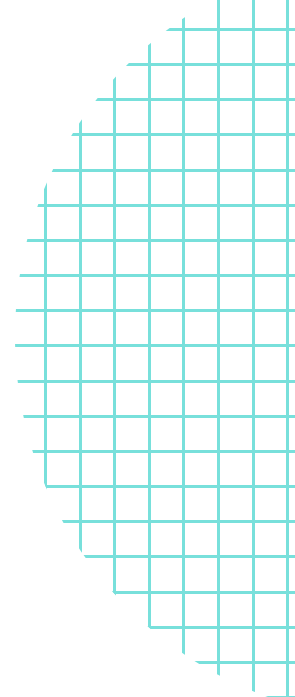


**COLLEGE
ADMISSIONS
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POLICY REPORT

TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

Written by Nancy Wong, Oi'Yan Poon, Julie J. Park, Jia Zheng, & Pearl Lo



Acknowledgments

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Authors

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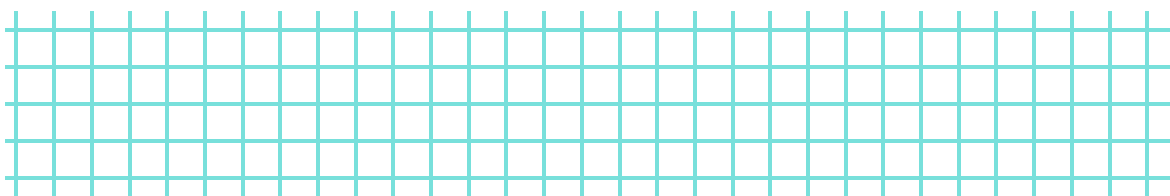
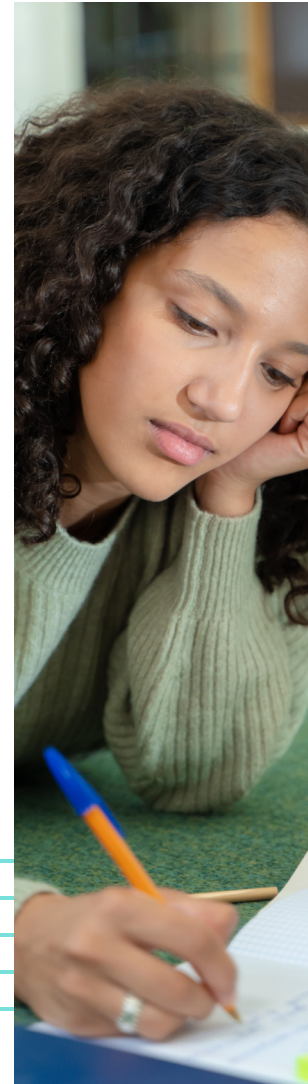


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic propelled many institutions to eliminate the use of tests in college admissions. With the start of the pandemic in 2020, over 1,700 colleges and universities across the United States announced temporary or permanent test-optional admissions policy changes, which meant that students are no longer required to submit a standardized test with their college applications¹. As a result, many admissions offices in higher education implemented wide-scale changes to systems related to messaging, communication, file review practices, and decision-making processes, as well as predictive modeling for enrollment management.

At the same time, little is known about the decision-making processes that led to these changes, or how college admissions offices and practitioners implemented them. Even less is known about how institutions will decide whether and how their policies will evolve over time. What are the contexts influencing whether they will remain permanently test-optional, shift back to test-required, or adopt some other policy?

To answer these questions, we analyze data from a survey of college admissions professionals and interviews with senior admission leaders. In total, 226 admissions college admissions professionals² representing 113 selective³, public and private nonprofit, 4-year institutions⁴ responded to the survey between July and December 2022. Survey respondents answered questions intended to gauge their perspectives on changes to admission policies prompted by the pandemic starting in March 2020⁵. Of these survey respondents, we interviewed 15 senior admission leaders⁶, who discussed their institution's policies related to test score requirements and usage.



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

² Survey responses were limited to admissions professionals who had worked in college admissions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning professionals had to have at least 3 years of experience in college admissions.

³ We define selective as having a two- or three-year IPEDS average admit rate of 50% or lower.

⁴ A total of 222 public and private nonprofit, 4 year institutions were included in the sample.

⁵ We note that some institutions were test-optional prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁶ Interview participants held positions ranging from Associate Director to Vice Provost.

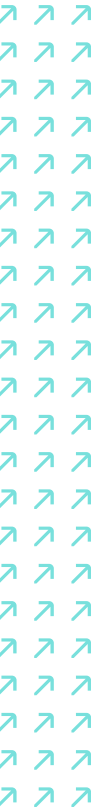


Summary of Findings

“Test optional” is an umbrella term encompassing varying test score policies in college admissions, including test-free, test-flexible, optional submission, or other conditions. Prior to the 2020 pandemic, 602⁷ postsecondary institutions had already implemented test-optional admissions policies. Due to the pandemic, almost all postsecondary institutions were forced to pivot to test-optional policies. In this report we highlight five key findings that spotlight motivations informing institutional policy changes and admissions work during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Concerns related to equity were central in policy changes prior to the pandemic, and in response to the global health crisis.
2. Adopting test-optional policies required attention to changes in routine workflows and practices.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic and test policy changes resulted in substantial changes to the volume of applications submitted by students and challenges to enrollment management.
4. Test-optional policies led to insights on the possibilities and limitations of changing testing policies.
5. The future of test-optional policies in selective colleges and universities may be driven more by politics and governance than by evidence suggesting that test scores lack utility in admissions procedures and decision-making.

Overall, the majority of respondents viewed the move to test-optional admissions favorably, and felt that they had received adequate training and preparation to evaluate applications under the new policies. Respondents did identify numerous implications for policy and practice, which we discuss in the full report.



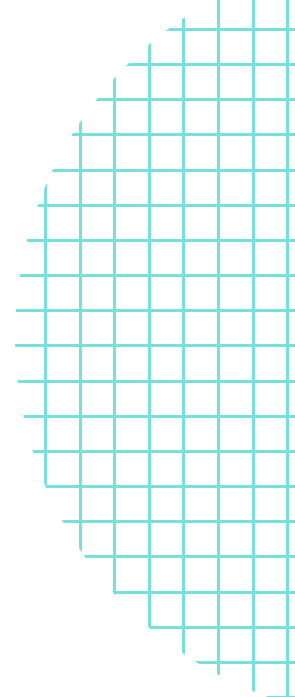
Recommendations

Overall, we found that admissions and enrollment management leaders desire to center equity in their work. However, they are beholden to larger systems of power and decision-making. Therefore, initiatives for change in this area must address these power dynamics. We offer the following recommendations with the future of test-optional admissions in mind.

1. Postsecondary institutional leaders should draw from research, evidence, and the experiential knowledge of leaders in enrollment management and admissions, as they consider the future of testing policies.
2. Professional associations (e.g., NACAC, AGB, ACE) and philanthropy should invest in organizational learning opportunities that gather small cohorts of institutional leaders, senior admissions practitioners, and researchers to deeply focus on generating ideas to address equity in admissions. One model for this kind of learning for evidence-informed institutional leadership and practice is NACAC's Elevate Equity conference.⁸
3. Stronger professional development connected to organizational work routines and sense-making for equity in the test-optional environment is needed.
4. Institutional leaders should consider evaluating and changing current systems and structures to better support college admission professionals, who are not only grappling with these post-COVID admission changes but also with overwork, as significant turnover impacts staffing.



⁸ <https://www.nacacnet.org/elevate-equity-2023/>



TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES IN THE ERA OF COVID-19: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic propelled many institutions to eliminate the use of tests in college admissions. Since the start of the pandemic, over 1,700 colleges and universities across the United States have announced temporary or permanent test-optional admissions policy changes, which meant that students were no longer required to submit a standardized test with their college application to be considered.⁹ To implement test-optional policies, many admissions offices in higher education implemented wide-scale changes to their systems, norms, and processes related to messaging and communication with students and families. File review practices, decision-making and deliberation routines, and predictive modeling approaches for enrollment management have also been subject to change. Still, little is known about the decision-making process that led to these changes, or how college admissions offices and practitioners implemented and communicated institutional policy changes internally and externally. Even less is known about how institutions will decide whether and how their policies will change in the future; whether they will remain permanently test-optional, shift back to test-required, or adopt some other policy. This policy report examines changes to college admissions test policies, before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

For this study, we conducted a survey of college admissions professionals and interviews with senior admission leaders. In total, 226 college admissions professionals¹⁰ representing 113 selective¹¹, public and private nonprofit institutions (out of a total population of 222 postsecondary institutions), responded to the survey between July and December 2022. Survey respondents answered questions intended to gauge their perspectives on changes made to their institution's admission policies prompted by the pandemic starting in March 2020¹². Of these survey respondents, we invited 15 senior admission leaders¹³ to participate in interviews to discuss their institution's policies related to test score requirements and usage.

⁹ Fairtest. (n.d.). Test optional and test free colleges. <https://fairtest.org/test-optional-list/>

¹⁰ Survey responses were limited to admissions professionals who had worked in college admissions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning professionals had to have at least 3 years of experience in college admissions.

¹¹ We define selective as having a two- or three-year IPEDS average admit rate of 50% or lower.

¹² We note that some institutions were test-optional prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹³ Interview participants held positions from Associate Director to Vice Provost.

Standardized Tests and College Admissions

Standardized tests have been an important factor in undergraduate admissions, especially at the most selective colleges and universities. In particular, the SAT and ACT are the most widely used tests in the United States. Yet, there have been persistent concerns about inequities embedded in these standardized tests for decades. Prior research has shown that racially minoritized students, women, and lower-income students on average have lower test scores than their counterparts on the SAT and ACT¹⁴. These disparities in test scores have been attributed to cultural and gender bias within the content of the test, inequities in test access and preparation, and other factors including stereotype threat and test anxiety.¹⁵

Background on Test-Optional Policies

In the decades following Bowdoin College's decision to remove standardized test requirements in 1970, test-optional policies gained some traction in college admissions, but the proportion of selective institutions with these policies remained relatively low compared to those with test-required policies.¹⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic made test-optional policies nearly ubiquitous. However, test-optional policies vary greatly across institutions, and the lack of clarity about what is defined as a "test-optional" admission policy complicates the ability of institutions to measure the consequences of these policies for equity.¹⁷ The term "test-optional" can refer to test-optional (i.e., applicants can choose whether to submit or not submit a test score), test flexible (i.e., applicants can submit a wider array of tests beyond the ACT and SAT), test-free (i.e., institution refuses to consider any test scores in the admissions process), and many other variations of test data submission policies and practices.¹⁸

Even within these distinctions, institutional admission policies may not neatly fit into these categories. For instance, test-free institutions may still use standardized test scores to award scholarships or determine academic placements. As found in our survey of admissions professionals, institutions

¹⁴ Rosser, P. (1989). The SAT Gender Gap: Identifying the Causes. Center for Women Policy Studies.

¹⁵ Toppling Testing? COVID-19, Test-Optional College Admissions, and Implications for Equity. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep41732.pdf?acceptTC=true&coverpage=false&addFooter=false>

¹⁶ Bowdoin College. (n.d.). Admissions. Test Optional Policy. <https://www.bowdoin.edu/admissions/our-process/test-optional-policy/index.html>

¹⁷ Belasco, A. S., Rosinger, K. O., & Hearn, J. C. (2015). The test-optional movement at America's selective liberal arts colleges: A boon for equity or something else?. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37(2), 206-223; 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.

¹⁸ Baker, D. & Bello, A. 2020. In a pandemic test-optional admissions is necessary but insufficient. https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/1e1bb38b-fdda-4ae1-93d8-f4102272ee48/downloads/Baker%26Bello-TestOptional_HTGreport.pdf?ver=1674240385449



may maintain requirements for test score submissions from particular student groups like homeschooled students and international students. This confusion about what “test-optional” truly means complicates the evaluation of these policy changes and their impact on access and equity.

Participant Demographics

In total, 226 college admissions professionals¹⁹ representing 113 selective²⁰, public and private nonprofit institutions²¹ responded to the survey between July and December 2022. (See Appendix A on page 30 for more information about survey participant demographics.) From the pool of survey respondents, we followed up and interviewed 15 senior admission leaders at various institutional types with test-optional or test-free admission policies. The purpose of these interviews was to ask senior admissions leaders about how decision-making about admission policies and practices shifted since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Senior admission leaders were also asked to elaborate on the complexities of these changes related to their survey responses. We selected 15 senior admission leaders to ensure diverse geographic and institutional representation. Senior admission leaders held positions from Associate Director up to Vice Provost of Admissions. For more information about interview participant demographics, see Appendix B. We refer to survey respondents as college admission professionals and interview participants as senior admissions leaders.

Key Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a critical turning point for college admissions, upending many prior conventions and beliefs about the necessity of standardized test scores in admissions decisions and enrollment management. Thus, our study aimed to explore how institutions decided to implement test-optional policies, the effects of pandemic on selective college admissions work and processes, and the future of standardized tests in selective admission practices.

We detail five key findings describing influences on policy changes and changes to admissions work.

¹⁹ Survey responses were limited to admissions professionals who had worked in college admissions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning professionals had to have at least 3 years of experience in college admissions.

²⁰ We define selective as having a two- or three-year IPEDS average admit rate of 50% or lower.

²¹ The sample included 222 public and private non-profit, 4-year, institutions. The sample was composed primarily of private nonprofit institutions (77%) and less than a quarter of public institutions (23%).

1. Concerns related to equity were central in policy changes prior to the pandemic, and in response to the global health crisis.
2. Adopting test-optional policies required attention to changes in routine workflows and practices.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic and test policy changes resulted in substantial changes to the volume of applications submitted by students and challenges to enrollment management.
4. Test-optional policies led to insights on the possibilities and limitations of changing testing policies.
5. The future of test-optional policies in selective colleges and universities is driven by governance, competition, politics, and student data even though prior evidence and data suggest that test scores lack utility in admissions procedures and decision-making

1. CONCERNS OVER EQUITY WERE CENTRAL IN POLICY CHANGES PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC, AND IN RESPONSE TO THE GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS.

Pre-Pandemic Test-Optional Institutions

Prior to the pandemic, forty-seven college admission professionals worked at institutions that were test-optional. College admission professionals shared that their institution became test-optional pre-pandemic because of concerns over inequities related to standardized test designs, access to testing, and desire to simplify the application process. For example:

- “Testing was biased against underrepresented populations. It is most correlated with family income.”
- “Testing creates unnecessary barriers and stress for students.”

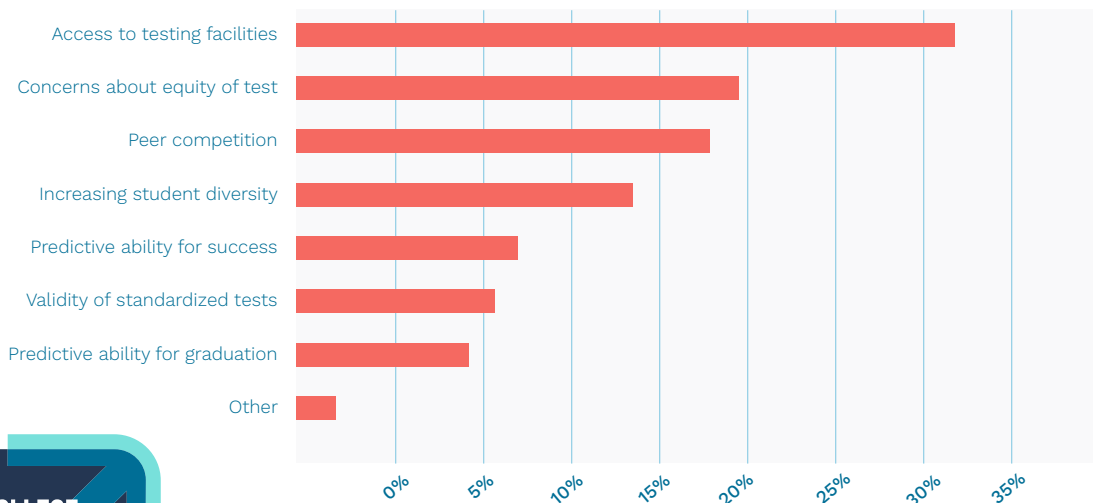


Similarly, senior admissions leaders explained that their decisions to implement test-optional policies prior to the pandemic were directly related to these inequities. Leaders emphasized the importance of removing barriers for students.

Testing was the next thing [to go]. And it coincided with COVID. There are issues with standardized tests. I think it's fairly well documented. We were seeing students who were very strong students, they were pursuing really strong courses of study in high school. And their test scores were just more modest, whether it was because they had test anxiety or they went to an under-resourced school that didn't offer preparation for the SAT or the ACT. We had, on the one hand, students who we felt could do really well, but the testing was just modest. And then we had the pandemic ... And test centers were being closed left and right, students weren't able to take it. And so that was the next natural step for us to say, "Let's do a three-year pilot of going test-optional."
(Senior Admissions Leader 9)

For us, we see it as an opportunity to be more efficient in the process because test optional is one of those barriers, but I also think how long we give students to make a decision is also another important piece of this process. And if we can get through our process sooner, it gives them more time to consider the offer, to consider the financial aid, to engage with us. It works better. And so we've found that the pandemic has helped us in other ways as well, being able to just even be more efficient with our time. (Senior Admissions Leader 8)

Which of the following were stated as factors influencing the decisions to implement the test optional policy? Select all that apply



Going Test Optional After the Start of the Pandemic

For college admission professionals who reported changing test policies after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to testing facilities (32%), concerns about the equity of the test (20%), and competition with peers (18%) were the top three factors that influenced their institution’s decision to implement a test-optional policy.

College admissions professionals expressed these concerns in their responses when asked about their institution’s internal reasoning for adopting a test-optional policy:

- “Access to testing (and our belief that students basically should NOT take the risk to test during the height of the pandemic) was the main driver for our decision.”
- “The pandemic gave us the opportunity to examine how and why we use test scores. The tests are biased and lack predictive ability. This has to be balanced with our need to evaluate students and make sure we are admitting students who will be successful. It would be terrible to admit someone who was academically prepared for our program.”
- “Internal reason is competition with peer institutions. We clearly stated the lack of access to the test but the internal worry was also the ability to compete. The year prior to the pandemic was a five year low for applications for us so there was a lot of worry about that being the new normal.”

Likewise, college admission professionals cited racial diversity, economic diversity, academic interests (to manage enrollments by major and/or college), and institutional budget goals or limitations as the most important priorities considered when making admission decisions to shape and enroll a class. Although these were the top priorities, college admission professionals noted challenges in balancing multiple priorities at the same time.

- “Like most institutions, we strive to increase diversity in all forms in our class each year to best represent the diversity of our world—this includes socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, sexual orientation, religious, academic, geographic and more.”



- “The priorities of any given year were superseded by the way the University operates. A profit driven process will institutionalize ways of speaking about financial aid, socioeconomic diversity, and intellectual diversity that weakens those structures. University priorities around financial wellness of the institution (making a profit) and marketability (athletics and specific forms of diversity admitted) were what dominated the conversation.”

The work of admissions offices is to advance a range of institutional goals, which can be in tension with each other. The many demands on their work can lead to entrenched routines, such as requiring test scores even when there are desires for more equitable practices.²² The pandemic offered a moment and inescapable pressure to fast-track test-optional changes.

2. ADOPTING TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES REQUIRED ATTENTION TO CHANGES IN ROUTINE WORKFLOWS AND PRACTICES.

In the sudden pandemic-motivated adoption of test-optional policies, college admission professionals shared that significant time and resources were dedicated to staff training to read applications without test scores. Admission professionals were generally satisfied with the training they received, with only 12% of survey respondents indicating that they strongly or somewhat disagreed that they received adequate training and learning opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Training and Learning Opportunities

College admission professionals explained why they agreed that they were provided adequate training and learning opportunities at their institution and described their preparation.

- “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 [to the full-time admissions office staff]—to prepare, answer questions, etc.”
- “We discussed new [application file] review modules, discussed different ways to evaluate students with/without scores to make them equitable,

²² Poon, O., Lee, D. H., Galvez, E., Engler, J. S., Sérrano, B., Raza, A., Hurtado, J. M., Chun, N. K. (2023). A Möbius model of racialized organizations: Durability of racial inequalities in admissions. *The Journal of Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2023.2203630>

discussed building a rubric that would make sense for reviewers, trained our front desk team on how to answer questions, updated website content, created some FAQs and focus groups with key players at the college, etc.”

- “We talked extensively with staff about avoiding ‘test-absence bias’ and applying greater scrutiny to other pieces of the application, especially the transcript (in assessing both rigor and performance).”

Although college admission professionals shared that they were provided with adequate training opportunities, some respondents identified challenges reading in instances when students still submitted test scores, even though they indicated that they would not be submitting scores. A few also indicated challenges in reading applications without test scores.

- “Times when a student would say to not use their ACT/SAT score in the consideration of their application, but the score is included in a transcript or a teacher or counselor mentions it. We don’t have the capacity to redact test scores in all documents... It’s when it comes from other sources that we don’t get to remove it. Training readers to unsee something when they can clearly see it is hard.”
- “[We had to decide] what to do about students who sent scores but did not want them considered.”
- “Applicants without testing from under-resourced high schools appeared to be at a disadvantage. We found it difficult to understand a candidate’s academic foundation without SAT/ACT or rigorous college-level coursework like AP/IB.”

Given the rapid shift to test-optional admissions systems and practices, most college admissions professionals suggested that their institutions had experienced a relatively smooth transition aided by adequate staff training and support.

Admissions leaders also addressed how they reviewed for academic qualities and rigor among applicants in a more nuanced way without test scores. One senior admission leader described how they implemented a new context-sensitive rigor component that they considered when reading applications.



We added a sort of academic rigor component to the rubric, where we were assessing the quality of a student's... I don't want to say the quality of their education, because that's not what it was. It's an assessment of their ability, based on if a school offered AP classes and desire to take more challenging courses. It gave us the ability to be like, okay, a 3.8, with all regular college prep classes isn't the same as a 3.8, where students have taken AP Bio, AP History, AP Chem, and AP English. We wanted to give a numerical sort of point to students who had taken a harder course load. So the scale, it's shifted over the years. When we first did it, I think it was two, and we're like, no, no, no, we need way more context than that. So the next year we had it be like three points. I think now it's like five. So we've really expanded our academic rigor rating significantly. (Senior Admissions Leader 11)

These survey and interview data suggested to us that without strong attention to equity, review procedures—with and without test scores—could privilege students who attended more well-resourced high schools that offered more academically rigorous classes. This phenomena is common among other high stakes organizational decision-making processes, wherein certain groups may retain advantages even when key policies shift, unless equity is centered throughout the process.²³

File Review Materials

College admission professionals also indicated that their offices developed new rubrics, rating scales, and other materials to assess applicants under newly implemented test-optional policies.

- “Our admissions counselors needed to calibrate a reading approach in the absence of test scores. We redesigned our review rubric as well as our GPA calculation policy.”
- “We expanded our existing rubric to provide more texture to the application review process - we specifically expanded a section on academic rigor to assess a student's academic preparation/commitment relative to the available opportunities at their high school.”

Survey respondents described how this allowed them to “seek alternative signs of strength within the application.” For example, survey respondents shared that there is a greater “emphasis on the transcript/contextual

²³ Posselt, J., Hernandez, T. E., Villarreal, C. D., Rodgers, A. J., & Irwin, L. N. (2020). Evaluation and decision making in higher education: Toward equitable repertoires of faculty practice. *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research: Volume 35*, 1-63. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-11743-6_8-1

factors,” “GPA,” and “academic rigor.” Although a greater emphasis on contextual factors could benefit racially marginalized and low-income students, we wondered whether these new rubrics and materials could detract from the equity motivations often attached to adoptions of test-optional policies. It is important to note that many of these new components are still linked to demonstrated race and class structural inequalities in K-12 education.

3. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND TEST POLICY SHIFTS RESULTED IN SUBSTANTIAL CHANGES TO THE VOLUME OF APPLICATIONS SUBMITTED BY STUDENTS AND CHALLENGES TO ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT.

Beyond changes to college admission processes and file review, college admissions professionals reported significant changes to the volume of applications submitted and challenges to managing review, selection, and enrollment yield practices.

- “The biggest challenge was the increase in applications that arose from the upheaval in college admission and K-12 education.”
- “We’ve overenrolled the past two years [2021 and 2022], but I don’t think that’s a huge problem to have in the grand scheme of things. Would testing have automatically cut some people who made it through? Probably, but we’ve had some great groups of students that we have admitted, so clearly there was something else about them that jumped off the page.”
- “Our total applications went up and we had a hard time predicting which students would enroll. We came in low the first year and high the second year. It’s not necessarily all dependent on being test-optional but there is belief that it was part of the discussion.”

Senior admission leaders talked at length about how these changes in application numbers and student enrollment affected their work in admissions and the institution as a whole.

This past year, we saw [nearly 14,000] applications to fill a class of [less than 600] students. So, we are very much a small liberal arts private college. We have a total of [over 2,000] students on campus. So, our

application funnel is always much larger than the space that we have on campus. We are not looking to grow or change that size identity that we currently have. So, as our applications are increasing, that means more tough decisions for our team. (Senior Admissions Leader 5)

Another senior admissions leader expressed excitement about increases in enrollment of Pell-eligible students and racially minoritized students at their institution, but they also explained that these increases in enrollment did not come with increases in support services for these students.

I think one hopefully positive attribute according to the trustees is we have the most diverse racially ethnically Pell Grant first-gen percentages class that we've ever had [here], right? 40% of our domestic students identify as Black or Indigenous or as a person of color. And that is a wild change going from about 33% to 40% in a single class is substantial, we've been at about 32% for nine years... We haven't changed, for example, the number of employees in our [Multicultural] Office. We have not increased our TRIO support, we do not have additional first-generation student advising support. We also acknowledge that while we in admissions feel really excited about this incoming class of incredibly diverse perspectives and backgrounds and lived experiences, that our on campus support is actually not changing substantially. (Senior Admissions Leader 10)

Other participants also underscored issues with predictive modeling for yield in enrollment for their desired cohort sizes. Survey respondents reported significant changes to applications and enrollment while senior admission leaders talked at length about how these changes in application numbers and student enrollment affected their work in admissions and the institution as a whole in supporting students. Many respondents shared that they were unable to use their old yield models, which affected their ability to create a class that met their institutional goals that did not under- or over-enroll students.



4. TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES LED TO INSIGHTS ON THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF CHANGING TESTING POLICIES.

When asked about the implications of these test-optional policies on college access, college admission professionals explained that these policies led to new insights about equity in college admissions.

- “Without the testing requirement, I believe many students who were previously ‘inadmissible’ were able to see their strengths rise above a poor test score by not submitting testing.”
- “I don’t believe test optionality has made it easier to ‘identify strong applicants from low-income and racially minoritized backgrounds,’ but I DO believe it has made it easier to advocate for their admission in a room sometimes full of folx [sic] who are content to run this process the way it’s always been run (i.e. unfairly advantaging particular groups of students).”

Study participants also recognized that removing tests was one step toward equity in complex admissions systems. There remained other admissions practices and norms susceptible to inequities.

- “The test was always just one metric, but without equal access to test prep or even taking the exam, it was certainly a barrier to applying. That barrier has been removed, but parsing out application trends during a pandemic while also removing the testing barrier has been hard to do.”
- “I guess it comes down to the fact that eliminating tests does not eliminate bias, preferences, and the way the work is done. There is a machine within higher education admissions at the elite Ivy+ institution. The possibilities for reform are there, yet, I am reticent to point out an institution, beyond those changing their literal systems of learning (competency-based learning, etc.), that has done the work to change the college admissions landscape.”

Additionally, college admission professionals revealed concerns about who would most benefit from test-optional policies, recognizing the disparities in high school advising and support.

- “Becoming test optional has opened my eyes to the barriers that many high-achieving low-income and first-generation students face with regards to standardized testing. I’m now worried that one of the



unexpected outcomes of test optional is the possibility that more affluent students who typically score well on standardized tests will benefit significantly in the new test optional admissions environment. Colleges and universities will need to provide evidence that they are truly test optional by admitting and enrolling as many students with standardized tests as without.”

In this COVID pandemic era, the rapid changes to test-optional admissions has created opportunities for admissions offices, professionals, and institutional leaders to experiment and learn from new practices, possibilities, and recognize a need to continue being vigilant against the persistence of inequities in their organizations.

5. THE FUTURE OF TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES IN SELECTIVE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IS DRIVEN BY GOVERNANCE, COMPETITION, POLITICS, AND STUDENT DATA EVEN THOUGH PRIOR EVIDENCE AND DATA SUGGEST THAT TEST SCORES LACK UTILITY IN ADMISSIONS PROCEDURES AND DECISION-MAKING.

College admissions professionals are engaged in data-informed deliberations within broader structures of power, politics, and governance, to determine whether to remain, iterate on, or abandon “test-optional” policies. While many participants stated that standardized tests generally lack utility in college admissions processes and aims, they indicated that the lack of utility alone was not enough for their institutions to go test-optional prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, college admissions professionals shared that governance, competition, politics, and data were central in these conversations.

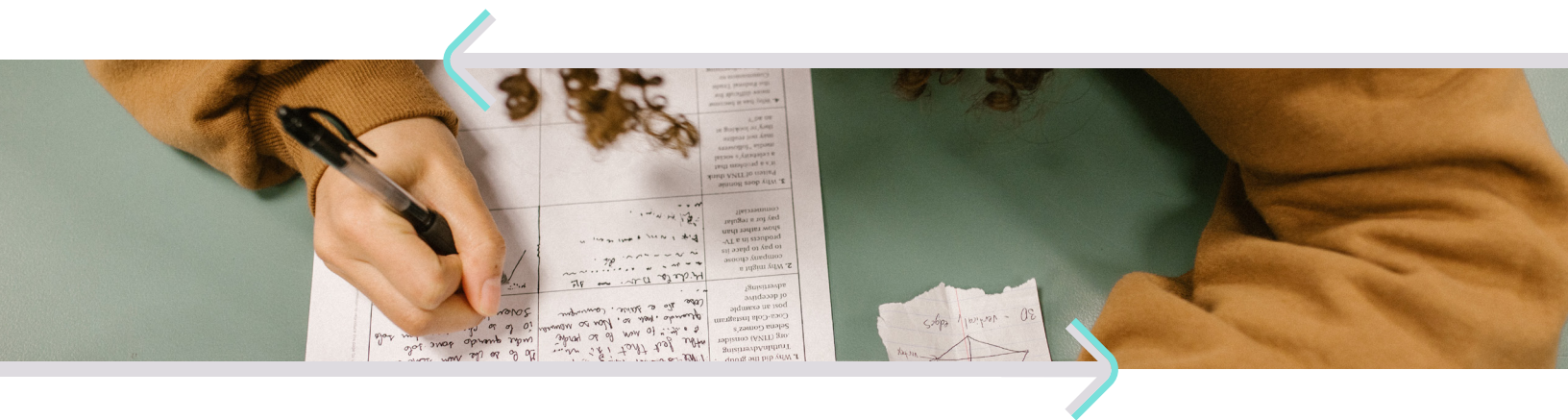
Internal Sources of Decision-Making Power and Shared Governance

When asked who held power to make these admissions policy decisions, nearly half of all respondents reported that these policy decisions were primarily decided by the Dean or Director of Admission (25%) and Chief

Enrollment Management Officer (22%). Respondents also indicated that other entities within the institution influence admissions decisions, including faculty, administrators, governing boards, and other committees across the institution. For instance, senior admissions leaders described the process of shared governance to implement a test-optional policy at their institution.

In the year leading up to the pandemic, the Provost asked me to convene a committee to look at basically the pros and cons of test optional... In the [fall], they thought it was important to explore it and they wanted it to be a broad committee. They wanted faculty on the committee. They wanted staff on the committee. They wanted people from some of our advising units. So I convened this committee and we worked from the fall through early March of 2020 when I produced the report weeks before the country shut down...There are things that we knew we had to do, but the committee's recommendation was that we move to test optional. So he said, "Send it to me, I want to read it." So we put it together. He literally emailed me the next day and he said, "Okay, we got to go." The Trustees weren't going to meet again until April. We couldn't wait. He said, "We need to take this to the [Trustees]." It would be on Zoom, but he said, "Before you do that, there are two other committees. You have to go to the [Faculty Council] and get that approved." So literally in a period of 10 days we pulled together a bunch of meetings and made a presentation. I mean, those are governance bodies at the university and they both agreed. (Senior Admissions Leader 13)

Changing policies in admissions and other places in postsecondary institutions require institutional leaders to navigate political governance structures and norms. One senior admission leader also explained the process for organizational policy review and adoption at their institution.



It starts with the Dean of admission and his staff and the faculty committee on admission. That group made the recommendation, of course, the dean of admission and I discussed it and we also have a dean of admission out at [satellite campus], and the three of us were the key folks who looked at what the recommendation was going to be. Then I crafted the recommendation, and I sent it up to the Provost. The Provost convenes the Dean’s council, which is the council of all of our academic Deans... and I presented the proposal to them. There was discussion. The Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, who’s not a Dean, was part of that discussion. [They] reflected on it, discussed it with our president, and then came back with the decision to affirm our recommendation. We’ve done that each of the three years we’ve been in it where the first year was more involved. Each year after has been us saying, “We’d like to extend this.” (Senior Admissions Leader 4)

One senior admissions leader underscored the difficulty of navigating shared governance in decision-making:

It’s a power struggle, because there’s no blueprint for shared governance. And for us, there’s less of a formal approval from any faculty body, and more of us sharing what our recommendations are, and let us know how you feel. We’re hoping this works. We’re bringing them in after we have already developed a policy, and hearing their feedback. I will say that we have a good sense of who we are culturally in our faculty, and so the likelihood that enrollment would draw up something that our faculty thinks is insane is pretty slim. At many points, we would say, “I don’t think the faculty would be going for this. Let’s think of something that might have their viewpoint better represented.” (Senior Admissions Leader 5)



Influence of Peer Institutions and External Entities

Other senior admissions leaders indicated that competition with peer institutions was an important factor in their policy deliberation processes over whether to remain test-optional.



I would say that we're more in line in looking at what other HBCUs are doing. For instance, if [college] came out and said, "We're requiring test scores again." I would be like, "What? Why? Let me find out why they're doing this." They're our number one cross application school. Our students' school list of the institutions they're interested in, they do tend to hover more around HBCUs. (Senior Admissions Leader 5)

As we were getting ready to kick off the fall '23 season, I went back and said, "Okay, it's great that we did this. We kind of need to do it again, because at this point, here are our competitors and what they're doing here, our cross-applicant schools and what they're doing..." (Senior Admissions Leader 6)

I don't feel like we can put additional barriers on top of students that the [competitor state system] doesn't require. [State school] is our biggest competitor, a little bit silly because they're not losing many students to us, but we have huge crossover in terms of [that State school] and [our] applications. We will follow the [competitor state system] for sure. (Senior Admissions Leader 11)

Senior admissions leaders also described the role of the most selective colleges and universities in shaping decision-making.

The ones that signal to presidents and boards at places like [my institution] are the MITs and the Ivies and such. And so my prediction is if Harvard and a bunch of big names say, 'This is the way it is. Test optional forever.' That's what we will do. I think that's what we want to do... But if Harvard goes the way of MIT and then Yale does and Princeton does, and Stanford does, well, we're going to have board members and presidents and provosts saying, 'Well, it's good enough for them.' There's a certain amount of you that follow the places that are your peer[s] and aspirants. (Senior Admissions Leader 6)

Beyond institutions, senior admissions leaders indicated that other external entities play a role in these decisions.

As much as we like to turn our nose up to rankings, we still all abide by them. And so, [we have been a top ranked] HBCU for [many years]. If we were to fall from that spot, a lot of people would be upset. A lot of people would wonder what exactly went into that, and god forbid a test-optional policy was part of it. They wouldn't like that. (Senior Admissions Leader 5)



The other challenge we face is we are a division one school, and we know that the NCAA is going to drop testing forever, come January. And so we're having conversations about, can we have two different admissions policies for materials? Like many D1 schools, we already have a secondary process for athletes as it is, but to have something that you can just totally not have for athletes that we require for all other applicants feels a little strange. Not sure it will fly.
(Senior Admissions Leader 6)

Overall, power and influence over admissions policy decisions came from a range of sources, including institutional shared governance and politics, institutional peer competition, ranking systems, and other structures like the NCAA.

Political Environment

Respondents discussed how the political environment informed their institution's decision about its standardized testing policies. Although 6 in 10 respondents reported experiencing no pressure to reinstate tests, one senior admissions leader explained that pressure depended on the location of the institution.

In a blue state, where it's going to be a Democrat, where we're going to talk a lot more about access, equity, inclusion, those types of things, I think test optional is a little safer, because of the political winds... In red states, like Florida, where it is mandated in Florida, you have to use these things because the testing agencies have lobbied. The student voice is lost... So I think you'll see institutions, especially state supported institutions, or state subsidized institutions bow to political pressure when it comes to testing. (Senior Admissions Leader 2)

I really do think that some of what we're seeing with testing policies right now is becoming yet another red state/blue state kind of thing. I think even if I had a like-minded institution but I was planted in a very different part of the country, I might be hearing a lot more [pushback] than I'm hearing here. (Senior Admissions Leader 1)

Other respondents shared concerns about the political environment, specifically how the Supreme Court rulings are influencing their thoughts around test-optional policies.

Yeah, I think a lot of it has to do with preparation for what we expect the Supreme Court to be bringing forward. And so how do we think about test optional policies and also not considering race and admissions decisions? As I mentioned, I don't know... a 26 [on the ACT] may be demographically really great, but if we cannot consider demographics that offer the context for a test score, that makes it much more challenging to say, "Wow, this test score does bolster the application."
(Senior Admissions Leader 10)

Data and Research

College admission professionals also emphasized the importance of research and data in decision-making about the future of their institution's standardized testing policies.

- "A determination about our testing policy going forward (after the 2022-2023 application cycle) has not been made yet. The institution is conducting internal research to look at the academic performance of the first class admitted through the test optional process (the class of 2024). The results of that research will determine the policy in the future."
- "The more significant pressure comes from school counselors who are pressuring colleges to remain test optional. Our decision must be made with data behind it. If similarly rated students who tested strongly outperform their classmates who didn't submit, we need to carefully consider reinstating them."



Senior admission leaders also emphasized the importance of data and research in decision-making.

We have done analysis of high school GPA and test scores for years. We do it in conjunction with the college board and their ACE survey. Over and over and over again, high school GPA is the single best predictor of college success. The incremental increase in predictive validity when you add a test score was not significant enough for us to sort of die on the sword and say we're going to have test scores forever and always. My president, who is a [STEM profession] by training, loves data, and I knew I couldn't just have these anecdotal, somewhat subjective reasons for wanting to do it. I had to show him the data and the data was very clear. So those were some of the reasons that the committee was an advocate for going to test optional, and those reasons all exist today.
(Senior Admissions Leader 13)

We didn't want to just say, "Let's do it for one year and see how this works." The reality is there's the admissions side of being test-optional, which is saying, "How are we going to review applications without that data point?" That's not that difficult to do. The other part of the equation is how do students do when they get to campus? How are they doing academically? If you're only looking at one year's worth of students, by the time you have to decide whether you want to be test-optional for a second year, that first group of students hasn't even enrolled yet. They haven't even gotten to campus yet. So why would you do that? We want to have data to say to us, "Students who applied for admission with test scores, their average GPA was this. Students who applied for admission without test scores, their GPA at college was this." You need a full year. And you could do it with a semester, but it really doesn't work as well. You need a full year's worth of data, which means you need at least two years of test-optional admissions." (Senior Admissions Leader 9)



However, some participants shared a worry that the data would not align with the direction of the desires of the college admission office.

- “I am pleased we’ve been able to extend our pilot. I hope that our data plays out in a way that makes it easy for us to drop testing in the future—it’s not that I think testing is actually important to success; I worry that the things that testing can be a proxy for (wealth, parental education, race) correlate to thing we look for (engineering experience, rigorous math and science in high school, self-advocacy) but that my institution thinks these things are unbiased when they perhaps aren’t. We feel some degree of pressure from other STEM focused schools as well as other highly selective schools to reinstate testing (especially post-MIT announcement).”

Recommendations

Throughout this project, we asked admissions professionals about processes related to changes in policies and practices in admissions and enrollment management. It was clear that questions regarding tests and racial and economic inequities were on the minds of admissions professionals across career stages, particularly as policy change led to a range of disruptions in organizational practices. While policy changes matter, how policies are implemented in practice and their implications for organizational design and redesign is equally important.

Overall, we found that admissions and enrollment management leaders desire to center equity in their work. However, they are beholden to larger systems of power, decision-making, and organizational norms and routines. Therefore, initiatives for equity must address these power dynamics and organizational changes. We offer the following recommendations to college and university leaders, admissions and enrollment management practitioners, higher education professional associations, equity advocates, and philanthropy who are interested in advancing equity.

1. **Postsecondary institutional leaders should draw on research, evidence, and the experiential knowledge of leaders in enrollment management and admissions, as they consider whether to remain test-optional or reinstate testing requirements in admissions systems.** If the goal of admissions offices is to enroll dynamic cohorts of students ready to engage in and successfully complete programs of learning and education offered at their specific institutions, they should ask whether standardized tests

add value to the evaluation of students. They should weigh the barriers to equity tests present against their empirical value in identifying students who can take advantage of the campus' educational offerings and successfully complete an academic program at the institution. Assuming institutional research projects reaffirm the limited utility of test scores, equity advocates could mobilize these data to question state mandated requirements of tests and the presumed value of test scores in admissions at public and other postsecondary institutions.

2. **Professional associations (e.g., National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), Association of Governing Boards (AGB), American Council on Education (ACE) and philanthropy should invest in organizational learning opportunities that bring small cohorts of institutional leaders, senior admissions practitioners, and researchers into conversation with each other to deeply focus on generating ideas to address questions of equity in admissions.** One model for this kind of learning for evidence-informed institutional leadership and practice is NACAC's Elevate Equity conference.²⁴ This convening model brought together dozens of trios (i.e., a Dean of Admissions or VP of Enrollment Management, a Provost or President, and a member of the Board of Trustees) from select campuses over several days for collective learning for all conference attendees and campus-based reflective discussions for each campus trio. Each trio represented key campus-specific actors in admissions policy deliberation, decision-making, and implementation. Such targeted learning and reflection opportunities are rare and can help bring key institutional leaders into conversation with each other and to review research and evidence as they consider future changes to their campus systems, policies, and practices.

3. **Stronger professional development connected to organizational work routines and sensemaking for equity in the test-optional environment is needed.** Admissions professionals are faced with increasing demands on their time and labor, as some participants indicated in our study, raising questions of organizational capacity and the need for change in work routines for sustaining the increasing numbers of applications. Some suggested that test-optional policies are connected to increases in submitted applications. Policy changes inevitably lead to pressures to



²⁴ <https://www.nacacnet.org/elevate-equity-2023/>

²⁵ Posselt, J. R., & Desir, S. (2022). How are admissions decisions racialized? In O. A. Poon & M. N. Bastedo (Eds.), *Rethinking college admissions: Research-based practice and policy* (pp. 83-100). *Harvard Education Press*.

change organizational practices and norms. How are practitioners and institutional leaders centering equity as they change their routines and norms? We encourage the field—institutional leaders and practitioners—to continuously examine and evolve their practices to center equity, which so many claim to value.

One approach could be using equity checks, to “...examine the racial/ethnic composition of who is advancing to the next stage of the process [to] raise attention to the phases in the process through which students from minoritized backgrounds are disproportionately being eliminated.”²⁵ Of note, engaging in evaluations of organizational routines and practices does not rise to the level of race-conscious admissions practices that influence the racial/ethnic diversity of an admitted pool of students, which may or may not remain legal. Rather, routinizing checks to identify disparities is central to organizational learning and identifying opportunities to challenge inequities.

CONCLUSION

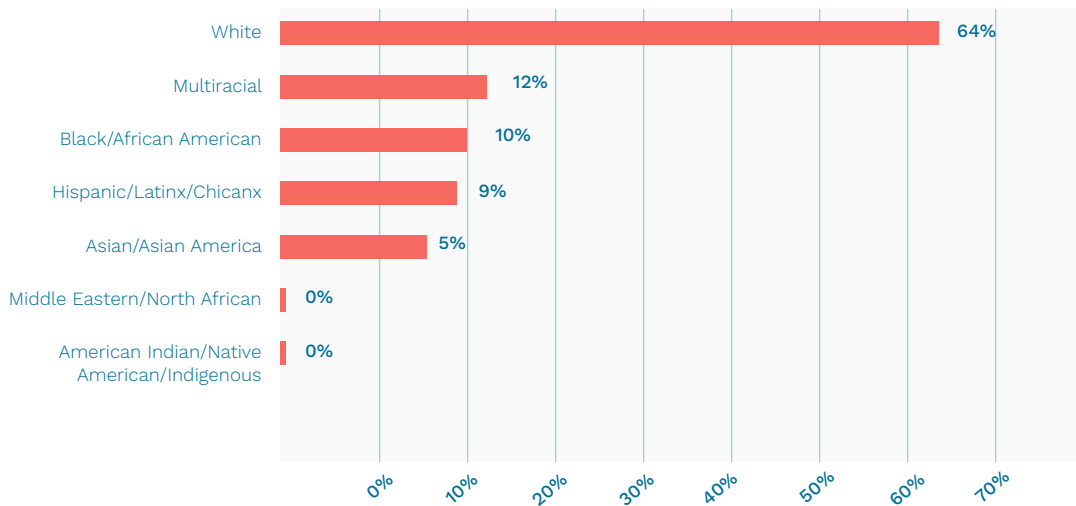
This study illuminates many of the factors that shaped policy decision-making at the institutional level as well as the complexities and nuances of applying a new testing policy in practice during the COVID-19 pandemic—a time of great uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic spurred colleges and universities to adopt new test policies in admissions. These new policies resulted in rapid changes to routine workflows and practices. While some of the factors - access and equity - remain a key value shaping decision-making as test-optional pilot programs reach a three-year mark, shared governance, competition with peers, politics, and data are four key factors that institutional leaders are weighing as they decide the future of their institution’s admissions policies and practices. As institutions continue to consider the future of standardized test scores in admissions, questions remain about how test-optional policies are defined, the impact of these policies on equity, the use of predictive modeling for enrollment management, and the future of race-conscious admissions.





A significant proportion of study participants cited equity concerns as drivers for test-optional policies in admissions. As policies and practices in admissions continue to evolve due to internal and external pressures, institutional leaders and admissions practitioners must continuously review and strengthen organizational routines that advance equity to align values with practices. Governance structures, state politics, other sources of decision-making power, and competition with peer institutions play key roles in institutional decision-making related to test score policies. For example, a few interview participants discussed the key role in shared governance that faculty play on their campuses in stymying progress toward test-optional policies despite research, data, and organizational evidence suggesting tests are inequitable barriers in admissions. Some survey and interview participants indicated that state politics were also central in whether or not an institution would adopt test-optional policy and practices. In contemplating the future of admissions policies and practices, research and evidence identifying ways to systemically advance equity should be central in deliberations and systems design to mitigate mission-drift and ideologically-driven policy decisions.

Racial Demographics of Survey Respondents





Appendix A: Survey Respondent Demographics

- **Participants:** In total, 226 admissions college admissions professionals²⁶ representing 113 selective,²⁷ public and private nonprofit institutions²⁸ responded to the survey between July and December 2022.
- **Sector:** 74% of respondents worked at a private nonprofit institution and 26% worked at a public institution
- **Institutional selectivity:** Admit rates for the 113 institutions represented among the employers of survey respondents ranged from 6% to 50%.
- **Geographic region:** Respondents worked at institutions located in the Northeast (40%), South (27%), West (20%), and Midwest (12%).²⁹
- **Years of experience:** 3-5 years (22%),³⁰ 6-10 years (30%), 11-15 years (20%), 16-20 years (12%), and 20+ years (16%).
- **Gender:** The majority of respondents identified as Cisgender Women: Cisgender women (56%), Cisgender men (40%), Agender (1%), Gender non-confirming/ Genderqueer/nonbinary (2%), and Other (1%).
- **Race/Ethnicity:** Nearly two-thirds of respondents identified as White. The remaining third were composed of Multiracial, Black, Latinx, and Asian respondents.

Additionally, survey respondents indicated that there were exceptions to these test-optional policies. For instance, respondents mentioned that tests were still required for some specific populations, including international students and homeschooled students. Some college admission professionals noted that policies also varied across their institution. Some schools (e.g. School of Engineering) at their institution were test-optional while other schools became test-free, which added another layer of confusion for students. One senior admissions leader also described how certain state policies, like automatic admission based on class rank, can lead students to assume that they do not need to submit tests to any schools within a particular state. These exceptions and inconsistencies potentially led to confusion for students and families applying to multiple colleges across states.

²⁶ Survey responses were limited to rank admissions professionals who had worked in college admissions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning professionals had to have at least 3 years of experience in college admissions.

²⁷ We define selective as having a two- or three-year IPEDS average admit rate of 50% or lower.

²⁸ The sample included 222 public and private non-profit, 4-year, institutions. The sample was composed primarily of private nonprofit institutions (77%) and less than a quarter of public institutions (23%).

²⁹ The original sample of 222 institutions are distributed primarily in the South and Northeast: South (39%), Northeast (35%), West (14%), and Midwest (13%).

³⁰ Respondents with less than 3 years of experience were filtered out of the survey.

Appendix B: Interview Participant Demographics

Participants	Race & Gender	Institution Type	Region	Testing Policy*
Participant 1	White, Cisgender Man	Public, 4-year institution	West	Test-Free
Participant 2	White, Cisgender Woman	Public, 4-year institution	Northeast	Test-Optional
Participant 3	White, Cisgender Man	Private nonprofit, 4-year institution	Northeast	Test-Optional
Participant 4	White, Cisgender Man	Private nonprofit, 4-year institution	Southeast	Test-Optional
Participant 5	Multiracial, Cisgender Woman	Private nonprofit, 4-year institution	Southeast	Test-Optional
Participant 6	White, Cisgender Woman	Public, 4-year institution	Southeast	Test-Optional
Participant 7	White, Cisgender Woman	Private nonprofit, 4-year institution	West	Test-Optional
Participant 8	Multiracial, Cisgender Man	Private nonprofit, 4-year institution	Midwest	Test-Optional
Participant 9	White, Cisgender Man	Private nonprofit, 4-year institution	Midwest	Test-Optional
Participant 10	White, Cisgender Woman	Public, 4-year institution	Midwest	Test-Optional
Participant 11	Multiracial, Cisgender Woman	Public, 4-year institution	West	Test-Optional
Participant 12	White, Cisgender Woman	Public, 4-year institution	Midwest	Test-Optional
Participant 13	White, Cisgender Woman	Private nonprofit, 4-year institution	Northeast	Test-Optional
Participant 14	White, Cisgender Woman	Private nonprofit, 4-year institution	Southwest	Test-Optional
Participant 15	Latinx Cisgender Woman	Private nonprofit, 4-year institution	West	Test-Optional



*For senior admission leaders who worked at test-optional institutions, the majority indicated that international students were still required to submit SAT or ACT scores under their test-optional policy.