



College 101: Juniors, Applying to College? Be

Ready *by Patrick O'Connor, Ph.D.* Wednesday, May 12, 2021

One of the oddest years in college admissions is just about over, with most students finding a great place for next fall, most colleges knowing what institutional flexibility is really all about, and most school counselors both exhausted, and wondering—"can it get any worse?"

The answer is Probably Not, But. Vaccination rates in most states are on track to find college campuses open for mostly business as usual in the fall. That's good news for this year's juniors, who will likely be in a better place to visit college campuses in person, meet with college reps who will actually come to their high school, and write an essay about COVID in past tense.

The worst may be over, but it doesn't mean college applications are back to pre-COVID status. Here's what juniors should be ready for as they get ready to build their futures:

Changing Test Policies Most colleges that were test-optional with admissions this year are staying test optional next year, which puts students in the driver's seat when it comes to SAT and ACT tests. But some schools have already changed their policy for next year, some making tests even more optional, some going back to where things were. Make sure you know what the policy will be for next year at your colleges. Admissions websites should have the latest news. If they don't, call the admissions office. **(Editor Note: to learn more about future exam test dates and register for either test – no school requires one or the other or both – click here for [ACT registration information](#) and here for [SAT registration information](#).)**

Admissions Policies Last year, many colleges weren't sure just how they would read no-test college applications, so they couldn't tell students how the process would go. A year's worth of application reading should have solved that, so if you want to know how a college is going to read your application, and what matters most, ask them—and if they hem and haw too much, ask them again in a month.

Percentage of Non-Test Admits Many colleges were test optional this year, but more than a few of them admitted far more students who submitted test scores than students who didn't. It's great if a school is test optional, unless they only admitted 4 test optional students. It's unlikely they will share their percentages with you unless you ask—so, ask.

Percentage of Early Admits Several colleges decided to admit a lot—and I mean, a lot—of students through Early Action and Early Decision programs, hoping that a large number of early admits would make a rocky year smoother. It's likely the trend will continue next year, so students would be wise to consider applying Early Action if they can, since that only means you hear back sooner from the college. Early Decision is still a firm commitment to attend—more like getting married than dating—so proceed with caution with any ED application. And remember, it's still easier to get admitted to Rolling Decision schools if you apply in September than in January—so don't let the deadline fool you.

Apply for Aid Early This year's seniors are still sewing up their financial arrangements, a trend that only has a little to do with COVID. This may continue next year, but it's still, and always, wise to file for aid early—as in, October.

Write Essays About COVID and... Many colleges requiring essays this year asked students to write one about the effect of COVID on their lives, and one about another topic. Even if colleges don't specify what to write on next year, consider a COVID/non-COVID essay approach if you have to write more than one essay. Yes, it was an historic year, and reflection is good—but so is anticipation. Write about both—and if they don't require a COVID essay, don't feel required to write one.



Top 10 Questions You May Not Think to Ask on a College Tour (but Totally Should)

The secret to getting the most out of your campus visit

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Megan Betancourt '21 Southwestern U *(edited for length)*

“What was your experience like as a first-year?”

Whether it's a particularly fun orientation week, first-year seminars, or how introductory-level courses feel coming fresh out of high school, your first year can really set the tone of the years that follow.

“What made you want to stay?”

This one is a good follow-up to asking someone why they decided to apply. After all, what attracted someone to a campus initially and what kept them there may not always be the same thing.

“What did the process of choosing your major look like?” Ask things like: “Do students have a lot of freedom to explore?” “Is there a lot of overlap between subject areas?”

“What does balancing seemingly unrelated majors and/or minors look like?”

“What about your first visit to this campus stood out?” Your tour guide may open your eyes to something you may not have noticed otherwise. Plus, it's fun to learn how different things stand out for different people.

“What does exam season look like, and what kind of support does the university offer during these times?”

Going to a school that still encourages you to have fun and take breaks every once in a while is really valuable, and this extends even beyond finals season. I've certainly been lucky enough to go to a school that acknowledges the mental health of students and where the culture among the professors is really accommodating and understanding.

“What's the surrounding community like?”

And just as college tours are insights into life on campus, attending a school is like a sneak peek into life in that particular city, so who knows? You may find your future home as well!

“How well do professors connect with their students?” What you really want to know is what office hours look like. Professors who are willing and able to connect with their students can mean the difference between feeling like you're going in for a job interview (yikes!) just to ask a question about the homework and popping in to vent about work or talk to your professor about exciting, non-school-related life updates.

“Are the students generally able to maintain a healthy school-life balance?”

Some students may want or need to have a job, and we all have hobbies we like to engage in. Some people thrive in an all-work, no-play type of environment; it makes other people very dull.

What compromises are you willing to make? Will your potential school support that?

“How are students academically recognized?”

Knowing what kinds of awards and honor societies are available gives you something to actively strive for, both for personal accomplishment and for your résumé.

“I think I might be interested in studying/exploring_____. Are there any professors you could put me in touch with?”

This is a great way to get a feel for the culture of (fill in the blank) departments within a university and may give you an opportunity to speak to faculty about what course offerings for different majors look like. After all, you may like the idea of a particular major on paper but seeing what the actual coursework looks like can totally change your mind. And if you do ultimately end up picking that school and have already met with a professor or two, those are more connections than you would have had otherwise.