

Applying to College During the Pandemic?

Here is some advice from admissions officers.

By **Judy Mandell**

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This article is part of our latest Learning special report, which focuses on ways that remote learning will shape the future.

Choosing a college has long been a major decision. It can affect your career, your income, where you live, your friends and possibly your selection of a mate. The admissions process has always been time-consuming, complicated and frustrating. But today, during the Covid-19 pandemic, getting into college will be different and in some ways more difficult than ever.

In hopes of providing some guidance to students and their parents, I asked college admissions officers to offer advice about the process in the year of the Covid-19 pandemic. (Their comments have been edited and condensed.)

Douglas Christiansen, vice provost for university enrollment affairs and dean of admissions and financial aid, Vanderbilt University, Nashville.

In these uncertain times, context in the college admissions process matters more than ever. For those of us who practice a holistic admissions process, it is clear that we will have to read applications even more fully, understand better the nuances in high school transcripts and in family circumstances, and tweak our selection processes to allow for the test-optional applicants and many new bits of information we are likely to receive, both from the applicants and from those who support them.

With regard to the SAT or ACT, ultimately, the decision to apply test-optional is the prospective student's alone. If a university is test-optional, then the test truly is optional. And it isn't necessary to sit for an exam at all. However, **if a test result is in hand, then a good rule of thumb is to carefully research past entering score ranges for the universities you are considering before deciding whether to submit or not.** But test-optional means test-optional. This is not a year to risk your health or the health of others to take an SAT or ACT exam for a test-optional process.

My advice is the same as in a non-pandemic cycle: Fully engage with the application for admission. Take time to carefully complete and prepare your application before submitting it, and be sure that what you submit reflects you to the greatest extent possible.

Seth Allen, vice president for strategy and dean of admissions and financial aid, Pomona College, Claremont, Calif.

The number of students electing to defer their entrance for a year (i.e., taking a gap year) has increased significantly at many institutions, due in large part to the pandemic.

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A common concern is that because the numbers at some institutions are unusually large, that may impact the number of admissions offers an institution will make for those applying for the Class of 2025.

Colleges understand this concern, and while each will pursue different ways to mitigate the potential impact of so many gap-year students, prospective students for the Class of 2025 should know that institutions will want to admit as close to normal a number of students as possible this year, perhaps modestly increasing the size of their entering class, or electing to admit a similar number of students as in the past in the assumption that the pandemic will create greater uncertainty about student enrollment choices.

Tim Wolfe, associate vice president for enrollment and dean of admission, William & Mary, Williamsburg, Va.

The application is a chance for us to hear a student's story and listen to their voice — that hasn't changed in 2020, and it is likely more important than ever that we continue to engage in this process from a holistic perspective.

Some of the chapters in the story may appear a bit different this year, or in some cases may be nonexistent. Such is the case with standardized testing, where many, if not most, colleges across the nation have shifted to a test-optional process for at least this cycle.

That is the case at William & Mary, and we stand by that flexibility. Ours is a holistic review process that considers many factors. If students do not send in standardized test scores, they will not be at a disadvantage. We will simply focus our review on the many other items in the application that highlight each student's strengths and perspective.

Gariot P. Louima, vice president for enrollment and student success, Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

The essay is monumentally important. It is your chance to get a college to know you beyond numbers. Remember, we'll see your transcripts and recommendation letters. Here you can describe — in your own voice — your goals, passions and experiences like no one else. Here you give a committee a sense of the context in which you experienced high school and how you overcame certain challenges.

They will be looking for students to share how they've adapted, grown and worked through the challenges that come with our new restricted reality under Covid-19. Sure, we pay attention to your command of language and grammar. But we also want to get a sense of how you think and process information. Are you ready to study at this college and live on this campus?

In terms of authenticity, we work very hard to try to get to know our applicants. If something feels inauthentic in an essay, we invite a conversation with that student. Sometimes we ask for a second writing sample. For the most part, students are pretty honest in their applications.

Jon Westover, director of undergraduate admissions, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C.

Classes are currently being taught virtually, but this is not the new normal. The values of a residential, educational experience remain. Much of a student's education during college happens inside and outside the classroom, through research with faculty, cooperative experiences, internships, study-abroad experiences and organizational leadership opportunities.

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The college search should still be about finding "fit." When I talk about fit, I focus on three areas of fit — academic fit, social fit and financial fit. Students and families can still address these questions as they move through the process through virtual programming and other opportunities to interact with students, administrators and faculty at colleges of interest.

Catherine McDonald Davenport, vice president for enrollment and dean of admissions, Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pa.

Students and their families have told me some of their biggest worries are about not being able to make campus visits. The pandemic and the spread of videoconference technology have leveled the college search playing field by making it easier for students to demonstrate interest, which is way more important than a campus visit. Students no longer have to travel to visit campus, which can be costly and time-consuming for families. Now they can show interest by signing up for a virtual tour, taking part in a video interview or talking with faculty in an online meet-up.

I've heard lots of worries about academic testing. Test scores give you a piece of information, but it is far from a complete picture of a student. Many colleges and universities made the decision to be test-optional for this next cycle. I actually think the SAT and ACT of today are gone for good, but a new holistic metric will take their place.

Elizabeth Johnson, provost of Post University, Waterbury, Conn.

High school seniors should write the essay, even if it's not required by their school of choice. The essay can highlight important aspects of their life that align with the preferred school's mission or culture, offer a window into their plans for the future or provide context to borderline test scores or a semester with lower grades.

And it goes without saying that prospective students should plan to write the essay themselves to ensure it is authentic. Institutions will often ask follow-up questions in an interview based on what was shared in the essay. If there is doubt about the submission's authorship, admissions teams may run the essay through plagiarism software to assess if it represents original work.

Erin Stine, assistant vice president for enrollment, The New School, New York, N.Y.

I encourage students to look at online content created both before the pandemic and during. How engaging are the online lectures and classes? What kinds of projects are the students creating?

In virtual and hybrid environments, universities have been forced to capture the college experience in ways that are far more casual and less polished. In the best cases, universities are featuring the strengths of faculty and administration in a far more authentic way. Students should pair their research of virtual and hybrid environments with an understanding of what life on campus was like before March.

While it's true that many students chose to take a gap year, the number of college-age students is also in decline. Fall 2021 could prove to be a competitive year, but many universities are committed to being as flexible and fair as possible, considering the challenges of the graduating 2020 class.

Zaire McCoy, vice president for enrollment management and dean of admission, Rollins College, Winter Park, Fla.

I don't think students who deferred their enrollment this year will prevent large numbers of graduating high school seniors from being admitted to top schools. Most schools should be able to absorb the gap-year enrollees while offering the same number of admissions spots this year. Keep in mind that schools that experienced large gap-year requests this year likely saw smaller enrollment, so there may be additional space in housing and classes next year, as a result.

In some ways, this is a great time to be an applicant because admissions offices are having to critically evaluate everything they do in light of the pandemic. Traditional methods of outreach, recruiting and application review have quickly had to change, and this is an opportunity for students to shine who may not otherwise have been seen as a strong applicant.

Eric Nichols, vice president for enrollment management, Loyola University Maryland, Baltimore.

There are hundreds of schools that would love to have your application without test scores. However, if there are certain schools you are serious about, and you're on the fence about submitting your scores, consider first how selective the school is. **If your scores sit at or exceed the school's midpoint, it may benefit you to submit because you'll be up against students with similar profiles.**