CSHPE

POLICY BRIEF

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.