The Universal College Application versus the Common Application

Although the Common Application (found at www.commonapp.org) has by far the bigger market share with over 500 colleges using it, the Universal College Application (www.universalcollegeapp.com) is an easier-to-use tool for students applying to one of the more limited colleges that use it too, thereby giving applicants a choice. Especially after the Common Application came out with a new version last year that had quite a few glitches for months, a number of colleges (among them Cornell, Princeton, and Tufts) began using the Universal College Application (UCA) for the first time even though it has been around since 2007.

The Common Application has been working in conjunction with Naviance, the computer program used by many high school guidance offices, but the people at the Universal College Application say they may work with Naviance soon too. Until they do so, high schools may prefer for their students to use the Common Application, but it would seem to be in high school students’ best interest to be able to use the UCA if the schools they’re applying to employ it.

Among the reasons the UCA is “friendlier” is first and foremost that it still has a “Topic of Your Choice” option for the essay, whereas the Common Application removed that option last year. Also, unlike the current Common Application, the UCA can be edited an unlimited number of times, allowing students to make school-specific modifications.

The UCA offers greater flexibility for recommenders, too. They may modify their letters to tailor them for each school they write to. Furthermore, students may elect to use different recommenders for different schools.

Although the UCA’s recommended essay length is 650 words (the absolute maximum for the Common Application), students using the UCA have the option of uploading their essay rather than copying and pasting it in, and the application will actually accept a slightly longer essay provided it doesn’t exceed 6,000 characters.

When an essay is uploaded, formatting (indenting, italics, etc.) may be employed that disappears when it is pasted into an application as it must be when using the Common
Application. Thus, for essays that contain bits of poetry or dialogue, the UCA offers a distinct advantage.

The UCA requires an application to be submitted and actually sends it before asking for payment, eliminating the risk of a student thinking an application has gone out without realizing that it has been held up because of a payment delay, as sometimes happened last year with the Common Application.

Finally, perhaps because it is a much smaller operation than the Common Application, the UCA is able to promise a more rapid response to students who use the “Help line.”

The following six schools just joined the UCA: Brandeis, Colgate, University of Chicago, the College of Mount Saint Vincent, the University of Rochester, and Wilson College. For a list of the other schools which use it, copy this link into your browser: https://www.universalcollegeapp.com/.

For comparison’s sake, check out this link to find a list of schools currently using the Common Application: https://commonapp.org/Login#!PublicPages/AllMembers.