



Time to Transform

COVID-19 forces college admission professionals to rethink how they serve students and families

By Jamaal Abdul-Alim

Ana Almeida had only been on her job as a college admission coach for two months before COVID-19 forced her organization to move operations online.

Prior to the switch, Almeida said she found it difficult to conduct college application sessions with substantial numbers of students because they were scattered at different high schools throughout Rhode Island.

“So just getting them all in one place was extremely hard,” said Almeida, who works for The College Crusade, a Rhode Island-based nonprofit that seeks to help students get admitted to selective colleges.

But the task got easier once things moved into cyberspace.

“Having to go online kind of opened up this opportunity where, ‘Hey I can just have these sessions online,’” Almeida explained. “I can just meet with these students anytime.”

Almeida is one of thousands of college advisers forced by COVID-19 to adapt the services they offer to effectively reach students online. While many say they have discovered more innovative and efficient ways to reach students, they also report a fair amount of challenges that have made certain tasks—such as protecting student privacy or working through the convoluted FAFSA—more difficult.

As the nation anxiously awaits distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine that will enable people to gather in the same physical space, some advisers say it’s important for the college admission community to take to heart the lessons they have learned by moving online to improve how they provide services to students.

“I hope that we will take things from this disruption and not go back to normal, but that we transform the work that we do so that we can reach more people,” said Stacy Sneed, coordinator of data management for Get2College, the signature program of the Jackson, Mississippi-based Woodward Hines Education Foundation.

In that spirit, *The Journal of College Admission* reached out to several nonprofit and school system leaders throughout the United States to collect concrete examples of not only challenges posed by advising students virtually, but—whenever possible—how they were able to overcome those challenges and what practices they plan to keep even after schools resume in-person teaching.



EQUIPMENT MATTERS

When the pandemic hit in March, Sara Woods, executive director of Philadelphia Futures, a non-profit that helps low-income students in Philadelphia get admitted to college, wasted no time in making a special appeal to donors to help ensure the students her organization serves did not have their college dreams derailed.

So the organization set up a special Opportunity Fund to help students with pandemic-related emergency expenses.

That's how Reya Ahmed, a high school sophomore in Philadelphia, got a laptop to help her stay connected once school went online.

"As many activities and schools have gone virtual, a laptop is vital in

these times," Ahmed said in a letter shared with the *Journal*.

"I am thankful for receiving a laptop and being able to get work done and even do my own research for colleges and scholarships," Ahmed said. "Dealing with the loss of outside contact and being on lockdown at home, having a laptop also helped me look for activities I can do online and video-chat friends to chat and study in a safer way. If I didn't receive a laptop, I don't know how I would've stayed on top of my schoolwork and commit to virtual activities."

But not all students are so fortunate. Sneed, the Get2College data coordinator, said her organization has had mixed results with FAFSA completion since going virtual.

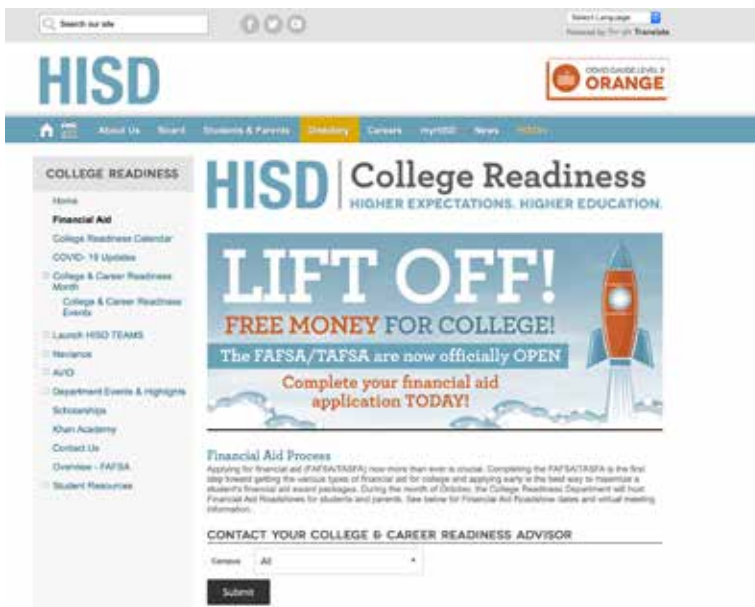
"For parents and students who have access to the internet, who have a device to call and make an appointment, the virtual FAFSA completion is working beautifully and it's going great," Sneed said. "But the school FAFSA days that have directly gotten most of the FAFSAs done in the state of Mississippi are not going well."

Nationally, Sneed noted in mid-November, FAFSA completion is down 16 percent. In Mississippi it was down 30 percent.

"The [school-based] counselors have to be super-invested in the program, helping kids get on to the Zoom link," Sneed said of her program's FAFSA completion days at schools in Mississippi, many of which have remained open despite the pandemic.

Sneed said a typical thing that happens during school-based FAFSA days is that the first wave of students will get set up in the morning. But the counselor will often get pulled to other duties as the day wears on.

"We had a FAFSA day all day long and the high school counselor helped all the nine o'clock appointments get on the Zoom link; she facilitated that and made sure they were all on. We put people into Zoom break rooms," Sneed said. "It was going beautifully for the first hour and then we never saw her the rest of the day and they saw eight students, where we should have seen 40 students, and it's because [school counselors] are being pulled. They have kids who are being quarantined. They come back to school for two weeks and they're being quarantined again and [the counselors] just have more to do than FAFSA completion. So we're going to rethink this."



Above: Javier Juarez speaks with College Crusade students about about "Celebrating the Journey."

Left: Department of College Readiness for the Houston Independent School District's financial aid webpage.

NEW MODES OF OPERATING

In Houston, one of the first things that David Johnston, executive director of the Department of College Readiness for the Houston Independent School District, did once the school system began to offer classes remotely was to update the website to include new contact information for the 40 or so college advisers in his department.

"We knew we had to get students connected quickly with their adviser," Johnston said. "We made all the advisers Google phone numbers and then we put that Google phone number in a drop-down menu on our website. We also created a booking page so students can book a time."

Johnston said the district also sent students and parents postcards with their adviser's photograph and new contact information. "We found

that mail worked very well," he said. It also helped that the district provided laptops and Office 365 to its students."

Counselors in the Houston Independent School District are able to work flexible hours since they are dealing with students and families at different times of the day due to the pandemic and many students opting to attend school remotely. Houston has offered both remote and in-person instruction in the fall semester of 2020.

Johnston reported that 3,427 students in his school district had completed their FAFSA applications in mid-November, compared to 4,860 at the same time the year prior. All things considered, he said those numbers are good because the district began working on FAFSA applications two weeks later than usual. He said he expects to catch up to last year's figures before the FAFSA application season is over.

EXPANDED MEETINGS

Johnston said counselors have been able to expand the number of colleges it does for virtual college events.

"One of the things we've become much more adept at is virtual college events," Johnston said. "We used to sort of be campus-by-campus. Now we're able to do large events."

He said the district is working with Zoom to add a simultaneous interpretation for students who are still learning English.

"None of those types of solutions we had before the pandemic," Johnston said. "The pandemic has taught us how to really use platforms like [Microsoft] Teams and Zoom to really meet students where they are."



College Crusade alumna and Providence City Councilwoman Nirva LaFortune gives the keynote address for the organization's first-generation celebration to open the afternoon's events.

COST SAVINGS AND COLLABORATION

Houston Independent School District is by no means alone in discovering bigger and better ways to do virtual meetings.

Stacy Richardson, director of college counseling at Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School in Washington, DC, said the Washington Association of Independent Schools, a group of college counselors at schools in Maryland, DC and Virginia, wanted to provide additional opportunities for students to learn about colleges in lieu of the typical in-person college fair and virtual presentations given by admission officers in the fall.

"We were trying to think of ways to help our students get to know these colleges since they can't visit, but we wanted it to be different from the typical high school visit from admission reps," Richardson said. "And so we asked the representatives to bring at least one student with them to the Zoom meeting so that students could ask questions about student life and sort of get that perspective. It's always good to have someone closer to their age to speak with them about what's going on on campus."

Similarly, when Georgetown Visitation conducted its summer application workshop virtually in August, the school was able to get representatives

from a wider array of colleges than they did when they held the workshop in person.

"I think we'll continue to do it online because it allowed us to have so many more admission officers," Richardson said of the summer application workshop. "Normally we ask people who are just local because we don't have the resources to pay for airfare, hotel, and all that sort of stuff for the four days that we do this workshop. And so because it was virtual, we've had people in California, all up and down the East Coast, all over the country join us to give students feedback on their essays and interview skills and do presentations."

At The College Crusade in Rhode Island, officials have discovered that they have reaped huge savings in transportation costs by holding various events virtually instead of in person.

"We're saving at least \$125,000 (conservatively) this year in transportation costs from moving our programming online as a result of the pandemic," Kristen Cyr, director of marketing and communications for The College Crusade, told the *Journal* in an email.

One of the biggest savings came from holding the organization's annual first-generation college student celebration online as opposed to flying in Crusader scholars from colleges around the country to share their experience with Crusader high schoolers. Being online also has enabled greater attendance.

"We're seeing some benefits from it where you can have more students participate, because they can pop on right from their bedroom or right from their dorm room. Certainly, a firstgen day on a Monday afternoon would be tough for students..."

"We're seeing some benefits from it where you can have more students participate, because they can pop on right from their bedroom or right from their dorm room," said Naglaa Gaafar, director of postsecondary success at The College Crusade. "Certainly, a first-gen day on a Monday afternoon would be tough for students at other colleges and universities across New England to attend."

But it's easier to attend, Gaafar said, when you can "just log on from wherever you are."

CHALLENGES REMAIN

Nancy Leopold, interim CEO at College Tracks, a nonprofit based in Montgomery County, Maryland, said one of the challenges with going remote is that many tasks take much longer than they would if counselors were sitting next to a student. The FAFSA, she said, is a prime example.

"We've had to develop some tools to help students and families through these processes remotely," Leopold said. "So we have developed, for example, a line-by-line FAFSA instruction packet that tells students and families precisely what they have to do to fill in each line." The document, she said, resembles a PowerPoint presentation and is 70 pages long.

Even though the FAFSA is filled out online, figuring out what to put in each of the spaces "remains challenging for many families," Leopold said.

"It's a tax document," Leopold said. "It has the complexities of a tax document. It's quite complicated, particularly for families who don't speak English as a first language, who don't have a lot of experience in filling out forms like this, whose finances may not fit neatly into the categories that the FAFSA has."

Being online has also curtailed the organization's ability to rely on volunteer help because of school district regulations that govern who can meet one-on-one with students via Zoom.

"Plus you have the technology issues," Leopold said. "And it's hard-to-impossible to supervise volunteers, whereas the volunteers worked entirely under our supervision when we were in schools."

"The other thing that we can't do is we can't tap students in the hallways," Leopold continued. "We can't send passes to students asking that they come see us at lunch or after school."

To make up for the lack of spontaneous contact, College Tracks has set up a Google Classroom for students to make Zoom appointments to see advisers at the organization. Still, it has its limitations.

"I don't want to create the impression that there are advisers sitting and waiting for students to do things in Google Classrooms, but they're very responsive," Leopold said.

SILVER LINING

Gaafar, of The College Crusade, said she is optimistic that the field of college advising will emerge better after the pandemic.

"I just want to emphasize the silver lining...Being online and delivering these materials online forced us to be very innovative in looking at students' needs and pinpointing these needs and transferring our programs online in phenomenal time in order to address these needs," Gaafar said. "So whatever we developed is here to stay. It's not going anywhere. It's only going to expand our offerings and our connection to the students moving forward, even when we come back in person." ▢

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