

Published February 17th, 2021

Hastened by COVID, a test optional experiment is underway in college admission

By Elizabeth LaScala



Elizabeth LaScala, PhD personally guides each student through each step of selecting and applying to well-matched schools for undergraduate and graduate school study. Over the past two decades, Elizabeth has placed hundreds of students in some of the most prestigious colleges and universities in the U.S. The number of clients taken is limited to ensure each applicant has personalized attention. Contact Elizabeth early in the process to make a difference in your outcomes. Write elizabeth@doingcollege.com; Visit www.doingcollege.com; or Call: 925.385.0562.

The movement toward optional use of standardized tests dates back to 1969 when Bowdoin College in Maine ended testing requirements. Since then, hundreds of colleges have moved in the same direction. This year, as the coronavirus interrupted SAT and ACT exam schedules, a new trend emerged - many prominent schools announced test-optional experiments that will span a year or more. For example, for the upcoming application cycle, the University of Virginia will suspend its ACT/SAT mandate for a one-year pilot and then evaluate the results.

Even before the disruptions related to the pandemic, skepticism about the value of standardized tests was mounting. Critics have observed that the ACT and SAT are too closely aligned with family income - with scores skewed higher for those who could afford expensive test prep - and exacerbated opportunity gaps for students in lower income brackets, especially those from African American and Latino families. Evidence of those disparities helped drive the influential University of California system to move forcefully away from both the SAT and ACT exams. Last year, the UC governing board voted unanimously to make the SAT and ACT optional for all applicants for two years and then to eliminate the tests for in-state applicants after that. That represents a momentous leap toward a policy known as "test blind," in which schools do not consider scores at all. UC officials are also exploring the creation of a new test that would provide a better measure of achievement in California's core high school subjects.

On Jan. 19, the College Board added another twist to the test optional experiment by announcing it will no longer offer the one hour SAT subject tests to U.S. students. These exams used multiple-choice questions to cover discrete topics such as math, literature, history, biology, chemistry, physics, and various foreign languages. The tests long served a niche role in admissions as a way for students to amass extra credentials and demonstrate their prowess to ultracompetitive schools. Along with ending the subject tests, College Board also ditched the optional SAT essay, which added 50 minutes to the main three-hour exam.

As testing mandates recede, we will likely see lasting change in how colleges evaluate applicants. Suspending testing mandates for one or more years raises the question of whether the test-optional pause could become a longer-term policy, leading high school grades, rigor of coursework, letters of recommendation and application essays to have greater weight. To a large extent, these factors also vary by socio-economic status with more affluent school districts offering more rigorous coursework and many high schools in underserved communities having few or no counselors to write letters of recommendation. Disparities will persist in the admissions world and the test optional experiment is only one of many factors in the equation.

For many individuals, a college education remains an essential first step toward a fulfilling career. It is important for families to stay up to date and informed on the dramatic and ever-changing impact COVID-19 is having on higher education. Staying informed is critical to wise decision-making.

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