

Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education

How Did Admissions Offices Adapt to Test-Optional Policies During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Although some institutions employed creative strategies to replace test scores in their admissions and financial aid processes, many institutions relied on traditional methods of evaluation, missing the opportunity to examine inequities in the admissions process due to the turmoil of the pandemic.

Postsecondary institutions have relied on standardized testing as a screening mechanism for nearly a century, despite persisting concerns about testing disparities along racial, gender, and socioeconomic lines as well as questions about the predictive power of such tests. These concerns have led to a growing test-optional movement among colleges and universities in the United States, beginning with private liberal arts schools in the late 1960s and spreading more broadly in the first decades of the 21st century. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift toward test-optional admission policies due to numerous issues with the availability of tests and public health concerns. Consequently, many postsecondary admissions offices had to rapidly adapt their evaluation practices to accommodate test-free and test-optional policies. While a majority of U.S. postsecondary institutions continue to experiment with test-optional policies post-pandemic, little is known about the involuntary implementation of these policies during the pandemic and their impact on enrollment outcomes.

When adapting to external shocks, such as those experienced by postsecondary admissions offices in the wake of COVID-19, organizations have the option to either refine historically successful systems and processes or to explore new strategies for accomplishing their goals. While the refinement of existing processes is less risky, it may only lead to marginal improvements, whereas exploring new processes can potentially lead to transformative outcomes. By examining institutional adaptations to test-optional policies during the pandemic, we shed light on the ability of postsecondary institutions to adjust to changes in the postsecondary environment while also examining how these policies can be adopted in more or less equitable ways. Our research aims to understand how postsecondary enrollment leaders made admissions and financial aid decisions in the absence of standardized test scores, as well as their perceptions of the challenges and benefits of test-optional policies.

The Study

This research is part of a two-year, mixed-methods study of the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted enrollment at postsecondary institutions. Our data are drawn from the qualitative portion of this study, which included focus groups and individual interviews with chief enrollment management officers (CEMOs) from 68 institutions of higher education across the country, ranging in type, size, and selectivity. For the 19 semi-structured focus groups, participants were grouped by institutional type and selectivity: community colleges, public less-selective colleges, public selective colleges, private less-selective colleges, and private selective colleges. Each focus group included 2-5 participants and lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Following the initial focus groups, the research team invited participants to participate in two rounds of individual interviews. We also recruited a small number of additional participants to increase the geographic and sector diversity of the participant pool. This yielded 38 individual interviews in fall 2021 and 36 individual interviews in spring 2022, providing a longitudinal view of institutional experiences during the pandemic.

The qualitative data was initially coded by the larger research team using grounded theory techniques, with five broad themes emerging: recruitment, admission, financial aid, enrollment, and retention. We then further analyzed the data related to admissions selection, financial aid, and diversity, equity, and inclusion to identify the challenges and perceived benefits of test-optional policies, as well as the implementation strategies utilized for applicant evaluation in test-optional admissions.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Institutions used three approaches to transition to test-optional policies: relying on other standardized measures of academic performance; engaging holistic review processes in new or familiar ways; and implementing dual systems of evaluation.
- Institutions that relied on other standardized academic measures often increased their reliance on AP and IB coursework or crafted their own quantitative indexes of academic achievement using historical data from prior student cohorts.
- Some institutions adapted holistic review processes by assigning different weights to non-test application materials or by using contextualization tools such as the College Board's Landscape tool.
- Other enrollment leaders reported implementing parallel systems of application evaluation for those with and without test score data, an approach that raises concerns for equity among applicants.
- Some enrollment leaders shared that test-optional policies made it more difficult to discern academic excellence in the applicant pool. Most enrollment leaders also felt that these policies led to a more diverse cohort of first-year students.

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Results

Our results help explain how institutions adapted to test-optional admissions during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite numerous challenges. We found that institutions' approaches fell into three categories: relying on other standardized measures of academic performance, engaging holistic review processes in new or familiar ways, and implementing dual systems of application evaluation. Additionally, although many enrollment leaders credited test-optional policies with broadening access to their institutions, evaluating applications in the absence of test scores created significant logistical challenges and raises concerns about admissions equity in a test-optional environment.

Institutions that adapted by using alternative academic measures increased their reliance on AP and IB test scores and coursework as well as transcript data and GPA. We were surprised to learn that some institutions used historical data on applicants to develop predictive indices that approximated test scores for test-optional applicants based on their GPA and the rigor of their high school curriculum. These approaches, while exploratory in nature, ultimately sought to replicate test scores so that admission officers could implement their standard evaluative processes for admissions and financial aid. As a potentially more transformative alternative, one institution used a similar process to create an academic rating for students based on weighted high school GPA to replace standardized test scores for all applicants. Other institutions added different academic measures, such as the highest level of mathematics, as evaluative measures.

Some institutions adjusted their holistic admissions processes to exclude test scores, adding emphasis on different aspects of the application or using contextualization tools. These institutions typically recalibrated their evaluation rubrics, relying more heavily on transcripts, essays, and letters of recommendations for insights into students' leadership and involvement. Some institutions also increased their use of contextual information about students' high schools and curricular rigor, often using the College Board's Landscape tool, to evaluate students' academic achievement in light of the opportunities that were available to them. While some institutions used creative approaches to contextualize students' academic records, the majority of institutions made only minor changes to their evaluation systems, and some institutions reported that they did not change their processes at all.

A few institutions implemented parallel evaluation systems for students with and without test scores. In these cases, the evaluation process for students who submitted test scores remained the same as in previous admission cycles, while the evaluation for applicants who did not submit scores relied more heavily on other parts of the application. Additionally, some institutions continued to require test scores for certain merit scholarships. At these institutions, the lack of a test score could negatively impact a student's chances of admission or receipt of merit aid.

Implementing test-optional admissions policies during the pandemic required institutions to find alternative ways to measure academic excellence, which was often a challenge at selective schools where the majority of applicants are high performing. Grade inflation, schedule changes, and changes to learning modalities resulting from the pandemic lockdown made it increasingly difficult for admissions officers to compare academic achievement across large applicant pools. Institutions that employed holistic admissions processes shared that their decision processes often took longer as a result of losing standardized testing as an evaluation tool. On the other hand, many enrollment leaders credited test-optional policies with increasing the enrollment of underrepresented students of color, low-income, and first-generation students. However, few enrollment leaders seemed to consider that other pandemic era policies may have impacted the diversity of the incoming class or that the underlying age cohort is becoming more diverse.

Three Approaches to Test-Optional Admissions Evaluation

<i>Approach</i>	Standardized Measures of Academic Potential	Holistic Processes	Dual Systems of Evaluation
<i>Strategies</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing reliance on AP or IB coursework • Creating alternative quantitative measures of achievement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-weighting evaluation rubrics to exclude test scores • Using contextualization tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parallel evaluation systems for students with and without test scores
<i>Example</i>	<p>“[We] found out that four years of math and four years of science grades combined came within a tenth of a point of predicting an SAT math score for us... We created a new index using the weighted high school GPA to use as our decision point.”</p>	<p>“Now we have to give different weighting to our rubric... looking more carefully at curricular aspects, recommendations, extracurriculars. We’d always looked at those things, but looking at them a little bit more carefully and giving them different weights.”</p>	<p>“If you submitted your test score, [the evaluation process] was the same, and if you didn’t submit your test score, we just apportion different weights to the GPA and to the other aspects of your application.”</p>

Policy and Practice Implications

Our research has important implications for admissions equity as institutions consider whether to implement test-optional policies more permanently after the pandemic.

Institutions primarily relied on making small changes to traditional methods of admissions evaluation, missing the opportunity to reevaluate admissions practices for more transformational changes

With the future of test-optional admissions remaining uncertain at many institutions, colleges and universities should reflect critically on their practices to determine whether their implementation of test-optional policies is truly equitable, especially in cases where their new processes closely mirror their traditional processes. Institutions that devised creative solutions should continue to experiment and study the implications of new academic indices and evaluation rubrics which, if successful, could be replicated at other colleges. Especially among less selective schools, adopting new policies and practices, such as direct and guaranteed admissions, could be essential in the wake of declining cohort sizes. These institutions should think about how they can better prepare for future cohorts of students in ways that consider the changing demographics and evolving needs of the American public.

The long-term impact of test-optional admissions and other COVID-era policies on diversity needs further study

While multiple enrollment leaders felt that their test-optional policies played a role in increasing the diversity of the incoming class, the existing research on the diversity benefits of test-optional policies shows that these policies historically have had weak impacts on student body diversity, even when those policies were implemented voluntarily. It is likely that other institutional, state, and federal higher education policies that were instituted during the COVID-19 pandemic played an important role in shaping the demographics of first-year college cohorts, but these policies have been largely unexamined. More research is needed to understand how these policies and practices, such as virtual recruitment and pandemic stimulus funding, may have influenced application behaviors and increased the racial and socioeconomic diversity of incoming students.

Running parallel systems of admissions in a test-optional environment can raise serious equity concerns

Dual systems of evaluation that use separate processes for students raises the possibility for different standards for applicants with and without test scores. When some students continue to benefit from the submission of test scores for financial aid or admissions decisions, an institution cannot truly say that tests are optional. This could be especially problematic for students from low-income families, first-generation students, and underrepresented students of color, who are less likely to submit test scores.

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