



# College Admissions Decoded

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Edward Truong:

Hello, and welcome to the College Admissions Decoded podcast, an occasional series from the National Association for College Admission Counseling, or NACAC. NACAC is an association of more than 15,000 professionals at high schools, colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations, as well as independent counselors, who support and advise students through the college admission process. I'm Edward Truong, Associate Director of Admission at University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, and today we'll be talking about how colleges are making admission decisions in a year without test scores, transcripts, and more.

Joining me today is Lisa Hill, Senior Associate Director of Admissions at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland, and Christoph Guttentag, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

Colleges across the country have made some big changes in their admission requirements in response to the coronavirus pandemic. More than 1,600 institutions are currently test optional, meaning that students are not required to submit ACT or SAT scores with their applications. And transcripts look a little different, too, especially at schools that have canceled extracurricular activities and moved their courses online. What are admission deans and directors looking for? What can students do to strengthen their admissions chances? And what parts of the process can students and parents feel comfortable letting go of this year? That is what our panel is here to discuss.

Let's start off with Lisa. Every institution is different, but traditionally college-bound students expect schools to look at their test scores, their grades, and their activities. That's changed a bit this year. Generally speaking, what are the primary factors colleges are now weighing when making admission decisions?

Lisa Hill: As Goucher College has been a test-optional institution since 2006, we've always practiced a holistic and individualized approach when reviewing applications. So, not having test scores as a required part of the application didn't really change how we've reviewed applications. However, the results of the shutdown did expand our review process so we could fill in the possible gaps in the application in the effort to benefit the student.

We took a deep dive approach in looking at the transcript, so we were looking at previous year trends, ninth grade and tenth grade, course selections, the essay, and as well as if a student responded to Common App's community disruption question. All this information helped put the applicant's academic progress and experience in context.

Truong: Right, so lots and lots of important context there. Christoph, some students this fall voiced concerns that not submitting scores, even at test-optional schools, would make them weaker candidates and/or negatively impact their scholarship chances. Have you heard concerns like those from students and what do you tell them?

Christoph Guttentag:

Edward, thank you so much for asking that question, because I do think it's on the minds of a lot of students, and their parents, and their counselors, and we've certainly heard those concerns when people have reached out to us. What I think people want to know and need to know is that good admissions officers will always read applications with the individual student in mind. That they're really thinking of the student as an individual in their particular circumstances, as a person, as a community member, as a member of the school, and we understand, and admissions officers around the country understand that being able to take standardized tests this year was very much not in the student's control.

We read applications of students who tell us the number of times they signed up for testing opportunities that were canceled time after time after time again. So, we're always going to look at those students within their particular context. It's not going to make them a weaker candidate. It's not going to set them apart in any kind of a negative way from their classmates who have had the opportunity to take standardized tests. They are who they are in their particular circumstances, and I know I speak for everybody in the profession. We are all trying incredibly hard to look at students in the same way, regardless of whether they have standardized test scores or not.

Truong: Right. And this question is for both of you. We know that student applications look a little different this year, so how has the review process changed due to the different factors that are in consideration, the lack of in-person meetings? How, as admission professionals, are you approaching the process differently? Christoph, do you want to start off?

Guttentag: One of the things that's important for us is to try to keep the process of reading applications as similar as we can compared to previous years. We have methods in place for reading applications. We have rubrics that we use. Our staff is... We have a very experienced staff that's comfortable with that, and in a year where so much has changed for the applicants, we want to keep our process as similar as we can. Now, that said, we've had a lot of conversations and a lot of thought, as I'm sure my colleagues in every university have, to being aware of the specific context of each application. And we read the essays that are in the Common Application and in the Coalition Application about how students and their families and their communities have been affected by COVID.

So, we're looking at them in the same way. We're looking for the same attributes, but we understand they're being manifested differently because students don't have the same opportunities that they've had in the past.

Truong: And Lisa, how are you and your colleagues approaching the reading process differently?

Hill: This is a great question. Generally, the effects of the pandemic and the shutdown will be apparent for the next several years as high schools and colleges begin to reevaluate policies and long-held traditions as they relate to the college admissions process. I think both entities will be asking themselves if temporary practices put in place to accommodate the pandemic are actually more beneficial to students in relieving some of the stress this process can cause.

In regards to the admissions process, I've seen a number of colleges have decided to continue their test-optional policies for the 21-22 admissions season, meaning many of the evaluation practices put in place this year to accommodate not having test scores will continue. Flexibility in the admissions process will be key as we begin to understand how the effects of the shutdown manifests itself in the long term.

Now, as for the juniors and sophomores, the traditional recruitment activities students and families will participate this time of the year will be sidelined a bit until the pandemic crisis subsides. So, until we are able to possibly go back to high school visits, or college fairs, or visiting college campuses, I strongly encourage students and their families to participate in virtual events sponsored by high schools, and colleges, and other organizations. Yes, Zoom fatigue is very real, however, colleges still want to get to know students and provide them with those very perspectives needed to determine if a college is a good fit.

So, I encourage students, take advantage of an event or two. And if you're comfortable to do so, unmute yourself and say hi. Let the college know that you are interested in them.

Truong: That's some really good insight and I definitely agree with your perspective there. So, Christoph, what advice would you give to students in that case, when they're worried about what they might consider to be "gaps" in their applications, such as

having a pass-fail as part of their transcript, or having limited extracurricular opportunities due to the coronavirus?

Guttentag: That's a really good question and the most important thing for families to remember is that everybody's in the same boat, that virtually every applicant, virtually every family, virtually every school, they've all had to adjust. They're all working with more limited opportunities. And so, the first thing for people to keep in mind is they are not alone in this. Everybody's being affected by this. To be fair, some people are being affected more than others, but the opportunities that the applications have given for students to talk about the difficulties that they've faced and how they've had to adjust, and how it's affected their families, that gives us all a context for understanding them.

So, they're in the same boat as everybody else. They have the opportunity to provide some context and to explain things, so hopefully they'll take some comfort in knowing that we are doing our best to understand them as individuals in their particular circumstances. So, we just asked that they do their best, that they present themselves as clearly as they can, and that we are doing our part to understand them as well as we can.

I think also for students who are applying now, a couple of additional thoughts are that I hope they understand that as always, there's more than one college that will not only fit their needs, but where they will thrive. And more than in years past, we understand that it's going to be more difficult for students to get a sense of the college that they're going to be attending. It's much more difficult if not impossible to visit colleges. They have to get a sense often just from being online and talking with current students, and faculty, and administrators about what a campus is like. But students are resilient. They are adaptable. And they have the ability and really the inclination to make the most of the situation that they find themselves in.

We're seeing that now in how they've responded to the pandemic under very difficult circumstances, and we know that they have the ability to make an exceptional college experience for themselves at any number of places. That's one thing that I hope they keep in mind. The other thing is that students take gap years. There are a lot of students this year taking a gap year and if a student feels that they want to take a break from what's been a very difficult year and a half, if they want to give themselves a little more time, taking a gap year is something that's not only allowed, but encouraged by a lot of colleges and universities. So, that's always an option that's on the table I think for a lot of students.

Truong: Yeah. I think some takeaways from those very insightful points is that one, it's a good idea to keep an open mind. To your point, there are thousands of colleges out there, and some that you may have never even heard of. I always mention to students that I'm working with, although I didn't go to the school that I work at now, I had never heard of Puget Sound when I was a high school student, and I think there are plenty of schools like Puget Sound that you may not have heard of if you hadn't taken the time to kind of research. So, definitely keeping that open

mind seems like a really important thing to consider, but also showing yourself some grace and some compassion in recognizing how challenging things have been and how we've all gone through quite a bit of trauma, quite frankly. And so, to give ourselves the space to take the time that we need to redirect ourselves if our initial plans don't quite work out the way that we think. Allowing ourselves that compassion, I think those are really wise words of wisdom, if you will.

But the good news is that things are getting better. Although we're still in the thick of this international health crisis, we're optimistic that over time, things will improve. So, can students and families expect changes to the admission process to stick around, despite all the upheaval? What should this year's juniors and sophomores know?

Guttentag: That's a great question and I'm glad we are thinking about students who are juniors and sophomores at this point, and their families, because the process continues and soon enough, they will be in a position to be considering colleges and applying to colleges. I very much believe that things will get better, and that the fall will be much better than the spring and a year ago, so things will get better, and I think they should absolutely take comfort in that and encouragement from that.

At the same time, this fall things will not be normal as we thought of them a year and a half ago. And so, a certain amount of flexibility will be useful. I do think that the overwhelming majority of colleges that are test optional this year will be test optional next year. I think that won't change until the opportunity to take standardized tests is really back to normal. That's not going to happen in the next three, four, five months, I don't think. It'll happen eventually, but it's not going to happen soon, so I think students can anticipate that the majority of colleges that are test optional this year will be test optional next year.

Beyond that, it's really difficult to say. I do think that gap years will remain popular. I also think that virtual recruitment is here to stay. I think while visiting campuses, while talking face to face with admissions officers will return eventually, I think colleges have seen the value of having virtual recruitment programs in allowing them to reach a much broader swath of students nationally and internationally. The opportunity for us to reach more students that wouldn't be able to visit campus, that wouldn't be able to come to our programs, we benefit from that and we understand that students can benefit from that, so I think this year's juniors and sophomores and their families absolutely need to keep their eyes open for virtual recruitment opportunities and to take advantage of them, particularly if they're not in a position to visit campuses or if admissions officers aren't coming to their city.

The only other things I would add, pieces of advice, one of course is to be kind to yourself, that we're all going through a difficult time and it's not only okay, but it's smart and good to think about yourself, and your health, and your wellbeing. The final thing I'd add is even in a difficult time like this, it's useful for students to think about what's important to them, what matters to them, and what opportunities they

have to do something about that. Some reflection about what is important to them and what's important to their community and what they can do, even in a limited context, is not a bad way to approach the college admissions process.

Admissions officers are deeply interested in the individual student and what they're bringing to the college community, and I think that students have the opportunity even in a limited way to at least think about what matters to them and to do something to express those interests in a tangible way. And to understand that we get that their opportunities are more limited.

Truong: That's a really good point, Christoph. I think having the permission to allow yourself to pivot and to understand that who you are when the pandemic started and who you are today may not be the same thing, and that's actually a positive, is something that I think is important to actually put out there and let people realize is not only acceptable but perhaps encouraged. So, this conversation has truly been so informative and helpful to our listeners, so thank you both for your time. Lisa, is there anything you'd like to add?

Hill: This has been a great conversation. Thank you, Edward, for having me. And if I have any final bits of advice, I would say to students control what you can control. Participate in virtual events sponsored by colleges, or your high school, or organizations. This is a great way to learn more about colleges, colleges that you're familiar with, as well as colleges you may not have heard of. And finally, be in touch with colleges. If you have questions about their admissions program or any aspect of the college, reach out to them. Send texts. Find your admissions counselor. Check with your own high school counselor to get those questions answered. We are here for you as we all grapple with the effects of the pandemic and the shutdown. We're all going through this together. We're all being affected by it. But in the end, we are here. Colleges are here for you, to help you find the college that's a good fit for you. So, if you have questions, reach out to us. Let us know what you're thinking so we can help you.

Truong: Absolutely. We will definitely get through this. I agree that definitely we are strong and resilient people and I think this conversation has really emphasized the strength and the ability for us to overcome the obstacles that we face. But hey, there'll be brighter days ahead and it could only go up from here. Lisa and Christoph, it's been a pleasure speaking with both of you. Your generosity of your time, and wisdom, and insight has just been fantastic, so I appreciate the great conversation.

I want to say thank you to our audience for joining us for this episode.

College Admissions Decoded is a podcast from NACAC, the National Association for College Admission Counseling. It is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Kojin Tashiro produced this episode. If you would like to learn more about NACAC's guests, our organizations, and the college admission process, visit our website at

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