

New Models for Assessing Applicants



College admissions officers have been searching for ways to better evaluate students, looking to acquire a much more complete picture of applicants. In the past few years, there has been a lot of buzz about grit, perseverance, and determination. These “noncognitive” factors, however, are a challenge to examine objectively and fairly. And those challenges have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 outbreak, as high schools go to a pass/fail grading system, colleges move to make ACT and SAT tests optional, and sports and other extracurricular activities have been canceled entirely.

How can admissions officers weigh applicants in this environment? And how are conversations about measuring these qualities changing during a public-health emergency?

On April 30, *The Chronicle* held an

hourlong webinar, “New Models for Assessing Applicants,” which examined how institutions can revamp admissions to create a more holistic view of students and what pitfalls to avoid while doing it—and how the coronavirus pandemic may accelerate these trends.

Moderated by Ian Wilhelm, assistant managing editor for *Chronicle Intelligence*, the webinar featured Giselle F. Martin, director of recruitment and talent in the office of undergraduate admission at Emory University, and Robert Massa, vice president emeritus for enrollment and college relations for Dickinson College.

The following comments represent key takeaways from the webinar. They have been edited for clarity and brevity. To hear the full discussion, register at <https://www.workcast.com/register?cpak=2540661746454273>

The pandemic has in some ways created an opportunity to take stock – and to try new ways of doing things.

Giselle Martin: We had to completely shift to, How do we create an environment of compassion, connectivity, information, and calm in a completely new virtual world? There's this moment of grace where we all had to put health and safety first, and listen to each other in a way that perhaps we've been wanting to for a long time, but never quite had the time to. So this is a wonderful opportunity to listen and re-engage.

Bob Massa: We've become more accustomed to virtual engagement. Video conferencing started before Covid. But that's something that, going forward, institutions are going to have to do, particularly if we have less reliance on standardized test scores. Personal interaction is going to become important, to reach out to populations across the country and across the world. I think that we will see admissions officers use video conferencing to visit high schools — not to replace the personal visit, but to augment it. And students can engage virtually on campus with students and faculty before they actually visit, particularly for campuses that are far away from where a student lives. Virtual engagement will not replace one on one, but will give us the opportunity to do even more.

Admissions officers need to communicate that they understand things have changed for students.

Martin: Let's work on building a good, solid framework together so that we can ease some stressors that are out there and make sure that those juniors and sophomores in high school feel like, We know that a lot has changed for you, a lot of things that you're not going to be able to engage in. We got you.

Academic transcripts will remain critical, but colleges should also look to their own mission statements to determine what they value.

Massa: The academic skills that students bring as evidence from their transcript in math, science, humanities, and language, that's going to continue to be the most important factor in the college-admissions process. But critical thinking, working in teams, problem-solving — and also the nonacademic attributes that the college itself says is important. Look at mission statements. It's the reason a college exists. What does it say? What does a college look for? These things will help drive whatever new processes that colleges use to assess their applicants. It makes it a little bit more difficult to be transparent. But that puts the pressure on us to make sure that we're very clear about who we're looking for and how we're assessing.

The test-optional trend has been growing. The pandemic will accelerate that trend – for some colleges.

Massa: There's public pressure for test-optional. But the most selective institutions in the country are going to have to use something to separate students who they're going to admit from those who they're not. Most students who apply to those institutions can clearly do the work there. So they'll probably revert back to testing.

But we really need to be concerned in the short term about access to the exam. The students that don't have access to digital resources at home are disadvantaged. Many colleges will continue to be test-optional.

What are some of the qualities colleges value? How do they evaluate candidates?

Massa: Intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, being creative,

being generous toward others, civic engagement, working hard, and open-mindedness. How do you look for them? You look at activities, the personal statement, the essay, at letters of recommendation. You assess the interview. These are all ways that you can find evidence of these attributes.

Martin: We are looking for significant leadership and creativity in school and community. Students who are not afraid to put themselves out there and maybe have a difference of opinion. Academic achievement and unselfish character. Kindness. We are essentially looking for how the student has the potential to enrich the lives of their contemporaries at Emory. How do we look for kindness? Sometimes a letter of recommendation. There are elements in the essays that come through. I read thousands of these every year. We work all summer to craft these questions, to bring out these elements of students

Admissions officers can try to determine potential by looking for these attributes – but it’s not easy.

Martin: You have to start by actually hiring good people in your organization, in admissions offices, who are not just there for a job, but are there because they truly believe in the mission of that institution.

Massa: Define these attributes. If we define grit as passion and perseverance for long-term goals, we look for evidence of somebody who works hard, works

vigorously toward challenging tasks or projects and can overcome failure. An applicant could have started a youth group that focused on combating anxiety and depression within their community. An applicant might write about achieving the goal of getting good grades in math in spite of the fact that they have a learning difference that made math more difficult. Or an applicant writes about achieving a goal of maintaining a B average in school while having significant responsibilities at home like taking care of younger siblings in a single-parent household.

Admissions officers need to work even more closely with high schools right now.

Martin: What we’re doing right now is, quite frankly, listening. We’re asking a lot more questions about, How are you shifting curriculum? What are the expectations of your teachers? How are those discussion courses coming to life? What does your grading system look like for this upcoming year, for this semester that just transpired?

Given the Operation Varsity Blues scandal, the public’s faith in the admissions process has been shaken. What should admissions officers strive for in the wake of Covid?

Massa: We’ve got to be empathetic. We’ve got to be transparent. Although, again, that becomes more difficult without test scores. We’ve got to be understanding. We’ve got to be clear. Why did we get into this field to begin with? It really was to help kids find their way.

*“New Models for Assessing Applicants” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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