POLICY BRIEF

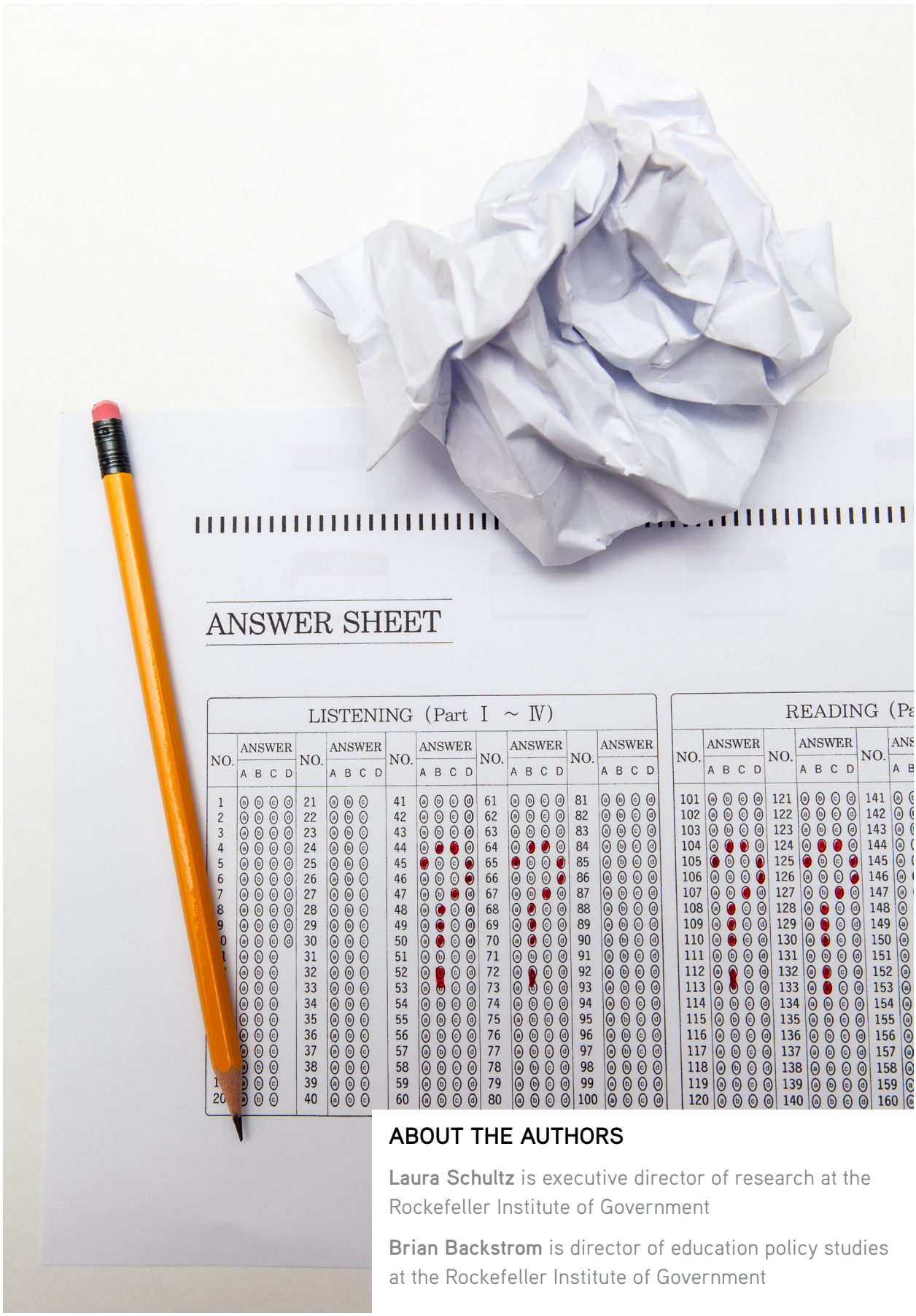
Test-Optional Admissions Policies

Evidence from Implementations Pre- and Post-COVID-19

Laura Schultz
Brian Backstrom

June 17, 2021

Rockefeller SUNY Institute of Government



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Laura Schultz is executive director of research at the Rockefeller Institute of Government

Brian Backstrom is director of education policy studies at the Rockefeller Institute of Government

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Executive Summary

As did the vast majority of higher education institutions, SUNY implemented test-optional admissions policies across all campuses for students applying to enroll in Fall 2021. SUNY and its peers made this decision in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which reduced applicants' access to SAT/ACT testing. A majority of these schools have extended their test-optional application policies through the Fall 2022 admissions cycle and many have committed to remain test-optional for 2023. The number of schools that are committing to permanently implementing test-optional admissions is growing, too.

Test-optional policies are not new and notable state systems such as University of California's began their move to drop consideration of SAT/ACT scores in admission decisions well before the COVID-19 crisis. Still, the pandemic resulted in a surge of public and private colleges, universities, and systems not only enacting temporary test-optional admission practices but also considering longer-term and permanent establishment of such policies.

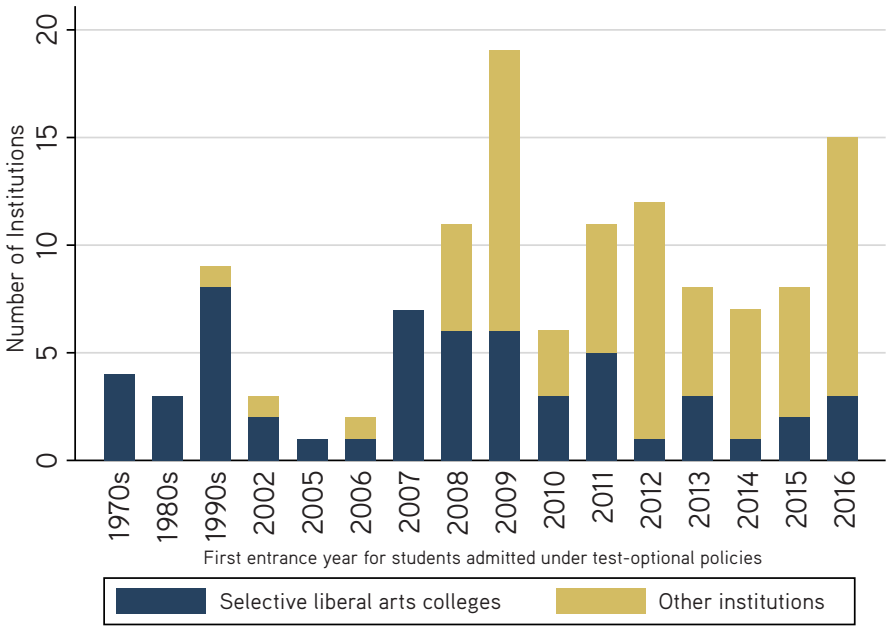
In this policy brief we address the following questions:

- What evidence exists on the effectiveness of test-optional admissions policies to increase applications, stimulate more diverse enrollment, and enhance student success?
- What is the evidence from SUNY's test-optional pilot program?
- What decisions have SUNY's peer institutions announced?
- What additional questions and data could SUNY consider before making a permanent decision?

Test-Optional Admissions Pre-Pandemic

Test-optional admissions was a growing trend nationally prior to 2020: Bennett (2021) identified 100 private institutions that adopted test-optional policies between academic years 2005-06 and 2015-16. While test-optional admissions policies originated with selective liberal arts colleges, the types of institutions shifting admissions strategies has diversified since then to more regional private schools and public institutions.

FIGURE 1. **Number of Institutions Enacting Test-Optional Admissions Over Time, by Type**



SOURCE: Christopher T. Bennett, "Untested Admissions: Examining Changes in Application Behaviors and Student Demographics Under Test-Optional Policies." *American Educational Research Journal* (April 12, 2021), https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312211003526.

Study	
Belasco, Rosinger, Hearn (2015)[2]	• Changes in schools' Pell recipient and URM enrollment were no different between test-optional and test-requiring institutions. Gains experienced by test-optional schools were also seen by test-requiring schools. • Test-optional schools saw an increase in average SAT scores and applications.
Syverson, Franks, Hiss (2018)[3]	• Application increases: 29 percent for private schools, 11 percent for public institutions. About half outpaced growth at test-required peer institutions. • 61 percent of test-optional institutions saw greater URM enrollment increases than their peers. • 50 percent of test-optional institutions saw an increase in Pell enrollments relative to test-required peers. • Nonsubmitters were admitted at lower rates, but enrolled at higher rates than submitters. • Nonsubmitters include larger proportions of URM, first-generation, and Pell recipients (42 percent of nonsubmitters vs. 32 percent of submitters). • Schools saw higher average GPAs and test scores post test-optional policy adoption. • Nonsubmitters had lower average high school GPAs (-.12) and lower first year college GPAs (-.17). Nonsubmitters were less likely to choose STEM majors. • Nonsubmitters graduate at rates equivalent to submitters. • Higher-needs students apply as nonsubmitters and gift aid is higher.
Sabo and Terrizzi (2019)[4]	• Policies do not influence racial and socioeconomic diversity or gender ratio of the institutions. • Policies have no effect on the quality of the student population. • Policies result in a short-term increase in applications that was not sustained.
Bennett (2021)[5]	• 3 to 4 percent increase in Pell Grant recipients. • 10 to 12 percent increase in first time students from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds. Total share of students of color grew by 1 percentage point. • 6 to 8 percent increase in first-time enrollment of women; 4 percentage point increase in share of students. • 20 to 30 percent of students took advantage of test-optional admissions.

Evidence of Impact: Nationwide

A handful of studies have explored the impact of test-optional policies on institutional enrollment and success. The findings to date are mixed. While schools have seen increases in the enrollment of students of underrepresented races and ethnicities (URM) and lower-income students (as reflected by Pell Grant recipient status), these are not trends that are exclusive to schools that have implemented test-optional policies. Many peer institutions that continued to require admission tests also experienced the same demographic shifts. Still, most studies find that the test-optional enrollment policies did result in higher numbers of applications from URM and Pell Grant recipients in the short term. One recent analysis of the test-optional literature published by the Hechinger Report highlighted that modest increases in applications, acceptances, and first-time enrollment among underrepresented groups have minimal effects on the total student population.[1] Test-optional enrollment also raised the average SAT scores of the applicant pools as students who would have been on the lower end of the distribution no longer submitted their scores and thus weren't included in the reporting pool.

A number of caveats should be considered when reviewing the results of these studies. First, test-optional is a relatively recent policy change in higher education admissions. The bulk of test-optional admissions shifts occurred after the 2005-06 academic year. As a result, the data required to assess the long-term impacts of these changes does not yet exist. Ideally, we would want to understand the impact of test-optional admissions on student retention, performance, graduation, and post-graduation success to better inform the development of a permanent policy. We also would want to understand what the short-term versus long-term effects of these policies are. The ability to assess the impacts in a statistically significant analysis is not available until several years after implementation.

It should be noted that these studies have focused on the experiences of smaller, liberal arts colleges, many of which are considered "selective." These schools were the early adopters of test-optional policies. Public institutions, which serve a different socioeconomic base of students, are not highly represented in these results.

It is not unreasonable to question if the experiences of the schools in these studies will be representative of the implementation of test-optional admissions policies in, say, a large public education system. Additional analysis needs to be completed to understand the effects in public universities.

Evidence from SUNY Campuses: Potsdam and Purchase

In 2019, SUNY Cobleskill and SUNY Morrisville requested test-optional trial periods for the cohorts beginning in Fall 2020. In response, SUNY's Office of Institutional Research and Data Analytics assessed the impacts of test-optional admissions practices enacted earlier at two other SUNY campuses: Potsdam, which adopted its policy in 2010, and SUNY Purchase, which adopted its in 2016. Here we highlight key findings from that comprehensive draft report.

Test-Optional and the Impact on Applications and Enrollment

Applications: Over a decade (2007-17), applications to SUNY comprehensives grew 6.9 percent. Potsdam adopted a test-optional policy in 2010 and since then application growth has outpaced its SUNY peers; Potsdam applications have grown 34.9 percent since the adoption of policy. It should be noted that Potsdam significantly increased its recruitment efforts in New York City since 2008, so it is challenging to determine how much of the diversity increase can be attributed to its test-optional policy versus other changes in recruitment strategies. Applications to SUNY Purchase peaked in 2012 and experienced a dramatic decline in 2014. The adoption of the test-optional admissions policy did not reverse the decline. Over the last decade, SUNY Purchase has experienced a 39.8 percent decline in applications.

Acceptances: SUNY Potsdam's acceptance growth has not deviated from the SUNY comprehensives' average over the past decade. Test-optional policies did not have any impact on SUNY Potsdam's acceptance trends when compared to peer institutions. SUNY Purchase had a peak in acceptances in 2011 followed by a steep decline. These movements do not appear to be related to the test-optional admission policies.

Enrollments: Potsdam and Purchase have not experienced increases in enrollments as a result of the policies. Both campuses are enrolling about 7 percent fewer students than a decade ago. Enrollment at SUNY comprehensives grew by 13.6 percent over the decade.

FIGURE 2. **Applications Received**

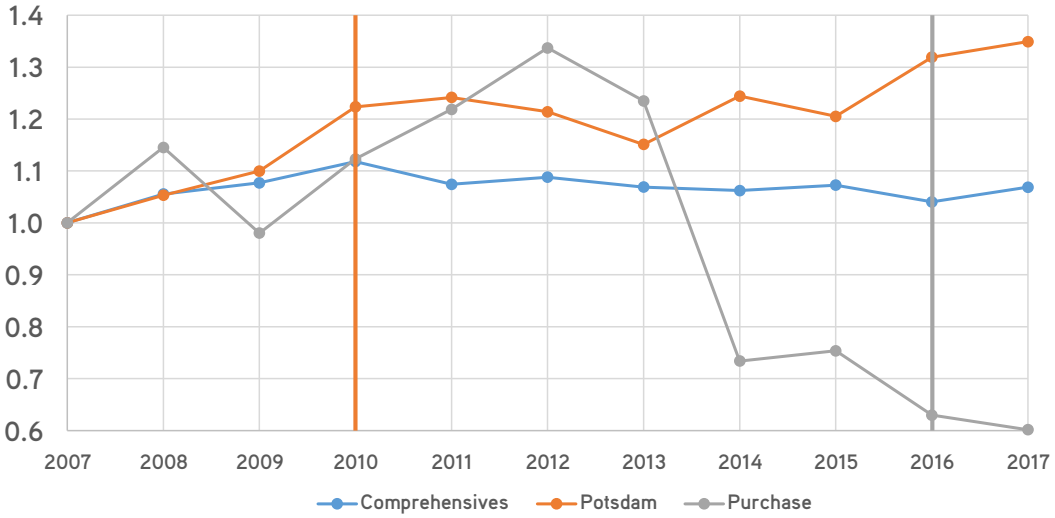


FIGURE 3. **Applications Accepted**

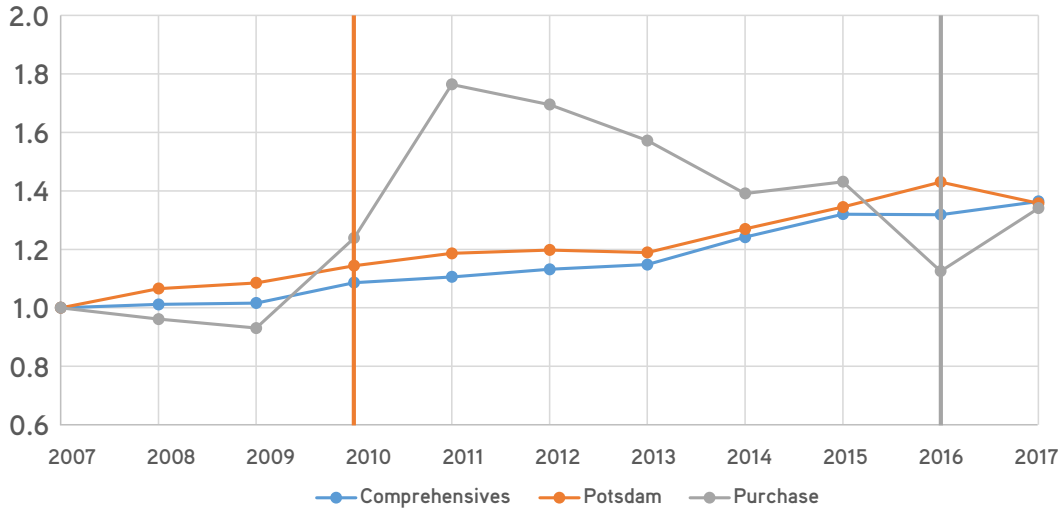
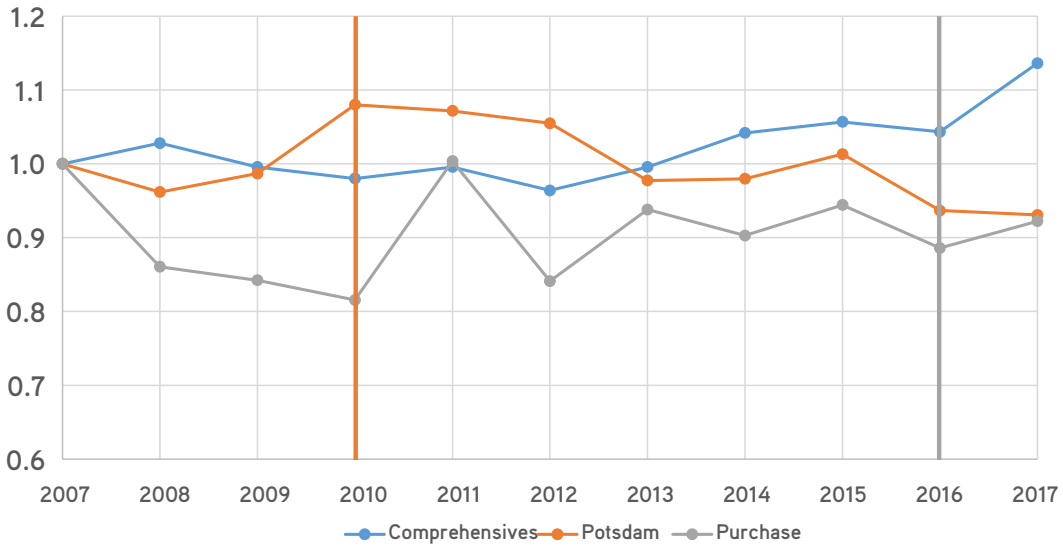


FIGURE 4. **Students Enrolled**



Test-Optional and Impact on Diversity

The diversity of full-time baccalaureate applicants at SUNY has increased dramatically since 2008, with the overall proportion of URM applicants increasing from 25.2 percent to 40.1 percent.

Prior to becoming test-optional, Potsdam had one of the least diverse applicant pools: in 2008, only 18.1 percent of full-time baccalaureate applicants identified as URM. As of 2017, more than half of Potsdam's full-time baccalaureate applicants are URM (56.2 percent), trailing only four other SUNY campuses. Meanwhile, Purchase had one of the most diverse applicant pools prior to moving to test-optional (43.2 percent, 2011). While Potsdam has outpaced SUNY comprehensive peers in diversifying its applicant pool, Purchase has not experienced the gains seen by other comprehensive institutions.

TABLE 1. **Percentage of URM Full-Time Baccalaureate Applications by Campus**

	2008	2011	2014	2017	10-Year Change
SUNY Comprehensives	24.9%	34.3%	37.0%	47.2%	22.3
Potsdam	18.1%	35.0%	45.5%	56.2%	38.1
Purchase	27.7%	43.2%	N/A	38.6%	10.9

TABLE 2. **Percentage of URM First-Time, Full-Time Undergraduate Students**

	2008	2011	2014	2017	10-Year Change
SUNY Comprehensives	8.2%	12.9%	18.8%	23.6%	15.4
Potsdam	4.5%	11.3%	20.2%	23.4%	18.9
Purchase	13.7%	17.5%	30.1%	30.3%	16.6

A closer look at enrollment of URM students shows that both Potsdam and Purchase are increasing the diversity of their incoming freshman cohorts. Over the last decade, SUNY has seen a 15.4 percentage point growth in the share of URMs in incoming freshman classes. Both Potsdam and Purchase outperformed their peers, seeing growth of 18.9 and 16.6 percentage points respectively. URM enrollment at comprehensive colleges has grown by 226 percent or 2,394 students over the past decade. The gains on the Potsdam and Purchase campuses account for 18 percent of this growth.

SUNY's Test-Optional Applicants and Outcomes

The percentage of URM students with nonreported test scores greatly exceeded their non-URM peers: at Potsdam, 68.2 percent of URM students had an unknown test score compared to 59.0 percent of non-URM students; at Purchase, 56.2 percent of URM were reported with an unknown test score vs. 41.9 percent of non-URM students. This is a trend also documented in national literature.

At Potsdam, students with unknown test scores had lower first-year retention rates than students that reported scores, 72.2 percent versus 79.2 percent. At Purchase, however, first-year retention rates for nonreporting students exceeded the rate for reporting students, 86.8 percent versus 80.6 percent in Fall 2018, reversing a trend of the previous four years.

Generally, the higher the SAT/ACT score the higher the 4-year and 6-year graduation rate for SUNY students. Students with unknown scores have graduation rates generally equivalent to students in the 1100-1200 SAT score range (48.8 percent, 4-year; 61.8 percent 6-year), which represents about one-third of all SUNY undergraduates. At Potsdam, students with unreported scores have far lower 4- and 6-year graduation rates than students in this median SAT-score band, 36.4 percent and 49.4 percent versus 46.8 percent and 64.6 percent.

Test-Optional Policies During COVID-19

Testing Disruptions

Education Week reports that for the August 2020 administration of the SAT "nearly half of students signed up to take the SAT were unable to do so."[6] The September and October dates also saw around 50 percent of registered students being turned away.[7] "Students…found their options for the SAT severely limited,as outbreaks and stay-home orders forced the cancellation of both testing dates and later make-up test attempts."[8] The overall number of test-takers, the number of students completing the essay portion, and overall mean scores all show marked decreases.[9]

Testing disruptions have had a disproportionate impact on some populations of underrepresented students, too: the number of low-income students who had their testing fee waived fell by 12 percent in 2020.[10] In recent years, states began sponsoring SAT/ACT testing in public schools. Maine realized a 3 percent increase in college-going, Illinois saw upticks in students enrolling in 4-year colleges, and Michigan saw an increase in enrollment in low-income students after offering state-sponsored in-school SAT/ACT test administration. These programs have this progress threatened by continued disruption to the traditional college entrance testing process.[11]

COVID-19 Test-Optional 2021 and Beyond

In response to limited access to college admittance tests, public and private colleges overwhelmingly suspended the SAT/ACT requirements for the Fall 2021 admission cycle. A preliminary review of public statewide university systems admissions policies in Fall 2021 found that 53 of the 55 public systems identified adopted a test-optional policy in the year most directly impacted by COVID-19 (Table 3). Florida's public university system is the largest that refused to forgo the requirement and saw significant impacts as a result: applications fell by as much as 50 percent on some campuses.[12]

For many schools, test-optional policies will continue for at least the 2022 and 2023 admission cycles. Forty-eight of the 55 systems have already announced test-optional policies for Fall 2022. Of the 48 state public systems that extended test-optional admissions through 2022, 27 have announced they will forgo the requirement in 2023 and 18 have made the policy permanent.

A review of New York's twenty largest private universities (Table 4) found that almost half had already adopted test-optional admissions before COVID-19. Those that had not implemented the flexible policy for 2021 and have already extended it through Fall 2022.

New York's other public university system, CUNY, adopted a test-optional policy on June 8, 2020 for Fall 2021 and Spring 2022. The board voted on May 24, 2021 to extend the policy through Academic Year 2022-23.

48

STATE PUBLIC SYSTEMS
WILL BE TEST-OPTIONAL IN 2022

27

HAVE EXTENDED TO 2023

18

ANNOUNCED PERMANENT CHANGE

18 OF 20

LARGEST PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN NEW YORK
ARE TEST-OPTIONAL THROUGH FALL 2022

CUNY

EXTENDED TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES THROUGH ACADEMIC YEAR 2022-23

TABLE 3. **Test-Optional Policies in Public Universities**

State	Pre-2020	Fall 2021	Fall 2022	Fall 2023	Permanent
Alabama	N	Y	Y		
Alaska		Y	Y	Y	Y
Arizona (ASU)		Y	Y	Y	Y
Arizona (UA)		Y	Y	Y	Y
Arkansas (UArk)	N	Y	Y		
California (UC)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Cali. (Cal State)	N	Y	Y	Y	
Colorado (CU)		Y	Y	Y	Y
Connecticut	N	Y	Y		
Delaware	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Florida	N	N	N	N	N
Georgia (UGA)	N	Y	N	N	N
(GSU)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Hawaii	N	Y	Y		
Idaho (ISU)	N	N	N	N	N
Illinois (U of I)	N	Y	Y	Y	
Indiana (U of I)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Iowa (ISU)	N	Y	Y		
Kansas (KU)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Kentucky (UK)	N	Y	Y	Y	
Louisiana (LSU)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Maine	N	Y	Y		
Maryland	N	Y	Y	Y	
Massachusetts	N	Y	Y		
Michigan (MSU)		Y	Y	Y	Y
Michigan (UM)	N	Y	Y		
Minnesota (UMN)	N	Y	Y		
Mississippi	N	Y			
Missouri	N	Y	Y		
Montana	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Nebraska	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Nevada		Y	Y	Y	Y
New Hampshire	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
New Jersey	N	Y	Y		
New Mexico		Y	Y	Y	Y
New York (SUNY)	N	Y			
New York (CUNY)	N	Y	Y		
North Carolina	N	Y	Y		
North Dakota	N	Y	Y		
Ohio	N	Y	Y		
Oklahoma		Y	Y	Y	
Oregon	N	Y	Y	Y	
Pennsylvania	N	Y	Y	Y	
Rhode Island	N	Y	Y		
South Carolina	N	Y			
South Dakota	N	Y			
Tennessee	N	Y	Y		
Texas	N	Y	Y	N	N
Utah	N	Y	Y		
Vermont	N	Y	Y	Y	
Virginia	N	Y	Y	Y	
Washington	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
West Virginia	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Wisconsin	N	Y	Y		
Wyoming	N	Y	Y		
Total Yeses	**1**	**53**	**48**	**27**	**18**

NOTE: Green = Yes, Orange = No, Blank = No information

TABLE 4. **Test-Optional Policies at New York's Largest Private Schools**

Institution	Pre-2020	Fall 2021	Fall 2022	Fall 2023	Permanent
New York University	N	Y	Y		
Columbia University	N	Y	Y		
Cornell University	N	Y	Y		
Syracuse University	N	Y	Y		
Adelphi University	N	Y	Y		
Rennselaer Polytechnic Institute	N	Y	Y		
Fordham University	N	Y	Y		
Yeshiva University	N	Y	Y		
New York Institute of Technology	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Ithaca College	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Utica College	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
St. John's University	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Pace University	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
University of Rochester	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Hofstra University	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
The New School	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mercy College	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Marist College	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Touro College	N	Y			
Long Island University					
Total Yeses	**9**	**19**	**18**	**10**	**10**

NOTE: Green = Yes, Orange = No, Blank = No information

Are These Changes Permanent?

While test-optional policies had been growing steadily in both the private and public sectors prior to Spring 2020, the pandemic caused a massive spike is such policies. The CEO of ACT, Janet Godwin, noted that "the immediate pressures presented by the pandemic" caused the adoption of policies that "were much less deliberate than [those] seen before March of 2020."[13] A February 2021 survey by ACT of higher education enrollment and admissions officers found that institutions that instituted pandemic-related test-optional policies are "somewhat unlikely to return to test-required [for 2023] with significant uncertainty remaining."[14]

Of the schools that did not have preexisting test-optional policies, only 17 of the public institutions/systems and none of the private schools have committed to a permanent change. With COVID-19 disrupting testing for applicants in Fall 2021 and Fall 2022, the continuation of test-optional policies for these admissions cycles could offer accommodation for these challenges. New York's private institutions have concluded that at least one additional year of test-optional policies will be required.

It appears that many schools are using these two application and enrollment cycles to collect critical data that will allow them to better understand how a long-term test-optional policy could be executed and what its impact on applications, enrollment, and student success is likely to be.

The Test-Optional Natural Experiment

Prior to COVID-19 limited information was available on the use of test-optional admissions in public universities. Only two SUNY schools had implemented the policies over the last decade. Researchers will have far more data as a result of COVID-19 disruptions and could use this information to inform admission policies moving forward. Important considerations that will be better supported by additional data from an additional cycle of test-optional admissions include:

What Academic Data Is Used by Enrollment/Admissions Officers and How Is That Information Used?

Test-optional institutions report a 20-30 percent decrease in students submitting scores from a college admissions test. Data from Potsdam and Purchase suggest the numbers could be higher for SUNY students.[15] Yet most institutions still report significant use of testing data throughout the enrollment process and many institutions note that the reduction in available data "has led to increased difficulty in some parts of their candidate evaluation process."

The role of high school GPA, individual grades, and grade trends used by SUNY's admissions officers in this environment can be better analyzed as this information is used as the foundation of academic-readiness and scholastic-eligibility decisions. The role of data from advanced coursework, including AP and IB classes, also will need to be evaluated within the context of sizable proportion of URM applicants typically having less access to such courses.

An increased emphasis on qualitative data and the use of more of it—including such things as personal essays, extracurricular activities, high school achievements, etc.—adds both subjectivity and time requirements to the admissions process. Measuring the student outcomes of these decisions takes on added importance. Additional information is required to better understand how admissions offices are making their decisions in the absence of test scores.

Impact on Diversity in Application, Admissions, and Enrollment

Studies have explored the differences in race/ethnicity, gender, and financial status in test score-reporting and nonreporting applicants. These studies to date have produced some mixed evidence that test-optional policies improve representation among traditionally under-represented groups. In addition, they have found that nonreporting students are more likely to enroll if admitted. To date, the bulk of the published studies have focused on the experiences of private liberal arts schools. Large-scale analysis of enrollment trends in public institutions is understudied. Additional information could be collected from the first years of test-optional admissions to insure that the policy isn't inadvertently negatively impacting under-represented groups.

Student Success

The ability of campuses to rely on standardized test data as a predictor of first-year student success—including academic performance and retention—is significantly jeopardized with the reduced information available in a test-optional environment. As institutions adjust their predictive models to more heavily account for other available factors and data points, measuring how first-year students perform and their reenrollment rates becomes critically important in determining the value of these other factors and designing any needed support systems for first-year students.

Merit Scholarship Awards

The recent ACT survey of admissions officers cited the determination of merit awards in a reduce-data environment "the most pronounced pain point" of this past cycle.[16] Not only individual institutions' merit awards but state-funded scholarships traditionally are based on test scores. Significant adjustments to the calculations used to determine merit awards in the absence of such data for many students will need to be developed and implemented, and measuring outcomes (including student academic performance and retention) under these new award structures will better inform scholarship policies.

Placement in Specialized Programs

Data from standardized tests are often used to make placement decisions in specialized programs, such as business, engineering, nursing tracks, and honors programs. How campus admissions officers adapt to fewer available data for these placements and student participation and success in these programs will become an important element in decision-making about test-optional policies.

Student Recruiting

Standardized testing data is often used at or near the beginning of student-recruiting efforts. With the decrease in such available information—particularly from URM prospects—additional data on the impact of test-optional policies in the sourcing and recruiting of potential students will better inform any long-term policy.

Conclusion

As New York State rides through the continuing uncertainties and disruptions to the traditional standardized college placement test cycles during what are hopefully the remaining several months of the COVID-19 pandemic, purposeful data collection on the above (and other) elements of test-optional admissions will provided a strong foundation for the development of a long-term policy.

ENDNOTES

Endnotes

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