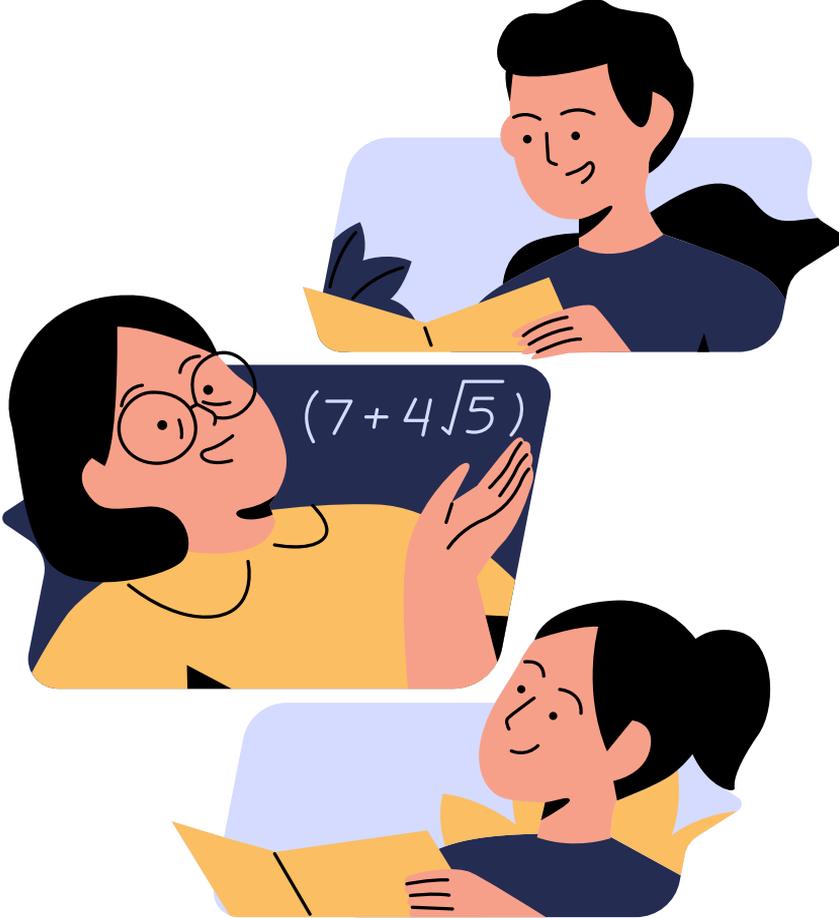


NAVIGATING HIGH SCHOOL DURING COVID-19

A Guide by



EMPOWERLY



Contact Us to Learn More or Schedule a Free Consultation!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS 1

- Introduction
- Navigating High School During COVID-19
 - High School Grades
 - Will P/F Grades be used to Calculate My GPA?
 - AP Classes and Exams
 - Should Students Take AP Classes?
 - Online and In-Person Exams
 - AP Exams and College Credit
 - Taking External Courses
 - Extracurricular activities
 - High school activities
 - High school clubs
 - Sports
 - Competitions
 - Summer academic programs and internships
 - Volunteering



TABLE OF CONTENTS 2

- Navigating College Admissions During COVID-19
 - Standardized Testing
 - Should I Still Take the SAT?
 - Subject Tests
 - What Admissions Care About During the Pandemic
 - Colleges Account for Pandemic Challenges
 - Answering the COVID-prompt
 - What is the Prompt?
 - Should I Answer It?
 - What Should I Write About?
 - Choice of College and the Pandemic
 - College Choice
 - Visiting Colleges...but Virtually
 - Deferring College During the Pandemic
 - How Can I Defer?
 - What Can I Do During a Gap Year?
- Conclusion





Introduction

When COVID-19 first hit our shores, little did we know that it would upend our lives so extensively and for so long. We quickly scrambled to come up with alternatives for work, school, and play. It taught us to be flexible, resilient, and innovative.

At Empowerly, we worked hard to help our students transition to the new world of learning and navigate the highs and lows of college admission with its new limitations. We have learned much from our colleagues, admission peers, and students. This guide brings together advice gathered along our journey during the pandemic, which we'd like to share with you.



Navigating High School during COVID-19



Online learning has brought lots of challenges as well as some opportunities. Here we share our advice for staying on track while you study from home as well as ways to pursue your interests outside of the classroom.

High School Grades

Many high schools moved to a pass/fail grading system in order to avoid any students being worse off as a result of online learning and to reduce stress. Schools wanted to ensure that students' grades didn't drop lower than they were before distance learning. The move to pass/fail grades have left many students wondering how it will affect their overall GPA and whether colleges will penalize students for not presenting letter grades.

Will P/F grades be used to calculate my GPA?

Many of our students have asked how pass/fail grades affect their GPA. The answer is they don't. The Santa Clara County Superintendent of Schools, Mary Ann Dewan recommended that all county schools move as soon as possible to a credit/no-credit model, which neither raises nor lowers grade-point averages. Some colleges have also expressed that P/F grades would not be used to calculate the overall GPA. For example, the University of California states:

Pass (P) or Credit (CR) grades will meet A-G subject requirements but will not be calculated in the GPA. UC will continue to calculate the GPA for admission purposes using all A-G courses passed with letter grades in grades 10 and 11, including summer terms following grades 9, 10 and 11. Extra points in honors-level coursework will continue to be capped at 8 semesters of honors points in A-G courses completed with letter grades of A, B and C in grades 10 and 11.

Colleges have assured students that they will not be penalized for the transition many high schools made in grading and have accommodated for the grading system each high school has chosen to take.

AP Classes and Exams

When the pandemic hit, many students were concerned about the effects it would have on their ability to take AP exams and whether the courses would still be worth the effort if the exams would not be offered. We offer advice on taking AP courses and exams below.

Should Students take AP Classes?

One of [our admission experts](#) offered up this sound advice: “Students can gain college credit and significant savings through taking AP classes while engaging in a challenging curriculum that is sure to engage and inspire. An AP course load can signal to colleges that a student is interested in and able to handle rigorous coursework. Many top universities will expect to see a number of AP courses and high scores from their incoming class of students if these are on offer at the students’ schools.”

Online and In-Person Exams

This AP season, the College Board is offering [in-person at your school or online](#). AP exams online use digital exam security and are scheduled for three different testing dates between early May and mid-June. Both in-person and online versions will be full-length taking approximately four hours.



AP Exams and College Credit

The changes to AP and IB testing procedures are influencing the way some schools evaluate AP and IB scores. For instance, some academic departments at [Princeton University](#) require incoming students to take placement tests in order to assess their subject matter knowledge and award credit in certain areas, even if they have earned a top score on the respective 2020 AP exam. Students should check the credit policies for those colleges they plan on applying to through the [AP Credit Policy Search](#) on the College Board website, or alternatively the college admission website.

Regardless of whether colleges choose to credit you for AP exams, we would recommend students take them to demonstrate their academic ability in a particular subject.

Taking External Courses

If you find yourself with limited course options to choose from in your high school or are just looking for an extra challenge, then consider signing up for an online course or a community college course. There are lots to choose from, both free and fee-paying with some offering high school or even college credit.

Here are just a few of online learning platforms out there offering everything from physical chemistry to personal development:

[K12](#) - Offers high school courses including AP, free to Californian high school students. Both individual courses and complete high school programs are available.

[UC Berkeley Extension](#) - offers tuition-based transferable college credit courses. Offers courses that start on a fixed date or that start anytime.



EdX - offers free and fee-paying courses. Many of their courses are sponsored or offered through top US colleges. A certificate is available for fee-paying students who complete a course.

Khan Academy - with the aim of making education free and accessible to the world, this organization provides a variety of free mostly school-level courses as well as test prep in a variety of languages.

Extracurricular Activities

The pandemic has put limitations on extracurricular and social activities - many students can't volunteer in-person, attend their extracurricular clubs, or train with the sports team. So what are the online options if we are feeling at a loose end? Are there ways to stay involved in the community without compromising our health? Can we get involved in activities that contribute to our education and add to the resume but take a break from the coursework?



High School Activities

High School Clubs

During this time in which we are less connected, we are all looking for ways to stay in contact and clubs are the perfect way to continue to build bonds over a shared topic of interest. If you aren't meeting with your club because of social isolation, why not do so virtually? See it as an opportunity to show leadership by setting up a structure and activities you can do online.



Sports

High school athletes may be the most challenged to find ways to continue with their activities. Most athletic competitions were canceled, making it difficult for athletes to get recognized by college recruiters. Despite this, we have encouraged our high school student-athletes to continue to work out, eat well and stay in contact with their coaches. We also suggest making video clips highlighting their athletic abilities. Athletes may also consider using the time to focus on other aspects of their high school education.



Competitions

Many competitions are offered online so why not enter a project, essay, or demonstrate your skills through an online competitive test/activity? You can enter individually or as a team. Some of the most well-recognized competitions include the [Junior Science and Humanities Symposia \(JSHS\)](#), [Clean Tech Competition](#), [GENIUS Olympiad](#), and the [Conrad Spirit of Innovation Challenge](#).



Summer Academic Programs and Internships

The pandemic might have changed the format of summer academic programs but that doesn't need to muck up your plans. Here is some advice on applying and participating in summer programs.

While several programs in the summer of 2020 were canceled, most programs have now had sufficient time to ensure they can deliver [their programs remotely in 2021](#). In most cases, programs will go ahead and be offered online, in-person or in a hybrid format. The bonus of online learning is more choice and less cost. Students can now participate in a program offered far from their location, without the hefty cost of accommodation. In some cases, admission costs have also been lowered because of the limitations of online learning.

If you are pondering over what to do this summer then now is the time to act as many application deadlines fall in March and April.



Volunteering

While there are limitations to the activities you can now do as a volunteer (volunteering in a hospital is out of the question), there are still plenty of options. Many nonprofits continue to actively recruit volunteers to assist with tasks that can be done online. Check out online platforms like [Volunteermatch.org](https://www.volunteermatch.org), [Idealist](https://www.idealist.org), and [Givology](https://www.givology.com) to find opportunities that interest you.

Navigating College Admissions during COVID-19

College admissions has been impacted by the pandemic in ways we could never have anticipated. While college admissions experienced an overall decrease in applications, applications to the most competitive colleges increased. Disruptions to testing meant many applicants had one less measure to demonstrate academic ability. Read on to find out how we navigate these changes to college admission.

Standardized Testing

In light of the ongoing disruptions COVID-19 has had on testing, most colleges made the 2020-2021 admission cycle test-optional. Colleges were mindful that students were under intense pressure with the closure of school and that standardized testing created unnecessary anxiety. Colleges that did not suspend testing requirements for more than one year are likely to do so for the upcoming 2021-2022 admission cycle. All of the Ivy League recently announced that their test-optional policies will be extended for another year.



Should I Still Take the SAT?

We've had many of our students express real concern over the omission of test scores in their applications. Will there be adverse consequences for not submitting test scores to test-optional colleges?

While the cancellation of standardized tests affects all high school students, the impact is being felt to varying degrees. The choice to take or not take the test will differ for everyone as it depends on the set of circumstances you find yourself in.

Think about the colleges you would like to apply to. Most are test-optional, meaning you can still submit. Many applicants are concerned that if they do not submit scores for these schools, they will be disadvantaged especially if they have the means and are located in areas where testing is offered. Test-optional is not test-blind. Some test-optional colleges like Cornell have stated publicly that they prefer students submit if they can:

In Cornell's review during the 2020-2021 application cycle, results from the ACT or SAT might still be a meaningful differentiator in particular for students who:

- *live near or attend a school that will be open, and where testing will be offered, or who live near a testing center that will be offering more testing seats or dates than they did in 2019, and*
- *have not experienced lost income for one or more of their household providers or other significant new hardships and losses during 2020. ([Read more here!](#))*

We recommend that you take the test if you can, especially if you plan on applying to the most competitive colleges. This will help enhance your application and show your competitiveness. However, if taking the test is not feasibly possible we trust colleges will take this into account when deliberating your application.



Subject Tests

These you no longer need to worry about! On January 19, 2021, the College Board announced it has decided to discontinue subjects tests, effectively immediately and the optional essay element of the SAT I. The SAT essay will continue to be offered through June to anyone who wants to take it.

What Admissions Care About During the Pandemic

With the temporary suspension of tests, subject tests being altogether dropped, and many high schools resorting to P/F grades, what is important in the admission application?

Not surprisingly, standardized tests and GPA have become less important, and instead, essays, recommendation letters, and interviews are being given more prominence in the application. Admission officers are relying more on the essays to find out about you - where you've been and where you want to go. We advise students to spend plenty of time focussing on the content and quality of their essays. Recommendation letters give a clearer picture of a student's character so make sure you select a referee that knows you and your abilities well. Finally, the interview provides admission officers the opportunity to get to know the applicant so take the time to prepare, listing responses to possible questions they may ask. Review your application and resume thoroughly and make sure you research the college website before the interview with some questions to ask at the end.

Finally, extracurricular activities may have been disrupted by the pandemic, but it's important to stay involved even if participation is virtual. Sustained involvement in your interests outside of the classroom demonstrates resilience to admission officers. The pandemic has presented opportunities to show leadership and come up with innovative ways to stay connected.



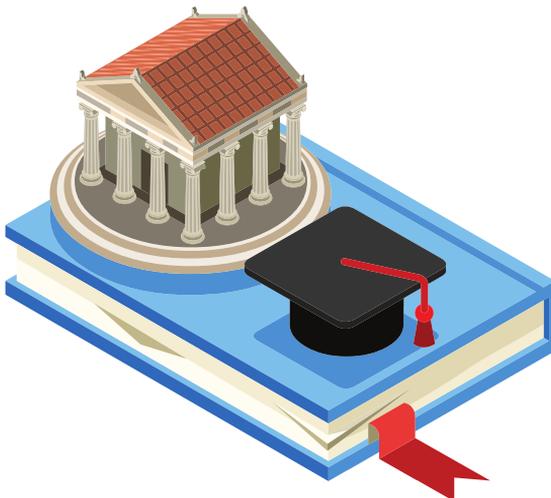
Colleges Account for Pandemic Challenges

Many students have expressed concern about how admission officers will perceive their application if they don't submit test scores or have too many pass/fail grades on their transcript. Just how do admission officers perceive applicants? Are students applying during the pandemic adversely affected?

We at Empowerly have repeatedly advised our students that the consequences of the pandemic are being taken into account by colleges and will continue to be accounted for until the pandemic has fully played out and life can return to normal. College admission offices have also publically emphasized this point.

In a joint statement signed by 340 Deans of admission, they expressed their commitment to carefully taking into account the many challenges and obstacles students are currently facing. During this time, they value self-care, academic work, service and contributions to others, family contributions; and extracurricular and summer activities.

It's important that students don't panic during these difficult times and keep their mental health in check. We all know that college admission is a stressful process, so it's especially important that students practice healthy habits during this time.





Answering the COVID-Prompt

In order to recognize the unusual circumstances that students are in, [the Common App](#) created a dedicated question for the 2020-21 application, to address the challenges and successes of students during COVID-19. We think that this prompt will feature in the 2021-22 application so here is some advice on responding to it.

What is the Prompt?

The [COVID-19 prompt](#) is a short answer essay question (word limit of 250) and reads as follows:

Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces.

- Do you wish to share anything on this topic? Y/N
- Please use this space to describe how these events have impacted you.

Should I Answer It?

The college application allows admission officers to learn about you and your unique story. Every component of the application is an opportunity for students to reveal something about themselves. The essays allow you to tell your story in narrative form highlighting your abilities, accomplishments, and insights as well as demonstrating your skills in written expression. In this instance, the COVID question is an opportunity to contextualize your experience under difficult circumstances.



What Should I Write About?

The Common App lists several aspects which have impacted you, your family, or support network, that you might wish to discuss:

- *Illness or loss within your family or support network*
- *Employment or housing disruptions within your family*
- *Food insecurity*
- *Toll on mental and emotional health*
- *New obligations such as part-time work or care for siblings or family members*
- *Availability of computer or internet access required to continue your studies*
- *Access to a safe and quiet study space*
- *A new direction for your major or career interests*

Perhaps you'd like to use the space to explain how it affected your high school studies or the new circumstances your family has been placed in such, as a move or loss in the family. This space is for writing about those extenuating circumstances that have impacted so many, so use it if it can provide a clearer picture of your experience.

Choice of College and the Pandemic

College Choice

The pandemic has definitely forced us to reassess what is important including choice in college. In considering a college list you may want to consider the following factors:

- Location - students might wish to stay closer to home. Alternatively, they may only want to be in small cities or regional areas where the virus is affecting fewer people
- Cost - cost may weigh more heavily. The economic downturn has affected many families' financial situations and students may need to find more affordable options. Universities may be less willing to give financial aid packages because of the economic downturn.



- International students/out-of-state students - fewer international and out-of-state students will apply. There is likely to be less competition for these spots especially for students who don't need financial aid.
- Community college - community colleges may be a more popular choice among some students. They may wish to transfer into university after a year or two of attending.

Visiting Colleges... But Virtually

Travel has been restricted and visiting colleges especially those further afar may not be possible. We suggest students visit and speak with admission officers virtually. Colleges are aware of the existing limitations and have created new virtual admission tools including online campus tours and interviews, to accommodate for the limited in-person access. Perhaps you know someone who is attending the college whom you can reach out to. Use these alternative ways to find out as much as possible about the college and get a sense of what life might be like studying there.

Deferring College During the Pandemic

Many students who were accepted in the 2020-21 admission round decided to defer, rather than begin their first year virtually. Students who had never considered a gap year suddenly reevaluated their choices. In fact, some elite colleges encourage students to defer and pursue other experiences. What is the process for seeking a deferral and what kinds of activities can students do during this period?

How Can I Defer?

Deferring requires college approval. Students need to either send a letter or email to the college's director of admissions and outline what they plan to do during their gap year/gap semester. The admissions committee will then evaluate the letter and either grant or deny the deferral. This process should happen as soon as possible following an offer of admission.

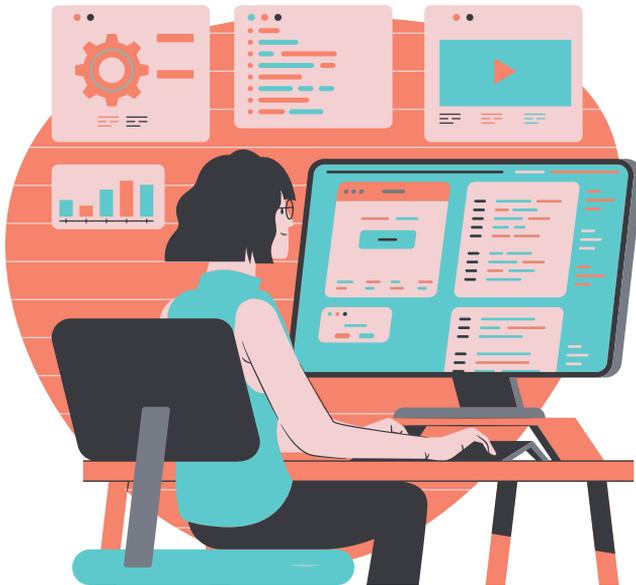


What Can I Do During a Gap Year?

If you decide to defer what are your options? What activities can you do? Here are just a few you can consider:

- Self-directed research projects
- Working at a job you can learn new skills from while saving money
- Developing a new skill you've always wanted to practice in a structured and measurable way
- Start studying out at a more affordable school or community college and diagram out what your transfer plan will be later on.
- and many other useful ways to dedicate your time and energy.

Remember if you are thinking about taking a gap year, make sure you take the time to figure out a useful way to spend it. Map out a plan and then stick to it!





Conclusion

The pandemic has created a lot of uncertainty around college admissions and high school education and many students may feel like they are doing it on their own as they were forced into physical isolation. We hope that students prioritize self-care and continue their academic progression in practical ways that don't place undue burden. For students who are struggling, it's important to seek good guidance. We hope this guide has offered you some practical tips.