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## College Applicants Stressed Out by Balky Online Common App

By KATHLEEN MEGAN, kmegan@courant.com The Hartford Courant 8:21 p.m. EDT, October 16, 2013

Kassidi Jones, a senior at Loomis Chaffee School in Windsor, woke up Monday morning, ready to send off her application to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She had been working on it since mid-summer and the deadline was the next day.

But when she went to sign on to her Common Application — the online application now used by more than 500 colleges and universities — she couldn't open it. She tried again and again, but no luck.

"I almost had a panic attack," said Jones, who was applying under an Early Action program. "I freaked out because I thought I had lost all my work. I was crying in my room. I was terrified."

For students, high school counselors and college admissions staff, this year's college application cycle has been hampered by serious technical glitches that have cropped up since Aug. 1, when The Common Application, a nonprofit organization, introduced a new version of the application.

"I had a kid in my office today who was just a wreck," Steve Boyle, a college counselor at Hall High School in West Hartford, said earlier this week. The student had a problem with her password and couldn't get her application to open.

"And, there's no one to call," Boyle said. "That's maybe the most frustrating part right now, and so the kids are in a panic. ... This just adds more anxiety to an already stressful process."

For more than three decades, students, high school counselors and college officials have had high praise for the Common Application, which streamlined the college application process, allowing students to fill out a single application that then can be sent to multiple schools.

But the problems reported this fall, which have been called "a disaster" and a "nightmare" by some college counselors, have led some college officials to extend their deadlines, while also reassuring students that bugs in their applications will not be held against them.

Jeremiah Quinlan, dean of undergraduate admissions for Yale University, said he is aware of the problems with the Common Application and has sent an email to applicants, urging them to stay

calm. "We expect everything to be fine by Nov. 1," he said, "and if not, we are prepared to be fully flexible with the application deadline."

Students have encountered problems with passwords and signing on; garbled text or faulty formatting in their essays; delays in getting credit card payments to register; the disappearance of application contents; and very sluggish processing.

Meanwhile, college admissions staff have had difficulty downloading applications, transcripts and teachers' recommendations and getting them into the proper format.

"My advice would have been that in hindsight, they probably shouldn't have gone live on Aug. 1," said Joan Isaac Mohr, vice president for admissions and financial aid at Quinnipiac University. "It wasn't all ready to go, and they've been playing catch-up in terms of solving issues they knew about and issues they didn't know about."

But she agreed that students shouldn't get too anxious. "Everyone will get through the process," she said. "If colleges need to extend deadlines, they will. ... Colleges understand that in some of the early apps, the essays show up looking odd with different-size fonts, which I know freaks students out. But we all know this is happening, so it's OK."

A call and an email to Rob Killion, executive director of The Common Application, were not returned, but Aba Blankson, a spokeswoman for the nonprofit, sent out a statement that said:

"We are committed to resolving these issues promptly. ... As we approach the busy deadline season, we are fully committed to ensuring complete and timely review of applications for all Common Application members, particularly those with November 1 deadlines."

The new system was launched to handle the anticipated growth in applications, Blankson said in an email. In the past 10 years, the number of schools and universities that use the Common App has more than doubled, from 241 to 517 this year. Last year, the system processed more than 3 million applications and 9 million school forms on behalf of 720,000 students.

"This was well over the system's capacity," said Blankson. "We could not take the chance that we would not be able to reliably handle future volume increases."

Joyce E. Smith, chief executive officer of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, which represents thousands of high school college counselors and university and college admissions staff, said the "technical glitches have really taken the steam out of this fall's application process."

She said her organization is getting many calls about the new system's malfunctions. "When counselors are having a problem, they want to talk to someone," Smith said. "That's what's proven to be so frustrating. Common App is saying, 'Email us your problem. We'll get it answered and post it for not just one counselor but for a hundred who might be having the same problem.'"

But, said Smith, counselors and parents "want to hear a voice saying it's going to be OK."

So do students. Rebecca Zeuschner, a senior at Hall High School, said she mistakenly clicked a button that said she did not want to waive her rights to review her teachers' recommendations. When she tried to fix it, she found the system wouldn't allow her to go back and make the change. She and Boyle, her counselor, spent hours trying to find a phone number for The Common Application. They finally sent an email Tuesday afternoon; as of Wednesday afternoon they had heard nothing back.

"I have my application and my essay done, the whole thing is filled out," Zeuschner said. If she doesn't get a reply soon, she worries she may have to open a new account and redo the entire application. "It was extremely frustrating when you think you're done and ready, and then you're not."

Janet Rosier, an independent college counselor in Woodbridge, said she had been confident The Common Application would resolve its problems, but on Monday, when nobody seemed able to log on at all, that was "the tipping point" for her.

"Then I started to worry like everyone else," said Rosier.

For a small number of schools, Tuesday was the deadline for students to apply for Early Decision or Early Action. But the spike in activity overwhelmed The Common Application.

The next big challenge for the new system will be Nov. 1 — the Early Action or Early Decision deadline for many of the most competitive colleges and universities. At least two of those schools, Columbia University and the University of Chicago, already have moved their deadline to Nov. 8.

UNC also extended its deadline, to Oct. 21, as Kassidi Jones at Loomis Chaffee said she was "ecstatic" to learn in an email from her college counselor, after several hours of frantically trying to open her Common App.

But, as of Wednesday afternoon, she still hadn't filed her application.

"I was all ready to push the button on Monday, and then I couldn't push the button," she said. "Now I have to psych myself up again."