

The Washington Post

7 college admissions myths

By [Jenna Johnson](#) and [Valerie Strauss](#)

Published: October 23

Help is here for the frantic seniors and their parents who are spending practically every waking moment fixated on getting into college (and there are plenty, with more than 3.22 million [projected](#) to graduate from high school next year) and for younger students who will eventually be in the same boat. Below we bust some of the most basic — and persistent — myths about admissions that can take applicants in the wrong direction and drive anxiety to unhealthy levels.

1. It's best to set your heart on one school and really go for it.

There are hundreds of colleges in this country, and most students can find success and happiness at any number of schools. It's important to be realistic in deciding where to apply. Nearly eight out of 10 college graduates say they would go back to the same college if they had to do it again, according to the American Council on Education. And don't listen to your opinionated classmates and their definitions of what constitutes the perfect school. Some groups of friends have found it healthier for their relationships (and egos) to not discuss test scores, acceptances or scholarship offers.

2. The tuition price listed in brochures is what everyone pays.

Flipping through college guides can be heart-stopping, especially with dozens of private schools now charging more than \$50,000 a year for tuition, housing and fees. But that's just the [sticker price](#). Last year, that [rate was reduced by more than 40 percent](#) for the average student through institutional grants and scholarships, according to an industry study. In an effort to make it easier for families to compare pricing, the federal government now requires that colleges and universities put a "[net price calculator](#)" on their Web site. Although these estimates are not perfect, they

give students a better idea of what they might be asked to pay each year. And everyone should fill out the free application for federal student aid, even if you think you won't qualify for aid; 1.8 million students who would have qualified for federal financial aid did not apply, the council reported in 2006.

3. The admissions department adores you.

Many schools dump lots of money into transforming their campus visits into personal experiences, building connections through social media and making average students feel aggressively recruited. They also flood mailboxes with personalized invitations to apply, and are sometimes even willing to waive the application fee. Don't think this makes you special. Realize that this is all [strategic marketing](#). Despite the overly personal facade, admissions departments are receiving numbers of applications and the evaluation process is often a technical, impersonal one.

4. It's best to crowd your application with a volume of extracurriculars.

In most cases, admissions staffers are not impressed by long lists of extracurriculars that fill in every single line on the application. In asking about your out-of-class interests, colleges usually want to hear about your interests, passions and leadership. Rather than spreading your time and dedication over a dozen activities you care a little about, focus on a couple that mean the most to you.

5. It's better to have a high GPA than to take difficult classes.

It's always better to challenge yourself, even if it means a lower grade. Just don't fail.

6. Essays don't really matter much in the end because grades and test scores are so dominant in admissions decisions.

Don't believe it. A poorly written, typo-filled essay can kill any application, and a beautiful piece can lift a student over another who looks similar on paper. Yes, college admissions officers can often tell if a student didn't actually write the essay. Some compare the writing with SAT and ACT essays. And no, don't think every subject will work as long as it is well written: Admissions officers have no interest in a student's love life, brushes

with the law or the trip to Costa Rica to fulfill a community service requirement in which the applicant wound up learning more from the locals than the locals got from the applicant.

7. Recommendations from famous people can give an applicant a huge boost.

In some cases, recommendations can make a difference. Admissions officers at public colleges will sometimes give a second look at a student if asked by a state legislator who controls education funding. And private schools won't want to inadvertently upset billionaire donors. But — and this is an enormous *but* — in most cases, schools want recommendations from people who actually know a student's academic and social abilities. A university dean told parents about getting a written recommendation from a famous actor about a student whom he did not seem to know well. That happens more than you'd think, and admissions officers just laugh when they see them. Not even a recommendation from President Obama could guarantee admission to a school.