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# Applications by the Dozen, as Anxious Seniors Hedge College Bets

By ARIEL KAMINER NOV. 15, 2014

Six college applications once seemed like a lot. Submitting eight was a mark of great ambition. For a growing number of increasingly anxious high school seniors, figures like that now sound like just a starting point.

Alexa Verola, a senior at Mahwah High School in northern New Jersey, drew up a list of some colleges where she would be happy majoring in anthropology and added more that would be good for photography or sound design: 18 in all. Then she applied to every last one of them.

Eighteen is a lot, but good colleges are so hard to get into these days, Ms. Verola reasoned, and there will always be students with better board scores or higher grades. So after those 18 applications were in — most of them way ahead of schedule — she looked over the list and decided to add 11 more.

“My guidance counselor thought it was a little too much,” she said. “She was worried about me getting too stressed out about it. There are a lot of high school students who are really stressed out.”

With college application season upon them, a lot of stressed-out high school students appear to be following the same path Ms. Verola did: Faced with an increasingly competitive landscape, they have begun applying to more colleges than anyone would previously have thought possible.

For members of the class of 2015 who are looking at more competitive colleges, their overtaxed counselors say, 10 applications is now commonplace; 20 is taking on a familiar ring; even 30 is not beyond imagining. And why stop there?

Brandon Kosatka, director of student services at the Thomas Jefferson School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Va., recently worked with a student who

wanted a spot in a music conservatory program. To find it, she applied to 56 colleges. A spokeswoman for Naviance, an online tool that many high school students and their counselors use to keep track of applications, said one current user's "colleges I'm applying to" tab already included 60 institutions. Last year the record was 86, she said.

A number of factors have contributed to this rapid escalation.

One is the growing popularity of the Common Application, a standardized form that more than 500 colleges now honor, making the process of applying to multiple institutions far easier. Another is the tough economy, which drives students to look ever farther afield for a college that can meet their financial aid needs.

But perhaps the most pressing factor has been plain old fear.

"Every year the story is that college is harder to get into, so kids panic and think they have to apply to more places," said Jim Jump, academic dean and director of guidance at St. Christopher's School in Richmond, Va. The resulting surfeit of applications drives acceptance rates down even further, making the next year's high school seniors even more panicked.

"It becomes a mania, almost," he said.

According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling, in 1990 just 9 percent of students applied to seven or more colleges. By 2011, the year of its most recent survey, that group had risen to 29 percent.

In the class of 2014, according to Naviance, 16.5 percent of seniors using the system said they intended to apply to 11 to 20 colleges. (Naviance did not have figures on how many applications were actually filed.)

With application fees running as high as \$80, the scattershot approach can be costly. Last year Annie Fagerlee of Minnetonka, Minn., applied to 18 colleges. Some waived the fee, but in the end Ms. Fagerlee, now at DePaul University, estimated that it cost her family about \$1,500 just to get the applications out the door. Still, college counselors say cost is rarely an inhibiting factor. What is \$1,500, the reasoning goes, when these colleges might cost \$50,000 a year?

On average, college-bound American high school students apply to just a handful of places, reflecting the fact that most colleges are not highly selective and that many students have limited access to college counselors. (The College Board,

which sponsors the SAT, introduced a campaign called Apply to 4 or More to encourage low-income students to broaden their portfolio.)

In the upper reaches of the applicant pool, however — especially in the kinds of upper-middle-class communities that can breed their own college neuroses — numbers can escalate rapidly.

Some high schools set a limit of perhaps 10 colleges per student. Others allow application creep, either because they do not want to infringe on a family's decisions or because they have concluded that families will do what they want, regardless. But most college counselors agree on one point: Filing so many applications is a terrible idea.

For one thing, counselors warn, quality and quantity work against each other. And the problems of scale only increase as decisions roll in. Five rejections are painful; 15 can be devastating. “The funny thing about 17-year-olds,” said Lisa Sohmer, director of college counseling at the Garden School in Jackson Heights, Queens, “is when you tell them that only 10 percent of students are accepted to school X, they never make the connection — even the math ones — that 90 percent are denied.”

But the most compelling reason not to apply to dozens of colleges, counselors say, is that more applications do not necessarily mean better odds. “It's not like the lottery,” said Michael Carter of St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School in Alexandria, Va.

Ms. Sohmer said she had found that when students file 20 or more applications, “they've loaded on lots of ultracompetitive schools, so their list becomes disproportionately top-heavy. Or they throw in lots of schools at the end where they're overqualified.” A far better way to increase one's chances, she and many others agree, is to come up with a manageable but carefully selected list of schools and get serious about them.

As for the colleges, they are generally eager for more applicants. In fact, many work hard to market themselves, with promotional mailings that begin well before senior year, because bigger numbers mean a higher position in the annual “best colleges” rankings. But dealing with students who have applied to 25 other colleges can make it hard for admissions officers to manage their yield — the all-important percentage of accepted students who actually enroll — and that can hurt the college's position in those same rankings.

As a result, many colleges have begun emphasizing “demonstrated interest” — tiny but telling indications of how badly students want to attend. “If they’re within a reasonable distance of the campus, did they visit?” asks Patrick O’Connor, associate dean of college counseling at the Cranbrook Kingswood Upper School in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. “Did they attend a college night and fill out a card? Have they contacted a rep to ask some legitimate questions?”

Marie Bigham, director of college counseling at the Greenhill School in Addison, Texas, said, “You can’t be a competitive, strong applicant without demonstrating interest, and you can’t do that at 25 schools.”

Ultimately, a wide range of counselors say, all they can do is counsel against applying to dozens of schools and against college-admissions panic in general.

“That’s when the kids put their best foot forward,” Mr. Kosatka said. “The kids who try to game the system just end up getting played in the end.”

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