

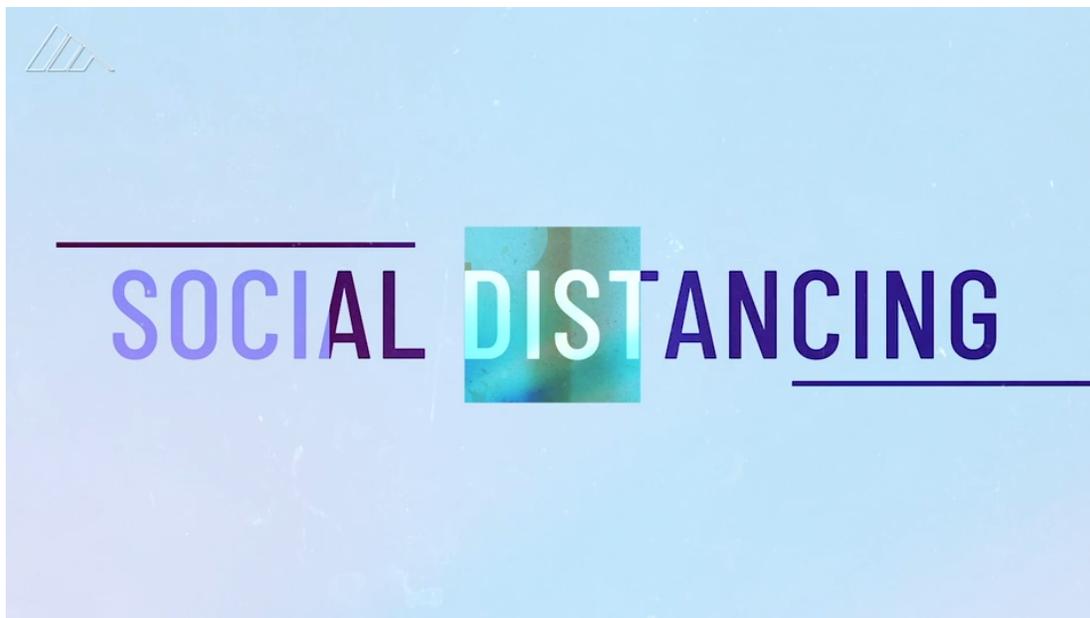


EDUCATION

What are Florida universities doing to prevent enrollment drops because of coronavirus?

BY JIMENA TAVEL

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Social distancing is all you've been hearing about when it comes to "flattening the curve" of the coronavirus outbreak. Here are the dos and don'ts of social distancing. BY PATRICK GLEASON | ERIC GARLAND

Two South Florida private universities recently announced plans to waive standardized testing requirements due to the COVID-19 pandemic, adding their names to a growing nationwide list of higher education institutions who have taken similar steps this spring.

Barry University tried a pilot program that didn't require SATs or ACTs for some majors in 2019 and will expand it to all this year. St. Thomas University will be a test-optional school for fall 2020 as well. Instead of looking at test scores, both schools will evaluate prospective students with a more holistic view, emphasizing their GPAs.

The moves come after College Board, the company headquartered in New York that administers the SAT, and the Iowa-based ACT both announced in March that the spring tests would be rescheduled to the summer.

The limited availability of testing, combined with the fact that college administrators want to prevent their enrollment numbers from dropping this fall, propelled the policy changes.

David Armstrong, St. Thomas' president, said he had been thinking about doing it for a while because he sees it as an obstacle that negatively affects socioeconomically disadvantaged students. The novel coronavirus crisis prompted him to do it.

He feels positive about the future, he said, because the number of tuition deposits is higher this year than it was at this point last year. However, he recognized he hopes making test scores optional will further increase enrollment, an effect other colleges have seen.

"I was taught never to waste an opportunity and to instead find opportunities," he said.

BARRY'S PROSPECTS UNCERTAIN

Mike Allen, Barry's president, said his staff is doing all it can to help students stay on track with their studies, but "it's too early to say where we're going to land."

He doesn't know what will happen with enrollment until he gets answers for two questions: How students will react to the crisis and if campus will reopen this fall.

"We're mapping out different scenarios; we're trying to prepare for every eventuality," he said. "We're not just waiting around and doing nothing."

FIU, FAU UNDECIDED

State universities, including Florida International University in Miami and Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, remain undecided.

Jody Glassman, FIU's director of admissions, wrote in an email that she's meeting with her counterparts at the other 11 state universities every other week to discuss the challenges they're facing.

But ultimately, it will be the Board of Governors that decides how the role of testing will change — if at all — in the admissions process, and the board is still evaluating the issue.

"We do not have answers at this time," Glassman said. "We will notify the community once a decision is made."

Those answers could come shortly.

On Monday, Gov. Ron DeSantis appointed Syd Kitson, the chair of the Board of Governors, as a member of the Re-Open Florida Task Force. Kitson might be able to raise the standardized testing question, along with others related to how campuses will operate in the summer and fall, during those meetings.

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Similarly to public universities, the University of Miami seems to be weighing its options. It is already test optional for the schools of music and architecture and might apply that policy to other majors.

John Haller, UM's vice president of enrollment management, wrote in a short, emailed statement that "as testing has become less available during the current COVID-19 period, the university is performing a more comprehensive review of the role standardized testing will serve in our admission processes in the future."

OTHER MEASURES BEING TAKEN

Forgoing SAT and ACT scores is just one of the decisions college administrators are taking to prevent their enrollment numbers, and revenue, from declining.

Most have moved admissions events like preview weekends, campus tours, information and orientation sessions, and advising appointments online. And the new format is proving to be successful for some.

Barry, for instance, is holding its admitted student week virtually this week. Usually new students visit and stay for a whole week. So it will be shorter remotely, but that has been a positive.

Roxanna Cruz, Barry's associate vice president of enrollment, said the number of the attendees registered doubled since the school announced it would take place via the internet instead of in person. About 1,500 confirmed they would participate.

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Additionally, Barry, which has rolling admissions, is accepting self-reported qualifying information and in-house credential evaluations for international students. Its guidance counselors are helping students who have had trouble getting final transcripts or taking end-of-year examinations.

FIU announced it will move its 2021 deadlines; the new ones will be published in July.

Although its deposit due date is still May 1, Glassman said the university staff has sent out messages about flexibility and understanding.

"We are working with students on a more individualized basis because each student has individual challenges," she wrote.

Miami Dade College is trying to launch new non-credit programs for adult learners and amending some of the scholarship conditions to encourage people to enroll.

It is trying to ease the restrictions on the American Dream Scholarship, which covers the in-state portion and eligible class fees remaining after all other scholarships, financial aid, and grants funds have been applied for high school students. It is also working to make it available in the summer term as well, not only in fall and spring.

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“There’s a lot of work going on behind the scenes, and our hope is in the next week or two we’ll be able to roll out these programs and let our students know how we’ll be here to support them,” said Lenore Rodicio, executive vice president and provost.

MDC PIVOTS TO JOB TRAINING

While universities with high tuition costs might struggle to attract students during an economic downturn, community colleges tend to have more options.

Enrollment at these institutions, which offer shorter, more affordable programs, usually rises during a recession, Rodicio said.

That’s because when people lose jobs or face financial difficulty, they often find they can quickly acquire new valuable skills at a school

like MDC before heading back to the competitive job market.

When people struggle to make ends meet, they consider changing careers, and that usually requires retraining.

Rodicio said she expects courses related to healthcare, technology and business to be in high demand as the community emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last week, MDC rolled out [new free online courses](#) mainly focused on technology, business and education, that vary in length from two days to 12 weeks.

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“But I doubt we’ll see a significant increase in enrollment until we return to a face-to-face scenario,” Rodicio said. “It’s hard to predict how students will react if we remain online for an extended period of time.”

During an education forum last week, MDC’s interim president, Rolando Montoya, said he expects MDC will receive more students from Latin America after the crisis, considering remote learning will improve and people in that region already have a strong connection to Miami.

And for the time being, Rodicio said, the college has not yet seen an unusual number of students dropping out mid-semester this spring.

“It seems like most of them are not giving up; they’re really trying to make it work and getting through it,” she said.

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