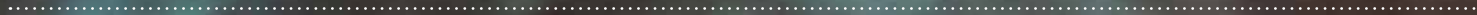
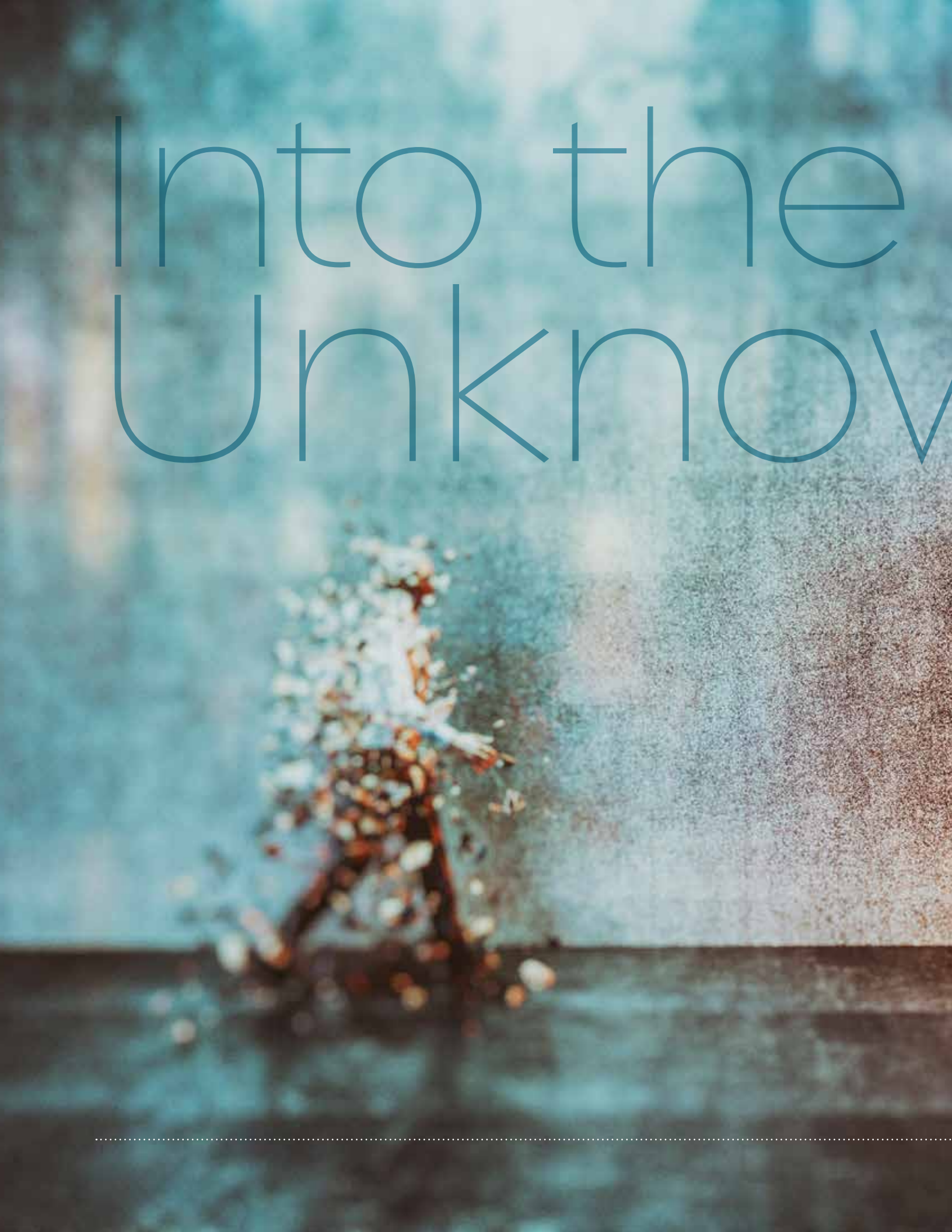


Into the Unknown





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As the coronavirus reshapes the college admission process for the high school class of 2021, school counselors adapt their communication methods, predictions, and advice for students.

Eric Neutuch

On Thursday, March 12, Lemont High School in the south suburbs of Chicago closed its doors for a deep cleaning due to a suspected coronavirus case in a district elementary school.

“Everyone expected a one-day closure, almost like a snow day,” said Denise Dalton, the chair of student services at Lemont. “But then we never came back.”

In abrupt moments like this—and less frantic ones elsewhere—the coronavirus pandemic upended schooling and students’ college admission journeys.

Schools transitioned to remote learning, extracurricular activities vanished into thin air, and in-person visits to colleges were abandoned.

The SAT and ACT calendars for the late spring were wiped out and subsequent plans for at-home testing were abandoned. After the collapse of the testing calendars, hundreds of colleges switched to test-optional for the coming admission cycle, including the eight Ivy League institutions. Advanced Placement (AP) exams, once two to three hour grinds, became 45-minute open-book at-home tests.

College counseling work was also turned upsidedown. During the springtime period of remote learning, counselors gauged the emotions of adolescents via Zoom interfaces, held online parent nights, and answered questions about ever-shifting testing calendars.

Although many colleges and universities have gone test-optional, college counselors are still generally advising students to test. The reality is that, as long as tests are still being offered, there’s something to be gained by students scoring well on them.

Danny Tejada, the director of college counseling at Villa Duchesne and Oak Hill School in St. Louis, said he couldn’t have predicted this drastic change. “I took for granted the fact that if I didn’t hear from a student, I could go and get them in the classroom,” he said.

A big unknown is how college admission offices will interpret and weight grades from an asterisked junior year semester in their admission decision-making. A further-off unknown is whether residential campus life will return to a semblance of its former self by Fall 2021, when the class of 2021 is set to begin their collegiate studies.

“We don’t know about a ‘new normal’ yet,” said Tejada. “We’re still going through the crisis.”

SUMMER TEST PREP

Although many colleges and universities have gone test-optional, college counselors are still generally advising students to test. The reality is that, as long as tests are still being offered, there’s something to be gained by students scoring well on them. “We want students to have that data point,” said Dalton.

Despite saying she wishes the tests didn’t exist at all, Tela Thigpen, director of college success at the charter school Freedom Preparatory Academy (TX), agreed. “High test scores will help elevate our students’ choices,” she said.

At Freedom Prep, students experienced numerous postponements to the school’s state-sponsored ACT testing date—from March 31 to April 21 and then to May and now to September. It was incredibly frustrating but “maybe a blessing in giving students more preparation time,” said Thigpen.

That is, if students can eventually test. As of early August, the College Board and ACT have testing calendars for the summer and fall jam-packed with dates, including seven ACT testing dates in just September and October. Yet the increasing number of virus cases is endangering the testing slates.

The College Board website warns that students “may encounter unexpected closures” and that testing capacities at sites are limited because of social distancing requirements. Already, ACT has had problems re-

introducing test administrations.

On July 20, 1,400 prospective ACT test-takers were unable to test when 21 test centers closed ahead of the test date, although 88,000 students did successfully test at more than 1,100 sites around the country, according to an ACT statement.

‘HORRIBLE’ FOR JUNIORS

At Baltimore City College (BCC), a selective public magnet school with a record of sending more than 90 percent of its graduating students to baccalaureate-granting colleges, the spring months are traditionally a time when juniors are deep into college admission work. By the end

of a normal school year, most juniors will have attended a college fair, sat for a one-on-one with a member of the counseling staff, taken a school day SAT and potentially other SATs, and solicited recommendation letters from their teachers.

“Normally, by June, we’re so far into it with the juniors that many are working on their own,” said Rodney Joyner, BCC’s director of college advising.

But this spring, said Joyner, without the constant interactions and structure afforded by being in the same building all day, much less progress was made on the various steps of the college application process by most students. “It was horrible for the juniors. Now everyone needs help,” he said.



The slow and complicated transition to remote learning at BCC was a major challenge for Joyner, his colleagues, and his students. Many BCC students lacked reliable internet access, which made the situation worse. A report from the Abell Foundation indicated that only about 60 percent of Baltimore families had in-home wired internet service when the pandemic struck.

This summer, Joyner and his college advising colleagues held a number of one-hour Zoom sessions for juniors on parts of the college admission process, trying to catch up on lost time, but those sessions couldn't reach all students.

In September, Baltimore City Schools will begin the school year by operating virtually with Chromebooks and mobile hotspots. Joyner said he expects the quality of teaching, learning, and counseling to improve for BCC students, as he and his colleagues are now "fully adept at working online."

Yet he fears that as a result of the pandemic, BCC students—many of whom are low-income, first-generation, and almost all students of color—will be left further behind in accessing high-quality education and higher education opportunities than they were in a stratified pre-pandemic world. "We worked really hard to give students access to high-level education and also to the college process," he said. "We were closing that gap and evening the playing field. But now, in one fell swoop, we're back to the haves and the have-nots."

Advocates for low-income students are concerned about the extent to which low-income students, post-pandemic, will enroll in college and stay enrolled. The National College Attainment Network (NCAN) and the Institute for College Access and Success are among the organizations calling for a

doubling of the maximum Pell grant, arguing that more resources are needed to help low-income students.

NCAN's policy statement reads, "This is a time of extraordinary need. The current public health crisis and resulting economic challenges are only exacerbating the financial difficulties faced by students—preventing many from pursuing and completing college degrees."

UNCLEAR ODDS

For the class of 2021, counselors say that gauging admissibility will be harder than ever before. "It's confusing to advise families on selecting universities right now. There's a lot of noise," said Jennifer Kim, the upper school counselor at the private Dallas International School (TX).

Students have flocked to Kim's Google Hangout open office hours to ask about admission criteria and admissibility prospects, yet with the landscape changing so fast and the value of historical data so limited, Kim said she has been unable to provide students with easy answers.

Dalton said she's feeling the same way. "I don't feel as though I have a good handle on how colleges are really going to be evaluating applicants," she said. Grades will still be the most significant factor, she said, though marks from the spring semester of junior year earned under relaxed grading standards are likely to be weighted less than grades from other terms.

The importance attributed to essays and letters of recommendations will almost certainly rise, especially at highly selective test-optional schools, according to the college counselors.

Over 300 college admission leaders—including leadership at NACAC—said as much by signing onto a pledge spearheaded by the Making Caring

Common Project at Harvard University (MA). In the pledge, the admission leaders vow to “[take] into account the many challenges and obstacles students are currently facing” and encourage students to “share information about these challenges in their applications.”

The Common Application is giving students a space to do just that. An optional question asks students to describe the effects of the coronavirus on “your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces.”

This relaxation in grading standards, coupled with the cancellation of extracurricular activities, allowed students to rest, spend time with family, and take on new creative pursuits.

Tejada hypothesized that students who might have been longshots for some highly selective schools in prior admission cycles will “take the leap and apply” to more reach schools, especially test-optional ones. As a result, he reckoned that the post-pandemic admission odds longer at many schools than before. He said he recognizes the irony in this situation—that in the midst of a pandemic, selective college admission may actually become even more competitive. He’s bracing for the fall crunch-time when his students and families stress about finalizing college choices. “It’s going to be maddening,” he said.

There’s another wrinkle in the calculus that might prompt more competitiveness in highly selective admission. According to the private college counseling firm Ivy Coach, international students from the high school class of 2020 who deferred their studies in Fall 2020 may begin their studies in Fall 2021. These students, plus other non-international students who deferred for a year, will reduce the number of seats available to class of 2021 entrants, ratcheting up the competition and making for a “tough year in highly selective college admissions” for the current class of rising seniors.

OFF THE HAMSTER WHEEL

Amidst the tragedies resulting from the coronavirus, it’s not easy to find silver linings. But Dalton identifies some good from the slowing down of teenage life that occurred during the late spring. “The stress was taken off students’ shoulders. I’m curious to see whether those who were experiencing pre-pandemic anxiety are now seeing reduced anxiety,” she said.

TIPS FOR RISING HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS



The college counseling experts interviewed offer six tips for rising high school seniors as they navigate the crisis-transformed college admission process.

1. Keep your grades up. The “old school advice” to focus on academics continues to remain as true as it was before, said Dalton.
2. Broaden your reach. Joyner tells his students that they “may be able to get into colleges that they couldn’t previously.” He emphasizes that the test-optional and flexible admission policies will benefit a lot of students who might have previously been overlooked. He advises students to cast a wide net.
3. Research colleges online. Joyner further urges his students to not procrastinate on undertaking college and financial aid research via virtual tours and online information sessions. Students and families waiting to visit colleges in person once everything is back to “normal” may be waiting for a time that never comes, he said.
4. Be disciplined. Kim has observed that the students who are the most autonomous and able to work independently have been the most successful with her school’s rigorous virtual learning expectations. As virtual learning continues in many school districts, she said that the mindset of being able to work independently is particularly valuable, and that it will yield rewards when it comes to succeeding in college, whether classes are face-to-face or remote.
5. Be safe. Tejada’s message for students who are aching for life to return to “normal” is to take a step back and to prioritize their health and safety, as well as that of others. “We can’t underestimate this virus. Take care of yourself,” he said.
6. Be proud. “Once you hit your best self, be okay with where you are standing,” said Thigpen. No matter what, students should be proud when they are putting in their best efforts.

The relief may be short-lived, as students are back to preparing for the SAT on the assumption that the test will be administered this fall. But during the spring months, Dalton said the overstressed and overscheduled students in her suburban middle-class community were compelled to take a break from the “hamster wheel” of achievement. “Because there was no track team, there was no pressure for students to become track team captain,” she said.

Her school district followed guidance from the state to not award students grades below what they had in mid-March. This relaxation in grading standards, coupled with the cancellation of extracurricular activities, allowed students to rest, spend time with family, and take on new creative pursuits. Dalton said one of her students painted a mural in their basement, which Dalton suspects would have never happened otherwise. ▢

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More than 500 institutions have signed on to NACAC’s Test-Optional Means Test-Optional statement. [See the list of colleges affirming that they will not penalize students for the absence of a standardized test score.](#)