



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

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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:

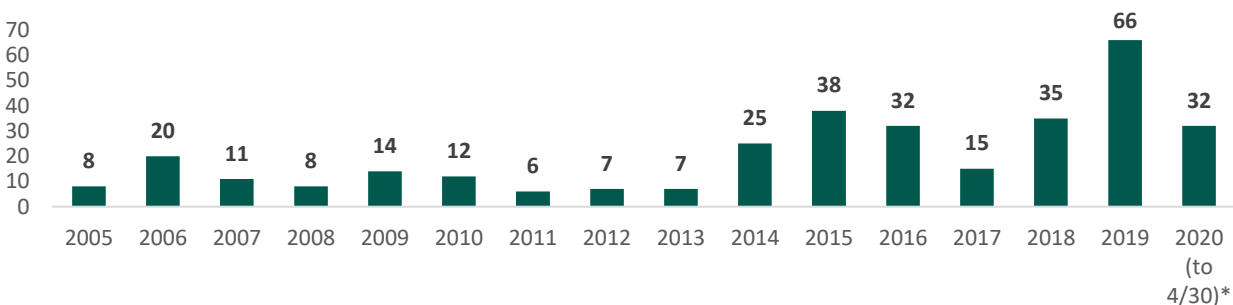
- Trends and changes in admissions testing policies prior to COVID-19, and how current decisions are impacted by previous debates on the topic
- Test policy implications for merit aid, equity, and the credibility of admissions decisions
- Variations of test-optional policies, including test-flexible, 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 1969.¹ 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.²

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.³ 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 Testing⁴

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.

¹ "Test Optional Policy." Bowdoin College. <https://www.bowdoin.edu/admissions/our-process/test-optional-policy/index.html>

² Hiss, William C. "20 Years of Optional SATs." Bates College. October 1, 2004. <https://www.bates.edu/news/2004/10/01/sats-at-bates/>

³ "Test Optional Growth Chronology, 2005-2020." FairTest. April 20, 2020. <https://www.fairtest.org/sites/default/files/Optional-Growth-Chronology.pdf>

⁴ "Test Optional Growth Chronology, 2005-2020." Op cit.

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

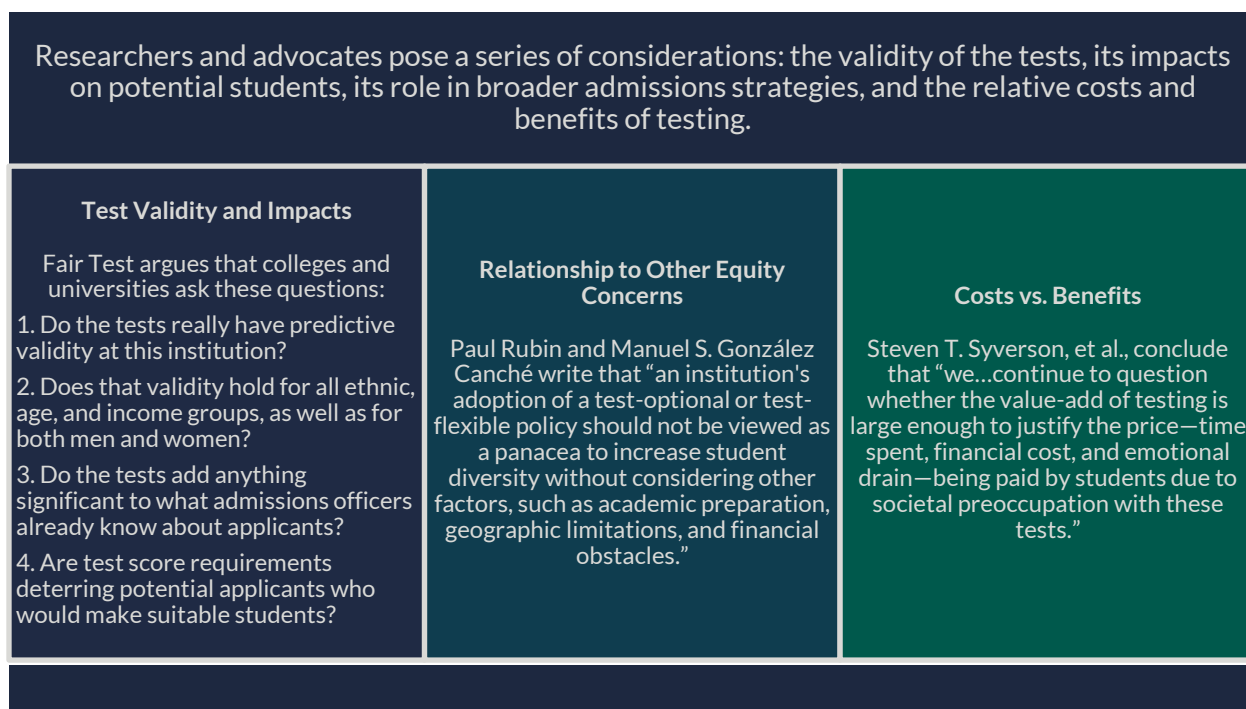
Previous considerations primarily relate to equity and validity concerns, predictive validity, and cost/benefit analyses, as summarized in Figure 2.

⁵ Strauss, Valerie. “Is it finally time to get rid of the SAT and ACT college admissions tests?” *The Washington Post*. March 19, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/03/19/is-it-finally-time-get-rid-sat-act-college-admissions-tests/>

⁶ Hoover, Eric. “Why Are SAT Takers Getting an ‘Adversity Score’? Here’s Some Context.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. May 16, 2019. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-Are-SAT-Takers-Getting-an/246318>

⁷ Nadworny, Elissa. “Colleges Go Test-Optional After SAT, ACT are Called Off.” *NPR*. April 1, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/01/825304555/colleges-go-test-optional-after-sat-act-are-called-off>

Figure 2: Three Ways to Evaluate Test-Optional Policies



Source: National Center for Fair & Open Testing,⁸ Rubin and González Canché,⁹ and Syverson, et al.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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

⁸ “Test Scores Do Not Equal Merit: Executive Summary.” The National Center for Fair and Open Testing. August 22, 2007. <https://www.fairtest.org/test-scores-do-not-equal-merit-executive-summary>

⁹ Syverson, Steven T., et al. “Defining Access: How Test-Optional Works.” National Association for College Admission Counseling. 2018. p. 4.

¹⁰ Rubin, Paul, and Manuel S. González Canché. “Test-Flexible Admissions Policies and Student Enrollment Demographics.” *The Review of Higher Education*. 42.4. (Summer 2019). p. 1,364. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/729346>

¹¹ Ibid. P. 13.

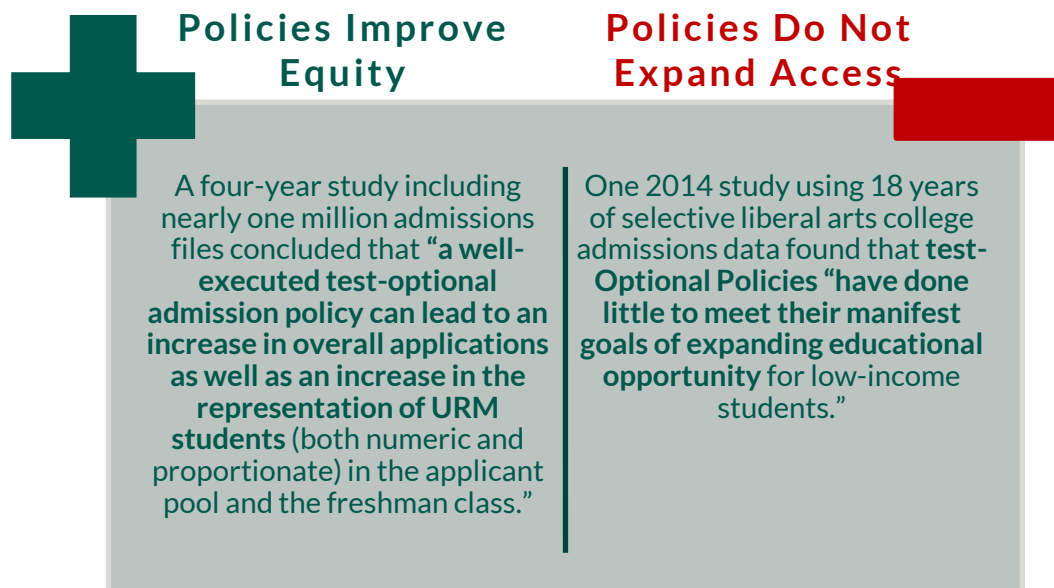
¹² Rubin, Paul, and Manuel S. González Canché. Op. cit. p. 1,364.

...the adoption of a well-executed test-optional 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-optional] institutions experienced URM growth above that of a matched test-requiring peer institution. A similar but smaller magnitude increase was seen among Pell recipients.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.¹⁴

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

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



Source: Syverson, et al.¹⁵ and Belasco, et al.¹⁶

TEST VALIDITY AND PREDICTIVE VALUE

Both the SAT and ACT have been modified substantially within the past decade.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

¹³ Syverson, Steven T., et al. Op. cit. p. 4.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 3.

¹⁵ Syverson, Steven T., et al. Op. cit. p. 4.

¹⁶ Belasco, Andrew S., et al. "The Test-Optional Movement in America's Selective Liberal Arts Colleges: A Boon for Equity or Something Else?" *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. June 2014. p. 13.

¹⁷ [1] Nelson, Libby. "Everything you need to know about the SAT." *Vox*. May 11, 2015. <https://www.vox.com/2014/9/29/18080522/sat-college>

[2] Sorenson, Tiffany. "How to Decide Between the 2019 and 2020 ACT." *U.S. News & World Report*. December 23, 2019. <https://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/college-admissions-playbook/articles/how-to-decide-between-the-2019-and-2020-act>

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.”¹⁸ 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

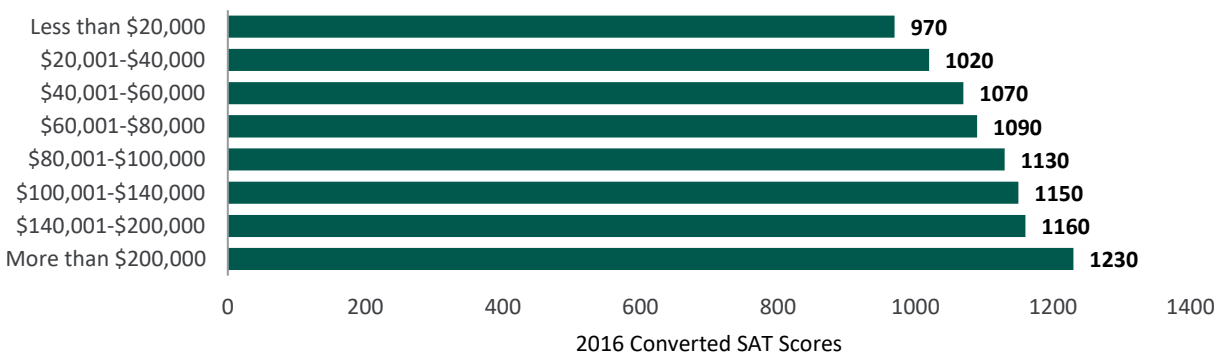
Burton and Ramist (2001) released a meta-study of eight prior studies to evaluate the predictive value of SAT scores. They found a cumulative college GPA correlation of 0.36 for the SAT and 0.42 for high school grades. The smaller subset of studies that looked at both indicators combined found a stronger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

Source: Evans¹⁹

SAT and ACT performance also correlates strongly with non-academic variables like income.²⁰ Moreover, some studies have shown that the tests are poorer predictors of performance for underrepresented minority students than for white students.²¹ 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 data²²

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.

¹⁸ Evans, Brent J. “College Admission Testing in America.” Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis. p. 5.

<https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Draft%20of%20College%20Testing%20in%20America.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 4-6.

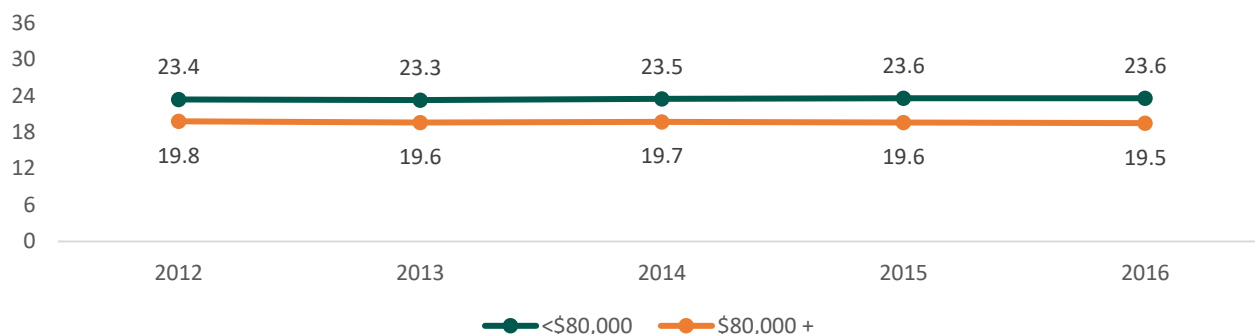
²⁰ Perry, Andre M. “Students need more than an SAT adversity score, they need a boost in wealth.” Brookings. May 17, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2019/05/17/students-need-more-than-an-sat-adversity-score-they-need-a-boost-in-wealth/>

²¹ See: Aguinis, Herman, and Steven A. Culpepper. “Differential Prediction Generalization in College Admissions Testing.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 108.7 (2016), p. 1054. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/305a/465ceff1cee43f11565025a9e38ef18bab6b.pdf?_ga=2.146865335.1253560970.1587680644-1616254979.1587570986

²² Cheng, Allen. “What is the Average SAT Score?” PrepScholar. October 6, 2019. <https://blog.prepscholar.com/what-is-the-average-sat-score>

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



Source: ACT²³

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.²⁴ Additional testing dates are currently being planned for Fall 2020 if conditions allow.²⁵ Many are speculating about the possibility of at-home standardized tests in fall 2020 but leaders at College Board say it is extremely unlikely.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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."²⁸ 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

²³ Mattern, Krista, et al. "ACT Composite Score by Family Income." ACT. August 2016. <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1604-ACT-Composite-Score-by-Family-Income.pdf>

²⁴ Ingersoll, Adam. "Impact of COVID-19 on College Admission and Testing." Compass Education Group. April 15, 2020. <https://www.compassprep.com/impact-of-covid-19-on-testing/>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hartocollis, Anemona, and Goldstein, Dana. "Students Might Have to Take College Admissions Tests at Home This Fall." *The New York Times*. April 15, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/us/sat-act-test-coronavirus.html>

²⁷ Bauer-Wolf, Jeremy. "Could Coronavirus Push More Colleges to Test-Optional Admissions?" *Education Dive*. March 23, 2020. <https://www.educationdive.com/news/could-coronavirus-push-more-colleges-to-test-optional-admissions/574679/>

²⁸ Lorin, Janet. "Colleges Drop SAT, Easing Admissions Burden for at Least One Class." *Bloomberg*. March 30, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-30/colleges-drop-sat-and-act-easing-burden-of-testing-for-admission>

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

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adelphi College • Alabama A & M University • Alabama State University • Albion College • Alma College • Auburn University at Montgomery • Austin Peay State University • Bethany College • Bismarck State College • Bluefield State University • Brigham Young University • Central College • Cleveland State College • Clarion University • Cottey College • Fairmont State University • Franklin College • Indiana University (select campuses) • Indiana Wesleyan University • Iowa Wesleyan University • Jackson State University • Kent State University | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kutztown University • Lamar University • Limestone College • Lock Haven University • Longwood University • Malone University • Mansfield University • McMurry University • Midway University • Millersville University • Newberry College • Northern Kentucky University • Ohio University • Saint Vincent College • St. Mary's University • St. Thomas Aquinas College • St. Thomas University • Savannah College of Arts and Design • Schreiner University • Southern Arkansas University • Southwest Baptist University | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thiel College • University of Akron • University of Alaska Fairbanks • University of Dayton • University of Mobile • University of Mount Union • University of Nevada (select campuses) • University of North Dakota - Grand Forks • University of Pittsburgh Regional Campuses • University System of Georgia (select campuses) • University of Virginia -Wise • Washington State University Vancouver • West Virginia State University • Westminster College • Winthrop University |
|--|--|--|

Source: National Center for Fair & Open Testing³¹

²⁹ "St. Bonaventure to Adopt Test-Optional Policy for Standardized Tests, with Conditions." *St. Bonaventure University*. February 23, 2020. <https://www.sbu.edu/about-sbu/news-events/latest-news/news-release/2020/02/23/st.-bonaventure-to-adopt-test-optional-policy-for-standardized-tests-with-conditions>

³⁰ Vigdor, Neil. "Some Colleges Are Waiving SAT and ACT Requirements." *The New York Times*. April 15, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/us/sat-act-test-optional-colleges-coronavirus.html>

³¹ "Colleges and Universities Temporarily Waiving ACT/SAT Requirements for 2020 Admissions Only." FairTest. April 21, 2020. <https://www.fairtest.org/sites/default/files/ACT-SATWaiversfor2020Admissions.pdf>

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

³² [1] Nadworny, Op. cit.

[2] Jaschik, Scott. "Coronavirus Drives Colleges to Test Optional." *Inside Higher Ed*. March 30, 2020. <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2020/03/30/coronavirus-leads-many-colleges-including-some-are-competitive-go-test>

³³ St. Bonaventure, Op. cit.

³⁴ Bauer-Wolf, Op. cit.

³⁵ Hoover, Eric. "DePaul Becomes Biggest Private University to Go 'Test Optional.'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. February 17, 2011.

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/DePaul-U-Will-Make-SAT-and/126396>

³⁶ Jaschik, "Coronavirus Drives Colleges to Test Optional," Op. cit.

³⁷ "Test-Optional Admission Policy Introduced at University of Redlands." *Bulldog Blog*. March 11, 2020. <https://www.redlands.edu/bulldog-blog/2020/march-2020/test-optional-admission-policy-introduced-at-university-of-redlands/>

³⁸ [1] Chapman University. "Chapman University to Go Test-Optional Starting Fall 2021."

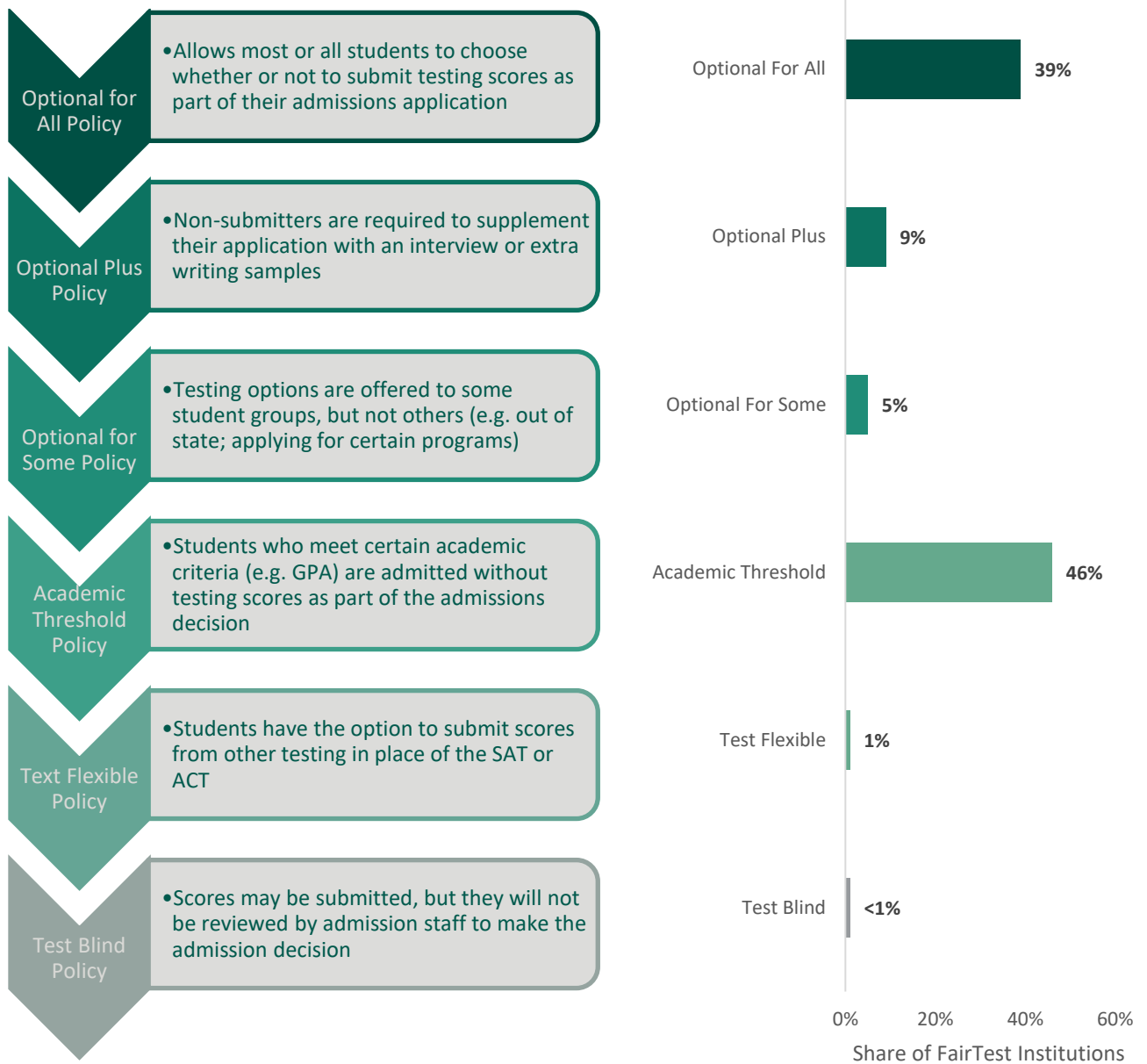
Orange County Breeze. March 2, 2020. https://www.oc-breeze.com/2020/03/02/178394_chapman-university-to-go-test-optional-starting-fall-2021/

[2] Ibid.

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



Source: National Center for Fair & Open Testing³⁹

³⁹ Syverson, Steven T., et al. Op. cit. p. 10.

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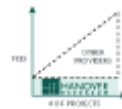
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