

Webinar Summary

THE CORONAVIRUS: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADMISSIONS AND REGISTRARS OFFICES

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Overview

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) is having a sweeping impact on admissions offices and registrars, limiting recruitment travel, casting a shadow of uncertainty over international enrollments, and making it difficult for students to request transcripts and letters from institutions.

Leading colleges and universities are implementing a coordinated Coronavirus response across departments. For international recruiting and admissions, many schools are turning to digital tools and resources. Increased levels of flexibility and collaboration will be the key to navigating this uncertain, rapidly evolving landscape.

Context

In a March 6, 2020 webinar, Gavin Newton-Tanzer and David Weeks explored the implications of the Coronavirus for admissions and registrars' offices. They offered recommendations for how institutions can respond to the crisis and best support international students.

Note: In just the short time that has passed since the March 6, 2020 webinar, much has changed. COVID-19 has spread across the globe. The World Health Organization has declared a pandemic. Thousands have died. The stock market has been rocked. Lives have been upended.

This summary has been updated to reiterate the main ideas shared in the webinar, while recognizing that significant changes have occurred in just the few weeks since the webinar took place and more changes occur seemingly each day.

What was known about COVID-19 on March 6, 2020

About COVID-19

The Coronavirus or COVID-19 has dominated global headlines. This virus belongs to a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases like SARS and MERS. The COVID-19 outbreak was first identified in Wuhan, Hubei in December 2019. By the beginning of March 2020, China led the world with over 80,000 infections, followed by South Korea with more than 6,500 cases.

For most people, COVID-19 is not a serious illness. However, it can be more severe for older people and individuals with pre-existing medical conditions. No vaccines currently exist for COVID-19. The fatality rate is uncertain due to the high number of unconfirmed cases (as many as 86% of cases were unconfirmed in China), but most experts estimate that it is less than 3%, which is much lower than SARS. The latency period is up to 14 days. So, while the virus is not lethal to most, it is highly contagious, even for those without symptoms.

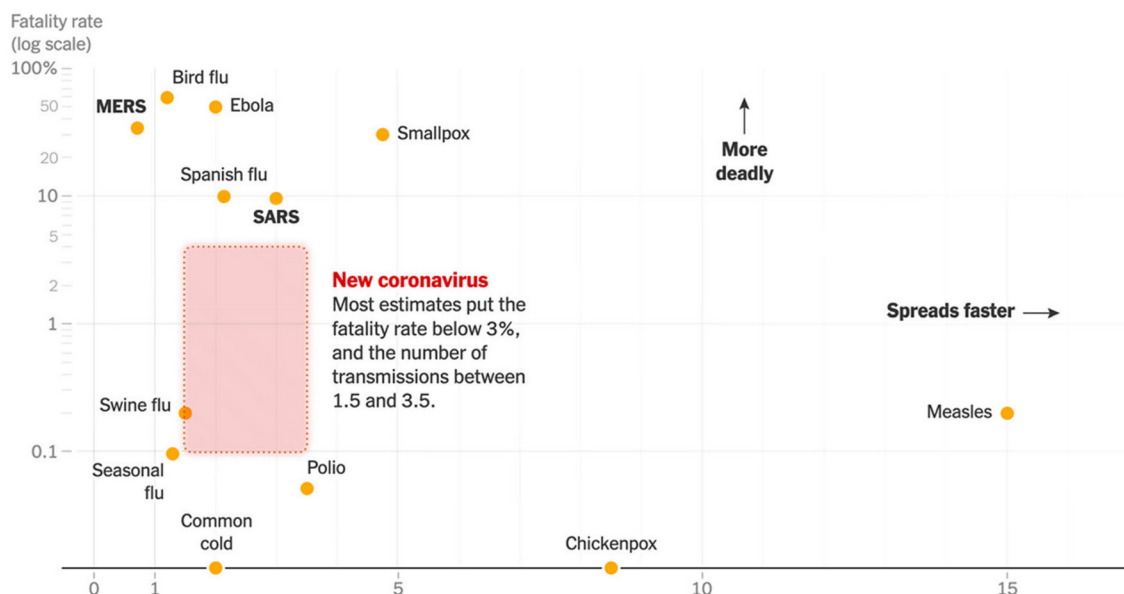
Genetic sequencing of the Coronavirus is complete and test kits have been developed. Comprehensive testing and completion of experimental vaccines will take up to a year. The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that no evidence exists that medical masks protect non-sick individuals (although in dense cities in Asia, masks are encouraged to prevent the unknowingly sick from spreading the virus). Experts suggest vigilant hand washing, observing respiratory hygiene, and staying at least one meter away from people with symptoms.

The response to COVID-19 in China's Hubei Province

After COVID-19 broke out in Hubei province, four major cities (Wuhan, Ezhou, Huanggang, and Chibi) with a combined population of about 20 million people were sealed. The scope of the quarantine is without historical precedent. A large hospital was built in one week and a second within 12 days. Chinese social media experienced a huge outpouring of support for Wuhan citizens, although criticism of the slow initial response of local authorities in Wuhan was also notable.

Throughout China, the response to COVID-19 has been sweeping. The government imposed nationwide limitations on large-scale gatherings like conferences. Extensive internal checkpoints were established between and within cities. Education agents and training organizations have been prohibited from holding offline training activities indefinitely, and most businesses were shuttered by government orders.

Figure 1: How COVID-19 Compares to Other Diseases



Travel restrictions

Air travel to China and in some regions of Europe has dropped dramatically. Routes worldwide are being cut. Many countries have instituted entry bans for non-resident travelers. There is no clear endpoint for these travel restrictions.

The economic impact of the Coronavirus

In China, GDP growth for 2020 was estimated to be down for the year. Many factory workers traveled to their ancestral hometowns for the Spring Festival and were stranded due to quarantines. Tensions have been growing between the health and economic ministries.

Sectors hardest hit worldwide include travel, hospitality, restaurants, luxury goods, event production, offline education, offline entertainment, and offline retail. The epidemic has been particularly damaging for Italy, since 13% of its economy depends on tourism.

Looking ahead, the best-case scenario is that new Coronavirus infections will slow. Worst case, COVID-19 will become a worldwide seasonal illness.

Note: In the few weeks following the webinar, as COVID-19 spread across the globe, economic activity in many countries is believed to have fallen dramatically. Many economists are predicting a recession. Economic uncertainty is extremely high.

What COVID-19 means for schools, colleges, and universities

Globally, secondary schools and higher education institutions are grappling with the impact of COVID-19. In light of the pandemic, colleges and universities should keep the following in mind:

Disruptions worldwide will affect exam schedules, event planning, and international recruitment visits

Primary and secondary schools in many countries have closed in response to the Coronavirus. Even if schools have migrated to online teaching, faculty will still have huge volumes of material to cover when in-person classes begin again.

Once classes resume, school administrators may restrict visits from outside guests like recruiters. In general, event planning will be complicated and student activities at schools are expected to be limited. The school year may be extended in many locations. In addition, major exams and graduation dates may be delayed.

Institutions must implement a coordinated Coronavirus response for students on campus

Colleges and universities must deploy a coordinated Coronavirus response with International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS), admissions, communications, and teaching faculty. International students may need additional support from the ISSS team.

In general, students may have greater mental health needs. The campus medical center should implement humane, dignified, and professional processes for students with symptoms. Self-isolation for 14 days is suggested for people who have been exposed to the virus.

From a financial perspective, the crisis may affect international students' ability to pay tuition on time and attend class as normal. It is critical to separate legitimate concerns from misinformation and racism.

Note: As the virus expanded across the world, many universities in the U.S. and OECD have extended spring breaks and either migrated classes online or ended the spring semester early. As universities do their part to mitigate the spread of the virus, it is important to recognize that some international students may be unable to return home, much less subsequently return to campus after the virus recedes. Although many international students have already returned home, some are stranded. Many will need greater levels of support from ISSS and understanding from faculty in the coming months.

Moreover, emergency measures are now severely affecting workers in the U.S. who work in "non-essential" fields and who are unable to work from home. Whereas on March 6, the crisis primarily affected the financial situations of international students, the economic disruption and unemployment caused by the epidemic is expected to affect many domestic students. Students who fund their own education may struggle to find part-time work, and the economic situation of a growing number of families is becoming dire.

As study abroad programs are cancelled, colleges and universities will need to consider whether and how to accredit online replacement courses

Large numbers of study abroad programs worldwide have been cancelled. In response, some students are taking replacement classes online either from their home campus or a third location.

Academic standards for online replacement classes may not be as rigorous as face-to-face learning. Online classes also lack experiential components. Despite these facts, institutions should avoid punishing students for events beyond their control. Once study abroad programs are cancelled, it is often too late for students to enroll in regular classes at their home campuses.

Schools must anticipate changes to recruitment travel, in-country events, and admissions activities

Most recruitment fairs, tours, and conferences for the spring have been cancelled. In-person admitted student receptions will be challenging, if not impossible, to host. In-country reps are largely telecommuting only. The Asia-Pacific Association for International Education (APAIE) conference and many global events hosted in North America have been cancelled. When this situation will change is unknown.

From an admissions perspective, institutions must keep the following in mind:

- **Student visas.** Visa services have been suspended at many embassies. As a result, long waits for visa interviews are becoming the norm.
- **Standardized testing.** Test dates for the GMAC, GRE, TOEFL, IELTS, civil service exam, and ACT have been cancelled.
- **Distance learning quality.** In areas with "stopping class, not stopping learning" programs, students are participating in online classes. Looking ahead, distance learning will be common for some applicants. The quality of this education varies.
- **Transcripts and recommendation letters.** These may take longer for students to obtain since many schools are out of session or have limited staffing.

Note: Since March 6, many more tests and events have been cancelled, most notably conferences like NAFSA and exams like the SAT (May date), the IB (April-May exam), and GCSE and A-Levels. Also, the State Department has suspended consular services worldwide, meaning that international students without active U.S. visas must postpone their studies, enroll in an online program, or reconsider their study destination.

Charting a Path Forward: Recommendations from Sunrise International

There is no question that everything is highly fluid due to the Coronavirus situation. With that in mind, Sunrise International has three recommendations for college and university leaders:

1. Institute monthly or bi-monthly reviews for admissions offices and senior international officers

Admissions and senior international officers may elect to:

- *Review travel policies for students and staff.* Banning travel for entire semesters, months in advance, seems to neglect the highly fluid nature of the situation.
- *Monitor consular services carefully.* Collaborate with the ISSS team and research what processing times have been in the past. If students cannot get visas in time to start studying, it is essential to proactively communicate with them.
- *Stay abreast of entry bans and travel restrictions.* If students can travel to your country, their arrival on campus may be delayed. If that is the case, institutions must offer support to those students. This may include assistance to prevent students from falling behind academically and programs to integrate socially on campus once they arrive.

2. Leverage digital resources to reach Chinese students

Gavin Newton-Tanzer suggested using digital alternatives to traditional admissions activities, with an emphasis on China where language barriers and internet controls can cause challenges:

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Paper brochures	Making all web pages, applications, forms, documents, and brochures accessible online without VPN
Fairs	Hosting online webcasts for prospective students in partnership with Chinese schools and organizations
Receptions for admitted students	Holding WeChat Q&A events or Weibo/WeChat livestream events
Expos and meet-ups	Answering questions on Chinese knowledge platforms like Zhihu or Zhike; Engaging trending topics on Toutiao and Weibo
Campus visits	Hosting virtual "Walking Tours" with live guides

Be sure to record all these digital resources so they can be made available on a local Chinese website and Chinese social media for future use. Other best practices include:

- **Localizing your digital presence.** Search for your institution on Chinese search engines and social media. Contact Sunrise International for a Web Presence Report.
- **Leveraging live streaming platforms.** Recommended Chinese platforms include [Zhumu](#), [Douyin](#) (Chinese TikTok), and [VKaijiang](#).
- **Joining Sunrise International's Spring 2020 China Webcast Series.** Each series will feature up to six universities per session. Each institution has 10 minutes to present, followed by Q&A. Each webcast is broadcast in one or several school auditoriums in different Chinese cities. The program is closely coordinated with counselors, associations, and school administrators. Each series is anticipated to have at least 1,000 participating students, and universities are expected to receive an opt-in contact list of at least 100 participants.

- **Utilizing the China Test-Optional Initiative (CTOI).** Sunrise International created CTOI to bridge the gap between the test-optional policy movement and Chinese students seeking international education opportunities after taking the gaokao or other standardized exams. CTOI is a web index accessible inside mainland China. Students browse a list of test-optional universities and indicate interest in different schools' application processes. Student contact information is relayed to the universities.
- **Adopting virtual reality.** This technology is well-suited for virtual visits and information sessions, as well as promotion videos with clips of classes, clubs, and facilities. Sunrise International will host up to six VR images for free at www.Campus360.org or in China at www.360Campus.cn. Institutions can also download Sunrise's "VR DIY Guide" and access a [VR camera discount](#) from Sunrise's partner Insta360.
- Talking to credential evaluators about barriers to obtaining original transcripts due to school closures and mailing challenges.
- Reviewing how the financial aid office will assess students affected by the virus, such as offering in-state tuition.
- Creating a guide about entering your country and sharing it with admitted international students.

Note: As universities are now no longer able to offer campus tours for domestic students, virtual tours are one of the only options students have to experience a campus.

3. Remember that collaboration, cooperation, and flexibility are essential for continued international admissions

As admissions teams and international recruiters navigate the evolving landscape with Coronavirus, flexibility and collaboration are strongly recommended. Suggestions include:

- Extending application deadlines and waiving application fees for international students.
- Asking agent partners and inter-university partners how you can support them. Many are running lessons online and collaboration opportunities may exist.
- Reviewing test-optional or test-flexible policies, since English assessments and U.S. standardized testing options will be limited.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is creating a new reality on a day-by-day basis. The impact of this pandemic will be massive. For colleges and universities, learning to accept and deal with uncertainty is essential. Although the future is unclear for admissions officers and registrars, there are a few actions that institutions can take now. These include ongoing evaluation of the global landscape, leveraging digital resources whenever possible to connect with students worldwide, and embracing an ethos of collaboration and flexibility.