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# Common App 4.0

By **JACQUES STEINBERG**

FOR the current crop of high school sophomores as well as those bobbing behind them in middle school, the technical process of applying to college using the Common Application is likely to be more streamlined (and less frustrating) than it was for their older brothers and sisters, to say nothing of their parents.

The Common App, the all-purpose form accepted by 456 colleges and universities, is getting a digital makeover, down to the most fundamental swatches of code, with the end result intended to be a smoother, faster, more intuitive application. (The application itself will still be a rigorous exercise, complete with 250- to 500-word essays.)

The new electronic form, now on the drawing board, is scheduled to make its debut in 2013. Estimated to cost \$7 million to \$8 million, the overhaul will replace a computer system put in place six years ago — in the days before iPhones and iPads, and when dial-up modems weren't as outdated as rotary-dial phones.

“This isn't going in and performing surgery,” Rob Killion, executive director of Common Application Inc., a nonprofit association, told me. “This is thanking the current system for its work, giving it a gold watch and sending it on its way.”

For applicants who have struggled with the quirks of the form — like when the short essay answers or key details are inadvertently cut off during submission — such changes may seem long overdue.

But the truth is that even the current Common App is a technological marvel, considering the strain put on it. In the application season beginning to wind down this month, an estimated 750,000 students will have submitted three million online applications. That represents an increase of about 25 percent in only the last year. Meanwhile, teachers, counselors and school administrators are expected to submit 10 million transcripts, recommendations and other school forms through the Common Application's electronic pipeline this year.

For that matter, it has only been in the last decade that most students began to apply to college by pushing the “send” button instead of walking their applications to the post office. The Common App itself — which made it possible, for the first time, for a student to type up one form and photocopy it for multiple submissions — is only 36 years old. But it has not kept up with lightning-fast changes in computing. For example, the application displays all the questions in a particular section on a student’s computer screen — as many as several dozen at some points — but only a fraction may be relevant to the student.

In Common App 4.0, as the forthcoming upgrade is known behind the scenes, one likely change is that only one question at a time (or at most a handful) will be visible, and the particular answers to each will determine which subsequent questions will be asked. “That is now best practice,” Mr. Killion said.

Another change being contemplated: within the application, students could pose a substantive question (opposed to a technical one, which is possible now) to a rotating team of college counselors — say, how to determine whether to check more than one box regarding ethnicity or race.

And then there’s the vexing issue known within the college application world as “truncation,” in which information that appears on the screen is cut off in the PDF an admissions officer will see. Now a box appears to warn applicants to preview their work before filing.

The quirk has also cropped up when students use too many words, or even letters, to describe a parental occupation or extracurricular activity. The current solution is to cut some words, or at least use shorter words. Mr. Killion assures that a more elegant remedy is at hand.

Acknowledging the millions of tablets now in use, a new incarnation might also make it easier for students to use their iPads.

While it’s possible to fill out basic information right now with the touch keyboard of an iPad, essays present a problem. The form requires files be uploaded, which isn’t possible directly from an iPad. Determined tablet users can e-mail the file to themselves, and upload from their computer.

It would be far less cumbersome for iPad users if they could type in an essay directly or copy and paste it — the better also, Mr. Killion said, to enforce the 500-word limit. But the advisory board has yet to approve such a change.

For now, as Jeff Durso-Finley, director of college counseling at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, advises his students, avoid tablets. “I tell them go sit down and use your laptop,” he said. “It’s a lot smoother.”

And considering that no less than one’s education is at stake, Mr. Killion doubts students will be able to tap out essays on devices as small as their Android phones. But then as now, they can check the status of their application materials using their phones, and even add institutions to their list of where they want their application sent.

The number of applications filed through the Common Application portal by the end of this decade could exceed 10 million — and the number of schools accepting it could grow to 1,000 or more. That workload is well beyond what the latest Common Application is built to withstand.

“If we stick with the architecture of the current system through the end of the decade, with the growth we’re seeing, there would be delays during peak periods, for students and for our member colleges getting applications,” Mr. Killion said. “This will all soon be groaning if we don’t do something now.”

*Jacques Steinberg oversees [The Choice](#). To post and read comments about the Common App, visit [nytimes.com/thechoice](http://nytimes.com/thechoice).*