

● **BREAKING**

**PRINCE PHILIP, HUSBAND OF QUEEN ELIZABETH II, DIES
AGED 99**

**BREAKING: PRINCE PHILIP, HUSBAND OF QUEEN ELIZABETH
II, DIES AGED 99**

The pandemic has upended college admissions with more surprises and more wait lists

By [Deirdre Fernandes](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 8, 2021, 7:57 p.m.





Zeinab Yusuf, who was admitted to Cornell University, believes she wouldn't have been accepted if the SAT had been required. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Each spring, high school seniors hope for joy but brace for heartbreak when colleges send out admissions decisions. But this year the pandemic has made the nerve-wracking process even more unpredictable, a mix of new opportunity and fierce competition that is confounding students and colleges alike.

Faced with a record number of applications from a broader pool of students, many selective colleges have admitted a more racially and economically diverse first-year class. But they have also rejected more students than ever before, and expanded their waiting lists to hedge their bets, leaving thousands of seniors in limbo.

“I feel like the cowboy in the wild, wild West because the landscape is so uncertain,” said Christine Chapman, a private college counselor in Hopkinton.

After the pandemic closed many SAT and ACT test sites, hundreds of colleges dropped their requirements for students to submit standardized test scores. That encouraged more first-generation and low-income applicants, as well as applicants of color, to apply to more [selective universities](#) than they might have otherwise, according to admissions experts.

At the same time, longstanding inequities in the admissions processes have drawn renewed attention, brought on by student protests over racial injustice and by the high-profile “Varsity Blues” cheating scandal, in which wealthy parents paid large sums to game the system.

Taken together, the developments are likely putting more pressure on selective colleges to open up their admissions to a wider group of qualified students, admissions experts said.

This year, first-year applications at Tufts University rose 35 percent from 2020, and came from 8,200 high schools, 2,000 of which had not sent a submission to the college in more than five years, or ever. Tufts admitted its most ethnically and racially

diverse undergraduate class, with students of color making up 56 percent of its US admissions, up from 50 percent last year, the university said.

The University of Massachusetts Amherst, the state's flagship public college, admitted 26.5 percent more underrepresented minorities and 12 percent more first-generation students this year, compared to last. The university also admitted 10 percent more women, after seeing an increase in female applicants, who tend to have higher grades but lower standardized test scores, according to admissions officials at the school.

At Harvard University, just over 60 percent of offers for admission went to students of color, compared to 54 percent last year. Boston College, which received 10,475 more applications over 2020, also admitted its more diverse class, including 42 percent who are students of color and 11 percent who are the first generation in their family to attend college, according to the university.

Zeinab Yusuf, 18, believes that the changed landscape opened more opportunities for her. A senior who lives in Roxbury, Yusuf knew that with her top grades, involvement in school government, and job teaching younger children self-defense skills, she was a strong candidate for a selective college. But she worried that her SAT scores were not high enough for the Ivy League.

But when she found out Cornell University did not require an SAT score, she decided to apply, and she and two of her classmates at Boston Prep Academy were accepted, a first for the charter school that educates mostly low-income Black and Latino students.

"I thought it was a prank . . . but I'm happy," Yusuf said. "The SATs being canceled was a blessing. I'm glad that colleges are realizing that SATs shouldn't be such a huge factor."

Aaron Canto, a Boston Prep counselor, said colleges have been more proactive in admitting students from the school this year. Usually, it takes months or even years for high school counselors to build personal relationships with admissions representatives from highly selective colleges, time that is spent explaining their system of courses and grades and the many challenges their students face, before their students have a fighting chance of getting in, Canto said.

But this year, institutions such as Emory University and the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill offered admissions, he said.

“The game has changed, but the country has changed, too,” said Bob Schaeffer, executive director of FairTest, which has long argued that standardized tests put students with fewer resources at an unfair disadvantage and that scores are strongly correlated to socioeconomic status. “It has opened up access to a broader range of families. This is a silver lining in an ugly cloud of the pandemic.”

But many students and families have also been blindsided by the sudden shift in admissions. Students who applied to schools they assumed were in their range, based on their grades, activities, and past trends, found themselves rejected or wait listed, college counselors said.

Jillian Perrone, 17, from Cohasset said the past few weeks have been stressful after several of the 11 schools she applied to wait listed her, including ones she was confident about, such as the University of Washington. But last week she felt a wave of relief when William & Mary offered her a chance to study abroad in the fall with guaranteed admission in the spring.

“I feel so much more comfortable knowing I have somewhere I wanted to go,” Perrone said.

Other families who were caught off guard said it’s been hard not to second-guess their decisions, including whether they should have applied early decision, taken different classes, or opted for different extracurricular activities.

“I’ve been doing a lot of crying lately,” said a high school senior from a Catholic prep school who was wait listed and rejected

at all the schools that were supposed to be within her reach. She asked to remain anonymous to protect her privacy. “Not having any answers has been a little bit of torture. It feels like I’m missing something.”

Colleges are reluctant to disclose how long their wait lists are, but many acknowledged they have grown. The lists give schools greater flexibility, which they may need if admitted students opt out because of the pandemic, the cost of attendance, concerns about campus living, or a better offer.

Colby College increased its wait list by 30 percent over last year, said David Greene, the president.

Applications increased, but many students haven’t had a chance to visit campus because of the pandemic. It’s also unclear how test-optional policies may have changed how competing colleges have reviewed applications and what other offers students are weighing, Greene said.

“Everybody is trying to figure out how things will shake up in the next few weeks,” Greene said. “There’s enough of a question mark here that a bigger cushion on the wait list would be wise. If you reject a student, there’s no going back.”

Although students usually need to send deposits to hold their spot at a college in early May, many institutions may be admitting students from the wait list into the summer, much later than usual, said Jon Carson, chief executive officer of Cambridge-based College Guidance Network. Many less competitive colleges will be eager to admit students and struggle to fill their spots this fall, he added.

Many colleges have already announced that they will be test-optional next year, and schools like UMass Amherst and Tufts are piloting the strategy for three years, in part to see how admitted students perform long term at the college. That means some of the changes to college admissions are likely to remain.

“I think society is getting really twitchy about a level playing field,” Carson said. Colleges “are in the crosshairs.”

Deirdre Fernandes can be reached at deirdre.fernandes@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@fernandesglobe](https://twitter.com/fernandesglobe).

 [Show 32 comments](#)
