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Welcome to College Bound, Notre Dame Admissions' new podcast. We're really excited to share with all of you what's unique about Notre Dame. Throughout our season, we'll have current students sharing their own experiences, we'll be providing a little bit of insight into the application process, and our big goal is to help you learn about all of the academic and extracurricular opportunities at Notre Dame.

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I'm Maria Finan, an admissions counselor in our office and a "Double Domer," which means I got my bachelor's and my master's degree at Notre Dame. I'm originally from Buffalo, New York, and I'm really excited to introduce my co-host to you.

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Thanks, Maria. My name is Matt Greene. I am an assistant director in the Admissions Office, an admissions counselor along with Maria, going into my fourth full year. I'm originally from Kent, Michigan and I am a "Single Domer." I graduated in 2016, I studied American Studies while I was at Notre Dame. And today we are bringing you our second episode of College Bound, which is going to cover the topic of our application, but the parts of our application when we evaluate the academic criteria for students' applications. And those criteria are: classroom performance, academic rigor, and anything to do with standardized testing.

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As we explained in our first episode, our applications that students provide to us and the way that we evaluate them involves holistic review, as well as a contextual review of those applications. "Holistic review" means that we are going to be taking a well-rounded look at applicants, and everything in the context of your application is put into the correct context. So we are going to be taking very seriously that holistic piece, as well as making sure we understand the correct context of your application. So with that, Maria, do you want to talk a little bit more about classroom performance and academic rigor?

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Definitely. So on the academic side of things, your classroom performance is really important. And when we say classroom performance, we're talking about your grades, your GPA, and your rank if your high school offers it. And then we're also going to look at the rigor--so the classes you've taken, whether those are International Baccalaureate classes, Advanced Placement classes, dual enrollment classes, honors classes--whatever curriculum your high school offers. So we're going to look at those two pieces to get a sense of who you are as a student, and gives us a sense of kind of what you've done over the course of high school, and the ways in which you've challenged yourself.

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I do want to note that, especially this year, we will be accepting pass/fail grades. We know that it has been a unique year. And so we will be looking at that classroom performance information with that in mind. I want to give Matt an opportunity to talk a little bit about testing, and the fact that we're test-optional. Matt, can you kind of explain what that means and how that fits into our academic review process?

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Maria, absolutely. In the past we have always required in the SAT or an ACT test. Because of the pandemic, and because there have been a lot of different issues and reasons why test dates might have been canceled or you might not have been able to access a standardized test, for this coming academic

cycle (2020 to 2021), we are implementing a test-optional policy with our admissions process. This is a provisional year for this rollout of test-optional.

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We will determine in the spring whether or not we will continue to be test-optional. We obviously want to be in tune to what is happening with the global pandemic, and we want to make sure we make the best decision for our students. So, for this year, it is affecting the seniors that are applying for this coming year, but for future years, for any underclassmen that might be listening, we are going to evaluate what the situation is come next spring. So please note that, and make sure that, underclassmen, if you're thinking about testing or taking a standardized test, making sure that you understand the situation that's going on and rely on the availability of testing if it's safe to do so. You could also wait until we evaluate and announce what our policy is for next year, but again, your safety is our safety and health are our priorities.

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And test-optional is a pretty common buzzword you might hear; especially now, a lot of institutions are also implementing something along the lines of a test optional policy with admissions, so we want to make sure you all understand what that is. With test-optional, it means that you can take a standardized test. If you have already, that's great, you always can. You also can submit a standardized test score to be evaluated with your application.

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You also can test and decide that you do not want to submit any of your scores that you have. A lot of times in the standardized test (SAT and ACT), you might ask once you start the test to send your scores to certain institutions, and even if you have checked that on the test and you've taken it you always can say on the application when you apply that you do not want your test scores to be reviewed. That is totally fine with us. If you do submit a test we will superscore both your SAT and/or your ACT, so we will take your highest possible score that we that we receive. So with that, Maria, what test scores should students submit, if they do decide to submit a test score?

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That's a great question, and I bet you're hoping that I'm going to give you a specific number of if you score this, you should submit it, and if you score this, you should not. That's not the case. So kind of a good question to ask yourself when considering whether or not to submit a test score is whether or not you think it is a fair representation of your academic abilities. So we're not going to give you a specific number. Something important to know about Notre Dame is that we've never had cutoff scores. There's not a certain GPA you have to get. We will review your application if you submitted to us.

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We've talked a lot about that holistic and contextual piece, so please have faith that even if you don't submit a test score or you're unable to test, we have a lot of other information, and that classroom performance piece, what you've done over three, three-and-a-half, four years of high school, that gives us a good sense of your academic abilities. At Notre Dame, you are eligible for merit scholarship consideration without a test score, so you do not have to test to be considered for merit.

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All students are automatically considered for merit, and we will talk about that in a future episode, but that's something really important that I want you to know. You're not at a disadvantage in our process if you are unable to test, or opt not to test, or just opt not to share that with us.

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And one thing to keep in mind, too, is that with us going test-optional, we recognize that your performance in classes on a day-to-day basis, and the grades that you receive and everything that you have done in those classes is going to show a little bit more value to us than your performance on a standardized test, one day, even one morning, out of the year. Those grades are important. We see what you've done in your classes, so that is something that we're definitely going to consider strongly.

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And with that, if you want to take a little bit more time to apply, and you want to show us your first semester grades in your senior year, feel freedom to take that time. You don't need to rush it, especially if you are not sending in a test score, you can always take your time with applying and apply Regular Decision for that January 1 deadline if you would like.

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And, Maria, if you don't mind, could you talk maybe about some other testing, and when to submit those, because we have some standardized tests are involved with our application that are outside the SAT and ACT, and we want to make sure we cover those, too.

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Definitely. So we often get questions about things like SAT II Subject Tests or AP scores- do I need to submit those? And the answer is no, you don't have to. So, again, if it's not safe to test, don't test. If you had issues this spring sitting for your AP exams, what we really see is the value in the challenge of those courses and the work you're doing over the course of the school year, so you do not have to submit those scores.

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If you are an IB student who has scores, or has predicted scores, you can submit those if you think they'll strengthen your application, but it's definitely not something we're looking for. For homeschool students, we've often recommended taking two to three Subject Tests in the past, just to give us a little more context in how you do academically since curriculums can vary a lot with that, but, again, your safety is the first priority. If you are able to test or have been able to test that's great, but it's not a requirement for us.

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For our international students in particular, we do need proof of English proficiency. There are a lot of different tests you can take to fulfill that. We know again that it can be hard to access those tests. If you're wondering, Duolingo is a great option that you can do from home. If you are able to take an SAT or ACT, there are ways to prove English proficiency on that side. But, again, we know those tests are going to be difficult to access. That's a little bit about international testing, subject tests, AP exams, other exams like that, but I want to a little bit more generally about a question we see a lot. So, Matt, can you tell our students, what is an average GPA for the students we admit?

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That is a good question, a question we receive a ton, but one thing, and it might be a misconception, but we actually do not have an average GPA for admitted students. There are so many different GPA scales across the board, and so many of the thousands of high schools that are around the country and around the world, too. So we are going to put your GPA in the context of your high school.

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As we talked about before, the context of everything is so important to your application, so we're not going to be comparing GPA's. We are not going to put your GPA into a set scale that we have at Notre Dame, we're going to be putting it in the context of your high school. And that's weighted or unweighted, whatever the grading scale and GPA scale might be, we will definitely understand that. Also, as a part of our holistic review we have non-academic pieces of the application that are also so very, very important to your application, and that is actually the next episode and included with that are the essays that you write.

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Thanks so much, Matt. I think hopefully this has been helpful for all of you as you're thinking about some of those academic pieces. We're really excited to jump into the non-academic pieces of our review process, so we're really looking forward to that. We'll also be diving into financial aid, merit scholarships, and life as a student on campus.

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In the meantime, if you'd like to connect with us, feel free to send us a message on Instagram, Twitter, or Snapchat @NDAdmissions. You can also follow Notre Dame Admissions on Facebook.