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The Most Confusing, Chaotic College Admissions Season in Years

Changes in the federal financial-aid application, testing requirements and affirmative action plunge applicants and schools into uncertainty; 'a hot mess'

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Logan Zielinski, a high-school senior in Sterling Heights, Mich., spent much of the fall getting wooed by football coaches at small Midwestern colleges. Scholarships were a major part of their pitches.

This week he is committing to enroll and play at one of those schools, Concordia University Ann Arbor, without having any idea how much it will cost.

The federal government hasn't yet sent colleges any information about applicants' family finances, which the schools need to make financial-aid offers. Coaches, though, were pushing Logan to commit so they could firm up their team rosters.

His mother, Heather Zielinski, said she feels she has no choice but to go in blind, because otherwise he would run the risk of not being able to play anywhere.

"It's just the perfect storm of life-changing events, big money and no control," she said.

This might be the most chaotic, frustrating, uncertain college-admissions cycle in recent history.

Schools opened their application seasons while still digesting the June Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action, which restricted how schools could consider race in admissions and left applicants unsure what to disclose about themselves.



Logan Zielinski during a recruiting visit to Concordia University Ann Arbor. He recently decided to enroll there despite not yet knowing how much it will cost. PHOTO: HEATHER ZIELINSKI

Uncertainty over test-optional admissions policies has compounded the stress. Some guidance counselors and families have become skeptical that applicants who opt not to include SAT and ACT scores won't be penalized for that.

The worst problem by far, though, is the trouble with the new federal financial-aid application. For years, college applicants have provided information about their family finances through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, called Fafsa. The system is the gateway to billions of dollars in federal, state and institutional loans and scholarships. It is one of the forms colleges depend on to decide what kind of financial aid to offer applicants—and those decisions are a big factor for students when picking a college.

When the Fafsa works as intended, families input details about their earnings and assets as early as October, then the federal government sends a report to colleges a few days later detailing how much the family should be able to afford and what federal grants and loans it is eligible for. The schools then package that with their own aid, sharing offers alongside acceptance letters and giving families plenty of time to weigh their options before locking in seats by May 1.

Bipartisan efforts to streamline the Fafsa process have stretched back more than a decade, and a revamp was approved by Congress in 2020. It slashed by more than half the number of questions asked of applicants. But the new system wasn't ready to roll until late December, and when it launched, it was a disaster. Outages hit immediately.

“The signature page is a hot mess,” said one college counselor, referring to the part that must be signed electronically. Some parents who signed their portion got messages saying they still needed to sign it, so they would sign again, only to receive the error message again, the counselor said. Parents also got error messages if they tried to complete their portion before students did theirs.

In late January, the Education Department announced that during the overhaul it had overlooked certain inflation calculations, and that it wouldn't begin releasing students' accurate financial details to schools until mid-March. That compresses the timeline for schools to send students their aid offers and for families to compare prices.

“It is the most significant changes to the financial-aid system in decades,” said an Education Department spokesperson. “It has required us to modernize or retire dozens of systems, some of which are 50 years old.”

Uncertain about how quickly the government will share student records, and how quickly aid packages can then be sent to families, many colleges have pushed back their commitment deadlines from May 1 to mid-May or June, and say they'll likely remain flexible even after that, knowing families need time to run the numbers.

Court ruling

At the same time, families and schools have had to decide what to do differently in light of the Supreme Court ruling that upended how admissions offices can consider applicants' race. The court said schools couldn't favor applicants solely because of their race, but could consider how race affected an applicant's life.

Colleges have tweaked software systems to prevent admissions officers from seeing applicants' race, updated the language in their policies to reflect that they are adhering to the law, and held training sessions for admissions staff on what to look for—and what to ignore—in applicants' essays.

They have also tried to communicate that they still value a diverse student body, adding essay questions to applications to learn more about candidates' backgrounds and expanding recruiting activities in new parts of the country.

Johniece Reynolds, who is Black and a senior at a performing-arts high school in Virginia, said she was initially hesitant to mention her race when she applied to a dozen colleges in the fall. Reynolds, 17, is eyeing schools with strong engineering programs and lively social scenes,

including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—one of the defendants in the affirmative action lawsuit that led to the Supreme Court ruling—the University of Virginia and Columbia University.

In conversations with friends, Reynolds said, “we were all scared to write in our essays if we’re Black or not.”

In one college application essay, she wrote about the experience of being the only Black person in most of her ballet classes and performances. In another, she compared the way ballerinas manipulate their pointe shoes for comfort to the way engineers make tweaks to improve results. In yet another, she described her volunteer experience providing first-aid care to athletes at a local football camp.

So far, she has been rejected by two schools, deferred by one and admitted to one. Reynolds said she can’t help but wonder whether mentioning her race might have worked against her, and questions whether she made the right call on the essay topics.



High-school senior Johniece Reynolds visited the University of Southern California’s engineering school, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke.

SUSAN WEEKS REYNOLDS

Many students can’t seriously consider college without financial aid, and counselors worry frustrations with the application could lead to enrollment declines.

Twenty-nine percent of high-school seniors submitted the Fafsa as of March 1, compared with 45% at that time last year, according to the National College Attainment Network, an advocate

of increased college enrollment. The decline was even steeper among students from low-income high schools.

Emmanuel Gil Gonzalez, a 17-year-old from Denver, ran into problems trying to fill out the online application. His parents immigrated from Mexico in the mid-1990s, but he was born in the U.S., making him eligible for federal college aid.

Fafsa's new online system doesn't accept signatures from parents who don't have Social Security numbers, and Gil Gonzalez's don't. Such parents used to have the option to mail in their signature pages after completing the rest of the form online, but not anymore. Some advocacy groups estimate that a half-million U.S. citizen students with undocumented parents are applying for financial aid this year.

"It kind of feels like a punishment for us students who have mixed-status families," said Gil Gonzalez's older sister, Alondra, who has been trying to help him navigate the process.

Two state scholarships for which Gil Gonzalez is a finalist require that he fill out the Fafsa, and those programs have said they would be flexible with their deadlines in light of the system delays. Emmanuel submitted a paper Fafsa in early February, but he worries his scholarship application won't be processed in time for him to qualify for the money because the Education Department has said paper applications will be reviewed after online submissions.



Emmanuel Gil Gonzalez ran into problems filling out the application for federal financial aid. PHOTO: GIL GONZALEZ FAMILY

The Education Department detailed a nine-step workaround for the signature issue, but warned it would override paper applications already submitted, meaning students like Gil Gonzalez would lose the earlier recorded date of submission. Some state aid programs and

private scholarships dole out money on a first-come, first-served basis, so the workaround could put students at the end of the line.

Schools scramble

Scott Friedhoff came out of retirement this winter to take a job as interim vice president for enrollment at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania. He laughs when asked whether he would have signed up for the gig, had he known how this year would pan out.

About 70 families visited Allegheny's snowy campus last month to attend an event for applicants who had been admitted, and half asked for one-on-one time with the financial-aid office. Three members of the office tried to help families start their federal aid forms, if they hadn't already done so, and were prepared to discuss the school's promise to cover full tuition for certain families earning under \$50,000.

Admitted students already receive details of merit scholarships along with their acceptance letters. But beyond that tuition offer for the lowest-income students, Allegheny can't calculate need-based aid, on which the school spends nearly five times as much money, until it sees Fafsa figures.

The Education Department has said it would release students' financial records in batches, generally sending no more than 1,500 records to each school in any single day, though some larger schools will get more.

"There's anxiety, there's no question about it," Friedhoff said. "We'll be doing in a few weeks what we would have done in a few months."



Scott Friedhoff, right, interim vice president for enrollment at Allegheny College, speaks with an admitted student in February. PHOTO: NATE SMALLWOOD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



A tour for admitted students at Allegheny College. PHOTO: NATE SMALLWOOD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Allegheny, like many small colleges, derives much of its revenue from tuition dollars. Forecasting enrollment and budgeting was already a challenge. Last year, just under 10% of those admitted to Allegheny actually enrolled. This year, the school's finances may be even more unpredictable because of the Fafsa hiccups.

“I have a feeling what we'll see is a lot of scrambling going on in late April and through May,” Friedhoff said.

Some schools, including the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York and John Carroll University in Ohio, have offered applicants financial-aid estimates based on information provided by families directly. Some of those schools guarantee that their eventual scholarship

offers won't be any lower than the projected amount. Others, though, say their figures could change.

In recent weeks, the Education Department has been testing the system, including sending small batches of student data to a few dozen schools. It said it would "gradually ramp up delivery" of the records after addressing any technical issues that come up during initial trials.

The University of California, Riverside, has much of its financial-aid process automated and says it can generally turn around offers within a day once it gets student Fafsa information from the federal government. Other institutions might not be as fast, and students will still need time to compare financial-aid packages.

Current students renewing their aid might wind up getting less than they expected. The government changed how it considers small businesses owned by their families, now factoring such assets into assumptions about how much families can afford. Families also won't be awarded discounts anymore if multiple siblings are enrolled in college at once.

"What we essentially did was take every student who was confident they could afford college, then destabilize their belief in that," said Stephanie Tusques, associate director of financial aid at UC Riverside.

Test confusion

The majority of four-year colleges stopped requiring test scores at the start of the pandemic, and have maintained those practices since. Their current policies contain perplexing new terminology: test blind, test optional, test recommended, test flexible and test required.

Louisiana State University is test-optional, but students can only qualify for certain state scholarships if they submit SAT or ACT scores. Quinnipiac University in Connecticut is test-optional, test-recommended or test-required, depending on an applicant's proposed major.

Valerie Velhagen, a college and career counselor at Eldorado High School in Albuquerque, said she used to provide families with lists of tutors to help teens study for the SAT. Now, almost nobody asks for them.

"So few people put any effort into prepping for it anymore," Velhagen said. The University of New Mexico and New Mexico State University are both test-optional. Velhagen said she tries

to remind students—especially those looking out of state—about potential admissions advantages and scholarships tied to strong scores.



An admitted student visits the Allegheny College gift shop in February. PHOTO: NATE SMALLWOOD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Some schools that didn't require test scores during the pandemic have reversed course, and others have said they would do so beginning with next year's applicant pool.

"Every day we go on, it feels like we're going into a deeper layer of chaos in admissions," said Jennifer Jessie, a college counselor in Virginia.

Though many schools delayed deadlines for tuition deposits to give families time to compare aid offers, not all have been so flexible with housing deposits. Families that don't yet know if they can swing the cost of a particular college say they are feeling pressured to lock in spots on campus, just in case things do pan out.

That has put Adriene Huddleston and her family in a bind. Her son, who is transgender, only applied to schools outside his home state of Florida. He chose states that he thinks would better protect LGBTQ students. But listed tuition at schools including Goucher College in Maryland and the University of Colorado is far higher than in-state options, and his family would need significant scholarships or loans to cover the costs.

Most of the colleges her son applied to have extended their enrollment decision deadlines past May 1, but students who commit earlier may get first dibs on campus dorms and roommate assignments.

Huddleston said putting down housing deposits at all five schools her son was admitted to isn't feasible, costing well over \$1,000.

"It's very complicated," she said. "His options are getting smaller as the time passes."

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