# COLLEGE ADMISSIONS FUTURES
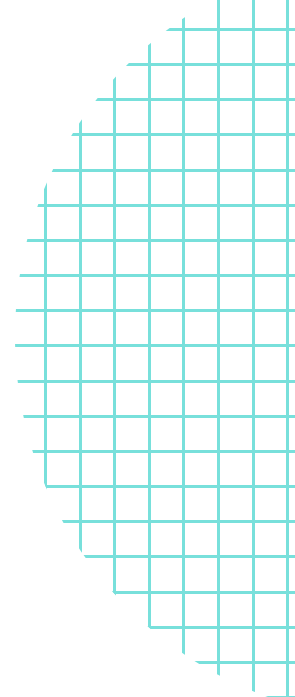## CO-LABORATIVE

# TEST-FREE ADMISSIONS AT SELECTIVE COLLEGES

## INSIGHTS FROM ADMISSIONS PROFESSIONALS

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## Acknowledgments

## About Us

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The College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative (CAF Co-Lab) is a multi-institutional partnership of faculty, researchers, and scholar-practitioners. Our research seeks to identify ways in which institutions and college admissions can be designed to advance equity. For more information and updates on research, see www.cafcolab.org

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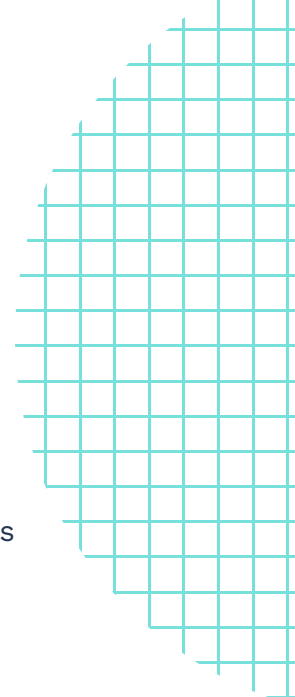
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While over 1,800 colleges and universities remain test-optional, about 86 institutions completely eliminated the use of standardized tests in college admissions during the pandemic.[1] Given the Supreme Court decision on race-conscious admissions, more institutions may consider test-free policies in the future. However, little is known about the implementation of such policies at selective institutions.

Drawing on open-ended survey responses from admissions professionals at test-free institutions, we examine the implementation and ramifications of test-free admissions. We found:

⭐ **Respondents generally viewed the shift to test-free admissions favorably**

⭐ **The vast majority felt that test-free admissions made it easier to identify talented applicants from historically underrepresented backgrounds.**

⭐ **Benefits included helping readers not over-rely on test scores as a shortcut when reviewing applications, and others**

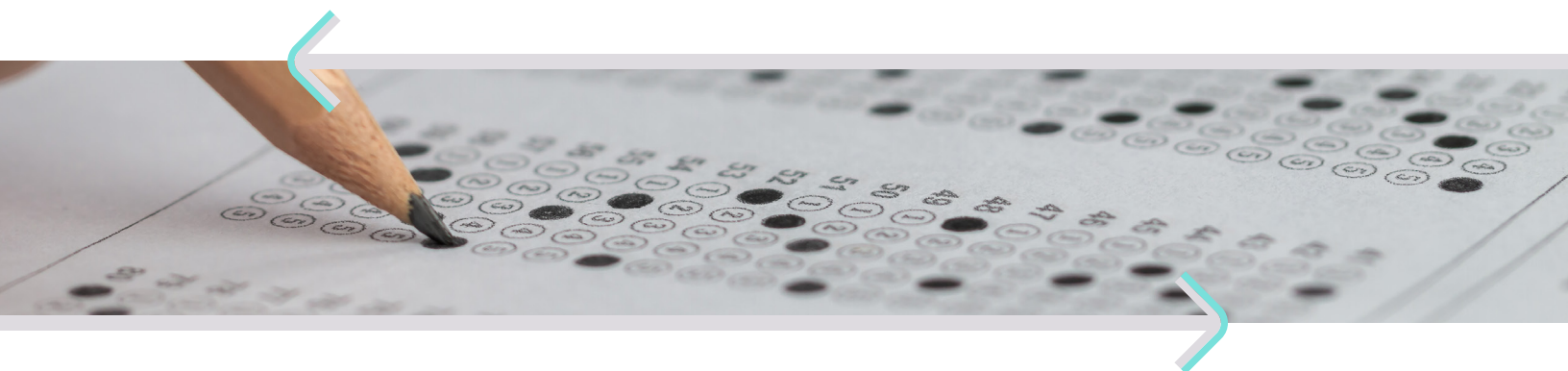Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

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[1] Fairtest. (n.d.). Test optional and test free colleges. https://fairtest.org/test-optional-list/

## Introduction

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, over 1,800 higher education institutions are test-optional, representing a major shift in college admissions. **Eighty-six institutions went even further and became test-free, eliminating the consideration of standardized test scores altogether**.[2] These institutions range from those in the sizable University of California system to private institutions like CalTech. Given the desire to promote equity in admissions and the Supreme Court ruling on race-conscious admissions, more colleges may consider becoming test free in the future. However, little is known about the ramifications of test-free policies at selective institutions.

To help fill this gap, we asked: **"What are the perspectives of admissions professionals on their institution's shift to test-free admissions?"** Data come from a broader study of admissions professionals on testing policies during the pandemic.[3] Here we focus on the subset of respondents from test-free institutions. Seventeen of the 226 respondents came from institutions that went test-free after March 2020, representing 10 selective[4] four-year institutions.[5] We analyzed data from open-ended responses to survey questions, which are similar in nature to data collected from qualitative interviews in that they capture participants' thought processes in a free response format.[6] Hence, the smaller sample size is appropriate for the study focus, which is to showcase the perspectives of admissions professionals in order to understand reactions to test-free policy implementation. In addition, while the number of test-free institutions has grown, it is still relatively small. Thus the sample represents a noteworthy proportion of institutions with test-free policies.

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## Findings

We identified three key findings regarding the adoption of test-free policies at selective institutions. Overall, we found that:

⭐ **Respondents supported test-free policies as a means to promote equity.**

⭐ **They generally felt well prepared to implement test-free policies.**

⭐ **Respondents noted ramifications for various processes related to admissions, such as not relying on test scores as a shortcut when reviewing applications.**

First, respondents consistently mentioned that **advancing equity, increasing diversity, and reducing barriers to access were the greatest benefits of test-free admissions.** Some respondents mentioned that the process of going test-free was a learning moment that made them realize the inequities associated with required standardized tests. **Various admissions professionals described standardized tests as an "outdated practice" that are a "significant barrier" and "negative obstacle" to college, especially for underserved student populations.**

As one respondent noted: "Standardized tests are well known to disproportionately benefit better resourced students than students who are disproportionately less represented in higher ed (including low income and/or first gen students)."

Fifteen of the 17 respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that ending test score requirements made it easier to identify strong applicants from historically underrepresented backgrounds (e.g., low-income students, racially minoritized students).

In terms of how test-free policies helped admissions professionals identify promising applicants, one respondent noted: **"[The] biggest opportunity is that a test score was no longer the cloud over the head of an otherwise highly qualified and accomplished student."** In other words, being test free allowed admissions professionals to not have to reject talented students due to test scores.

Second, we found that the vast majority of respondents felt **"extremely comfortable" with their preparation in implementing test-free policies.** One respondent expressed surprise at how they were able to evaluate students without test scores: **"It is actually much easier to assess a student's academic capabilities than I expected."**

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Another respondent was from a liberal arts college that was an early adopter of test-optional policy and practices. They noted: "We had been test optional since [the 1990s] so moving to test-free was not a challenge." In this example, the individual was already familiar with reading applications without test scores, and expanding this type of review made the shift fairly uneventful.

For those from institutions where reading without test scores was new, participants described steps that their offices took to implement new policies. Preparation included updating training and calibration between readers, as one admissions professional described:

> "We prepared by implementing a summer study of re-reading applications without test scores to examine possible differences in the class without the scores. We spent a significant amount of time working with readers that fall—internal and external [readers]—to prepare, answer questions, etc."

Other respondents noted that their offices worked to reconfigure algorithms and rubrics "... to account for rigor, coursework, grades, as well as context for the transition to test free." One issue noted by several individuals was communicating what "test free" really meant (i.e., as opposed to being test-optional) to students and counselors. While not overly burdensome, it was listed as one of the more common challenges of becoming test free.

Third, respondents noted implications of being test free for the actual review process. A byproduct of being test free was **that staff could make decisions without feeling pressured about an admitted or enrolled class' average test score,** as noted by one respondent:

> "Standardized testing was just one [element of admissions] and not even [a] key piece before—**not utilizing them I don't think takes away from our process in terms of admitted prepared students, but does make the process more equitable and authentic** as well as take[s] the pressure off to not worry about whether our test average would go up or down (even by a few points)."

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While standardized tests were not a "key" piece for this institution even before the pandemic, the respondent noted that **being test free still took "pressure off" from being concerned about how decisions would affect the institution's average SAT/ACT score,** a part of the U.S. News & World Report rankings. Even shifts of several points could be worrisome, and being test free removed that particular pressure.

Another key ramification was how **test-free policies made readers slow down** when reading applications, as one respondent observed:

> "[In] over nearly 17 years in admission, my perspective on standardized testing has evolved. It's become clear to me that **students are far more than their performance on a test on a Saturday in May, and we should treat them that way. Many readers don't admit this, but they use numbers as shortcuts far too often, so this requires them to slow down, read the full app,** a [sic] fully consider a student's achievements and triumphs."

After noting shifts in how they viewed test scores, the respondent explained that many readers would use test scores for "shortcuts far too often." From their perspective, having a test-free policy forced readers to slow down and read more carefully. This observation is one way how reading applications without considering standardized tests could help admissions officers identify talented students, through **carefully reading all parts of the application instead of leaning on the test score as a shortcut.**

Interestingly, the practice of using test scores as a shortcut could happen through multiple ways, from a reader easily disregarding a student because of a low test score, to a reader quickly favoring another student because of a score. While test-optional policies can help reduce chances of the first scenario happening, the second case will still occur because high scoring students will be more likely to report scores. In contrast, test-free admissions seeks to eliminate both scenarios—both negative and positive treatment of students due to test scores.

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## Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Overall, **admissions professionals generally viewed the transition to test-free policies positively due to implications for equity, and almost all felt well-prepared to recruit students and review applications under new policies.** Key ramifications included the ability to make decisions with less external pressure, and the sense that being test-free made readers review applications more carefully. **Findings point to how test-free policies are feasible to implement,** providing insights for institutions and policymakers considering a shift to test-free.

Particularly compelling was one respondent's perspective that the **absence of test scores forced readers to slow down and not rely on the test score as a "shortcut."** As researchers have pointed out, these types of mental shortcuts can exacerbate biases in evaluation and decision-making.[7] Taking out a notable "shortcut" like test scores may facilitate a more equitable and careful reading of applicants. Test-free policies may reduce other concerns related to test-optional, for example, differential treatment between score submitters versus non-score submitters, or confusion among students on whether they should submit scores or not.[8] Of note, it is likely impossible to completely remove bias from any evaluative process, and another point of concern is inequality related to non-standardized components of the application which remain (e.g., extracurricular activities).[9] However, **going test-free may contribute to a reduction in bias in the admissions process, potentially through the elimination of test scores, a more careful evaluation process, or both.**

[7] O'Meara, K., Culpepper, D., & Templeton, L. L. (2020). Nudging toward diversity: Applying behavioral design to faculty hiring. *Review of Educational Research, 90*(3), 311-348.

[8] Slay, K. (2023). Enacted Versus Espoused: The complementarity of interviews and observations in diversity-focused yield recruitment. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference in Chicago, IL.

[9] Park, J.J., Kim, B.H., Wong, N., Zheng, J., Breen, S., Lo, P., Baker, D.J., Rosinger, K.O., Nguyen, M.H., & Poon, O.A. (2023). Inequality beyond standardized tests: Trends in extracurricular activity reporting in college applications across race and class. College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative. Accessible at www.cafcolab.org

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Of note, while test-optional policies come with some concerns (e.g., percentiles for reported scores often increase, which could make an institution seem less accessible even if students have the option not to submit), they may be a stepping stone for institutions looking to reduce reliance on standardized tests or eliminate them altogether. Similar to the respondent perspective we shared, **being test-optional for a period may help institutions adjust to reading without test scores, setting the stage to consider a move to test-free policies.**

Additional research is needed to further assess the impact of test-free policies and practices, especially on admissions and enrollment outcomes. Like test-optional policies, test-free policies may encounter limitations without accompanying aggressive investments in financial aid, recruitment, and retention.[10] In order to expand access and opportunity, **institutions need to make strong investments in expanding financial aid, recruitment, and support to reach and retain historically excluded populations, regardless of testing policy.**

Similar to test-optional counterparts in the broader study,[11] admissions professionals reported increases in application numbers from students from a broad range of backgrounds. Although the increased diversity in the application pool was a welcome change, workload concerns remained. Additionally, as noted earlier, **test-free policies may encourage admissions professionals to read applications more carefully–a welcome development, but one that will likely require additional investments in staffing and resources to support a comprehensive review of students.**

Our current study provides valuable insights related to how test-free policies are being experienced on the ground. Future research may include more in-depth inquiries on the nuances of test-free policy adaptation, as well as quantitative analyses capturing the impact on various outcomes. Given the Supreme Court rulings on race-conscious admissions, it is especially critical for institutions to investigate all possible means to expand access and opportunity. **Insights from admissions professionals indicate that test-free policies can be a compelling way for institutions to enact their values around diversity and equity, and that such policies may contribute to a more equitable evaluation of applicants.**

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[10] Bennett, C. T. (2022). Untested admissions: Examining changes in application behaviors and student demographics under test-optional policies. *American Educational Research Journal, 59*(1), 180-216.

[11] Wong, N., Poon, O., Park, J.J., Zheng, J., & Lo, P. (2023). *Test-Optional Policies in the Era of COVID-19: Responses from the College Admissions Community.* College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative. Accessible at www.cafcolab.org

# APPENDIX: METHODS

**Survey Background**

The survey questionnaire was developed by the multi-institutional research team. The survey questionnaire was then reviewed by subject matter experts on college admissions and members of the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC). These groups provided expert feedback that was incorporated into the design of the survey questionnaire.[12] Data for this study was collected through an online survey of college admissions professionals, which was administered from July to December 2022.

**Institutional Sample**

The sample of institutions included 222 selective, public and private non-profit, four-year institutions located throughout the United States. We received responses from college admissions professionals at 113 institutions for an overall response rate of 51%. From the sample of 113 institutions, only 10 institutions reported adopting a test-free policy after the start of the pandemic.

**Recruitment**

Respondents were invited to complete the survey questionnaire through four different recruitment strategies. First, individuals received an email from NACAC on the NACAC Exchange, an organizational listserv for college admissions professionals to share news and discuss issues related to college admissions. Second, Assistant Directors, Associate Directors, and Directors of College Admissions at the 222 institutions were sent individual emails from NACAC encouraging them to participate in the study. Third, college admissions professionals at the 222 institutions were sent invitation emails from cafcolab@umd.edu. Fourth, participants were recruited by the research team at the 2022 NACAC Annual Conference hosted in Houston, Texas.

Participants were provided an overview of the project, the name and contact information of the principal investigator, and a hyperlink to the survey. Participants received $50 gift cards from Tango Rewards for their participation in the study.

**Participants**

The broader sample consisted of 226 college admissions professionals. The subset sample of respondents working at a test-free institution was limited to 19 college admission professionals. Of these 19 respondents, 17 participants worked at an institution that became test-free after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

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[12] Bradburn, N. M., Sudman, S., & Wansink, B. (2004). *Asking questions: the definitive guide to questionnaire design—for market research, political polls, and social and health questionnaires.* John Wiley & Sons.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected using an online survey via Qualtrics.com. The survey included close-ended questions about their institution's testing policies, institutional decision-making processes about testing policies, and demographic questions. The survey also included 8 open-ended questions about improving their institution's testing policies, their office's preparation for policy implementation, their own agreement or disagreement with their institution's policies, the reasoning behind their institution's decision to change policies, their institution's priorities, and any changes to their own perceptions or beliefs about college admissions. The survey took no longer than 20 minutes to complete.

**Data Analysis**

We ran descriptive statistics for exploratory analysis. Open-ended survey questions were hand-coded using deductive coding.[13] Thematic analysis was employed to analyze what findings emerged from the data. Initial coding of responses was conducted by one member of the research team. Three members of the research team engaged in the process of "hashing out" by having the coders discuss and negotiate the themes that emerged from open-ended data.[14] To protect respondents' identities, we did not provide institutional information when including quotations.

[13] Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Sage publications.

[14] Armstrong, D., Gosling, A., Weinman, J., & Marteau, T. (1997). The place of inter-rater reliability in qualitative research: An empirical study. *Sociology, 31*(3), 597-606.

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