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Redesigning College Admission: COVID-19, Access And Equity



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Education

I write about an intentional approach to college admission.

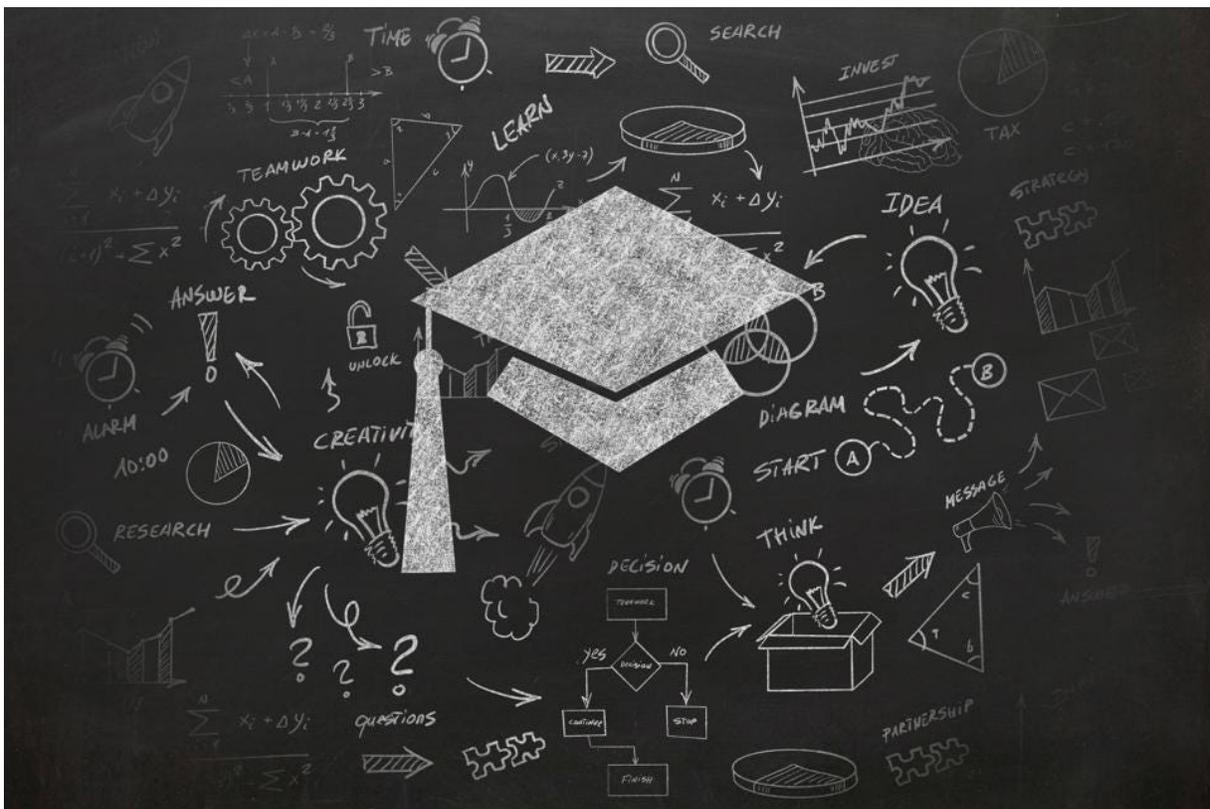
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The spread of COVID-19 throughout the world is evidence that the virus does not discriminate. It has infected individuals from all nations, backgrounds, ages, races, genders, and economic status. However, the impact of the virus is—and will be—felt very differently by various

populations. The most vulnerable people in our society are likely to disproportionately suffer from the health and economic implications of this crisis. As more and more college campuses close and learning goes online, it raises [significant concerns](#) about students who depend on college housing, meal plans, jobs, and other support to stay safe and secure. The virus (though more severe) is analogous to college admission, a process that should not discriminate, but inherently does so.

What can COVID-19 teach us about access to college? Last March, the [admission scandal](#) opened the nation's eyes to many inequities on the road to a college acceptance, and almost exactly a year later, we find ourselves faced with another unexpected learning opportunity. Perhaps the growing crisis associated with the virus provides an opening to examine admission policies and practices and re-center the experience around issues of access and equity. Angel Pérez, vice president for enrollment and student success at Trinity College says, "COVID-19 is going to force us to think differently about our work. Every aspect of higher education will be disrupted." He adds, "I believe we should never let a crisis go to waste. While we are taking care of immediate needs, we should also be asking ourselves—what are the opportunities for the long term?" Akil Bello is the senior director of advocacy and advancement at FairTest: The National Center for Fair & Open Testing. He agrees with Pérez, saying "COVID-19 is having—and will continue to have—implications well beyond any particular campus or community. This situation will disrupt economies (and thus families) and the only real question is how bad will it be?" He adds, "As with almost everything, the impact will be felt most by low-income communities and families, and we as a nation will have to ask ourselves how we view our role as a society. Is the role of society to support those in need? Is education a public good or a positional good?"

Jerry Lucido is a professor and associate dean of strategic enrollment services for the University of Southern California's (USC) Rossier School of Education. He is also executive director of the USC [Center for Enrollment](#)

Research, Policy and Practice. Lucido expands on Bello and Pérez's assertions, explaining that "the virus is preventing campus visits and standardized testing and is causing educational disruption." He predicts that increasingly "colleges are likely to waive deadlines, make accommodations on testing requirements and the like," and he asks, "so what if we always did this?" Better yet, he says, "what if we found new ways of evaluating talent? What if such a crisis made us reevaluate our commitment to broader public health, not in the form of fighting viruses but in the form of a broadly educated public that serves the strength of our democracy, the economy, and social services? What if we leveled the playing field, as does the virus, by eliminating the natural advantages that wealth and privilege have in the admission system."

Let's look at some of the potential opportunities to learn from this disruption:

Early Decision and Early Action

Lucido says if we operationalized this theory of disruption and access, "we would eliminate Early Decision, Early Action, and other forms of **demonstrated interest** in the process, as only the privileged really understand how to play these games." Early applications have grown like unchecked weeds in the past decade, with many colleges and universities filling over half their first-year class through binding Early Decision and or non-binding Early Action plans. High school counselors and college admission officers **debate the usefulness of these plans** and the impact on students and institutions, but it is hard to argue that they allow for equity in access. The push toward early applications with deadlines in October and November over the last twenty years has forced the timeline of searching for and applying to college earlier and earlier in the high school experience. Meanwhile, this shift has disproportionately favored students with more access to personalized counseling and the resources to do advanced planning and visiting. Maybe now, with our nation undergoing an

experiment in social distancing and sheltering in place, it is the time to abandon these early plans altogether and move to one single deadline for admission.

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Standardized Tests

Many test centers closed for the March SAT and College Board and ACT have already canceled the April and May administrations of their tests worldwide. Depending on the duration and spread of this pandemic the potential for other test dates to fall prey is high. Even if June and July test administrations proceed as planned, the backlog of testers from this spring has created situations where the nearest test center available for some students is hours from their home. This lack of access will increase the divide between the haves and the have nots.

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Trinity's Pérez says, "COVID-19 might have enrollment professionals rethink issues like testing: what happens if we don't have an SAT or ACT - how else might I predict this student's success on my campus?" Fairtest's Bello explains that "every disruption to normal processes will impact low-income families at greater rates and will be a force multiplier of inequitable outcomes. When rich students have school counselors, test prep tutors, and independent education consultants to proactively provide solutions to the cancellations of SAT and ACT test dates, low-income students will have to scramble to find information and develop alternative plans. When College Board and ACT make announcements about rescheduling tests they almost never proactively identify whether that applies to fee waivers, leaving those students to figure it out on their own." He adds, "This crisis will hopefully help our work of reframing the thinking around testing in American education. The March SAT is a prime example of the unequal access to testing and its disparate impact on communities. As large urban districts closed all schools and canceled SATs, some private schools held their March SAT." Rhetorically he asks, "for whom does that create an advantage?" Bello argues that "besides the weak predictive validity of most tests, the increasingly obvious lack of equitable access (and preparation) should have every college questioning whether requiring admission tests is worth the costs or is a test-optional policy more reasonable?"

Jonathan Burdick, vice provost for enrollment at Cornell University encourages us to consider this from a different perspective. He says, "count me among those who worry that a dramatic increase in what is already tremendous uncertainty ultimately privileges (once again) those who have access to the best information fastest. That is not a formula for improving access, it's a formula for a market even more characterized than ever by 'insider trading' behavior. If all colleges are test-optional, what will they use instead to make good decisions? Among the devices are: better quality of application submissions, including an increased emphasis on the quality of a recommendation letter or six; evidence of co-curricular activity and leadership, competitions, etc.; 'proven' reputations for academic rigor in

specific schools; grading practices designed to ‘show improvement’ and minimize the effects of small differences, etc. And, most basic of all, the likelihood of paying tuition.” Rhetorically he asks, “Do any of these sound like access options?” Burdick says, “the idea that not requiring standardized tests would increase access everywhere is not proven,” adding, “I believe, and led the University of Rochester (where he previously worked) to accept, that abandoning this requirement could improve access **at a selective college.**” That’s a different proposition he argues, emphasizing “I’m not sure I’m saying this enough: ‘access’ begins with access to good information, and you tell me if America’s or higher education’s response so far has aligned with ‘good information’ spreading. So campuses finding themselves ‘forced’ to drop testing requirements willy-nilly doesn’t create an ideal ground for access either.” This issue is not cut and dry, but the current moment asks us to consider the role of testing. What would it take, in redesigning the requirements of college applications, for us to remove standardized tests, as we know them, from the—unbalanced—equation?

College Visits

The opportunity to travel to college campuses has long been an exercise of privilege and though some colleges and universities have “fly-in” programs that will pay for underrepresented students to visit, often there is an application and/or nomination process associated with these opportunities. The students who most need the inspiration and information provided by setting foot on campuses rarely have the chance for this experience. This is especially true for colleges and universities at a distance, which could be more affordable or a better match, but simply are not in a student’s awareness (or within their financial reach to visit).

Wil Del Pilar, vice president for higher education at the [Education Trust](#) says “many institutions use interviews or campus visits as a sign of ‘interest.’” He points out that both the outbreak of COVID-19 and the ability to pay are limiting students' ability to visit campus. He adds, “virtual tours

and/or alternative contact opportunities should be implemented that do not disadvantage students in impacted areas or those who do not have the resources to travel.” Jenny Rickard, executive director of [Common App](#) agrees, arguing that “in addition to compelling residential colleges and universities to rethink how they educate their current students, the impact of COVID-19 is driving new, creative thinking for providing virtual and other alternatives to the tried and true campus visit to market their institutions to prospective students.” She adds, “while in-person campus visits may present the best opportunity for students to get a more tangible sense of a college's campus and environment, unfortunately, underserved students and low-income students, in the healthiest of times, are most likely not able to experience a live campus visit for a number of reasons, including being unaware of the opportunities to do so, financial reasons, and more.”

Heath Einstein, dean of admission at Texas Christian University says that “COVID-19 forces us to creatively consider how to turn the in-person events into [virtual programs](#), applying a multi-channel approach. Since not everyone has resources to visit campus, these virtual options can have an equalizing effect.” He explains that “of course, we are aware that not everyone has internet access, but even the most impoverished students now typically have a smartphone. We can prove commitment to equity in ways that are difficult without seeing us in action and so while this crisis has moved us in a particular direction by force, it potentially provides a library of digital content from which we can draw once we move into a more stable future.”

Admission Travel

The normal spring would find many college admission officers on the road again, visiting high schools and meeting students at college fairs throughout the country/world. Needless-to-say high school visits are out for the foreseeable future and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) has already [canceled the large admission fairs this](#)

spring, as physical distancing would be next to impossible. Again, this is an opportunity to examine the practices around recruitment and how resources are allocated by college and university admission offices. In the spring of 2018, Ozan Jaquette, an assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, and Karina Salazar, who is now an assistant professor in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at The University of Arizona, wrote an [op-ed for the *New York Times*](#) highlighting their research about how [colleges disproportionately recruit students](#) from wealthier, whiter areas. With high school visits currently off the table, the admission profession must focus efforts on other recruitment tools and this provides an opportunity to level the playing field in the approach to building an applicant pool that is more representative of our society.

Andy Borst, director of undergraduate admissions at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign says, “I’m excited by the innovations to college admission that may come from this crisis. The new tools we are working on developing to expand online resources and tele-counseling may open up all kinds of possibilities.” He adds, “I’ve also been encouraged by the acknowledgment of care around privilege and access to these online resources, while we look for alternatives.” Borst encourages us to “imagine a future when a student in a rural school which may not get many visits from colleges can schedule a one-on-one meeting with an admission counselor from across the country in real-time. Or students in a country around the world, who may have been limited to direct information by such a thing as time zones, may now have access to a plethora of new content, including student panels to answer common questions.” He acknowledges that “many of these resources currently exist, but COVID-19 will force all of us to examine our daily operations. Whenever things calm down, rather than returning to business as usual, there will be some schools that can effectively turn this crisis into a real opportunity for improvement.”

Access to Counseling

David Hess is a school counselor at Elgin High School in Illinois. Elgin is one of 5 high schools in District U-46, which is the 2nd largest district in Illinois. The school serves about 2600 students, of which 75% are low income and 81% are students of color. The vast majority of their graduates who continue onto college are the first-generation in their family to do so. Hess explains that Elgin doesn't have dedicated post-secondary counselors and he says, “in working with low-income, underrepresented students daily, I see a strong work ethic and eagerness to attend college, yet many lack the necessary information to make sound decisions in the process. COVID-19 and its impact on college campuses raises an important question about equity and access, how can we reach more students with quality information about the process?”

Studies have shown that personalized and [intensive college counseling](#) creates more college opportunities for low-income students and those from high schools with fewer resources.

Unconscionably, there is a huge divide in our nation with regard to counseling resources. Though the [American School Counselor Association \(ASCA\)](#) recommends a ratio of 250 students per counselor, according to Department of Education statistics, the national average is [464-to-1](#). This means that [4 out of 5 high school students \(over 11 million kids\)](#) attend schools where access to a school counselor is insufficient. As the novel coronavirus forces high schools everywhere to transition to virtual learning it, once again, highlights the desperate need for more counseling resources. In response to the pandemic, some college admission offices are offering individual online counseling for high school students in the absence of travel and other outreach. Likewise, community-based organizations, independent educational consultants and other educators have asked themselves and the admission profession how they can serve more students who lack access to personalized guidance.

Hess encourages us to ask, “as an educational community, including both secondary and post-secondary institutions, how can we better reach and support low-income students?” He adds, “It's not just about access, but equity in support, to ensure success at those institutions. Can this crisis help us come together and actively address the college completion gap that disproportionately impacts low-income students? As a country, we are trying to flatten the curve; can we also improve our work flattening the barriers to equity and access for low-income students?”

Extracurricular Activities

Del Pilar at the Education Trust encourages colleges to consider the ways that we think about student involvement outside the classroom. He says "consideration of extracurricular activities in the application process needs to be closely scrutinized," adding, “students will be impacted as many of these will be canceled out of necessary precautions.” Del Pilar reminds us that we must ask, “how might this disproportionately impact low-income students and students of color?” This is not only true in times of crisis like we are experiencing now with COVID-19, but also a reality for many students in the college admission process. Pay-to-play athletic programs, and other extracurricular opportunities that require significant resources, present barriers for some applicants. Students who have family responsibilities and other demands on their time because of their unique circumstances often can't be involved at school or outside of school in the same ways that their well-resourced peers might.

Elgin High School's Hess says, “a few weeks ago, I met with a low-income senior, who has a 3.95 unweighted GPA and ambitions to be an engineer, but did not apply to selective colleges because she didn't think she had enough community service. Over the summer, she has to watch her younger siblings for 11-12 hours while her parents work, she also watches them two hours a day, after school, during the school year.” The repercussions of COVID-19 will not only limit extracurricular involvement for all applicants

this cycle but will also increase the number of students whose contributions at home are needed. The [Making Caring Common](#) (MCC) project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) has focused intentionally on these issues through the [Turning the Tide](#) campaign. Their second report on college admission, *Turning the Tide II: How Parents and High Schools Can Cultivate Ethical Character and Reduce Distress in The College Admissions Process*, includes the [Dean's Commitment Letter](#), a statement endorsed by more than 140 college admission deans that reinforces the value of contributions to family and community. Richard Weissbourd is a senior lecturer and the faculty director of MCC and the co-director of the Human Development and Psychology Program at HGSE. He says, "how colleges assess extracurricular activities is often wildly unfair because access to these activities is so unequal. Many more colleges should take a closer look at how underrepresented students actually spend their time. Many of these students are taking care of family members or working to provide family income many hours a week for years. That should count a lot more than a summer volunteer stint abroad." The college admission profession needs to continue to search for better ways to communicate these messages and values to students.

Affordability

In good times, the cost of higher education is increasingly prohibitive to more and more students. And, all indicators suggest that the coming year is lining up to be anything but good times—along with the health threat of the virus comes the potential for significant economic fallout. Cornell's Burdick explains that financial pressures lead to "the basic law of diminishing access" He says that "even in this current term, and far more so if coronavirus disrupts enrollments this fall, the overall financial stress on higher education institutions is going to continue accelerating the trend of many years now to prioritize collecting net tuition revenue." He points out that this is not going to help access, predicting that, "If the financial stress is deep enough, more campuses are going to go out of business faster than

they would have, and the institutions least likely to survive are those who have been least selective, meaning (at least in some sense) more accessible.” While student loan interest has been frozen and national conversations swirl around student debt forgiveness and free college, we need to think outside the box and the current crisis demands we do so.

Rick Clark, director of undergraduate admission at Georgia Tech suggests that “one of the silver linings of this pandemic could be seeing innovative programs and more flexible enrollment options for students.” He adds, “I would not be surprised to see hybrid online/in-person options for some programs or reduced rates of tuition for online offerings, as well as growth potential at highly sought after schools—particularly publics.” If we can create access during times of crisis, then we must examine the ways that colleges—especially the most selective—can open their gates to individuals who have not traditionally seen this as possible. Pérez, at Trinity College, expands on Clark’s suggestion explaining that COVID-19 might cause colleges and universities to explore enrollment patterns. He says, “we tend to be traditionalists when it comes to semester start and end dates. If students can’t enroll on our campuses this fall, might we rethink the academic cycle and program delivery? Might we be able to reach more students by thinking about non-traditional methods of teaching and a different academic cycle?” Weissbourd, at Harvard, has been thinking about these issues for some time. He says, “many selective colleges are very capable of providing rigorous, exciting pathways to undergraduate degrees that are more affordable.” He invites us to “imagine a hybrid pathway to a public service degree, for example, with two years of traditional residential experience and two years of exciting field experiences in this country and abroad combined with rigorous, engaging— and significantly less expensive — online courses. Instead of touting how few people they admit— an ethically indefensible metric used by highly selective colleges in particular— selective colleges could brag about how many people they educated.” The time is ripe to upend tradition and consider how the legacy of college admission and affordability has kept so many out.

Reality Check

Lucido, at USC, reminds us of two critical realities as we consider the implication of the novel coronavirus and future of college admission. He says, “first, colleges must have enough revenue to operate. This resource dependence will naturally direct their attention to those who can pay (at this point in our history). So social ends will be balanced by what is necessary to keep institutions afloat.” However, he argues that “we are not in a place where there is any kind of balance. Institutional interest is primary now at a time when societal goals must ascend to that position.” Lucido points out that the bottom line questions are, “will the institutions actually admit these new students who are brought to their doorstep, and what levers will it take to see them make this change?”

Jenny Rickard at Common App says, “COVID-19 is amplifying the inequities that the college-search experience has on low-income students, and colleges and universities need to internalize these inequities and make the necessary changes to ensure their institutions are accessible and welcoming to all students. Once college campuses are safe again for students to visit, institutions need to have plans in place to ensure that every student, no matter their financial situation, can experience their campuses personally - either physically or virtually.”

Reinvention

It is said that “necessity is the mother of invention.” Admission to college has needed reinvention, essentially since its inception. It is a system that was not designed for equity and access, and the healthy growth of an educated society demands it be redesigned. Dr. OiYan Poon is an assistant professor of Higher Education Leadership in the School of Education at Colorado State University and director of the [Race and Intersectional Studies for Education Equity \(RISE\) Center](#). She is also a founder of the [Hack the Gates](#) initiative to “Radically Reimagine Admission.” She says, “If COVID-19 is forcing everyone to figure out how to do everything differently,

and examine/reflect on all of our relationships to each other and society, how might we think differently about college admission? COVID-19 is definitely revealing all of the vulnerabilities and inequities of our social systems.” Trinity’s Pérez adds, “higher education is one of the slowest moving institutions in the world. COVID-19 could be the impetus that forces us to change that.”

Fortunately, what is not slow-moving is the wave of support and collaboration that this global pandemic has set in motion within the admission profession. It has been inspiring to see how colleagues in high schools and colleges are sharing resources and remaining student-centered as we adjust to the challenges at hand and that inevitably lie ahead. If we can manage to keep the [Department of Justice from stunting future initiatives](#) to work together, then there is hope for building a better system for accessing higher education. Together, we will continue to support our students, even if in new and different ways. They need us now, more than ever.

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