

Toolkit #3

Navigating College Admissions During Covid



The pandemic has thrown a curveball to high-schoolers and their families as this year's college admissions process has unfolded. Yet, it's absolutely still possible to explore colleges and successfully submit applications. Let's get to it!

WHAT'S IN THE KIT:



THE
TAKEAWAY



TIME FOR
ACTION



RESOURCES



HELPFUL
TERMS



LET'S TALK
ABOUT IT



The Takeaway

The last year of high school is *always* a time of transition. Whether or not there is a pandemic, students and their families start the school year with a degree of uncertainty about what the post-graduation path will look like. So, it's absolutely natural to feel some anxiety about the future during the senior year of high school.

When it comes to the college admissions process, keep in mind that the fundamentals remain unchanged from previous years. There is plenty you can do to keep your own college admissions plan moving forward.



Focus on what you can control. It's true that certain things are out of your hands -- like whether your school is operating in-person or remote, and whether or not standardized testing is available. But what you can control is how you research the various college options, frame your essays, choose teachers for recommendation forms, and conduct yourself during a college interview.



The college search looks and feels very different this year, but there are actually some benefits that come with these strange times. **Remote exploration of colleges can be as meaningful as a physical visit to campus.** Instead of being overly influenced by the weather or other quirks of a one-day visit to campus, online you can be focused on particular aspects of a college that are truly consequential. You can reach out to professors directly, explore course catalogs, and find ways to connect with current students for a read on student life.



There is some general anxiety that there may be fewer spots for incoming college first-years (Class of 2025), because a higher percentage of students postponed their enrollment from fall 2020 to the fall of 2021. While more of last year's class did choose a gap year, **how colleges will ultimately respond to enrollment discrepancies this year and next year will vary campus by campus; and, in many cases, decisions on class size have not yet been made.** On the family or individual student level, there is not much you can do about this unknown variable. It is best to prioritize your personal needs and keep the focus on your own admissions process.



As always, a student can submit an Early Decision (ED) or Early Action (EA) application in November, or a Regular Decision application in January. Each option remains valid. Choose the one that makes the most sense to you. If you've done your research and/or visited a campus before campuses suspended their visitor programs, and if you're comfortable with the critical question of affordability, apply ED if you feel ready to make a confident declaration of your first choice. Otherwise, applying non-binding Early Action is a prudent option: it may relieve stress levels if at least one option is secured early. But many students are still pondering -- or have important financial considerations to clarify -- and prefer to remain uncommitted until spring. In that case Regular Decision works well. Students who apply EA or Regular Decision must enroll by May 1; successful ED candidates will have to render a decision by mid-December and will be expected to enroll at that point without filing additional applications.



As part of the admissions process, schools make every effort to get to know a student on many levels. **A student's transcript remains at the heart of the admissions application**, so choice of courses and grades really matter, especially in 11th and 12th grades at selective colleges. As for other aspects of the application, **think of extracurricular activities as a way of showcasing your talents and interests, and your essay as a way of telling your personal story. Your teachers' recommendations help the admissions committee learn about you in a classroom environment in a more holistic way than grades do on their own.**





Time For Action



Don't get overly caught up in peer conversations. If your friends are freaking out, you may decide to avoid the topic of college applications with them. Remember, you can also lean on your adult support system, such as mentors, a school counselor, trusted teachers, and family.



Don't skimp on listing your extracurriculars, just because they look different this year. Reflect on your talents and outside interests, and absolutely list and describe them in the extracurricular section of your application. It's OK to report the hours and weeks per year that you *would have* spent on them in normal times.



When deciding on a topic or theme for your personal statement, look for the common thread between your ambitions, when you've been happiest, and the top adjectives that you would use to describe yourself. A suitable topic will likely emerge.



When it comes to writing all your college essays, don't worry about perfection, just get something down on paper. Remember, there is a reason a first draft is known as a "rough" draft. Once you've got words on the page you can think more concretely about structure and clarity. It's normal for your essay to go through multiple drafts before it's finished.



Think about who will write your recommendation(s). Most colleges want to see a recommendation from a teacher or two from your junior year, as that is someone who has known you for a full academic year.



Do allow yourself some time to reflect on where and how you do your best learning. In your college search consider size, geographic location, as well as choice of majors. There are many types of colleges out there, including: public, private, liberal arts, engineering, and more.



Do keep in mind that the uncertainties brought on by the pandemic present an opportunity for high-schoolers to learn an important life lesson about getting more comfortable with the unknown. Although it doesn't feel like a positive right now, dealing with Covid-19 can help students become more flexible and resilient, which is useful in applying to college and in life in general!



Resources

Our goal is to empower you with the right resources at the right time. College Guidance Network has carefully curated this list for you.

Upcoming College Guidance Network programs.

- Wednesday, October 7 at 7 PM, "Money Matters: College Affordability and Financial Aid 101"
- Listen to Episodes 2 ("Getting Started") and 3 ("Does It Fit?") of *The Search*, an admissions podcast sponsored by Dartmouth College and hosted by Dean Lee Coffin.
- **Excellent virtual campus tours**, You can filter your search by geography, type of institution, tuition price.
- **YouTuber Domonique Cynthia** offers a popular channel from a current college student, where you can find campus tours, day in the lives, university student's group conversations, college party scenes, and 73 questions with student representatives.

- **Campus Pride Index** This free online tool allows prospective students, families/parents to search a database of LGBTQ-friendly campuses to improve the academic experience and quality of campus life.
- **College essay prompts for the Common Application**
- Application portals:
 - Coalition Application
 - Common Application
 - Questbridge Application



Helpful Terms

To be a successful college applicant, it helps to know the lingo! This glossary of terms will come in handy while you do your research and communicate with admissions offices.

Coalition Application: A college application platform accepted by over one hundred and thirty schools. You can select from five essay prompts. An application fee is required for each school to which you will apply, but fee waivers are available. Founded in 2015, the Coalition aims to improve the application process, particularly for those students from historically under-represented groups.

Common Application: A college application platform accepted by over eight hundred schools. You can select from seven essay prompts. An application fee is required for each school to which you apply, but fee waivers are available.

Core Curriculum: Many, but not all, colleges offer a core curriculum. It is a set of graduation requirements, often in a wide range of academic disciplines, that a student needs to fulfill in order to earn their undergraduate degree. The core curriculum is required, regardless of your choice of major. When deciding on a college, pay attention to core curriculum requirements, as they range from minimal to up to one-third of students' coursework.

Early Action (EA): Colleges that offer this application round welcome **non-binding** applications in November with the guarantee of a decision by mid-December and permit an enrollment commitment from accepted students by May 1.

Early Decision (ED): Colleges that offer this application round welcome **binding** applications in November with the guarantee of a decision by mid-December. As a binding option, a student declares that if admitted s/he will enroll at the college (assuming any financial aid issue is resolved) and withdraw all other applications from consideration. Accordingly, students who pursue an ED application should have a clear first choice.

Fit: This is a broad term, frequently used by school counselors and admissions officers, that describes the match between a college and an applicant. When a school is a good fit for you, it often **feels right**, in whatever way you might define that phrase. Ideally students feel an affinity for their college based on a number of factors, including academic, financial, social, and cultural.

Regular Decision: All colleges offer this **non-binding** application round with deadlines typically ranging from January 1 to mid-February. It is assumed that a student will apply to multiple colleges during this round and, if accepted, an enrollment decision is required by May 1.



Rolling Admission: Colleges that offer this application option welcome non-binding applications over a period of time (rather than by a set deadline) and make admission decisions throughout this application period rather than on or by a set date for all applicants.

Personal Statement: Your personal statement is your primary college **essay** -- it is your introductory story to each of the colleges on your list, typically in 650 words or less. This long-form essay is how you'll convey to the admissions officer who you are. Remember, you aren't writing a complete autobiography. Instead, you are giving the admissions committee a thoughtful glimpse into one experience that inspires you and brings meaning to your life.

Supplemental essays/answers: In addition to the personal statement, some colleges also require one to several shorter written responses that are specific to the individual institution. Many also include a short question asking the applicant "Why us?" The response to this question often reflects a student's perception of fit.

Transcript: A high school transcript is your academic record during high school. It includes the classes you took, in what sequence and at what level of rigor (college prep, honors, AP, for example), as well as the grades you earned. The transcript typically includes your Grade Point Average (GPA) and class rank, if your school keeps track of these. Even if you've never seen it, every high-schooler has a transcript. Think of it as the summary of all of your report cards since 9th grade.

Questbridge: College recruitment and free application platform, connecting the nation's most exceptional students from low-income backgrounds with leading institutions of higher education. QuestBridge finalists generally come from households earning less than \$65,000 a year for a family of four. Through the "National College Match" on Questbridge, students can apply to and be selected for admission to partner colleges with full, four-year scholarships.





Let's Talk About It:

Students, you're heading off to college. This is perhaps your biggest life decision, to date. Parents, you're most likely financing your child's college degree (in one way or another). It makes sense for you to discuss as a family your goals and priorities. It's best to start this conversation now, rather than waiting until decision time in the spring.



Parents/guardian(s) to their teen

- Have you had much interaction with the guidance counselor at school? Do you think you've made a personal connection with him/her? How can I supplement the guidance s/he's giving you?
- What role do you want or expect me to take when it comes to things like college campus visits and narrowing down your choices?
- When you write your college essay, will you want my input and feedback?
- Let's talk about costs and how we will share the financial responsibility for your college education. That way you can choose a school we can pay for within our budget.
- How do you plan to keep track of deadlines and requirements for applying for scholarships and financial aid? What documentation will you need from me?