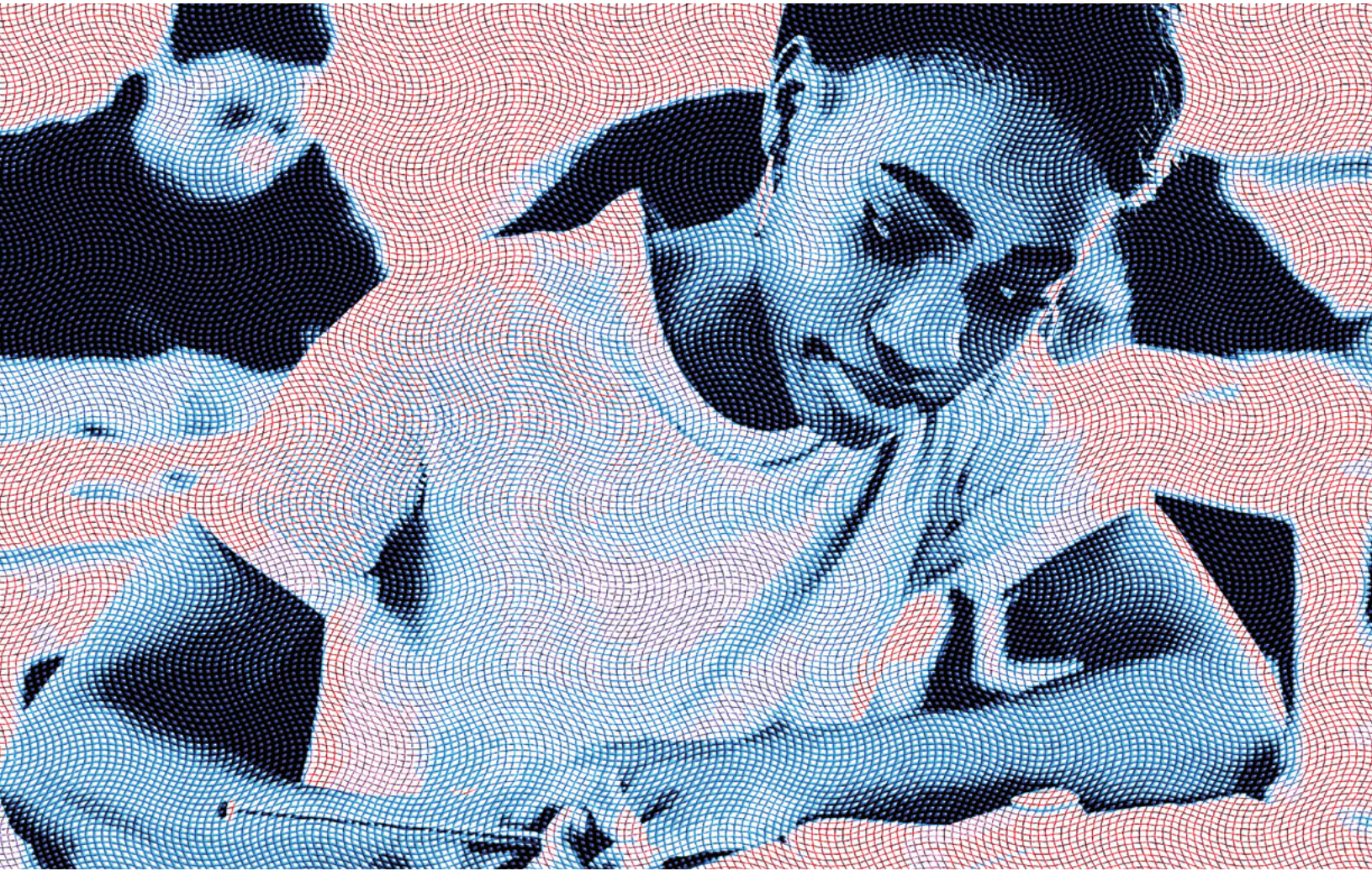


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EQUITABLE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PRACTICES

Advancing Equity by Rethinking the Use of Tests in College Admissions

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The Campaign for College Opportunity



Preface

Over 50% of American students in our public schools are Latinx, Black, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI), or American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN). Tapping into their talent and ensuring their access to a college education is essential to our future economic power and the success of our multi-racial democracy. Despite the historical exclusion and current underrepresentation of many Americans in our colleges and universities, in June 2023, the Supreme Court of the United States severely curtailed the use of race in higher education admissions, prohibiting the consideration of an applicant's racial status as part of that process.

Race-conscious admissions helped ensure America's colleges and universities were more diverse. Without it, there is a greater urgency for college leaders and policy makers to review current practices for equity, and to identify solutions that provide a fairer approach to preparing students for college, admitting them, and supporting their success. Towards that aim, the Campaign for College Opportunity is releasing a series of briefs, including this one, as part of our [Affirming Equity, Ensuring Inclusion and Empowering Action initiative](#). The series will elevate practices that support the college preparation, admission, affordability, and success of Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN students, ensuring America does not return to an era of exclusion in higher education.



Overview

This brief discusses the equity implications of requiring college applicants to submit an SAT or ACT score as part of their application for admission, considerations for college leaders examining test-optional policies, and ways in which test-free policies may address equity concerns related to standardized tests in college admissions. The brief concludes with recommendations for college leaders and admissions officers who are seeking more equitable admissions practices.

All higher education institutions should value the importance of a diverse and inclusive student body, and test-free policies can be helpful in broadening access and opportunity for students from all backgrounds and income levels. As a result of the pandemic, over 1,700 colleges use “test-optional” policies, meaning that they have made SAT/ACT score submission optional.¹ Test-free and test-optional policies offer institutions a way to communicate their values and signal that they welcome students from all backgrounds.

The University of California (UC) system and several private institutions (e.g., the California Institute of Technology [Caltech]) are among the prominent universities and systems pioneering test-free policies. These policies facilitate access for traditionally excluded students and eliminate a substantial source of bias from the evaluation of applicants. In May 2020, the UC Regents unanimously voted to make the submission of an SAT or ACT score optional; by November, the system announced it would no longer consider the scores at all in its admissions processes.² Campuses at both the UC and California State University (CSU) are among the 86 colleges and universities that now have test-free or test-blind admissions.

Colleges with test-optional policies allow, but do not require, students to submit SAT or ACT scores as part of their applications. Test-optional policies are valuable, in some respects, and the most comprehensive study on test-optional policies indicates a modest, but significant, positive effect on schools' racial/ethnic diversification. However, these policies can present complications that include the shifting SAT/ACT percentile ranges that colleges report, as a disproportionate number of score reports from students with relatively higher scores, and applicants' confusion over whether to submit scores or not. As discussed below, these considerations do not warrant a return to required testing, which is rife with inequality. Test-optional policies can pave the way for test-free policies by helping institutions learn to evaluate applicants without test scores. Test-free policies can also lead to more streamlined training for admissions readers and less confusion among applicants, and they can encourage a more careful reading of applications versus an overreliance on test scores as a shortcut.



The SAT and ACT are standardized tests commonly used in college admissions. Prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the majority of selective higher education institutions required a SAT or ACT score. Currently, most institutions use test-free or test-optional policies. Test-free institutions do not ask for or consider SAT or ACT scores in making admissions decisions. Test-optional institutions allow a student to decide whether to submit a SAT or ACT score as part of the application.

Equity Concerns With the SAT/ACT and Standardized Test Preparation

The need for shifts in testing policy is a result of equity-related challenges with the SAT/ACT and test preparation. First, the SAT/ACT presents a significant barrier to accessing higher education, and such norm-referenced tests are troublingly linked to race and class. Analyses of data from the UC system found that about one-third of the variation in students' SAT scores could be explained by the combination of race and class, with a growing association between race and SAT scores.³ Much of this dynamic is due to racial disparities in academic preparation in a highly unequal K-12 system.⁴ Just as importantly, SAT/ACT scores add little, if any, unique information to predicting academic performance in college. Geiser (2017) notes:



“After taking [information from holistic review] into account, SAT/ACT scores have become largely redundant and uniquely predict less than two percent of the variance in student performance at UC.”⁵

Saul Geiser (2017), senior associate at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley

Broadening access to test prep is often recommended to address inequality linked to standardized tests. However, this solution is insufficient because test prep mostly benefits students with already high levels of academic preparation.⁶ Average gains tend to be lower for the general population.⁷ One analysis of Khan Academy's free SAT prep program found that gains were largely overstated, and that the program fostered a “rich get richer” effect, with well-resourced students benefiting the most.⁸



Understanding Test-Optional Policies

Colleges with test-optional admissions policies consider test scores for students who choose to submit them. In contrast, test-free institutions (discussed in a later section) do not consider test scores at all in admissions decisions. The term “test-optional” encompasses a range of policies. Some institutions are test-optional only if a student’s GPA exceeds a certain threshold, and others may require or encourage submission of scores for scholarships or honors programs. Institutions can brand themselves as test-optional, but state on their websites that test scores are helpful in determining scholarships and financial aid, encouraging students to still submit scores. This type of messaging undermines the ability of a test-optional policy to support diversification.

Prior to the pandemic, test-optional policies were first adopted by private liberal arts colleges and then by a broader array of mostly private institutions. In the most comprehensive study of test-optional policies to date that examined nearly 100 private institutions that went test-optional before the pandemic, Bennett found a modest positive effect on racial/ethnic diversification for enrolled students and a smaller effect on enrollment for Pell Grant recipients.⁹ Another study found that test-optional policies had no significant effect on the academic performance of a student body.¹⁰

Research on the impact of test-optional policies adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic is still emerging, but these evaluations are challenging because the pandemic influenced many factors affecting not only students’ decisions about admissions and enrollment, but also their academic performance in high school and college.¹¹ Further complicating these analyses, numerous learning disruptions were particularly hard-felt by students from the most vulnerable backgrounds.

Scholars note that test-optional policies may have a limited impact on student demographics in college without significant investments in financial aid and campus climate.¹² Students might be admitted to a college or university through test-optional admissions but be unable to attend due to insufficient financial aid, or they may decline offers of admission due to concerns about the campus lacking a welcoming and inclusive environment. Most, if not almost all, studies of test-optional policies have been conducted in contexts where race-conscious admissions policies were legal. No research to date has closely examined the impact of test-optional admissions in institutions affected by bans on such policies. The constraints placed on colleges and universities by the recent SCOTUS decision will limit institutions' ability to fairly evaluate these scores outside of a well-designed holistic admissions process.

One concern about test-optional policies is that testing percentile ranges (i.e., scores for the 25th and 75th percentiles of score submitters) will increase, since high-scoring students are more inclined to submit test scores when applying to college. Institutions may welcome these boosts, associating them with prestige, gaining positions in ranking systems that incorporate these ranges as a measure of institutional quality, and pointing to these score ranges as evidence that their admitted students are high academic achievers. However, such shifts may make the institution seem out of reach to some students, even if students are not required to submit test scores.

Test-optional policies cannot solve all inequities related to admissions, but colleges should not misconstrue these considerations as reasons to require tests again. Of note, sizable percentages of students — both overall and from historically excluded backgrounds — have chosen not to submit test scores. In the 2021-2022 cycle, over half of the applicants who applied to colleges and universities through the Common Application, the country's largest application portal, did not submit test scores, and 60% of Black and Latinx applicants did not submit scores.¹³ Clearly, the option to not submit test scores is attractive to many applicants. Moving away from required testing may make higher education feel more accessible to historically excluded populations.¹⁴ Test-optional policies can also serve as steppingstones for institutions to realize that they can evaluate applicants without test scores, opening the door for consideration of completely test-free policies.

Test-free policies, versus test-required or even test-optional policies, are likely more helpful for students who experience high barriers to navigating college admissions. In focus groups that included Indigenous and Latinx students, students expressed confusion about testing requirements and received conflicting information about whether they needed to take SAT/ACT tests and report the scores.¹⁵ While test-optional policies were met with mixed reactions, the authors note that bringing back mandatory testing was not the answer: "For the multiply marginalized focus group participants, test-taking can be experienced as a traumatic task that confirms feelings of not-belonging."¹⁶



Examining Test-Free Policies

As of July 2023, 86 institutions around the country had adopted “test-free,” “test-blind,” or “test-elimination” policies, where admissions professionals do not consider SAT/ACT scores at all in decisions. For some students, test-free policies avoid some of the confusion and uncertainty linked with test-optional policies, because they do not have to worry about whether to submit scores. The issue of rising testing percentiles is also averted since institutions no longer report percentiles. Students can still take the test if they want, and some test-free schools request scores after admission for the purpose of course placement. However, under test-free policies, scores are not requested at the time of the application. Even if students send scores with their applications, they are not considered at all in admissions decisions.

Institutions may see test-free admissions as a way to communicate their values, signaling that students are welcome to apply, regardless of test scores. Going test-free can also send the message that an institution sees limited or no value in standardized tests.

In 2020, the UC Regents adopted a test-free admissions policy for the system.¹⁷ Several developments led to the UC’s shift to test-free admissions, the most important of which was a lawsuit challenging the UC’s use of the SAT/ACT for violating California’s anti-discrimination laws. The COVID-19 pandemic was also a major factor. California courts concluded that the UC needed to be test-free for all students, because safe testing conditions could not be ensured for students with disabilities amid the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸

At various points, the UC had discussed developing its own in-house test or using the California statewide assessment, “Smarter Balanced,” as a substitute. After careful study, the UC Regents rejected those ideas and moved to test-free admissions.



“At UCLA, the move to test-free certainly had an impact on both our application volume and the makeup of our applicant pool. Some of our largest increases came from underrepresented and high-performing students, as measured by both unweighted and weighted GPA . . . The increases in apps from these communities and from top performing students tell us that there were strong students each year who may have been scared off by the middle 50 percent of our test scores.”¹⁹

Gary Clark (2021), director of undergraduate admissions at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)

Clark noted that, in comparison to test-optional policies, “test-free is clearer in many ways — for equity and access for less-resourced students, for universities from a training standpoint, and for families and students who are trying to determine if/when they should submit scores. While we were prepared to train our readers to read apps with and without test scores, not having to toggle between two frameworks certainly streamlined that training.” Clark noted how admissions staff felt that the information collected through the application “provided more than enough information for us to make an informed decision” without test scores.

A number of private institutions are also experimenting with test-free policies. While most are private liberal arts colleges (the same group that first adopted test-optional policies), the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) and Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) are two STEM-focused private institutions currently piloting test-free policies. WPI started an eight-year pilot of test free in fall 2022, following their adaptation of test-optional admissions in 2009. Caltech is currently test free until 2025 at least, announcing in July 2022:



"The current decision to extend the testing moratorium to five years is supported by a rigorous internal analysis of the academic performance of the last seven undergraduate first-year cohorts, representing classes that matriculated before and after the moratorium went into effect. The study, conducted by members of the Caltech faculty supported by professional staff, indicates that standardized test scores have little to no power in predicting students' performance in the first-term mathematics and physics classes that first-year students must take as part of Caltech's core curriculum. Further, the predictive power of standardized test scores appears to dissipate as students' progress through the first-year core curriculum."²⁰

Caltech (2022)

Some upticks in Black and Latinx enrollment have occurred since the adoption of the policy at Caltech, but it is difficult to ascertain the independent effect of test-free policies on enrollment outcomes.

Research on test-free policies is still in the very early stages. One survey of 222 admissions staff members about shifts in testing policy included 17 respondents from test-free institutions.²¹ The vast majority viewed the shift positively. One respondent noted: "It is actually much easier to assess a student's academic capabilities than I expected." **A staff member with over 15 years of admissions experience commented that going to test-free made admissions readers "slow down" and read applications more carefully, instead of just using the test score as a "short cut."**



Policy Recommendations for States and Institutions

State-, system-, and institution-level leaders who understand the benefits of a diverse student body and who want to ensure greater equity and inclusion can support a more equitable and fair admissions process by ending the overuse and misuse of admissions tests. To do so, we offer the following recommendations to state, system, and campus leaders:

- ✓ Eliminate requirements for students to submit SAT or ACT scores as part of their applications in order to broaden access for populations that experience high barriers to accessing higher education.
- ✓ Strongly consider test-free policies in order to eliminate or avoid concerns and drawbacks of both test-required and test-optional policies.
- ✓ Institutions choosing test-optional policies should view this as a transitional stage before moving to test-free admissions. A period of being test-optional can wean admissions officers from overreliance on test scores or using test scores as a short cut rather than carefully reading all parts of the application.
- ✓ Institutions that choose test-optional policies must actively monitor data on the demographic backgrounds and other characteristics of students who are admitted with and without test scores.
- ✓ Institutions that choose test-optional policies must evaluate test scores in a holistic review process that allows admissions officers an opportunity to evaluate the test scores in the larger context of a student's application.
- ✓ Institutions must provide sustained training for admissions officers and readers of applications on how inequality affects applicants and components of the application apart from standardized tests.

Changing testing policy is a critical step toward greater equity in admissions, but campuses also need to review all policies and practices for disparate racial and economic impact, including recruitment, financial aid, letters of recommendation, curriculum requirements, consideration of essays and extracurricular activities, yield management, and early action/decision policies. These topics are discussed in [**“Ensuring Fairness in College Admissions,”**](#) [**“The Urgency of Fair and Equitable Holistic Review of College Applicants,”**](#) and forthcoming briefs in this series.



Conclusion

Test-free policies are a promising development to help lower barriers to accessing higher education for historically excluded populations. They must be accompanied by aggressive investments in resources and support for students, as well as broader system-level analysis and reform in admissions at every campus. Test-optional policies may be helpful to institutions as a transitional phase as they seek to move away from relying heavily on test scores, opening the door to considering whether test-free policies better reflect their goals and values. Tremendous talent exists among students throughout the country who are from a wide array of backgrounds and circumstances, and institutions must work aggressively to enroll them.

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