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Virtual college fair open to area students Nov. 2

In a typical year, area students and their families would descend on the auditorium of Conestoga Valley High School in November for the school's annual college night.

Representatives from 100 or more colleges and universities would be on hand to answer questions and offer advice on everything from the admissions process to financial aid.

But 2020 has been anything but typical. Like so many other events, CV's college night is going virtual.

"This is kind of a little bit of an experiment with this format so that students can just try something new," says Dana Wile, a board member of the Lancaster County School Counselors Association, organizer of the online event along with Millersville University.

Close to 50 colleges, universities, technical and trade schools will participate in the virtual fair, which takes place from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday, Nov. 2. The event is open to high school students from Lancaster, Lebanon and York counties.

Here's how it will work:

Step 1: Register for the college fair in advance at <http://millersville.edu/collegefair>.

Step 2: Receive a list of participating colleges and an agenda for the day. The event will be divided into eight 10-minute blocks in which students can hear an elevator pitch from college representatives and then have time to ask questions.

Step 3: Choose the colleges you want to visit. (Don't worry. You can change your mind the day of the event.)

Step 4: Make sure you've downloaded Zoom on your device.

Step 5: Using the link provided, log on to the event on Nov. 2 and choose the Zoom room for the school you want to visit during a particular time slot. Each participating school will have three time slots, so students will have multiple opportunities to

"visit" the college of their choice.

"We're asking colleges to sort of prompt some conversation," Wile says.

Not quite sure how to tackle a virtual college fair? Here are some tips:

— Look at schools in different categories — think official state school, private school and out-of-state school — so you can compare financial aid offers. "Students will be surprised," Wile says. "Sometimes you do get more scholarships and a private school can actually be the same or cheaper than a state school depending on your family situation."

— Be prepared to ask a few questions. If it's a school you're applying to, then prepare specific questions. Otherwise, consider asking the college rep to tell you about a really cool major or something that sets their school apart from others.

— Explore schools you haven't looked at before.

— Remain in the Zoom room after the 10-minute session if you have additional questions.

After the event, students will receive information on how to follow up with schools they may not have had an opportunity to visit.

Wile says the counselors association chose weekday hours for the fair since the National Association for College Admission Counseling hosts several virtual college fairs on Sundays, including one scheduled for Sunday, Nov. 8. (For more information, visit nacafairs.org.)

This virtual college fair, Wile says, is marketed directly to local students. And unlike the traditional college night, this event may be a little more accessible and relaxing, she says.

"There's a bit of walking into this big room with all these tables that can be a little nerve-racking for students," Wile says of the in-person college night. "This is a less intimidating format."

PARTICIPATING COLLEGES

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- Kutztown University
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- Shippensburg University

Community College and Technical/Trade Schools

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- Empire Beauty School
- Harrisburg Area Community College
- Pittsburgh Institute of Aeronautics
- Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology
- Universal Technical Institute

PA Private and Commonwealth Schools

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- Bucknell University
- Cedar Crest College
- Central Penn College
- Delaware Valley University
- Dickinson College
- Elizabethtown College
- Franklin & Marshall College
- Geneva College
- Harcum College
- Harrisburg University of Science and Technology
- Lancaster Bible College
- Lebanon Valley College
- Messiah University
- Moore College of Art and Design
- Moravian College
- Muhlenberg College
- Pennsylvania College of Art & Design
- Pennsylvania College of Health Sciences
- Penn State University
- University of Pittsburgh
- Robert Morris University
- Rosemont College
- Seton Hill University
- Widener University
- Wilkes University

Out-of-State Schools

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- Becker College
- Fairmont State University
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College admissions counselors look for more than just good grades

ASHLEY STALNECKER
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

While academic success is helpful when applying to colleges, admissions counselors are looking for a well-rounded student that has pursued their passions and done their research on the college.

A student needs to show that they can succeed at their prospective college and that will require a fair bit of introspection, Elizabeth Ziegler, college and career counselor for Manheim Township High School, says. Students need to know themselves, where their strengths lie and what they can improve on, Denise Hall, school counselor for Manheim Township, adds.

"I think it's really compelling to universities because it shows them like, 'Wow, I know that they're going to be a great alumni, because they already know what they're good at,'" Hall says.

Involvement in clubs, sports and volunteering can show colleges that a student will be active and contribute to the college outside of academics.

"Not only are you looking at someone who can succeed academically, you're also looking at someone that's going to succeed and add value to all the external things that are happening on that campus," Brian Hazlett, vice president for student affairs and enrollment management at Millersville University, says. "Ultimately those students that engage with the campus are the ones that ultimately stay and ultimately typically succeed and graduate on time."

Yet, students should not take this as having to pack a resume with dozens of activities, Ziegler says. If a student can demonstrate leadership and initiative in a few activities instead, that will be beneficial on a college application.

"Passionate involvement in a few activities is preferable," Ziegler says.

Colleges aren't just looking for academic skills but soft skills, Maya Bard, guidance counselor for Lampeter-Strasburg high school, says. Due to increasing technology usage, Bard says students may be lacking in important soft skills like face-to-face interaction not just with peers but with teach-

ers and instructors. Students should also be able to show that they have employability skills like time management, setting and achieving goals, and reliability.

Interaction with an institution and its admission counselors will show a college that a student is truly interested and committed to that institution. When colleges send out texts, emails or letters to a student, a student can show their interest in the college by responding, says Lena Poff, admissions counselor for Lancaster Bible College.



GETTY IMAGES

An essential form of interaction with the institution is the college application essay. Lukman Arsalan, director of admissions for Franklin & Marshall College, says in a response that students should show their story rather than tell it. Colleges are looking for how a student can write in an academic setting.

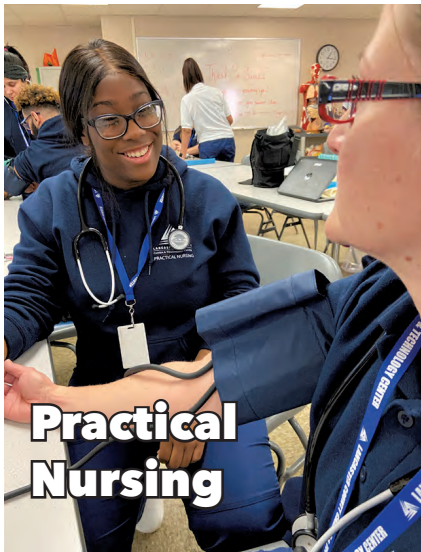
Bard says it's really about showing the college "how you've taken initiative to seek experiences and opportunities to further yourself or to kind of better yourself in certain areas."

Hazlett emphasizes that a lot of colleges are taking a more holistic view when evaluating applicants. This increases the value of the college essay.

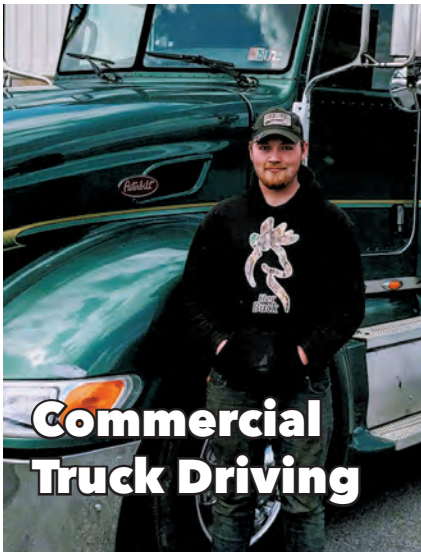
"It's important for students to try to step outside of their comfort zone when they write their essay and to really think of topics and think of ideas that are creative," Hazlett says.



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Get early jump on the financial aid process

ASHLEY STALNECKER
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

With the unemployment rate in Lancaster County up to 8% in August, twice as much as the rate in March, it's no surprise that families sending a student to college in the next few years might be a bit more strapped for money than usual.

A few financial aid counselors from Lancaster County colleges weighed in on the steps students facing financial hardship can take to afford college.

Even if a family's situation has changed dramatically in the last year, families should still fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) using their tax information from 2019. It's the foundation for how college's will determine financial aid eligibility.

The form opened Oct. 1 and students planning to attend college in the 2021-22 school year should have it submitted by June 30, 2022. Karen Fox, director of financial aid for Lancaster Bible College, suggests submitting the FAFSA as early as possible.

Starting early is the key for getting the financials of the col-



lege application process in order.

"If they know they've had changing circumstances, they shouldn't wait until they're admitted or they should not wait until they get the financial aid package," Clarke Paine, director of financial aid for Franklin & Marshall College, says.

By that point, the college may not have the funding to make changes to the student's financial aid package.

Before a student even applies for college, it may also benefit the family to discuss their financial situation and how that will impact the college search.


"I always stress with families in my presentations that the parents should be talking with the student," Paine says. "This is really a conversation so that it should not be occurring in the senior year, it should be occurring much sooner."

Communication with the prospective school's financial aid office should happen during the application process, after admittance and throughout the college experience.

"If there's anybody on campus you need to just be open and just tell us the whole story with, it's us," says Dwight Horsey, associate vice president of student financial services at Millersville University.

Calling the financial aid office can help families ascertain the school's process for a change in finances that would not

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How to write a college essay that stands out

MARGARET GATES
CUSTOM CONTENT EDITOR

High school grades. SAT scores. Extracurricular activities. Community service. Letters of recommendation. They are all factors that can play a role in college admissions. But there's something else that can be just as important.

"When a student says, what is the one thing I should really focus on, the essay is my go-to," says Kevin Dyer, senior assistant dean of admission at Franklin & Marshall College.

Dyer and Adam Smith, senior director of admissions at Elizabethtown College, offer these tips for writing an essay that will stand out:

— **Write something about yourself that isn't identifiable or visible in your application.** "Think about the qualities that make you unique or what sets you apart from your peers," Smith writes. Adds Dyer, admissions counselors understand that not every student has had a life-changing experience or overcome an extreme hardship. "You don't have to have cured cancer or climbed Mount Kilimanjaro to write a good essay," he says.

— **Have others proofread your essay.** One or two typos is not the end of the world, Dyer says, but more than that is too much.

— **Let your personality show through.** "We're looking for

a sense of uniqueness and identity," Dyer says. Smith encourages students to be authentic and not simply write what they think others want to hear.

— **Choose the right topic.** "Share issues you're passionate about as a young adult or how a service project or volunteerism changed your life," Smith writes. It can be something as simple as describing a really cool encounter you had on a nature walk, Dyer says. "Interest breeds interest."

— **Show don't tell.** Do be specific. Talk about specific incidents or areas of interest, Dyer says.

— **Use your word count wisely.** "Keep in mind, admissions counselors are reading essays every day, and to stand out does not mean you have to write a novel," Smith writes.

— **Don't write about winning the big game.** "Winning a game or hitting a note in a choir performance is an incredible feat," Smith writes. "But what is more worthy of your time is sharing how you got to that point."

— **Don't choose a topic that's too broad.** Stay away from topics, such as world hunger, that are too big to cover within the context of a college essay.

— **Avoid the 'grandma essay.'** Applicants sometimes write about someone who has been impactful in their lives, but do not spend enough time talking about themselves. Share your outlook and why that person is important to you, Dyer says.

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be included in the FAFSA.

Fox says many schools, particularly private schools, will be able to re-process the FAFSA based on the current year's projected income if the family is experiencing a job loss. After contacting the financial aid office, the family can fill out a special circumstance or reduction of income form.

Families should provide as much documentation as possible when asking the college to give more financial aid, such as unemployment statements or a letter of job termination.

If the student is not satisfied with their financial aid package, they can also appeal to the school's financial aid office for more funding. When detailing additional needs for funding, students should provide as much documentation to back up their argument as possible.

Students should also pay attention to scholarships they can apply for outside of a prospective college. Fox says fall is a good time to search for scholarships in the community because many of them have fall deadlines.

Most importantly, financial aid conversations should not end after a student's first year in college, Horsey says.

"There's actually more resources available to students after their freshman year than there are during their freshman year but most people don't come back and talk to us after freshman year," Horsey says.



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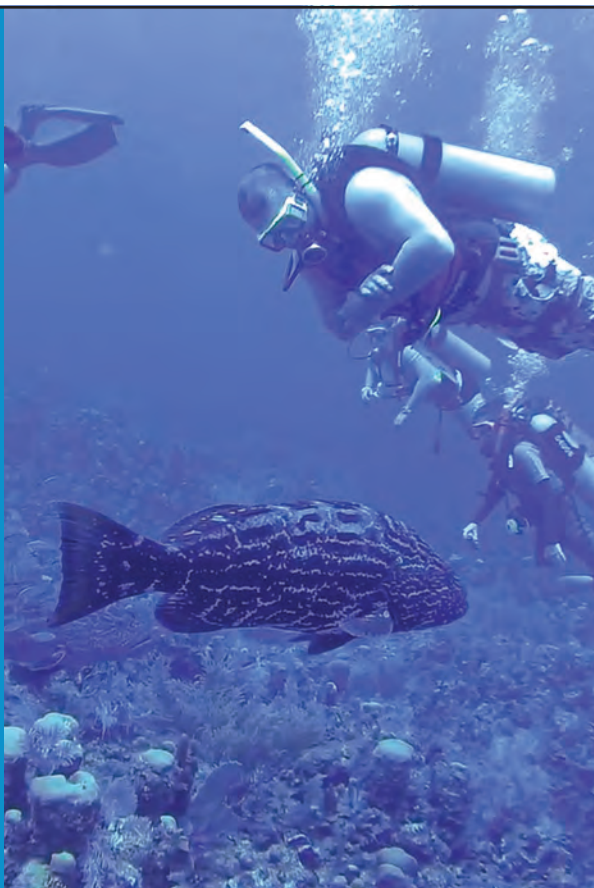
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