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## JOURNAL REPORTS: COLLEGE RANKINGS

# College Admissions in a Covid Year: SATs Are Out, Personal Stories Are In

The pandemic has dramatically changed what admissions officers are looking for



The coronavirus pandemic continues to present challenges for high-school students.

PHOTO: SETH WENIG/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [Douglas Belkin](#)

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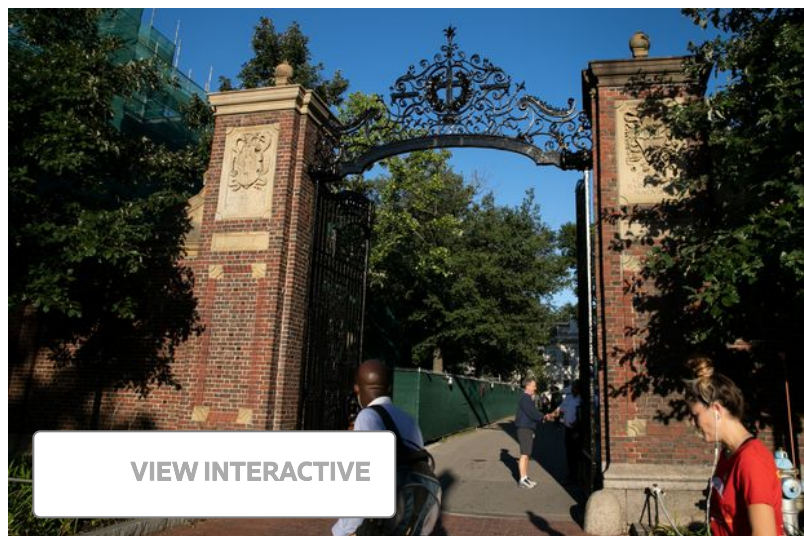
Memo to high-school seniors applying to selective colleges: A high score on your SAT is out. A Covid-19 epiphany is in.

Hundreds of colleges dropped their mandate for a standardized test score this year as a result of the pandemic, but the replacement criterion at many schools may be just as daunting for would-be college freshmen: a new understanding of themselves and their place in the world as a result of the pandemic.

“This wasn’t something you could study for or plan for, but it offers a great opportunity for students to show us what they were able to do when they just had to figure out how to make it work. That’s a unique story,” says Catherine Davenport, dean of admissions at Dickinson College, which won’t include test scores in its admissions decisions for the first time this year.

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KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Standardized college entrance exams like the SAT and ACT have been a fixture in the application process for most colleges for decades and a rite of passage for generations of college-bound students. But criticism that scores largely track household income, combined with pandemic-related logistical challenges, have prompted about 400 schools to pay less or no attention to test scores this year, according to the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, an organization critical of the exams. Now, more than 60% of four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. don't require test scores.

Many students welcome the change, but the absence of a standardized score leaves a gap in the information most schools use to judge applicants. Two additional holes are left by the cancellation of most extracurricular activities and the inability of students in most cases to demonstrate interest in schools by attending college fairs or visiting schools.

Admissions counselors say they will place more weight on what remains: transcripts, grades and recommendations. They will also consider how students handled the limitations imposed on them by the pandemic and what they learned from the experience.

“Students should explain as well as they can the context of their lives during Covid,” says Eric Furda, dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania. “That means hunting deep for insight about how Covid affected them, how they were able to derive meaning from it, how it will impact them moving forward.”

Both the Common Application and Coalition Application, which together are used by about 900 schools, added space for students to describe their experience during the pandemic.

Carleton College admissions officers are seeking to build a class of students who are engaged learners and bring different talents and experiences to the college campus, says Art Rodriguez, dean of admissions. The paths students took when the routine of their lives was removed offers a unique window into their lives, he says.

“It did not affect everybody the same way, but it has affected everybody in some way,” he says.

Matt Bonser, the director of admission at Colorado College, says students who apply early-decision, which commits a student to one school before they have heard from any others, may have an additional edge this year. Admissions teams will face more Covid-related uncertainty as they try to enroll their next class, so many of them may be inclined to accept more early-decision applicants, he says.

As for students’ experiences during the pandemic, Mr. Bonser says this is an opportunity for them to illustrate how they showed leadership and perseverance. And if some students spent most of their senior year in their basement watching cartoons and eating Cap’n Crunch cereal, Mr. Bonser says he understands that, too.

“But hopefully at least there will be some glimmers of hope,” he says. “Maybe it will help them clarify their goals or what they are looking forward to in their future.”

*Mr. Belkin is a Wall Street Journal reporter in Chicago. He can be reached at [doug.belkin@wsj.com](mailto:doug.belkin@wsj.com).*

## JOURNAL REPORT

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