



How Covid-19 Impacted 2020-2021 College Admissions

The most recent college admissions cycle was unprecedented in many ways, and the extent to which the next cycle will be similar remains to be seen. The Common Application reported an 11% increase in the number of schools to which it was submitted during the 2020-2021 cycle, but the number of students using it did not change; what increased, rather, was the number of schools to which students applied.

With widespread cancellations of SAT and ACT test administrations, most colleges felt they had no choice but to waive their test requirements, but whether or not individuals submitted tests anyway depended in part on the availability of testing in their area and whether or not they had been able to complete their testing before the pandemic began. Thus, admissions officers had to process more applications with variable amounts of information.

The largest uptick in applications was for the most selective colleges, suggesting that students whose test scores might have discouraged them from applying in past years now thought they had a chance of being admitted if only the other parts of their application were subjected to scrutiny. Colgate University experienced a whopping 104% increase in applications; M.I.T. saw an increase of 56%, Columbia 51%, and Harvard 42%. The flagship public schools also saw an increase in applications, the University of Georgia leading the pack with a 39% increase. Virginia Polytechnic experienced a 36% increase and Berkeley and UCLA both saw a 28% increase.

Although the colleges maintain that applying without test scores did not hurt any applicants, the most selective schools have been less than transparent about which students were admitted this year without them. Since many of the applicants to these schools typically complete their testing earlier than their less academically distinguished classmates, a good portion of their strongest applicants submitted scores from tests taken last fall before the cancellations began.

The data collected so far by George Fan of College Kickstart suggests that at colleges with admit rates between 10 and 25%, applicants who submitted scores were admitted at a significantly higher rate than those who did not. At the schools he looked at in this category, 55% of applicants submitted scores, and only 16% of the admitted students had applied without them. The less selective the college, the less of a disadvantage applying without scores seemed to be, as 34% were admitted

without scores at the schools he looked at with admit rates between 25 and 50%, and 68% were admitted without scores at schools with admit rates above 50%.

Another ramification of students' submitting applications to more schools this year is that many colleges, unable to predict yield based on previous year's analytics, relied more heavily on Early Decision. As a result, the gap between admit rates for Early Decision and Regular Decision applicants grew, in some cases dramatically. Boston College, for instance, admitted 54% of its class Early Decision this year as compared with 45% last year. With fewer spots remaining for a larger-than-ever number of Regular Decision applicants, their Regular Decision admit rate declined from 25% last year to 17% this year. A similar scenario played out at Bucknell, Villanova, and Johns Hopkins, among others.

Another factor that made college admissions more competitive this year is the anticipated arrival on campuses next fall of students who graduated from high school in 2020 but deferred for a year rather than begin college in the middle of the pandemic.

Competition with previously deferred students should not be an issue for next year's applicants, but most colleges have announced that they will remain test-optional for the next several cycles, so the other trends are likely to continue. Aspirants to the college class of 2025 would thus be wise to construct their college lists more conservatively than they might have in the past, in recognition that schools they previously considered "targets" may have become "reaches" due to significant declines in their admission rates.