

# Early Considerations and Guidance for College Board Enrollment Leaders

## *Admissions-Flexible in the Time of Coronavirus: Communicating and Planning for Effective Decision Making in a New and Altered Environment*

In response to questions and requests from many of our members, and based on input from early conversations, we are sharing initial strategies and guidance to help enrollment offices begin to communicate about, consider, and plan for the 2020-21 admissions decision making cycle. This is the first in a series of resources we'll provide on this topic. In April and May, we will host a series of focus groups to understand more specific needs, and a national webinar for enrollment leaders to share their thinking, ask and answer questions, and identify how the College Board can help advance the collective response of the profession.

The coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic is driving unprecedented disruptions to learning and assessment for high school students. The challenge for all institutions will be **how to make good admissions decisions based on application data that is likely to be less complete, less consistent, and less current than in the past.**

Of course, colleges and universities will make the best decisions they can; and no single decision, policy, or plan will be sufficient for every institution. Our role is to share what we are learning from our members and to respond as quickly as we can with data, information, and context to assist higher education in their response to the pandemic and its aftermath.

Based on input from members and student survey data, we are sharing a set of initial considerations as you communicate with prospective students and plan for fall 2020 admissions process adjustments.

### 1. Communicate Reassurance and Flexibility

Students are seeking reassurance from higher education institutions that their strengths, work, and accomplishments will be recognized; that there will be flexibility around application components and deadlines; and that all applicant information will be evaluated in the context of coronavirus impacts.

At the same time, colleges and universities are concerned about gaps in students' academic information, and seek ways

to balance flexibility in the admissions process while encouraging students to continue to take advantage of the academic opportunities that are and will be available to them (e.g., completing coursework virtually; completing IB and AP® projects; taking assessments; etc.). Some illustrative examples of reassuring language and encouraging students to continue learning, given what's available, include the following:

- **University of Chicago (Ill.):** We encourage students to continue to engage with whatever method of learning your school is able to offer, and to do so to the best of your ability. If your school moves to an alternative grading system or method of credit notation (pass/fail, credit/no credit, etc.), we will fully understand why the change has been made and it will not, in any way, be an issue for an admissions office.
- **Washington University (Mo.):** We know that you are unable to take standardized tests right now. We know it is hard but please don't worry. We anticipate that we will need to be flexible during the upcoming admission cycle and will communicate any changes in our requirements as soon as we understand the full impact of COVID-19 on the availability of standardized testing. Until then, focus on staying healthy, find ways to relax, and continue with your studies in whatever form they may take over the coming weeks.

## 2. Emphasize the Importance of Context

College Board members are seeking advice about how they can evaluate, weight, and interpret academic data in new and flexible ways. Based on early conversations with enrollment leaders, we recommend that institutions consider reinforcing to students that **the academic information in their application (courses, grades, test scores) will be thoughtfully considered in the context of what opportunities were and weren't available, and that all data will be viewed from a strength, not weakness, perspective.** By emphasizing the strengths-based approach and assuring students that context will be considered, institutions can also encourage students to send all available information. Illustrative examples include:

- **Harvard (Mass.):** We will continue to look at the whole person as we consider applications next year – as always. Accomplishments in and out of the classroom during the high school years - including community involvement, employment, and help given to your family – will all be considered. Students who find themselves limited in the activities they can pursue due to the current coronavirus outbreak will not be disadvantaged as a result.
- **Georgia Tech (Ga.):** We've heard some schools may only issue pass/fail grades for this spring. Others are saying they plan to simplify their grading scales for this term or may compress certain subjects into summer courses...This should not concern you, or make you fearful that you'll be at a disadvantage. First, everyone is dealing with this unprecedented new reality and continually adjusting to unfamiliar territory. Second, admission folks are used to seeing varying curriculum, grading scales, and delivery methods.

As institutions seek to achieve both flexibility and sufficient data to make good decisions, they may want to consider asking for and encouraging the submission of additional context data. Examples could include: (for students): the number of times a student had the opportunity to take an entrance exam; and (for high schools), a clear summary of how juniors' grades were calculated.

## 3. Highlight Strengths and Encourage More Info

Institutions should consider encouraging students to **“put their best foot forward”** when applying to college, understanding that the current crisis has disrupted their plans in preparing for admission. Encouraging students to submit all relevant information will allow institutions to evaluate various information to identify and highlight student strengths. During this unusual time, colleges can encourage students to be creative and request nontraditional information that highlights their strengths. Examples include:

- **University of Oregon (Ore.):** We don't want the stress of taking the test to simply be replaced by just as much stress about whether you should send scores to us. Especially during a time of adjustments and test date cancellations due to COVID-19, we also know you might have unusual challenges taking the test in the first place. As always, Admissions wants to see anything that could help us make a decision to offer you a spot in our class.
- **Puget Sound (Wash.):** Standardized test scores can be a great measure of ability for some students. Other students however may not do as well on standardized tests but have the academic preparation and commitment to excel in college. As a result, we are offering students the opportunity to choose to respond to two short essay questions in lieu of submitting standardized test scores. The choice of which to submit is yours. Our goal is to provide you with options to put your best foot forward in your application. Feel like your scores are an accurate representation of your ability? Submit them! If you would rather tell us about yourself in the essays, great! Either is cool with us and you will not be penalized in the application review process for the option you choose.

## Looking Forward: Adjusting Admissions Decision Making for 2020-21

In response to coronavirus, and over the last month, College Board members have asked for data, tools, and guidance to help them plan for the fall 2020 admissions process, posing the following questions:

- How should we assess and weight grades from the 2019-20 school year, especially if districts shift to pass/fail grading? If these decisions vary widely, how can we ensure fairness?
- What data or research are available that would allow us to assess high-school-course rigor, especially in concert with course grades?
- Can you help us understand and incorporate research-based assumptions about student growth on and across varied assessments? What data and methodologies would you recommend to further incorporate AP, IB, and honors coursework, grades, and exam scores into an academic evaluation—even when some of these data points are missing?

In the coming weeks and months, the College Board will provide analysis and research to answer these questions and help guide colleges that take a best foot forward approach.