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A college admissions dean writes open letter to panicked high school juniors

By **Valerie Strauss**

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There probably isn't a high school junior in the country, distance learning at home during the coronavirus pandemic, who isn't worried to some degree about what their senior year — and life afterward — holds for them.

Of particular concern to many is how they will navigate the college admissions process. Juniors are facing canceled SAT and ACT test administrations; online Advanced Placement tests; grading systems that have changed, often to pass-fail; new family financial pressures and much more.

To be sure, many colleges and universities have waived the requirement that students apply with an ACT or SAT score for the 2020-2021 school year, and the owners of both of those tests say they will ramp up testing opportunities in the fall. Still many students who would have visited campuses now can't, and they worry about their grade-point average and lost opportunities for extracurricular activities and sports.

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With that backdrop, here is an open letter to high school juniors from Andrew B. Palumbo, who is dean of admissions and financial aid at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Worcester, Mass.

Dear Juniors,

Over the past several weeks, I have spent a great deal of time considering what you must be going through as covid-19 has spread across the globe. As if junior year isn't already stressful enough, now you have to learn remotely, grapple with a pandemic and worry about your basic health and safety. Some of you may be dealing with food and housing insecurity, and mental health and wellness issues; others are impacted by the coronavirus directly as our country goes through a dangerous surge in cases. I hope you are managing and getting the support you need.

Meanwhile, your friends in the senior class are making difficult decisions as they finish their college searches. I've seen first-hand how difficult this is for them. But starting your college search in the midst of a global pandemic while you're practicing isolation and social distancing with no clear end in sight? You're facing a whole different set of challenges; I feel for you.

So many of you are calling and writing to me and my colleagues in admissions and financial aid offices across the country.

“How will pass/fail grades affect my application?”

“Will I be able to visit schools?”

“Will I get credit for my AP courses?”

“My SAT/ACT testing date was canceled. Now I might have to take these test in the Fall as I’m catching up on school work and applying to schools? And they might be online?”

“I don’t know where to start...”

I am writing to you not because I believe I have all of the answers, but because I know that you have these questions.

The college admissions process has always brought with it a high level of uncertainty and anxiety for most students. Often, applicants and their families are puzzled by admissions decisions. Every college has its own requirements, values, and decision-making process. The process lacks a feedback loop, often leaving students disappointed and wondering “why?”

The covid-19 pandemic has added a level of uncertainty never experienced by students wondering how to navigate the college admissions process; that’s potentially the hardest aspect for you to wrap your head around.

Uncertainty marks today, tomorrow, and the foreseeable future. But I encourage you to accept what you can’t change and try to focus on the things that you can.

Take care of yourself. Do everything in your power to eat well, exercise, get the rest that you need and, of course, wash your hands and don’t touch your face. Keep up with the passions that make you who you are. While colleges need to see your transcript, your essay, and letters of recommendation, we’re not admitting a collection of credentials, we’re seeking out the people who we want to welcome into our community.

Look out for your friends and family. Nothing is more important than the people you care about. Support those who you are living with and be sure to reach out to friends and family who are remote. It’s easy to become isolated and focus on ourselves and our immediate surroundings. Don’t underestimate the positive impact that a phone call, a letter, or an email can have on the people you care most about.

Do your best to focus on your education. I mean what I say: do the best that you can given the circumstances. But don’t try to do more than that. Far too often, I speak with students in the midst of the college admissions process who are striving for perfection or

who want to “please” me or my university. There is no “perfect;” your education should be driven by your passion and interests, not by what you think colleges want. It’s okay to struggle. This is especially true in a time where you are likely learning in a remote environment and may be lacking accommodations, services, and the individual face time with your teachers that you might normally have.

Finally, here are a few things you should not worry about:

Pass/Fail grades: There are countless ways that high schools assess students’ performance. Admissions professionals see a range of grading point scales (4.0, 4.5, 5.0, 12.0, 100, etc.), narrative transcripts and, yes, pass/fail. Our goal is not to set expectations for your school; instead, we’re responsible for understanding your school’s grading system.

SAT/ACT: They don’t matter as much as you probably think they do. High-stakes standardized test scores have always been a point of contention for many of us in admissions. These scores don’t provide as much value as your high school transcript, and they have a problematic correlation with family income, sex, and race and ethnicity. Admissions offices never “need” a test score to make a sound admission decision. Now more than ever, schools are stepping away from this antiquated metric. Well over 1,000 schools had test-optional admissions policies before the covid-19 pandemic. In the wake of canceled SAT and ACT test dates, dozens more are rapidly eliminating these test score requirements for you and your classmates. The College Board just announced a plan to squeeze in additional test dates during your senior year and possibly host an online SAT. ACT responded that it will be offering an online version of its test. But these plans ignore what’s most important to all of you. Save your energy and focus for more important pursuits.

The Admissions Committee: The faceless group that sits around a long table discussing your greatest achievements and tries to identify critical flaws in your character and academic record? That’s a caricature of the real process and the dedicated admissions professionals who are eagerly looking forward to supporting you through your college search process and advocating on your behalf. The past five weeks I have sat in daily on Zoom meetings with an incredible group of people who are spending their days thinking about how they can support you. They are dealing with remote working

issues that include caring for children and families, sharing work spaces with partners and roommates, and dealing with annoying (but adorable) interruptions by pets and children. Their lives and work aren't normal, and they know that yours aren't either. As a result, our admissions team — and others as well — are coming up with innovative ways to connect with you and to provide you with the information that's critical for your college search. This is playing out at universities across the country. We are here for you. Call, email, connect on social media. We are here.

The rest of it? We'll figure it out together.

Be safe and be well.

Sincerely,

Andrew B. Palumbo, Dean of Admissions & Financial Aid Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Valerie Strauss

Valerie Strauss is an education writer who authors The Answer Sheet blog. She came to The Washington Post as an assistant foreign editor for Asia in 1987 and weekend foreign desk editor after working for Reuters as national security editor and a military/foreign affairs reporter on Capitol Hill. She also previously worked at UPI and the LA Times. Follow 