Obstacles or Opportunities? Test-Optional Policies in College Admissions

by Kexuan Li, Irvine Valley College
Mentors: Prof. Emily Liu and Prof. Kurt Meyer

Introduction

On March 1, 2020, Columbia University shocked the academic world as the first Ivy League school to announce that due to public health concerns regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, standardized tests like the SAT and ACT are permanently optional for undergraduate admission (Sheridan). Then other Ivy League schools like Yale followed suit and declared that they too, would make the standardized test optional (Seth). Concurrently, the vast majority of American universities have chosen to adopt this policy, which proponents argue is a giant step towards equity and diversity in the history of higher education. Even before the pandemic, some universities had been reassessing the fairness, validity, and equity of SAT and ACT in undergraduate admissions like CSU (Nietzel). Test-optional policies are becoming a trend in the U.S. during the epidemic, some people like them while some people don't. However, in 2024, some universities, represented by Yale University and Dartmouth College, have proposed resuming standardized testing.

Admittedly, test-optional policies are understandably criticized by some educators. They argue first and foremost that standardized tests are necessary due to a lack of uniformity in grading among different high schools and districts, and due to grade inflation in terms of high school GPA is not as reliable a predictor of their ability and potential as their performance on a standardized test. Nevertheless, test-optional policies are practical and effective, and there is no significant difference in graduation rates between admitted submitters and non-submitters. They also criticize that by making the test optional, those who submit the test and did well on it are devalued. This negatively impacts many Asian students and affluent white students who performed well on SAT, and introverted students who are not good at extracurricular activities. However, test-optional policies benefit more student groups such as non-traditional students, international students, and transfer students, which contribute to equity and diversity. Then, they argue that as the test is optional, the weight of extracurricular experience will be higher in the admission evaluation, which causes inequity due to unprivileged students not having equity access to extracurricular activities. Despite the drawbacks, test-optional policies are more equitable because they lead to statistically significant increases in applying and enrolling students, especially among underrepresented minority groups, and further increase the universities' socioeconomic and racial diversity and are conducive to equity. Therefore, test-optional policies should be maintained because the benefits outweigh the challenges.

Methods

This research comprehensively reviews scholarship, including scholarly journals and books. This research also looks at Student profiles on the institutions' websites and Existing statistical data on SAT mean scores from the SAT Annual Report. This research examines the impact of test-optional policies in college admissions, analyzes obstacles and opportunities for students from diverse economic, socio-racial, age, cultural, and educational backgrounds, and advocates for equity and diversity in higher education.

Results

Some educators have concerns about unfairness such as different scoring systems among high schools and grade inflation without a standardized test. While some may argue that "high school grades are a much better incremental predictor of graduation rates than are SAT/ACT test scores" in the book Measuring Success

© Think You?! The Proceedings of the Bay Honors Research Symposium, 2024. All Rights Reserved.

(Buckley, Jack, et al., editors 193), some critics point out that different regions and high schools have different courses and grading standards, and rigors vary by class and high school. In particular, admission officers tend to focus more on applicants' GPAs in their junior year of high school (Wulick). Truly, differences in grading standards and course strength calculations for each class in American high schools make comparisons between students difficult if not standardized. In addition, the phenomenon of grade inflation in U.S. high schools is common. Therefore, proponents argue that standardized tests provide uniformity, validity, and neutrality while different scoring standards and grade inflation cause inequity.

On the other hand, test-optional policies are practical and effective because they do not impact on students' graduation rates between admitted submitters and non-submitters. Saboe and Terrizzi in their article "SAT Optional Policies: Do They Influence Graduate Quality, Selectivity or Diversity?" state that SAT optional policies have no significant effect on enrolled student quality (Saboe, M., & Terrizzi, S). Besides, the book Measuring Success, edited by Jack Buckley, Lynn Letukas, and Ben Wildavsky, demonstrates that the difference in Bates graduation rates between submitters and non-submitters was 0.1%, and the college GPAs difference was only 0.05 (Buckley, Jack, et al., editors 149). After researching 33 test-optional institutions including both private and public colleges over 8 years since 2014, a study found that there is no significant difference in graduation rates among admitted and enrolled students who submitted test scores and those who did not (Buckley, Jack, et al., editors 150). Consequently, test-optional policies are feasible and valid because they do not affect the completion rates of admitted students.

Another subsequent criticism is that test-optional policies are unfriendly to applicants who performed well on SAT, especially Asian and wealthy white students; and those who are introverted but have academic talents. A study demonstrates SAT scores for 7 different race and ethnicity groups. In 2022, the average score of Asian, two or more races, white, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, American Indian, and black is 1229, 1102, 1095, 964, 945, 936, and 926 respectively. The average SAT score of Asians and White is dramatically higher than other races (Nam). Therefore, if the college admissions process de-emphasizes standardized tests, they will lose their advantages. Besides, some students are extremely introverted, which makes it virtually impossible to have rich extracurricular activities compared to extroverts. However, they are potential researchers and scientific talents and might become excellent scholars in the future. As a consequence, under test-optional policies, the admissions process focuses more on extracurricular activities which they are not good at instead of their academic intelligence, which is unfair to them. Thus, if standardized scores are no longer an important indicator of students' ability, Asian students, wealthy white students, and introverted students might lose their merits.

While test-optional policies have negative impacts on certain groups, they benefit more groups such as non-traditional students, international students, and transfer students by increasing their applications and admissions rates, and further increasing equity and diversity. Among the beneficiaries are non-traditional students and those with lower grades but otherwise good performers. For example, some students take a long break from high school or return from military service, it is hard for them to retake the SAT and the previous score can not reflect their recent academic performance, which is unfair; some students need to foster children, and family responsibility takes their a lot of time, as a result, they don't have time to prepare the standardized test beyond their curricular; some students have strong personal characters and intelligence, and stand out in extracurricular activities while they don't have a super SAT score. It doesn't mean they are not understanding, they can still be strong applicants as the admission process requires a holistic assessment.

To promote equity and diversity, Yale as a role model not only abolishes SAT mandatory, but also opens the Eli Whitney Student Program, which is especially set for veterans and adult students. Students are eligible to apply to the program if they have at least 5 gap years and do not currently hold a bachelor's degree. The admissions process pays more attention to the EWSP students' recent performance and personal qualities. Standardized tests are not required as well ("Eli Whitney Students"). It can be imagined that when non-traditional students re-enter school after so many gap years if they still need to retake the SAT or ACT, they will

be under huge pressure. Nevertheless, they might have brilliant military exploits; they might perform excellently in recent academic years; they might have a nonprofit that engages in the community and have helped a lot of people or animals; they might have a successful company and they might be very successful in a certain field like a world-class dancer, etc. In this case, if universities just use standardized tests to assess them, it would be too superficial. Furthermore, under these policies, students who may have taken some gap years due to poverty and going to work after high school, and who accidentally failed the SAT test can have a good opportunity to access rigorous higher education and show their talents in other ways. Therefore, test-optional policies are beneficial to re-entry students and allow for a more comprehensive assessment of the admissions process. Through encouraging them to apply to prestigious universities, they eliminate the discrimination of age and provide the impetus for equity, impartiality, and diversity.

In addition to the above groups, test-optional policies also have positive impacts on international students. Some admission officers think that the standardized exam of the U.S. is impractical and pointless for students studying under a completely different system. Besides, it is unfair because students in certain areas do not have access to testing centers at all times and the number of test centers is limited so international applicants have less access to standardized tests than U.S. students. Moreover, the global test takers need to cost more for the test and the fee is unavailable to waive. The National Center for Fair & Open Testing is one of the organizations that advocates for test-optional policies, and some universities have already been test-optional for international applicants for several years such as Marquette University. Educators argue that as long as it takes the time and the effort to granularly review a student in context, and evaluate them more strictly and case by case, it can avoid deviations caused by different national and regional standards. There is evidence that some students have been extraordinarily successful with universities in the United States, Canada, and other countries that adopt test-optional policies (Redden). Thus, it is a more practical way for admission to allow international applicants to choose whether to submit SAT and ACT or not, and it helps to narrow the gap in educational resources among different countries and regions, which is conducive to educational equity, impartiality, and ethnic diversity consequently.

Accordingly, test-optional policies have many positive impacts on different student bodies, and transfer students are also a group that benefits. According to the college transcript of students, most colleges have less weighted SAT scores for the transfer student than the freshman, and the further away from high school, the fewer schools rely on them (Heimbach). Indeed, standardized test scores can only prove students' academic performance in high school. Their recent college performance is a better indicator of their ability to adapt to their new college and succeed academically after transferring. Hence, standardized tests are a minor metric to measure transfer students which is not convincing enough. Through SAT optional policy, transfer applicants can be evaluated more comprehensively and objectively during admissions. It can also motivate intending transfer applicants to focus on current college grades. In other words, although they do not have a perfect SAT score, they can still apply for their dream universities or majors with their excellent recent college transcript. As a consequence, transfer students can have more options to apply to universities, so test-optional policies promote equity among different applicant groups.

Whether the SAT is implicitly biased to favor wealthy and white students has long been a subject of debate. Some educators argue that the SAT test scores do not measure academic merit, but rather, quite accurately measure family wealth. For example, the average cost of SAT tutoring is between $45 and $100 per hour (Grupa). Therefore, if test-optional policies are implemented, discrimination can be mitigated. Conversely, it puts more emphasis on the applicant's personal background characteristics, letters of recommendation, and extracurricular activities, which causes other potential inequality that some students do not have equal access to resources and opportunities as affluent students. For example, students with strong social connections are more likely to find an excellent internship; economically privileged students can easily find prestigious people to help them with recommendation letters, which can improve their competitiveness. Meanwhile, students without strong backgrounds might not have the ability to access opportunities such as international competitions, or

they have to spend a lot of extracurricular time working to pay their tuition. According to Brown University's Annenberg Institute, "private school students and those from wealthier backgrounds listed more extracurricular activities and top-tier leadership roles on their college applications than their public school and less affluent counterparts'; and on average, White and Asian students reported 63% more activities with top-level leadership positions than did Black applicants" (Spitalniak). Hence, educators' criticisms of inequity under test-optional policies are reasonable due to inequity may permeate extracurricular experiences, in terms of disadvantaged students not having equity to access extracurricular activities.

However, the inequity phenomenon in extracurricular activities doesn't mean universities should return or rely more heavily on standardized tests in the admissions process (Spitalniak). Despite test-optional policies bringing challenges to unprivileged students, they bring them more opportunities. The policies produce equity between women, racialized, minoritized, and historically underrepresented groups by increasing access, opportunity, and advancement for them in higher education, and by increasing their engagement and participation. In his article "Untested Admissions: Examining Changes in Application Behaviors and Student Demographics Under Test-Optional Policies" in the American Educational Research Journal, published in 2021, after comparing the admissions of nearly 100 private selective universities in the U.S. that adopted test-optional policies, Christopher Bennett concludes that universities, where the standardized test is optional, have more applicants who are Pell Grant recipients, women, and from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds. The acceptance rate for each group has increased from 3% to 4%, 6% to 8%, and 10% to 12% respectively (Bennett).

Coincidentally, Joseph H. Paris, Benjamin Torsney, Sara Fiorot, and Catherine Pressimone Beckowski, in their 2022 article "The Impact of Optional: Investigating the Effects of Test-Optional Admissions Policies", by analyzing application, admission, and enrollment data from more than 900 U.S. colleges and universities, conclude that after implementing test-optional policies, the diversity the racial and socioeconomic composition of the student body has been increased, especially at elite universities (Paris, Joseph H., et al). Thus, test-optional policies facilitate access to higher education for disadvantaged applicants, and further encourage them to apply for selective universities.

Conclusion

Indeed, opponents of test-optional policies have valid concerns about different grading systems among different classes and grade inflation. However, they are applicable and feasible because data shows whether or not submitting SAT does not affect completion rates among admitted students. While test-optional policies are unfair and devalue the merits of Asian students, wealthy white students, and introverted students; they are more equitable because they serve more students like re-enter students, global students, and transfer students. Despite these policies may potentially be biased on students' backgrounds, from another point of view, they increase equity and diversify the student body by increasing the application and admission number of unprivileged students and encouraging them to access higher education.

Besides, there are numerous solutions that can be used to minimize these concerns that some educators have about different scoring systems, grade inflation, and inequitable extracurricular activities. For instance, admission officers should refer to the assessment for international students which was mentioned previously, that they should take more time and effort to review students' transcripts and evaluate them strictly according to different high schools and curriculum criteria. Moreover, applicants should report their grades along with the median grade for the classes. In addition, the inequity gap can be narrowed. Universities can consider limiting the number of extracurricular activities applicants can list. Besides, university admission processes should focus on academic recommendation letters instead of internships or any other non-academic factors. When they assess applicants, they can weigh applicants' daily work and family responsibilities more. Last but not least, governments should provide volunteer opportunities for vulnerable Groups; nonprofit and NGO organizations, and local communities should manage to hold some events to help them; and high schools are

also a strong backup force to support them. Therefore, test-optional policies should be maintained because despite these legitimate concerns and challenges, test-optional policies are more beneficial than detrimental, and, ultimately, the opportunities outweigh the challenges.

Furthermore, majority universities in the United States like CSU and UC also maintained test-optional policies. Under these policies, students are empowered and have more flexibility to choose whether to submit standardized test scores according to their own strengths and weaknesses. In making such high stakes chances, both admission officials and applicants might be informed by these questions: for applicants who don't submit their SAT or ACT scores, do some universities assume potentially that their scores are low in terms of universities having some unconscious bias? In other words, do universities have a partiality for students who submit a score? How much weight of outstanding scores in the assessment in terms of how helpful they are? Do standardized scores impact getting off of the waitlist? Finally, if you were an applicant, would you choose to submit it or not?

Works Cited

Bennett, Christopher. "Untested Admissions: Examining Changes in Application Behaviors and Student Demographics Under Test-Optional Policies." American Educational Research Journal, vol. 59, no. 1, Apr. 2021, pp. 180–216. SAGE Publishing, journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0002831211003526?journalCode=aera.

Buckley, Jack, et al., editors. "Measuring Success." Google Books, 15 Jan. 2018, books.google.com/books?hl=zh-CN&lr=&id=EudFDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA145&dq=SAT+optional+and+graduate+rate&ots=zLZnMDOoH6&sig=Ohz3Dsl7pPPswdjhxLYzs3PvlOU#v=onepage&q=SAT%20optional%20and%20graduate%20rate&f=false. Accessed 2 May 2023.

"Eli Whitney Students Program Details." Yale College Undergraduate Admissions, admissions.yale.edu/eli-whitney-students-program-details.

Grupa, Tom. "How Much Does SAT Tutoring Cost?" Tutors, Feb. 2023, tutors.com/costs/sat-tutoring-cost.

Heimbach, Alex. "Do You Need SAT Scores to Transfer Colleges?"

blog.prepscholar.com/do-you-need-sat-scores-to-transfer-colleges.

Nam, Jane. "All About SAT Scores: National Average and Full Statistics | BestColleges." BestColleges.com, 8 Feb. 2023, www.bestcolleges.com/research/average-sat-score-full-statistics.

Nietzel, Michael T. "California State University Ends Use of SAT, ACT for Undergraduate Admissions." Forbes, 24 Mar. 2022, www.forbes.com/sites/michaeltnietzel/2022/03/24/california-state-university-ends-use-of-sat-act-for-undergraduate-admissions/?sh=d90577e3d31f.

Paris, Joseph H., et al. "The Impact of Optional: Investigating the Effects of

Test-Optional Admissions Policies," Journal of College Access, Vol. 7, no. 2,

2022. ScholarWorks@WMU, scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol7/iss2/3.

Pellegrino, Christina. "Test-Optional Policies: Implementation Impact on Undergraduate Admissions and Enrollment." American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, Vol. 97, no. 2, 2022, pp. 4–6. Proquest, www.proquest.com/docview/2673379776/abstract/12D087AB7174D97PQ/1?accountid=39837.

Redden, Elizabeth. "As Colleges Go Test Optional for Domestic Applicants, They Take Different Approaches to Testing Policies for International Applicants." Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Events and

Jobs, July 2019, www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/07/22/colleges-go-test-optional-domestic-applicants-they-take-different.

Saboe, M., & Terrizzi, S. “SAT Optional Policies: Do They Influence Graduate Quality, Selectivity or Diversity?” Economics Letters, vol. 174, Elsevier BV, Jan. 2019, pp. 13–17, doi:10.1016/j.econlet.2018.10.017.

Seth, Anika Arora. “Yale to Announce Long-term Testing Policy This Spring - Yale Daily News.” Yale Daily News, 9 Feb. 2023, yaledailynews.com/blog/2023/02/08/yale-to-announce-long-term-testing-policy-this-spring.

Sheridan, Hope. “Columbia University Announces Permanent Test-optional Policy.” The DP, Mar. 2023, www.thedp.com/article/2023/03/penn-columbia-test-optional-policy-admissions-ivy-league.

Spitalniak, Laura. “Wealthier Students, Those at Private Schools List More Extracurriculars on College Applications.” Higher Ed Dive, 19 Apr. 2023, www.highereddive.com/news/application-advantage-extracurriculars-wealthy-white-asianstudents/648117.

“Standardized Testing Requirements and Policies.” Yale College Undergraduate Admissions, admissions.yale.edu/standardized-testing.

Wulick, Anna. “Which Year of High School Is Most Important for College Applications?” blog.prepscholar.com/which-year-of-high-school-is-most-important-for-college-applications.