?

While it is helpful to understand why the college choice, application and decision-making processes are stressful, the more salient question to consider is how we—as school counselors and admission professionals—can help reduce applicants’ identified anxieties. In asking participants to reflect on their relatively recent admission experience and what *would have* made it less stressful, students offered advice for future applicants, school counselors and admission representatives.

For those about to embark on the admission process, participants’ advice included:

1. **Start early.** Our participants had pragmatic guidance for future college applicants. In the words of one student, “Start your application early. Start thinking about how you are going to present yourself to the colleges in your apps as far back as ninth grade. You don’t want junior year to roll around and to find yourself just learning about the process.” Echoing this sentiment, one student added, “Do as much as you can before your senior year. If you’re on vacation somewhere new, visit a school there just to see it. Also, take the SATs more than once. Even though they are not fun, you will almost certainly do better after the first time.”
2. **Ask for help.** Several participants noted that they would advise future applicants to seek guidance on the process. Expanding on the “start early” theme, one participant suggested, “Get to work on your application the day it comes out and always seek answers or help.” Taking a slightly more specific tone, one student indicated, “I’d love for someone to be around to read my college essay.” This comment is particularly noteworthy, as it points to a strategy for alleviating a potential stressor before it escalates.
3. **Exhale.** The participants also offered support and encouragement for future applicants. This reinforces earlier data on the emotional nature of the college choice, application and decision-making process. In the words of the participants:
 - “Just stay calm. You applied to the schools because they are a good match for you. Have faith in the application that you [submitted], and enjoy senior year.”
 - “Just breath[e] and relax. Don’t worry too much about writing the perfect essay, just be yourself and let your true self shine through.”
 - “Work very hard at it but don’t let it get to you. Everything will work itself out.”

Though the participants had fewer suggestions for school counselors and admission officers, their recommendations bear analogous messages. For counselors, participants advised:

1. **Help students understand the process.** Building on the notion that applicants could benefit from and are sometimes stressed without well-informed admission guidance, one piece of advice for college counselors was to help their students navigate the college choice and application processes. One student emphasized the need for help generating college lists, stating that counselors “should do their best to ensure that students have a wide range of college applications (e.g. two safety schools, two reasonable schools and two dream schools).” Other participants focused on time management: “As annoying as it is, school counselors should remind students of deadlines more.”
2. **Provide exposure.** Along the lines of time management, participants noted that early exposure to actual college applications could help reduce anxiety about the admission process. As described by one student, “My school counselors helped us in the second half of our junior year by familiarizing us with the common application and having us write a sample common app essay, which starts to get you... thinking of how those essays work.” Another participant suggested that “in junior year,” school counselors should encourage students “to see schools throughout the summer and to work on essays as soon as possible.”

Finally, for admission representatives, our participants had two suggestions (shared by just four students):

1. **Provide timely responses.** In the words of one participant: “Get back to students as quickly as possible.” This advice could span numerous categories, ranging from pre-application questions to the final admission decision. This seems to support the data from Table 2, which shows “waiting for decisions” as one of the most frequently selected stressors.
2. **Address the stress.** While it may seem intuitive, one student reminded us that many admission representatives—ourselves included—do not always acknowledge the stressful nature of the application process. As the participant described, “Simply addressing the idea of stress itself throughout the process would also be helpful, as the focus is often entirely on the end result.” Though this topic may be addressed on some admission office websites, it could be valuable for representatives to reiterate in information sessions, prospective student outreach, and/or in other communications.

Recommendations

In reviewing the questionnaire responses, we observed that admission stressors fell into two categories: those that we as admission professionals can support (and potentially alleviate), and those somewhat beyond our control. We cannot control the perceptions

In reviewing the survey responses, we observed that admission stressors fell into two categories: those that we as admission professionals can support (and potentially alleviate), and those somewhat beyond our control. We cannot control the perceptions or behavior of parents, teachers and peers; further, we cannot alter university rankings, we cannot control how students perform on standardized tests and we cannot give them a silver bullet to gain admission to their top-choice institution. However, based on the survey responses described above, there are certainly ways we can support applicants in navigating this complex process.

or behavior of parents, teachers and peers; further, we cannot alter university rankings, we cannot control how students perform on standardized tests and we cannot give them a silver bullet to gain admission to their top-choice institution. However, based on the questionnaire responses described above, there are certainly ways we can support applicants in navigating this complex process.

1. **Provide access to information.** Many students expressed frustration that they simply lacked information about the college admission process. Their responses suggest they did not know how to write essays, which institutions to consider or how to manage the application timeline. Thus, we offer the following advice:

School counselors:

- Recommend that students join colleges' mailing lists to learn if and when a representative is visiting the local area, as representatives will provide much more information about academic programs and campus life than a general guidebook.
- Encourage students to plan official college visits (i.e., join the information session and take the tour) to get a sense of college types and admission requirements.
- Engage parents early on—not just in the spring of junior year, but in freshman and sophomore years. Counselors have the opportunity to help parents understand the admission process through information sessions at the high school, or by hosting a panel of recent graduates, of recent graduates' parents or of admission officers to talk about their experience and provide tips/best practices.

Admission officers:

- Provide clear instructions about deadlines for various parts of the application, including financial aid, when communicating with students via emails, brochures, social media, and websites.

- Release supplemental essay prompts, if applicable, early in the summer so that students have an opportunity to begin working on them.
 - Employ student ambassadors to communicate with prospective applicants (e.g., through email or via blogs) to acknowledge the anxiety of applying to college, encourage them in the application process and answer their questions.
2. **Promote time management.** In honoring our participants' "start early" advice to future applicants and addressing their high levels of reported stress related to essay development, we offer the following suggestions:

School counselors:

- Help applicants develop application timelines. Counsel students on time management strategies (e.g., block X hours per week to work on application forms, essays and standardized test preparation in addition to school work and extracurricular activities). Essay-writing workshops, staffed by teachers, counselors and/or admission officers, could also be offered to address this particular source of stress.
- Check in systematically—even if it is an automated message sent to all applicants. This could be something as simple as "I know early admission deadlines are coming up; do you have any questions?" or "It's almost January 1! Feel free to come see me if you need help finalizing your applications."

Admission officers:

- Set and communicate deadlines early. If one does not already exist, it could be helpful to create an application calendar hosted on the admission office website. This could include admission deadlines, as well as related dates, such as financial aid deadlines, recruitment events and approximate decision-release dates.
- If possible, schedule automated reminders to prospective applicants about upcoming deadlines. These should occur at realistic intervals, such as four weeks, two weeks, one week, and/or a few days before the deadline.

3. **Be responsive.** Though we cannot eradicate admission decision anxiety, we can offer a few strategies to improve overall responsiveness—which, combined with the suggestions for providing access to information (see page 11), speak to participants' recommendations for providing guidance to alleviate stress.

School counselors:

- In an era of email overload, one strategy for increasing responsiveness is to hold 15–20 minute appointments, office hours or small group sessions to answer students' questions quickly and perhaps simultaneously. These sessions/appointments could be offered more frequently in the weeks leading up to major application deadlines.
- Given our findings about the emotionally stressful nature of the admission process, counselors might offer appointments for general support—not necessarily related to specific components or development of the application. Providing opportunities to talk through the process could alleviate some of the application stress.

Admission officers:

- Facing a similar challenge of email overload, one suggestion for admission officers is to host online FAQ sessions to address common application questions. Admission representatives could also hold virtual "office hours," for groups or individuals, in the weeks leading up to application deadlines. This may help provide timely feedback when we cannot get to the email pile.
- As noted above, admission officers should not forget their other source of human capital: students. Students can be hired (e.g., work-study candidates) or may volunteer to review, triage, and/or respond to messages in overflowing admission inboxes to provide timely feedback. This could be a role for student ambassadors or tour guides.

4. **Manage emotions.** As indicated by the questionnaire responses, the admission process can generate significant anxiety and stress, potentially prompting other negative emotions. For all of us in admission counseling, at the secondary or postsecondary level:

- Keep reminding applicants that while it may feel prescriptive, admission does not define their personal importance. As counselors, admission officers, parents, families, and peers, we must all remember the inherent anxiety in this process, and make efforts to be supportive during a particularly stressful experience. We cannot always eliminate stress, but we can help reduce it.

Conclusion

Though limited by a small sample and a general data review, the results of this questionnaire offer a unique foray into the college choice, application and decision-making process from the perspective of rising and current college students. While our findings may not astound school counselors or admission representatives, the results both confirm some commonly-named admission stressors—essays, standardized tests, parents/peers—and add new dimensions to *why* alleviating them is important (e.g., feelings of failure and disappointment) as well as *how* we can better support applicants through this process. Our hope is that the recommendations above will be useful for all those who advise upcoming generations of college applicants.

Endnotes

¹ All percentages are rounded.

² Gender attributions are arbitrarily assigned.

³ Only one participant added a category to the list above; he indicated that he was denied admission via Early Decision.

⁴ Forty-five percent of participants self-reported that their household income was greater than \$150,000; 21 percent self-reported household income between \$100,000 and \$150,000; 17 percent self-reported household income between \$50,000 and \$100,000; and 17 percent self-reported household income under \$50,000.

⁵ Media examples include *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The New York Times* and *Inside Higher Education*.

⁶ Those participants who selected "Financial aid applications and deadlines" were not necessarily the same participants who selected "Paying for college."

⁷ In both income groups, students reported standardized tests and application essays as two of their top three stressors, which suggests that these components also generate significant anxiety in college applicants across the income spectrum. The top-ranked stressor for high-income participants—"Deciding where to apply"—was further down the list for lower-income participants, who collectively ranked it #10, whereas the #1 stressor for lower-income participants ("Parents/family members") was ranked #4 by the higher-income group.

⁸ The number of participants for each self-reported income category is important to note, as the difference between 19 students (>\$150K) and seven students (<\$50K) may seemingly inflate the response percentages of the latter group. Although the number of students with self-reported <\$50K household income is small, their responses are still helpful in examining and understanding sources of admission stress.



JULIE VULTAGGIO is assistant dean of the Doctor of Education Leadership (EdLD) program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (MA). She has worked in admission at Harvard as well as Tufts University (MA). Her academic and professional work focuses on issues of college access, persistence and retention, particularly for underrepresented groups.



STEPHEN FRIEDFELD co-founded AcceptU, an admission counseling group comprised of former admission officers. He received his BA from Cornell University (NY), MA from Columbia University Teachers College (NY), and PhD from Rice University (TX). He was an assistant dean of admission at Cornell and associate dean of graduate admission at Princeton University (NJ).