

**HOW HIGH SCHOOL JUNIORS  
CAN MASTER THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS  
IN THE AGE OF COVID-19**

*Jason S. Marks*

President, Mackler Associates



*Moving Minds Forward*

**macklerassociates**

# INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, the novel coronavirus, has upended our daily lives in countless ways. We find ourselves under stay-at-home orders and in general lockdown. Many businesses have temporarily closed under government decree. Schools have moved online to try and finish the semester. All of us worry about getting infected or spreading the virus to friends or family. None of us have lived through such a disruptive and surreal time.

I wanted to address all the emotions, anxieties, questions and concerns high school juniors have at this moment. I know that the tens of thousands of you who have been preparing so diligently for the college application process wonder what will happen to this process because of COVID-19. This Guide will answer the key questions and give you critical information with respect to handling the changing landscape for applying to college when we do not know exactly when life will return to normal.

Before we get into the most frequently asked questions, I want to stress the most important step for all high school juniors at this point: TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF! Your health and safety, and those of your family and friends, matters most right now. I am certain that as teenager you feel a bit invincible and really miss hanging out with your friends. I get it – I miss my freedom of movement too, and seeing live music and movies. But COVID-19 is highly contagious and life-threatening for older people and those with chronic health conditions. While teenagers have been asymptomatic or experiencing what feels like a normal bug, teenagers can easily spread the virus to family members who could get seriously ill or even die. None of us want that to happen. So, let us all follow the CDC guidelines and stop the spread of the virus. Not only will it keep you healthy and those you love, it will bring this lockdown to an end much faster.

It is quite likely that this coming year of college applications will be one of the most chaotic and troublesome we have ever seen. The process will be far from uniform across campuses. It will be harder to fairly evaluate all students because of a potential lack of important data. I say this not to freak you out, but rather to give you a reality check, a good lay of the land. I will explain how to maximize your chances in the chaos.

In the following pages, I will answer the most common questions I hear from high school juniors just like you who wonder what to do and what will happen with respect to the college application process. Because much remains unknown given the uncertainty as to our national quarantine, please check back often to [www.mackleradvantage.com](http://www.mackleradvantage.com) for the latest updates. And please remember – this too shall pass. Our lives will return to normal eventually – sooner if we all work together.

## **WILL COLLEGES BE TAKING APPLICATIONS FOR FALL 2021?**

**Yes.** While colleges have experienced a great deal of flux because of the novel coronavirus, including sending current students home to complete the semester online, colleges will continue. They exist to provide quality higher education, and they can do so only so long as they admit a new class of freshmen every year.

## **WILL THE APPLICATION DEADLINES CHANGE FOR THIS YEAR?**

**Likely.** At the moment, we do not know if colleges will start on campus come August. It is possible that colleges may need to begin their fall semester online. If that happens, the staff that handles admissions will not be able to work together as usual, even though they can communicate online and through videoconferencing. More importantly, if colleges cannot begin in August with on-campus learning, it is likely that you will not start your senior year on campus either. Colleges will not want to delay the application deadlines, but they may have no choice if life for applicants is still much like it is today.

Hopefully, and I would say probably, high schools will return to regular classroom learning by the fall. But even if this happens, I would anticipate the college application deadlines to get extended, especially those for early action and early decision. Colleges know that your lives as students have been interrupted: you have not had the chance to finish your semester in a regular way; you will take abbreviated AP exams; you may not have had enough opportunities to take the ACT or SAT; you likely have not had the chance to make college visits. With all these contingencies floating in the air, colleges will want to be fair to all applicants and extend deadlines to give everyone a full chance to do what we normally do in the college application process.

I do not expect the deadlines to extend too far, however. Colleges need to get confirmations so they can complete their class, assign housing and otherwise plan for the fall of 2021. At the moment, many colleges have given current high school seniors one additional month to make their final college decisions. I think colleges recognize that they do not have much additional “wiggle room” in their administrative planning to delay final decisions much further without causing a delay to the start of class this fall.

So, I would expect pushing early action and decision deadlines back four to six weeks, and regular decision back four weeks. Schools with rolling admissions will continue to accept applications as they arrive, but they may start later and extend later to accommodate students impacted by the virus.

## **HOW WILL COLLEGES EVALUATE MY GRADES BECAUSE OF COVID-19?**

Colleges typically look first to junior year performance as the best barometer of an applicant's ability – the classes resemble those a freshman in college would take, particularly for students enrolled in AP classes. But, for all of you, junior year has become a bit of a nightmare as your whole second semester depends on your online work. Some schools cancelled the semester entirely, leaving credits and grades up in the air.

Colleges will know that the second semester of junior year for students will come with an asterisk, and so they will discount its importance. For those of you who did not do as well as expected, this may come as a relief. For those of you who worked hard and did well, this will feel unfair. How colleges react to your grades for that one semester is out of your control. What you can control is how well you do in the first semester of your senior year. It is likely colleges will want to pay more attention to your grades in the fall, particularly if the application deadlines get pushed back. Instead of seeing this as a negative, see it as an opportunity to improve your chances. If you were planning on taking easier classes, you may want to change your plan to include at least some challenging (honors or AP level) classes to demonstrate your upward academic ability. If you are taking AP classes now, definitely take the AP exam and try hard! AP scores still represent the best objective validation of your high school learning.

If you feel like your academic record has not been fully reflected on your transcript because of COVID-19, I would encourage you to take advantage of the standardized tests to give you additional evidence of academic readiness, including SAT Subject Tests you might not have even considered before. And while we are on the subject of testing...

## **WILL COLLEGES GO TEST OPTIONAL FOR THIS ADMISSIONS CYCLE?**

This may be the question I receive most at this time. While it is true that some colleges have already decided to make the submission of SAT or ACT scores optional for the entering class of fall 2021, notably Tufts University and the entire University of California system, I do not anticipate the majority of schools to follow that path. The few schools that have made this move did so because they feel students will not have the chance to prepare sufficiently and test enough to submit a good score by the end of the year. However, I am certain the ACT and SAT will offer as many testing options as possible to make up for cancelled administrations. And Mackler Associates has continued all of its test prep courses uninterrupted – we have moved to virtual sessions that retain all of our one-on-one instruction. Also, many schools rely on ACT or SAT scores to award merit scholarships. For students who would like those scholarships, continue to prepare and hope that colleges will offer these opportunities in the coming application year.

## **TO TEST OR NOT TO TEST, IS THAT THE QUESTION?**

Even assuming that more schools jump on the test optional bandwagon, you should not think that helps you, even if you do not like standardized tests (what student does?). The ACT and SAT, while imperfect tests, give colleges an objective standard to gauge how well you perform compared to your peers around the country. If a college has little knowledge of your high school and how rigorous its level of academics, a high ACT or SAT score gives you a chance to answer questions they may have about your transcript, whether your grades or class choices. Also, given that a critical semester on your transcript will have an asterisk, you should want to find other opportunities to validate your ability. Many colleges use very little data to make big decisions about who to accept: transcripts, test scores, teacher recommendations, and one or more essays. That is not much data. So, should you choose to ride on even less data where the process becomes too subjective, or should you opt for more data and submit not only an ACT or SAT score, but also a few SAT Subject Tests as well? If you take more tests and do well, you show competitive colleges you are not afraid of testing and have the initiative and ability to handle the demands of those colleges. I recommend in this time of uncertainty that students follow the path most familiar to colleges – one built on test results.

## **WHEN AND HOW SHOULD I START THE APPLICATION PROCESS?**

During the summer. It is never a good idea to wait until a month before applications are due to work on your application. In this new era of uncertainty, what you put on your application, particularly your essays, will have even greater importance. You will want these essays to shine, and that requires time and effort and help. A helpful hint: I would not want to focus on how COVID-19 affected you. Many people will go for that topic, and that will make it cliché. You cannot stand out if your essay looks like that of every other applicant. Keep working on your resume; think about what teachers you want to ask for recommendations. While the deadlines may get pushed back, never plan on a delay – that is exactly when you find yourself behind the curve. Mackler Associates has continued its college application assistance in virtual sessions, and those will continue until we can safely resume in-person sessions.

## **WHAT ABOUT COLLEGE VISITS?**

Many juniors had to cancel college visits because of the coronavirus outbreak – campuses closed and travel became restricted. A quality campus visit may not be available until well into the fall, and at that point, you might not have time for the visit because you are busy back at school. What should you do?

First, take advantage of the online resources. Colleges have excellent virtual tours – some are actual tours taped and uploaded, others are tours that take advantage of technology and give you glimpses of all aspects of campus life. You can watch actual classes online to see what a course would look like at a particular college of interest. You can gather an incredible amount of valuable information without leaving your home (and since you really cannot leave your home now, use some time to go on virtual tours now!).

Second, contact friends or siblings of friends who attend your college of interest. While you should never take one student's experience as fully representative of a college, the feedback you get from people you can trust can give you excellent insight into aspects of the college, from what a major might involve to what the dorm feels like to live in for months on end, to how easy it is to make friends or find extracurricular activities.

Third, and most important, reach out to the admissions officer for your region. All colleges divide the country up into geographic regions and assign different admissions officers to different regions. They not only show up for college fairs, they also have principal responsibility for reviewing your application. Because no college fairs can take place now in person, some admissions officers are offering virtual fairs. Find out if your college of interest is doing so and check it out! Even if that is not happening for you, find the officers at your colleges of interest and start emailing them about your interest. These contacts are very valuable for gathering information and getting virtual face time.

When life returns to normal, you can schedule college visits in the fall. But remember – the most important college visits occur after you get accepted and you spend a few days at these colleges deciding which one best fits you and your goals.

## **CONCLUSION**

The college application process is stressful and confusing in the best of times; during the COVID-19 outbreak, it is more anxiety-producing than ever. It will be harder for you as juniors to work the application process than in years past. You need to understand how the changes in life will impact your chances of admission. A more subjective process makes getting into your college of choice even harder. You can take some of the subjectivity out of it by building your grades whenever possible, even toughening your schedule for fall. You can take more standardized tests rather than risk no test data at all. Do your research now while you have the time. And start thinking about good essay topics, again while you have the time.

I hope you have found this Guide helpful. Please know that Mackler Associates has been delivering high quality assistance in all aspects of the college application process for four decades, and we are ready with our individualized programs of test preparation, academic tutoring and college mentoring in these uncertain times.

We will get back to normal, and when we do, you want to be ready to maximize your chances of getting into your dream college.