Applying Futures Thinking to College Admissions
College and Career Counseling

What
Colleges and universities across the country waived SAT and ACT requirements for seniors this year, shifting the emphasis to other parts of an applicant's profile (See Supplemental Information: Table 1).

Numerous studies[1] show that grades alone[2] are a better predictor of a student's college success than test scores, which may be why so many colleges have felt that dropping the testing requirement would not compromise the academic quality of the admitted class[3]. It is unclear, however, if this shift will permanently change how colleges and universities select students[4].

So What
As an institution, it is imperative that we continue to focus our efforts on collecting weak- and moderate-strength signals of change[5] to anticipate any lasting shifts that might require us to adapt. Applying futures thinking concepts such as *trend identification* and *scenario planning* can enhance our capacity to anticipate change in environments of uncertainty, to surface hidden assumptions, and to uncover strengths and weaknesses within our program and the larger landscape of college admissions.

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[1] Matthew M. Chingos. "What matters most for college completion? Academic preparation is a key of success." *Urban Institute* (2018). URL: https://www.thirdway.org/report/what-matters-most-for-college-completion-academic-preparation-is-a-key-of-success?_ga=2.160657279.356987963.1600115460-523675063.1597943279

[2] Michal Kurlaender and Kramer Cohen. "Predicting college success: How do different high school assessments measure up?" *Policy Analysis for California Education* (2019). URL: https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/predicting-college-success-how-do-different-high-school-assessments-measure-2019

[3] Jeffery Selingo. "Even the coronavirus can't kill SAT and ACT." *The Atlantic* (2020). URL: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/even-coronavirus-cant-kill-sat-and-act/616360/

[4] Melissa Korn and Douglas Belkin. "College admission season is crazier than ever. That could change who gets in." *The Wall Street Journal* (2021). URL: https://www.wsj.com/articles/college-admission-season-is-crazier-than-ever-that-could-change-who-gets-in-11615909061

[5] For further reading, see: Brennen Barnard. "2021 college admission predictions." *Forbes* (2021). URL: https://www.forbes.com/sites/brennanbarnard/2021/01/01/2021-college-admission-predictions/?sh=5507371c15eb

Now What

College and Career Counseling is currently in the early stages of a test and learn cycle with *trend identification* and *scenario planning*.

Trend Identification

- I have done an initial *trend identification* exercise using CIPHER[6], a trend identification framework from the Future Today Institute, to organize signals that have been noticed and collected by community members.
- In Table 2 and Table 3, I have included an initial CIPHER as an exercise and thought experiment. It is my opinion and hope that the shift to test-optional admissions may be a trailhead for long-term disruptions of policies that are most susceptible to bias and exploitation.
- The application of this method has been more valuable in building my capacity to make meaning of subtle happenings and to foster a culture of foresight, more so than its ability to accurately forecast what may actually occur. I may continue to use CIPHER to organize other incoming signals, or try a different framework altogether.

Scenario Planning

- Following any feedback from our CIPHER exercise, I will collaborate with my department to begin an attempt at *scenario planning* in which we will forecast different future states for college admissions that range from probable, possible, to plausible.

In closing, to quote the most recently released Global Trends report from the National Intelligence Council which examines the forces that will shape our future, "we must be ever vigilant, asking better questions, frequently challenging our assumptions, checking our biases, and looking for weak signals of change[7]."

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[6] The CIPHER acronym describes six indicators for trends: Contradictions, Inflections, Practices, Hacks, Extremes, and Rarities. Visit Future Today Institute at https://futuretodayinstitute.com/foresight-tools-2/

[7] "Global Trends 2040: A more contested world," a publication of the National Intelligence Council (2021). URL: https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/GlobalTrends_2040.pdf

Supplemental Information

Table 1. Comparison of Typical Achievements Requested in College Applications.
Applications to highly competitive institutions typically allow students to highlight more achievements than applications to less competitive or non-competitive institutions.

	College Competitive		College Ready
	Highly Competitive	**Less Competitive**	**Non Competitive**
Academics			
Grade Point Average	✓	✓	✓
Course Rigor	✓	✓	✓
Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) Points	✓	✓	✓
Semesters of College Prep (a-g) Coursework	✓	✓	✓
Trend	✓	✓	✓
Standardized Tests			
SAT / ACT			
SAT Subject Tests			
AP Exams			
Extracurricular Activities			
Community Service	✓		
School Clubs	✓		
Arts	✓		
Athletics	✓		
Paid Work	✓		
Enrichment Programs	✓		
Leadership	✓		
Internship	✓		
Capstone Project	✓		
Harder to Measure Variables			
Personal Statement	✓		
Supplemental Essays	✓		
Letters of Recommendation	✓		
Demonstrated Interest	✓		

Table 2. An exercise in CIPHER: The shift to test-optional admissions may be a trailhead in a long-term shift away from policies susceptible to bias and exploitation.

An exercise in trend identification using CIPHER from Future Today Institute: Hope for unbiased college admissions, forged by recent antiracist movements.	
Possible Trend	The shift to test-optional admissions may be the start of a systems-level disruption to remove policies that are most prone to bias and exploitation.
CIPHER Summary	The shift to test-optional or test-blind admissions is coinciding with national uprisings against racism, injustice, and the institutions and structural barriers that perpetuate social strata -- including selective colleges, who have historically served very few students from working-class and low-income families[8], and standardized tests[9], which have long faced accusations that they heavily favor affluent students who can afford coaching.
Implications for Further Research	If the college admissions process were confronted with systems-level disruption and evolution that removed the elements most prone to bias and exploitation, what would be left? What other factors might be considered?

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[8]In 2016, The Education Trust identified 113 colleges and universities as "engines of inequality" because very few of their students came from working-class and low-income families. URL: https://edtrust.org/engines-of-inequality/#:~:text=We%20call%20these%20institutions%20%E2%80%9Ce ngines,aid%20for%20low%2Dincome%20students.

[9] Jeffery Selingo. "Even the coronavirus can't kill SAT and ACT." *The Atlantic* (2020). URL: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/even-coronavirus-cant-kill-sat-and-act/616360/

Table 3. An exercise in CIPHER, a method for collecting signals of change which can be helpful for making meaning of happenings.

CIPHER		
C	**Contradictions** Examples that demonstrate opposing or incongruous forces at play simultaneously.	• Last summer, national uprisings against racism and police brutality, with deeply rooted tensions concerning power, identity, injustice, and belonging, erupted into protests, riots, and lethal violence. • Over the past year, racist rhetoric related to COVID-19 has fueled a rise in hate crimes and lethal violence directed at Chinese Americans and Asians and Pacific Islanders.
I	**Inflections** Occurrences that mark a major turning point or establish a new paradigm.	• The shift to test-optional or test-blind admissions is coinciding with national uprisings against racism, injustice, and the institutions that perpetuate social strata -- including selective colleges, who have historically served very few students from working-class and low-income families, and standardized tests, which have long faced accusations that they heavily favor affluent students who can afford coaching.
P	**Practices** Emerging behaviors that are becoming more pronounced or gaining in popularity.	• Individuals and organizations take clear, antiracist stances and oppose inequality
H	**Hacks** Inventive, unintended uses	• New research from Stanford University[10] identifies a correlation between reported family income and college application essay topics • Studies show harmful disparities in letters of recommendation

[10] AJ Alvero, Sonia Giebel, Ben Gebre-Medhin, anthony lising antonio, Mitchell L. Stevens, Benjamin W. Domingue. "Essay content is strongly related to household income and SAT scores: Evidence from 60,000 undergraduate applications." Stanford University Center for Education Policy Analysis (2021). URL: https://cepa.stanford.edu/content/essay-content-strongly-related-household-income-and-sat-scores-evidence-60000-undergraduate-applications

	for tools, technologies, and systems.	that favor white male applicants in college admissions[11], medical residency placements[12], and internships[13].
E	**Extremes** Instances of technologies, functions, or concepts, being pushed to new limits that might change the nature of their use.	● Using Customer Relationship Management (CRM) for college admission, with the debut of "connected joins" on Slate (a leading college admissions CRM) which can enable colleges to amass troves of student data and activity for analysis and, potentially, predictive analytics ● Salesforce (a leading CRM) has a native AI called Einstein ● Artificial Intelligence is being used for student support in higher education ● Algorithmic hygiene[14] in artificial intelligence could potentially help detect bias and mitigate against it in a consumer setting. I suspect that findings may spill-over from consumer goods to college admissions to also, potentially, prevent against bias, exploitation, and fraud. ● InitialView, used to verify identities of international applicants via video releases new feature for domestic applicants to include a 90-second video introduction as part of their application, and share that they are prioritizing integration with Slate (InitialView is a company with the former Director of Admissions at UC Berkeley on staff)
R	**Rarities** Highly unlikely	● COVID-19

[11] Patrick Akos, Ph.D. and Jennifer Kretchmar, Ph.D. "Gender and ethnic bias in letters of recommendation: Considerations for school counselors." *ASCA Professional School Counseling* (2017). URL: https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/11e887c3-bf04-4345-90c0-432f7dd8d69a/Gender-Ethnic-Bias.pdf

[12] David A. Ross, Dowin Boatright, Marcella Nunez-Smith, Ayana Jordan, Adam Chekroud, Edward Z. Moore. "Differences in words used to describe racial and gender groups in Medical Student Performance Evaluations." *PLoS ONE* (2017). URL: https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0181659#abstract0

[13] Chris Houser and Kelly Lemmons. "Implicit bias in letters of recommendation for an undergraduate research internship." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* (2017). URL: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1301410

[14] Nicol Turner Lee, Paul Resnick, Genie Barton. "Algorithmic bias detection and mitigation: Best practices and policies to reduce consumer harms." *Brookings Institution* (2019). URL: https://www.brookings.edu/research/algorithmic-bias-detection-and-mitigation-best-practices-and-policies-to-reduce-consumer-harms/

	or unexpected events and phenomena; Black Swan events.	