Test-Optional Undergraduate Admissions Policies in the COVID-19 Era

May 2020
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 3
The Pre-COVID-19 Context .......................................................................................................................... 3
  PRE-COVID-19 MOTIVATIONS FOR TEST OPTIONAL POLICIES ......................................................... 4
    Testing and Equity Outcomes .................................................................................................................... 5
    Test Validity and Predictive Value ............................................................................................................... 6
Post-COVID-19 Adoption .............................................................................................................................. 8
  APPROACHES TO GOING TEST OPTIONAL ............................................................................................. 10
Taxonomy of Test-Optional Policies ........................................................................................................... 11
About Hanover Research ................................................................................................................................. 12
INTRODUCTION

The following report examines admissions testing policies and strategies at US colleges and universities, particularly as an increasing number of institutions reconsider their use of the ACT or SAT in the wake of COVID-19. Topics covered by this research brief include:

➢ Trends and changes in admissions testing policies prior to COVID-19, and how current decisions are impacted by previous debates on the topic
➢ Test policy implications for merit aid, equity, and the credibility of admissions decisions
➢ Variations of test-optional policies, including test-flexible, test-optional, and test-blind

THE PRE-COVID-19 CONTEXT

The test-optional movement has existed for decades, with Bowdoin, Bates, and Sarah Lawrence Colleges among its early pioneers. Bowdoin College eliminated standardized testing requirements in 1969. Bates College went test-optional in 1984 after five years of study, and by the early 1990s over one-third of its incoming students had opted not to submit their test scores.

According to the National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest), the number of test optional four-year institutions has risen to 370 in the past 15 years. As indicated in Figure 1, the pace at which institutions loosened testing requirements accelerated significantly even before COVID-19.

Figure 1: Institutions Announcing Test-Optional Policies by Year, 2005-2020

Source: National Center for Fair & Open Testing
Note: Policies announced in the winter terms spread over two years (e.g. winter 2019-2020) are counted under the earlier of the two years.
* Excludes 50 institutions that specify the policy change is only for the class of 2021.

The 2019 Varsity Blues admissions scandal, in which several SAT testing centers were compromised, and wealthy and influential parents arranged for additional testing time, compelled some institutions to reconsider their use of SAT and ACT scores in admissions. However, none of the equity issues highlighted by the scandal were new at the time. Valerie Strauss observed in *The Washington Post* that:

...as high-profile as Varsity Blues is, it is just the latest issue facing the College Board...and ACT Inc. — including repeated cheating scandals and fundamental questions about the value of the scores.⁵

The same spring Varsity Blues broke the College Board unveiled an “adversity score” designed to provide additional insight into students’ scores and the challenges they may have faced. According to FairTest, the initiative “concedes that the SAT is really a measure of ‘accumulated advantage’ which should not be used without an understanding of a student’s community and family background.”⁶

**Pre-COVID-19 Motivations for Test Optional Policies**

Although COVID-19 introduced new logistical concerns, several institutions that changed policies in response to the virus were already considering the move. Case Western Reserve University was among the first institutions to move test optional after COVID-19, but indicated the situation was a final push toward the change:⁷

Rick Bischoff, who oversees enrollment [at Case Western Reserve University], told NPR last week that the school had been discussing going test-optional, in part because of how it has been shown to improve equity. Bischoff said Case Western Reserve was planning to make a final decision in a year or so, but the disruptions from the coronavirus outbreak moved that decision up.

Previous considerations primarily relate to equity and validity concerns, predictive validity, and cost/benefit analyses, as summarized in Figure 2.

---


Figure 2: Three Ways to Evaluate Test-Optional Policies

Researchers and advocates pose a series of considerations: the validity of the tests, its impacts on potential students, its role in broader admissions strategies, and the relative costs and benefits of testing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test Validity and Impacts</th>
<th>Relationship to Other Equity Concerns</th>
<th>Costs vs. Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fair Test argues that colleges and universities ask these questions:</td>
<td>Paul Rubin and Manuel S. González Canché write that “an institution’s adoption of a test-optional or test-flexible policy should not be viewed as a panacea to increase student diversity without considering other factors, such as academic preparation, geographic limitations, and financial obstacles.”</td>
<td>Steven T. Syverson, et al., conclude that “we…continue to question whether the value-add of testing is large enough to justify the price—time spent, financial cost, and emotional drain—being paid by students due to societal preoccupation with these tests.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Do the tests really have predictive validity at this institution?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Does that validity hold for all ethnic, age, and income groups, as well as for both men and women?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do the tests add anything significant to what admissions officers already know about applicants?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Are test score requirements deterring potential applicants who would make suitable students?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Center for Fair & Open Testing.
Rubin and González Canché, and Syverson, et al.

TESTING AND EQUITY OUTCOMES

Studies on the equity and diversity impacts of going test optional are conflicting, with strong examples reaching divergent conclusions in recent years.

Belasco et al.’s 2014 study of test-optional policies at 180 selective liberal arts colleges concluded that, despite intentions, test optional policies have not expanded access and opportunity to low-income and minority students but may “fulfill a latent function of increasing the perceived selectivity and status of these institutions” by increasing the number of applicants. Findings from a 2019 study concur that test-optional policies appear to “have minimal impact on enrolled student demographics” and an “inconclusive” effect on institutional merit aid.

However, a 2018 study published by the National Association for College Admission Counseling reached a different set of conclusions:

11 Ibid. P. 13.
...the adoption of a well-executed test-optinal admission policy can lead to an increase in overall applications as well as an increase in the representation of URM students (both numeric and proportionate) in the applicant pool and the freshman class. Roughly two-thirds of [test-optinal] institutions experienced URM growth above that of a matched test-requiring peer institution. A similar but smaller magnitude increase was seen among Pell recipients.\textsuperscript{13}

This study was based on a review of 955,774 admissions records from 28 institutions ranging in size from 1,500 to 20,000 undergraduate students and admitting between 15 and 90 percent of its applicants.\textsuperscript{14}

Differing perspectives on the role of test-optinal policies in increasing equity and access are summarized in the figure below.

**Figure 3: Two Recent Studies of the Equity Impacts of Test-Optinal Policies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policies Improve Equity</th>
<th>Policies Do Not Expand Access</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A four-year study including nearly one million admissions files concluded that &quot;a well-executed test-optinal admission policy can lead to an increase in overall applications as well as an increase in the representation of URM students (both numeric and proportionate) in the applicant pool and the freshman class.&quot;</td>
<td>One 2014 study using 18 years of selective liberal arts college admissions data found that test-Optional Policies &quot;have done little to meet their manifest goals of expanding educational opportunity for low-income students.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Source: Syverson, et al.}\textsuperscript{15} and Belasco, et al.\textsuperscript{16}

**TEST VALIDITY AND PREDICTIVE VALUE**

Both the SAT and ACT have been modified substantially within the past decade.\textsuperscript{17} As a result, research that considers older versions of the tests may not be as valid as more recent studies. That said, evidence has long supported the assertion that the tests can help predict students’ postsecondary success. Brent J. Evans’ review of validity

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p. 3.
scholarship surveys a range of SAT and ACT studies dating back to the 1960s and concludes that “research consistently demonstrates the predictive validity of the SAT and ACT.” However, other metrics are equally as predictive, if not more so.

Figure 4: Selected SAT and ACT Validity Findings

**Predictive Values of the SAT and ACT - Prior Research**

Burton and Ramist (2001) released a meta-study of eight prior studies to evaluate the predictive value of SAT scores. They found a cumulative college GPA correlation of 0.36 for the SAT and 0.42 for high school grades. The smaller subset of studies that looked at both indicators combined found a stronger correlation of 0.52.

A 2002 study by Noble and Sawyer used ACT-sponsored research from 129 institutions that shows a correlation of 0.43 between students’ ACT scores and their freshman year GPA. The correlation for high school grades was higher at 0.48, and the correlation for both indicators combined was 0.53.

SAT and ACT performance also correlates strongly with non-academic variables like income. Moreover, some studies have shown that the tests are poorer predictors of performance for underrepresented minority students than for white students. The most recent analysis shows a steady increase in scores by income.

![Figure 5: SAT Scores by Family Income](source: PrepScholar analysis of 2016 College Board data)

Note: Table converts 2016 scores to the 2020 SAT score scale, which is based on a total of 1600 rather than the 2400 possible points on the 2016 test.

---


19 Ibid. pp. 4-6.

20 Perry, Andre M. “Students need more than an SAT adversity score, they need a boost in wealth.” Brookings. May 17, 2019. [https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2019/05/17/students-need-more-than-an-sat-adversity-score-they-need-a-boost-in-wealth/](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2019/05/17/students-need-more-than-an-sat-adversity-score-they-need-a-boost-in-wealth/)


Similarly, the average ACT score for students from families earning less than $80,000 per year has fluctuated from 82.6 to 84.6 percent of the total scores achieved by students whose family income is $80,000 or higher.

Figure 6: ACT Scores by Family Income

![ACT Scores by Family Income](image)

Source: ACT

**POST-COVID-19 ADOPTION**

Post-virus adoption of test optional policies, often at institutions that were already considering them, is driven by a combination of logistical, ethical, and student wellbeing concerns. An April 15, 2020 feature by test prep firm Compass Education Group reports that SAT and ACT test dates from mid-March to mid-June have been cancelled by the College Board and ACT. Additional testing dates are currently being planned for Fall 2020 if conditions allow. Many are speculating about the possibility of at-home standardized tests in fall 2020 but leaders at College Board say it is extremely unlikely. Admissions officers also express concerns about the impact of canceled or altered school semesters on test performance as well as the potential larger impact of disruptions on students from less wealthy families or underrepresented groups.

The dean of admissions for Tufts also indicates students’ general wellbeing or mental health as a factor, stating that “a standardized test for college admissions should not be at the forefront of [students’] thinking.” These COVID-19-related concerns add to existing issues institutions have previously considered about equity as well as enrollment prospects. According to its president, St. Bonaventure University found

---


25 Ibid.


that before COVID-19, it was losing applicants to other institutions that were test-
optional.29

The number of institutions waiving their SAT and ACT admissions requirements, at
least temporarily, continues to rise as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. As of April
15, 2020, The New York Times reported that while Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and many
other elite universities continue to require scores from their applicants, other
institutions have modified their stance. Top-tier liberal arts colleges such as Williams
College and Amherst College have made the tests optional for the class seeking to
enroll in fall 2021. As discussed above, the University of California and California
State University systems have taken this step as well.30

The list below names a selection of institutions that have temporarily waived SAT and
ACT testing requirements for the 2020 admissions cycle.

Figure 7: Institutions Temporarily Waiving ACT/SAT Requirements for 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adelphi College</th>
<th>Kutztown University</th>
<th>Thiel College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama A &amp; M University</td>
<td>Lamar University</td>
<td>University of Akron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama State University</td>
<td>Limestone College</td>
<td>University of Alaska Fairbanks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albion College</td>
<td>Lock Haven University</td>
<td>University of Dayton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma College</td>
<td>Longwood University</td>
<td>University of Mobile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auburn University at Montgomery</td>
<td>Malone University</td>
<td>University of Mount Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin Peay State University</td>
<td>Mansfield University</td>
<td>University of Nevada (select campuses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethany College</td>
<td>McMurry University</td>
<td>University of North Dakota – Grand Forks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bismarck State College</td>
<td>Midway University</td>
<td>University of Pittsburgh Regional Campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bluefield State University</td>
<td>Millersville University</td>
<td>University System of Georgia (select campuses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigham Young University</td>
<td>Newberry College</td>
<td>University of Virginia – Wise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central College</td>
<td>Northern Kentucky University</td>
<td>Washington State University Vancouver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland State College</td>
<td>Ohio University</td>
<td>West Virginia State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarion University</td>
<td>Saint Vincent College</td>
<td>Westminster College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottey College</td>
<td>St. Mary's University</td>
<td>Winthrop University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairmont State University</td>
<td>St. Thomas Aquinas College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin College</td>
<td>St. Thomas University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana University (select campuses)</td>
<td>Savannah College of Arts and Design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana Wesleyan University</td>
<td>Schreiner University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa Wesleyan University</td>
<td>Southern Arkansas University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson State University</td>
<td>Southwest Baptist University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kent State University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Center for Fair & Open Testing31


Approaches to Going Test Optional

In general, practices for going test optional are evolving more rapidly in response to COVID-19 than prior to the pandemic, but do not seem to be significantly different. Most new policies adhere to the existing range of test-optional approaches (see page 11) that were evident before COVID-19. However, institutions are approaching the transition differently from one another. While some are adopting fundamental, permanent changes accelerated by the current situation, others are changing their practices as a temporary stopgap. Some institutions have adopted test optional policies for a defined period, like Tufts University and Davidson College’s three-year pilots or Boston University’s single year adoption. 32

Test optional policies may also be applied with limitations. St. Bonaventure University’s policy is conditional, with tests still required for some majors, applicants planning to compete in Division I athletics, and qualification for its highest tier scholarships. 33 University of Toledo has a similar policy, in which applicants to programs such as nursing and engineering are still required to submit test scores. 34

In some cases, institutions may replace test scores with alternative measures of student-institution fit. When DePaul University went test optional in 2011, it allowed students who do not submit ACT or SAT scores to answer essay prompts “designed to measure ‘noncognitive’ traits, such as leadership, commitment to service, and ability to meet long-term goals.” 35 Similarly, Newberry College allows students unable to take the SAT or ACT due to COVID-19 to submit a statement as a substitute. 36

In general, statements regarding new post-COVID-19 policies indicate that existing holistic admissions processes provide ample alternative ways to judge applicants’ academic ability. University of Redlands “will assess other components of the application, including high school GPA, quality of writing, strength of curriculum, course sequences, contribution to the community, and community college courses taken, if applicable.” 37 Several institutions are placing more consideration onto high school GPA; both Chapman University and Redlands University cite reviews of multi-year internal data that show high school GPA to be a better predictor of performance than test scores. 38

---

TAXONOMY OF TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES

Test-optional policies may be extended to all prospective students or made optional for students meeting academic thresholds (e.g., a certain high school GPA). Several institutions have also implemented “test-blind” policies in which their admissions committees do not consider any scores submitted. Figure 8 describes the continuum of test-optional policies recognized by FairTest, as well as their 2018 estimates of the share of test-optional institutions embracing each policy.

Figure 8: Test Optional Policy Taxonomy and Prevalence

- **Optional for All Policy**: Allows most or all students to choose whether or not to submit testing scores as part of their admissions application.
- **Optional Plus Policy**: Non-submitters are required to supplement their application with an interview or extra writing samples.
- **Optional for Some Policy**: Testing options are offered to some student groups, but not others (e.g. out of state; applying for certain programs).
- **Academic Threshold Policy**: Students who meet certain academic criteria (e.g. GPA) are admitted without testing scores as part of the admissions decision.
- **Text Flexible Policy**: Students have the option to submit scores from other testing in place of the SAT or ACT.
- **Test Blind Policy**: Scores may be submitted, but they will not be reviewed by admission staff to make the admission decision.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Type</th>
<th>Share of FairTest Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Optional For All</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional Plus</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional For Some</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Threshold</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Flexible</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Blind</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Center for Fair & Open Testing

ABOUT HANOVER RESEARCH

Hanover Research provides high-quality, custom research and analytics through a cost-effective model that helps clients make informed decisions, identify and seize opportunities, and heighten their effectiveness.

HANOVER’S HIGHER EDUCATION SOLUTIONS

Hanover enables higher education institutions to offer a world-class educational experience and operate an efficient and sustainable institution. Hanover’s Higher Education Solutions tackle the academic and administrative challenges facing every department at your institution—amplifying your individual efforts with our tried and tested suite of solutions. Our partners include higher education institutions of all varieties: from large to small, public and private, two-year, four-year, professional, graduate, and for-profit schools.

ACADEMIC SOLUTIONS

- **Enrollment Management:** Target the optimal pool of students and maximize application and acceptance rates.
- **Academic Development:** Strengthen your academic portfolio through market analysis of existing and potential new programs.
- **Student Experience:** Spot at-risk students early, identify the drivers of attrition, and pinpoint factors driving poor post-graduate outcomes.

ADMINISTRATIVE SOLUTIONS

- **Finance:** Increase revenue and dynamically evaluate costs to run an efficient, financially viable, and growth-oriented institution.
- **Advancement:** Highlight your institutional impact with donors and alumni.
- **Marketing:** Reach the right audience at the right time with the right message.

GRANTS SOLUTIONS

- **Grant-seeking Capacity:** Develop your organizational capacity to pursue grant funding.
- **Funding Research:** Spot grant opportunities aligned to your funding needs.
- **Pre-Proposal Support:** Facilitate the development of competitive project concepts prior to submission.
- **Proposal Review & Support:** Provide review and revision to ensure robust proposal submissions.
- **Proposal Development:** Engage full proposal development support.

OUR BENEFITS

- **EXPERT**
  200+ analysts with multiple methodology research expertise

- **FLEXIBLE**
  Ongoing custom research agenda adapts with organizations’ needs

- **DEDICATED**
  Exclusive account and research teams ensure strategic partnership

- **EFFICIENT**
  Annual, fixed-fee model shares costs and benefits