

the TEST and the ART of thinking

Summary of Pertinent Information for Colleges Evaluating Admission Test Policies
December 12, 2018

A RAPIDLY-CHANGING ADMISSIONS LANDSCAPE

The tremendous growth in the number of test-optional colleges over the past 5 years has put pressure on many college presidents and admissions offices to assess the advisability of adopting such a policy from the standpoint of a competitive response to peer institutions, in addition to considerations of the real educational value of standardized tests.

On June 14, 2018 the University of Chicago made national headlines as the first top-ranked college to [launch](#) a test-optional admissions process. Most significantly, on September 26, 2018 the flagship US public university system, the University of California, [announced](#) the initiation of a new study to re-assess the place of the SAT and ACT in its admissions decisions. One week later the California State University system decided to [follow suit](#).

VALIDITY STUDIES

Institutions are encouraged by NACAC to perform their own research into the validity of the tests in predicting student success, but [only about half of colleges](#) do so.

After consideration of high school GPA, strength of curriculum, and socioeconomic status, many colleges that have conducted validity studies found that SAT/ACT test scores add only marginally to predicting college performance. Jon Boeckenstedt, Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management and Marketing at **DePaul University** and one of the most data-conscious admissions officers, has stated that the [SAT/ACT only provide about 2% of unique statistical contribution](#) to predicting grades at his institution. DePaul, which adopted a test-optional policy starting with its incoming class for the fall of 2012, processes over 20,000 applications annually to select some 2,500 incoming freshmen.

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From [InsideHigherEd](#):

"What we found is that the students we were taking a chance on" before dropping a test requirement "were doing very well." So that raised the question of why they were being required to submit test scores that might have discouraged them from applying or the university from admitting them, Boeckenstedt said.

"There's a point you start to feel disgusted with yourself," he said, for referring to a student by his or her test score.

The results of one of the most comprehensive and scholarly studies about the role of the SAT/ACT is reported in the book, [Crossing The Finish Line](#). Based on examining the college records of more than 150,000 students, the authors conclude:

High school grades are a far better predictor of both four-year and six-year graduation rates than are SAT/ACT scores.... The consistency of the results is extraordinary.... The findings are dramatic.... We had not expected to find that SAT/ACT scores are such relatively weak incremental predictors of college outcomes.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

One study of prospective college students, [College Admissions...What Are Students Learning](#) helps us understand the "market appeal" of colleges downgrading the relative importance of standardized tests. "Students believe the SAT plays a significant role in College Admissions that is patently unfair and unjustified," conclude the authors of the research report.

DISCERNING THE IMPACT OF TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES

Some institutions are reluctant to consider test-optional policies because they fear that their ability to select students who will persist, excel academically, and graduate will be compromised. Such fears are not well supported by recent data.

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One recent study found that students who do not submit SAT/ACT scores for admissions consideration have college GPAs and graduation rates that are nearly identical to those attained by students who submit scores. [Defining Promise](#) (2014) found only slight differences in GPA and graduation outcomes between students who had submitted test scores versus those who had not:

With almost 123,00 students at 33 widely differing institutions, the differences between submitters and non-submitters are five one-hundredths of a GPA point, and six-tenths of one percent in graduation rates. By any standard, these are trivial differences.

A follow-up study regarding the outcomes of test-optional admissions ([Defining Access](#), 2018) surveyed the academic records of nearly 1 million students and found a somewhat wider gap in GPA (3.40 among college graduates who had submitted test scores versus 3.23 for non-submitting graduates). However, the study also found that non-submitters graduated from college at slightly higher rates.

An oft-cited [study](#) conducted by the **University of Georgia** found that 32 colleges did not increase diversity in the aggregate after going test-optional. This study has been questioned due to its inclusion of many colleges that had been test-optional for only a year or two, and for not considering college-specific outcomes. Given the large number of selective colleges and universities that have adopted test-optional policies since this study's 2010 cut-off (for instance, the number of test-optional top-100 national liberal arts colleges has more than doubled), further research regarding test-optional policies on student body diversity is indicated. In addition, the University of Georgia study's conclusions are called into question by the many specific citations of gains in diversity published in recent years by test-optional colleges (a few of which are offered below).

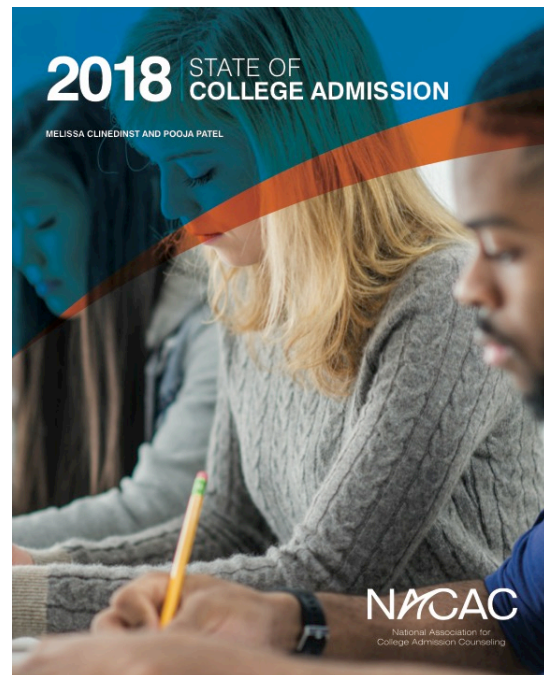
CHANGING PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE VALUE OF SAT/ACT TEST SCORES

Have the significant number of test-optional adoptions, and the many questions raised about the validity and value of standardized tests in recent years had an impact on their use by college admissions offices?

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A recent [article](#) in *Education Week* highlighted a **reduction** in the percentage of colleges that said they assigned “considerable importance” to SAT/ACT scores.

- [NACAC’s State of College Admission 2018](#) shows this figure falling from 59% to 52% since 2010, while those placing “considerable importance” on “grades in all courses” rose from 46% to 81%.
- Correspondingly, the percentage of colleges reporting that SAT/ACT scores had “little or no value” increased from 11.8% to 16.8% during this period.
- The 52% figure placing “considerable importance” on test scores is the lowest since 2001.



SUCCESS WITH TEST-OPTIONAL ADMISSIONS

More than 300 selective colleges and universities have adopted a test-optional admissions policy to date. Here’s a look at recent comments by leaders at test-optional institutions regarding the impact of the policy, or the factors that led to the decision to make test scores optional:

George Washington University [announced](#) that its recently-admitted test-optional applicants have been on par academically with other students:

In a March presentation to the Faculty Senate, Provost Forrest Maltzman introduced new data showing that students admitted for fall 2016 who did not submit SAT or ACT scores – the first admissions cycle under the new policy – had about the same first-year GPA average as those who submitted scores. The data shows that, despite initial expert and faculty fears, students who applied test-optional are on par academically with other students.

Officials found that it’s not more difficult to predict how students will perform in their first year even without standardized test scores. Administrators said this finding reaffirmed the University’s decision to follow a national trend and shift to a test-optional admissions policy in 2015.

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Maltzman said officials do not plan to change the current test-optional policy, which also led to a 28-percent spike in applications and a higher number of Latino, African-American and first-generation applicants in 2016.

Worcester Polytechnic Institute (the first nationally ranked science and engineering university to adopt a test-optional admissions policy) released a [statement](#) at the 10th anniversary of its test-optional policy:

Over the past decade, the policy has received support and pushback. Some worry that a test-optional status lowers the standards for admission. As WPI marks its test-optional 10-year anniversary, it has the hard facts about how the move has led to a stronger and more diverse applicant pool and student body.

Since going test-optional, enrollments of women and minority students have grown by 81 percent and 156 percent, respectively, Kristin Tichenor, [WPI's senior vice president, enrollment and institutional strategy] notes. At the same time, the admission rate has dropped from 66 percent to 48 percent and the percentage of first year students who ranked in the top decile of their graduating high school class has gone from 48 percent to 68 percent.

Bowdoin College will be celebrating its 50th year of test-optional admissions in 2019. Comments regarding the impact of the policy, taken from [Inside Higher Ed](#), are offered below:

Whitney Soule, dean of admissions and financial aid at Bowdoin, said the experience of her college shows that a highly competitive college can have consistent success at admitting students without test scores. Since the early 1980s, applications have gone up at the college from about 2,500 to more than 9,000. During that time, the share of students who submit test scores has remained relatively stable, at between two-thirds and three-quarters of the class.

As the college has become more competitive in admissions, she said, Bowdoin has regularly conducted tests to see if admissions choices made without tests are as accurate at predicting college success as are those where test scores are considered. There has never been a difference, she said.

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The top factors in admissions decisions, she said, are the high school transcript and the high school profile, Soule said. Those factors allow the college to see academic preparedness and also how the applicant took advantage of opportunities available at a given high school.

Highly-ranked **Colby College** has recently announced that its admissions test policy is changing from test-flexible (which it was since 2010) to [test-optional](#):

The limited ability of standardized tests to assess a range of intellectual attributes Colby values and that are rewarded in an innovation economy is one reason the College is changing its admission policy. There are others, including a body of research that demonstrates how students from under-resourced backgrounds are disadvantaged by the testing industry. Through Colby's own research and through national studies, standardized tests have been shown to have only modest predictive powers for success in college.

TEST-OPTIONAL ADMISSIONS AND *US NEWS* RANKINGS

Despite wide-ranging questions about the value of standardized college admissions testing, the influential *US News* college rankings system still apportions [nearly 8%](#) of its 100-point ranking metric to SAT/ACT scores.

One common criticism of test-optional admissions is that colleges adopting such policies are motivated in part by a desire to raise their reported SAT/ACT scores by only reporting scores of submitters, which are typically 100 or more points higher than non-submitters.

However, many colleges require students who were admitted without consideration of scores to submit scores upon enrollment for research purposes. For instance, Wake Forest University generally reports about 98% of its freshman test scores, despite a significant non-submitter presence among enrollees.



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A concerted effort to report the scores of non-submitting enrollees should mitigate any perceived advantage of test-optional policies on a test score-related rise in the *US News* rankings. Additionally colleges not reporting at least 75% of their freshman SAT/ACT scores are subject to a 15% devaluation penalty. *US News* maintains that colleges that adopt test-optional policies do not as a group see a statistically significant rise in the *US News* rankings, a conclusion that is matched by Canobie Films' own research.

Another putative motivation for test-optional adoption is to raise the number of applications in order to lower a college or university's acceptance rate. However, starting with the 2019 rankings released in September 2018, ***US News no longer uses college acceptance rates in its calculations.*** This component formerly represented a modest 1.25% of the rankings metric.

For more information about the documentary "The Test & the Art of Thinking" please contact Carla Fleisher at carla@filmsprout.org to request a screening.

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