

# Pandemic's toll shows up on students' college applications

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High school senior Gabriella Staykova poses for a photo at her home in Lexington, Ky., Tuesday, Jan. 5, 2021. As a senior, she planned on visiting college campuses during the last spring break, but with campuses closed due to the pandemic, she is applying to colleges sight unseen. (AP Photo/Timothy D. Easley)

In a college application season like no other, students who have seen every aspect of their lives disrupted by the coronavirus are grappling with how to show their potential.

High school seniors around the U.S. are facing January and February college application deadlines without SAT and ACT entrance exam scores, community service records and resumes flush with extracurricular activities—all casualties of an era of social distancing and remote learning that has carried over from their junior year.

The pandemic has prompted colleges to make tests optional and find new ways to evaluate students, including [student-athletes](#), like southern California high school senior Anthony Herrera. The pandemic canceled his last football season, shortening the highlight tapes that he'd hoped to share with college recruiters.

"Colleges and universities don't have the same tools that they did to evaluate students before," said Angel Perez, chief executive of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, or NACAC. "The experience that students are going through right now is drastically different from many others."

For the first time, the Common Application that allows students to apply to multiple institutions at the same time added an optional space so students can explain in 250 words or less the pandemic's impacts.

A sampling of responses provided to The Associated Press illustrate the pandemic's academic, emotional and financial toll.

"My parents losing their jobs made it very hard financially and we struggled to get by," a [student](#) wrote. "It was already hard before the pandemic but with the low amount of money flowing in as a result of COVID-19's safe to say our situations got even worse."



In this Friday, April 10, 2020, photo in Sanford, Fla., Serra Sowers, left, and her mother Ebru Ural look over brochures from various colleges. The coronavirus pandemic has changed the process of college visits to online and virtual interviews. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

Others wrote of struggling to focus alongside siblings and parents in noisy households disrupted by work and school Zoom calls, or of money and technology challenges.

"We want to provide colleges with the information they need, with the goal of having students answer COVID-19 questions only once while using the rest of the application as they would have before to share their interests and perspectives beyond COVID-19," the nonprofit Common

Application said.

Correra, an all-season athlete at Grand Terrace High School in California, said he hadn't thought much about college until recently, describing a side effect of life on what he called "quarantine time" where months and milestones pass unremarkably. He has applied to schools in the University of California and California State University systems, as well as some private colleges.

The colleges that have shown interest have been understanding because so many students are in the same situation, said his father, Mike Correra.

"It's been kind of refreshing a little bit because I'm not as stressed as I was," said Mike Correra, who said one coach even viewed his cellphone video from his son's games.

Colleges have been eager to work with applicants amid concerns about enrollment declines and an alarming drop in the number of potential students, particularly low-income students, filling out financial aid documents—an indicator they may not pursue college.

Very competitive colleges, though, have had the opposite problem of trying to juggle large numbers of students who deferred acceptance last year on top of increasing applications for the coming year. Harvard College, for one, marked its most competitive early admissions cycle ever, the Harvard Crimson reported. The [college](#) invited 747 of 10,086 early applicants to join its Class of 2025, down from 895 of 6,424 applicants last year.



In this Friday, April 10, 2020 photo, Ebru Ural, left, and her daughter Serra Sowers take a walk to discuss choosing colleges without actually visiting them at a park in Sanford, Fla. The coronavirus pandemic has changed the process of college visits to virtual interviews and visits. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

More than 1,600 institutions have made it optional for students to submit admissions test scores in an acknowledgement of cancelled testing sessions, Perez said. Instead, admissions officers will lean more heavily on essays, grades and the rigor of coursework, pre-pandemic extracurriculars and more than ever, the interest students show in attending.

"Usually this time of year, schools would be all over the country and the world, recruiting. ... But now they've moved into this online space where

they are seeking individual conversations, interviews, engagement with students and families," Perez said. "So I would also say to students, raise your hand and reach out individually to an admissions counselor if you're interested in those institutions."

With in-person interviews difficult, institutions including Washington University in St. Louis and Bowdoin in Maine are inviting students to send videos introducing themselves, a practice that was catching on before the pandemic. Bowdoin this year also said applicants could swap out a usual teacher evaluation with an "other" recommendation from a friend, employer or someone else with insight about their character.

But rounding up any kind of letters remotely can be challenging.

"It's definitely preferable to be able to discuss those in person instead of emailing back and forth," said Claire Gelillo, a high school senior in Rockville, Maryland. "One of the big things is not having the support of peers and teachers as readily available."

Lexington, Kentucky, [high school](#) senior Gabriella Staykova had planned to visit several colleges during spring break in her junior year, but with her [school](#) shut down since March 13 she is applying for many colleges sight unseen. She crossed Barnard College in New York City off the list and has reservations about others in unfamiliar cities.

"I'm just hoping that things will clear up enough before Decision Day that I'll be able to either tour the schools in person or that the schools will offer some sort of online alternative that's a lot more personal than what they usually would do," she said. "That way maybe I can make more educated guesses."

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