

Top Colleges Shy Away From Identity-Focused Essays in Wake of Trump Attacks

Applicants to US universities are confronting a rapidly shifting higher education landscape.



Duke University campus in Durham, North Carolina.

Photographer: Cornell Watson/Bloomberg

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A tumultuous year in higher education is reshaping the college application process.

Prospective students were already facing a stressful admissions cycle as [acceptance rates](#) for the most selective schools plummet and costs per year [approach](#) \$100,000. Now, as President Donald Trump's

administration slashes federal funding and scrutinizes diversity practices, high school seniors are preparing their applications in an increasingly fraught environment.

One of the most notable developments is Trump's [crackdown](#) on international student visas, which has undermined universities' finances and enrollment strategies. Delays in [visa interviews](#) this year have left schools struggling to figure out whether they'll be able to admit as many international students as usual.

"Parents and kids are reading about higher ed in the news as Trump does all these attacks on universities, so there's a lot of uncertainty about what all that means," said Eric Tipler, author of *Write Yourself In*, a guide to writing college essays.

With most early-decision applications due Nov. 1, here's a look at the biggest trends in college admissions:

Removing Diversity Questions

Some colleges are removing identity-focused essay prompts.

In response to the US Supreme Court's decision to [end affirmative action](#) in college admissions in 2023, many schools added application questions allowing students to discuss their race. In recent months, however, the executive branch has been [probing](#) schools they believe are using proxies for race in their applications.

The University of Virginia removed a question asking students to "write about any past experience or part of your background that has shaped your perspective" which could include "community, upbringing, educational environment, race, gender or other aspects of your background."

Duke University got rid of [one prompt](#) asking about "sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression," and another calling for applicants to describe ways in which they feel different and "how that's influenced your experiences or identity." The school instead added a prompt asking students to talk about a situation in which they would or would not use artificial intelligence.

Bethanie Glover, a spokesperson for UVA, said the university decided to "develop a leaner application this year to help students," since high school seniors are applying to more colleges than ever.

In a continuation of [last year's trend](#), more colleges also introduced questions about how students would handle discussions with those holding opposing views. Barnard College added a question requesting applicants choose a woman — fictional or real, living or dead — whose views differ from their own and imagine a conversation with her.

“There is no question that colleges want to know if you can have a constructive conversation with someone you disagree with,” said Leelila Strogov, chief executive officer of the college counseling company AtomicMind. “They are trying to weed out the attention-seekers and mischief-makers from the genuine justice-seekers and changemakers.”

Earlier Deadlines

Traditionally the domain of Ivy League colleges, early decision programs are becoming more common as schools try to lock in their favored applicants, said Mande Heller Adler, founder of a college counseling firm based in Florida.

Under early decision, students apply with a binding agreement that they will attend if accepted. This helps colleges achieve a higher yield, or percentage of admitted students who decide to enroll. For students, it can serve as a way to accelerate the application process and improve their odds, since these programs typically have higher acceptance rates. Meanwhile, so-called early action options allow students to apply earlier in the school year but without the binding agreement.

University of Michigan is one of the latest schools to add an early decision option to its application, after previously offering only early action. Stephen Friedfeld, co-founder of the college counseling firm AcceptU, said this could entice some of his clients to pick Michigan as their top choice over rival schools that also offer early decision.

Other schools are trying to notify their applicants of admission decisions sooner as a way to convince them to commit early.

The University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill [will now notify](#) in-state early decision applicants of their acceptance in late December, several weeks before they announce out-of-state decisions. The University of Chicago [added](#) a new program called Summer Session Early Notification, in which students who have completed either a

UChicago residential or online program can apply between Sept. 1 and Oct. 15, and receive an admissions decision within three weeks or before Nov. 1.

Video Prompts

An increasing number of colleges, including Duke, Vanderbilt University and Washington University in St. Louis, have been adding optional video prompts as part of their applications. Most videos can be submitted through a platform called Glimpse and have a time limit of two minutes.

For instance, Northwestern University offers prospective students a chance to “share a 60 to 90 second video helping us get to know you better: your values, your perspectives, your background or experiences — whatever you feel matters and may not otherwise come through fully in your other application materials.”

The video submissions are optional, but college counselors say that they can be beneficial to applicants. If a student already has a strong application, a video can help them stand out, Tipler said.

Better Odds

Admissions experts expect fewer foreign students [to apply](#) to US universities this year.

For the 2024-25 academic year, schools like Stanford and Duke [tapped](#) their waitlists at the last minute, at least in part due to international students struggling to secure visas or opting to attend school elsewhere. That could happen again this year — college counselors who advise international students have recommended they include colleges outside of the US on their lists, in case visa issues limit their ability to enroll in an American institution.

That means some American students this year might take more risks and apply to more competitive colleges.

“With international students being really restricted or limited, it could be the case that more students apply to these universities just to see if there is a shot,” Friedfeld said. “But also more universities might

accept more domestic students, knowing that they can't necessarily fill their spaces with international students this year.”