

Session 4: Evaluating Test-Optional Programs

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**Best Practices
in Test-Optional Admissions**

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Evaluating Admissions Practice & Policy in a Test-Optional World

Acknowledgements

Introductions & Framing

A (Very Brief) History of Testing

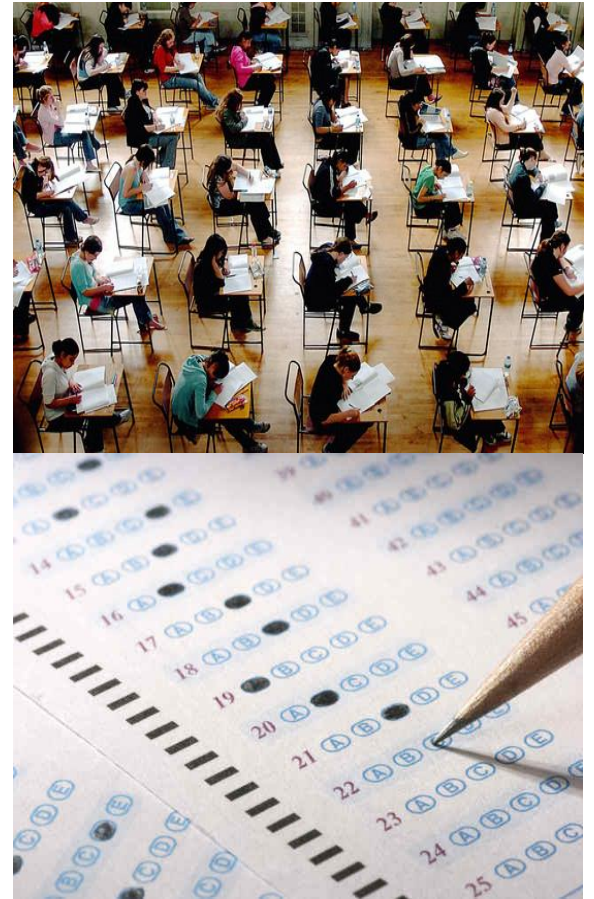
How Can We Evaluate “Success” in Test-Optional
Admissions and in a COVID-Era? **(It's complicated)**

Where do we go from here?

A (Very Brief) History – Part I

A Century of Testing

- 1900-1950: Army, Harvard, Kaplan, Mass Adoption
- 1950-2000: Comprehensive Review, Access, FairTest
- 2000-2022: Demographics, New Tests, COVID



A (Very Brief) History – Part II

Utility of Standardized Admissions Testing

- Predictive validity; First year GPA
- Common yardstick; grade biases & inflation
- Placement and resource allocation
- Appropriate use and limitations

Critiques of Standardized Testing

- Allegations of bias; Wealth test
- Differentials in predictive validity
- Over-reliance in certain contexts
- Mixed findings on longer term outcomes

How Can We Evaluate “Success” in Test-Optional Admissions?

Determining success means defining success

What are we trying to measure?

- Application volume and characteristics
- Enrollment and class composition
- Academic indicators and metrics
- Persistence and completion

What does the research and experience say about each of these considerations, and **what questions should we be asking now?**

What is the relationship between test-optional admissions and *the applicant pool*?

More applications, on average, immediately post-TO

- Institutions that change test-optional experience application increases relative to peer institutions with static testing policy
- Disproportionate increase relative to selectivity?
- Policy or Publicity?

Interesting observations among subpopulations

- Applications from all populations tend to increase
- Underrepresented students are overrepresented among non-submitters
- Some indications that well-resourced students may use test-optional in a selective way

What is the relationship between test-optional admissions and *the enrolled class*?

Evidence to support enrollment increases among underrepresented minorities (URM)

- 10-12% increase in URM enrollment (99 inst.) (Bennett, 2021)
- 14/23 TO colleges report increases in URM enrollment (Syverson et al, 2018)

Mixed results on increases in Pell-eligible students

- 3-4% increase in Pell enrollment (Bennett, 2021)
- 11/22 TO colleges report increases in Pell enrollment (Syverson et al, 2018)

Enrollment results are heavily dependent on institutional action and response to test-optional policy

What is the relationship between test-optional admissions and *academic indicators*?

Reported test scores increase, on average, post-TO

- Students with lower test scores more likely to withhold
- Students confident in their scores are likely to submit
- Reported statistics calculated on a skewed population

How does reporting track with actual experience?

- Undoubtedly, there is greater presumptive variation in testing on campuses than what is reported
- It is likely that there is greater variation under TO than what there was prior, despite the changes in reporting.

Why is this critical to evaluating the impact of TO?

What is the relationship between test-optional admissions and *academic outcomes*?

The most important question, and the one with the fewest answers...

- One study (13 institutions) found non-submitters had lower college GPAs and greater skew towards non-STEM fields compared with submitters
- But, they found graduation rates to be similar

COVID has introduced an opportunity and necessity to ask these questions again on a massive and individual scale.

What should institutions be thinking about right now in terms of evaluating test-optional?

Reckoning with COVID: A Messy Natural Experiment

- Campuses have a wider variety of presumptive scores
- Opportunity for more validity research
- What is the relationship between test submission and success? What is the relationship between test score and success?

Research considerations

- Missing information//Revealed scores
- Countless confounding factors

Where do we go from here?

We need to be careful about declaring success before we've defined the outcome.

We need time, which we don't have, to do good research on the longer-term, outcome effects of test-optional policy.

We need to constantly ask ourselves why and how we use these tests in our processes

We need institutions to be open with their experience, so we can each learn from one another.

What Does All of This Mean for the Practical Evaluation of Test-Optional

Introduction and Framing: Access, Equity, and Student Success

Test Policy and Our Changing Environmental and Institutional
Context

Test Policy and Evaluation

So, Where Do We Go From Here? How Can Test Optional
Evaluation Inform Broader Evaluation and Practice?

Access, Equity and Student Success

Test policy changes are often focused on access and equity.

Such a lens compels us to understand that access without success is not access; that success means a student is admitted to, enrolls in, and graduates from college.

This view considers admission as one piece of the access, equity, and student success continuum, connecting or extending admission policies to scholarships, honors program review, access program consideration, and their impacts on retention and graduation.

- This extends an admission policy beyond new student enrollment.
- This broadens the evaluation review to mean understanding of the policy, the implementation of the policy, and the outcomes associated with the policy.
- Finally, this compels us to make appropriate changes to our policy and implementation when we discover barriers to access, equity and student success.

Test Policy, Environmental and Institutional Context

The change in test policies over the last two years is different than what was experienced in the past.

- The number of schools that have changed their test policies expanded quickly, and the variations in policy are significant.
- The pandemic not only impacted student testing, but also teaching and learning, access to college information, and also our admissions operations—in ways and with likely impacts we don't fully understand.

Test-optional policy implementation, whether the policy is new or old, is occurring in a new context for us all.

Test Policy, Environmental and Institutional Context – Pre-Pandemic

Pre-Pandemic:

“The relative importance of many admission decision factors have remained remarkably stable over the long term.

“Public colleges valued admission scores more highly than private institutions.”

Post-Pandemic:

“...the pandemic has led more public institutions with varying institutional profiles to adopt test-optional policies.”

“Pre-pandemic test-optional adopters have only a slightly higher selectivity rate than nonadopters, but both have a higher acceptance rate than pandemic adopters. “

Bennet (2022) (pre-Pandemic evaluation)

- Open questions remain about “whether test-optional institutions are able to ensure that all admitted students have the supports they need to succeed.”
- Suggests that “adopting test-optional policies can increase the enrollment of Pell recipients, URM students, and women at selective private institution...”

Hiss & Franks (2014)

- 30% of admitted students at test-optional schools did not submit test scores.
- Differences in GPA and graduation outcomes “are trivial.”

What We Are Seeing, So Far

- Prior to Covid, nearly 73% of applicants submitted test scores. For fall 2021, that percentage dropped to 40%.
 - Common App (2021)
- From 2020 – 2021 applications, offers, and enrollment increased at all colleges above rates in prior years (across all racial and socio-economic identities, and for first generation students).
- In the aggregate, no change in enrollment trends or student behavior across populations of underrepresented students; yet, more selective private colleges did see significant growth in the enrollment of underrepresented students.
 - College Board Admissions Research Consortium (2021)
- Yield dropped for students who did not submit test scores.
- “Pre-pandemic...70.7% of enrolled students” were from more affluent families; in fall 2021, 71% came from more affluent families.”
 - MARKETview (2021)

Test Policy and Evaluation

Our changing environment means we must leverage a set of best practices that:

- Help us define and articulate our policy, its implementation and its evaluation.
- Recognize the nuances of institutional context.
- Embrace an action research approach to help us modify our policies and practices to meet student and institutional needs, as we learn more in our ‘new environment.’
- Facilitate the development of a campus-based longitudinal study of our incoming applicant, admitted, and enrolled student cohorts; and support our participation in such studies on a national or international level as well.
- Engage campus partners not only in our development and implementation approach, but also in the evaluation of our policy.

Defining Our Policy

Start with your policy creation-begin with the end in mind. Take clear steps to define our **why, what, and how** to assess whether our policy, as stated and implemented, is in line with our institutional mission and context, is meeting our goals, and if not, cues us to do further research and make changes to our policy that do align with our needs and our goals.

- I. Defining our why...** Why are we compelled to modify, change, or create the policy? What goals/objectives are we hoping this policy will help us achieve? What are the implications for our policy change? Document the answers to these questions.
- II. Defining our what...** What is our policy? Write our policy—the policy statement and its implications and measures.
- III. Defining our how...** How will we implement our policy (who outside/what processes outside of admissions will need to be aligned)? And, how will we ensure consistency in your policy implementation (essentially, are we doing what we said we'd do, so that we understand what we are measuring)? Finally, how will we measure our policy and implementation—have we identified how we will know if we've achieved our goals/objectives?

An Iterative, Evaluative Approach to Policy

Then confirm or redefine your policy. Use our institutional context and mission (our definitions and values around access, equity, and student success) as our guide—does our policy make sense for us? Make sure our policy says what we mean—that it addresses the issue we are trying to address, we can clearly state and explain our policy, why it exists, and how we will know if its implementation is successful.

- IV. Confirm or redefine our why...**Did we learn anything in steps II and III that help us more clearly state our needs and our objectives/goals?
- V. Confirm or redefine our what...**Do any changes need to be made to our policy statement, description of implementation, implications, and measures after going through the previous steps? Does our policy, as stated, align with our why and our how? Does it meet our needs?
- VI. Confirm or redefine our how...**Do we have a clear plan for confirming effective and consistent implementation? Have we defined and described our outcomes (qualitative and quantitative) and an evaluation approach that aligns with our why and our what?

Practical Test Policy Evaluation

An access, equity, and student success lens requires evaluation of the impacts of our policy language, implementation and outcomes.

- Our policy language – does it convey what we mean and do?
- Our implementation – do we have the right approach and our we consistent?
- Our outcomes – are we achieving our goals and desired outcomes?

Evaluating our Policy Language

Clarity and transparency are critical. Does our policy encourage alternative ‘interpretation’?

Goals:

- Our language should describe what we do, why we do it, and how students will be affected.
- Our language needs to make sense to our stakeholders, not just to us.

- “[Test-optional and test-flexible] are often (incorrectly) used interchangeably, and test flexible is often used as an umbrella term that includes test-optional as well.”
- College advising service blog

- “It’s this messaging that’s creating confusion for families” – Money Magazine

The more complex the application process, the less equitable it becomes.
- NACAC Report

Best Practices – Clarity and Transparency

How do we achieve clarity and transparency?

Say what we do

- Don't make assumptions - use plain and direct language
- Define any terms that are confusing.
- A lack of clarity and transparency will impact accessibility, equity and student success outcomes.

How do we evaluate clarity and transparency?

Test our policy language and understanding.

- Ask our stakeholders (prospective students, current students, school counselors, parent, our campus partners, and our admission counselors) to explain our policy, why we have it, and how we use it.
- If it is confusing, ask our stakeholders to help us rewrite it.

Alignment and consistency are important. Does our policy implementation align with our objectives and goals?

Goals:

- Our processes should align with our goals.
- Our process should be consistent across campus.

Like with admissions, **USC's** merit scholarship selection process is holistic. Our scholarships are awarded based on all-around excellence, and we have never awarded merit aid based on formulas or test score/GPA cut-offs.

Q: "Will going test-optional hurt me in not getting any scholarship money?"
A: "Yes, need based scholarships are based only on your family's ability to pay. Merit scholarships are the ones you'd be missing out on." – Discussion on Reddit

Best Practices - Alignment and Consistency

How do we achieve alignment and consistency?

Align processes and eliminate surprises for us and for students.

- Our test policy should be consistent across processes (access and equity rationale would apply to all student engagement).
- Test and monitor our implementation.
- Include campus partners at the beginning of our implementation design, evaluation and monitoring.

How do we evaluate our implementation?

Simulation and verification are key.

- Don't make assumptions. Misunderstanding context and not addressing biases can directly impact access, equity and student success.
- Run simulations of our intended process (especially if you are using new variables in your process) to identify any issues or concerns.
- Trust, but verify. Periodically monitor our processes for alignment and consistency.

Evaluating Our Outcomes

Evaluate what matters. Do our outcome measures match our policy and our goals?

Goals:

- Our outcome measures should be focused and reflect our objectives, both in the short-term and the long-term.
- We should actively track our outcome measures **ALONG** the way.

...to study over time how such a policy might alter the composition of its incoming classes. Data gathered and analyzed by university researchers will help determine whether **UW-Madison** returns to a standardized test requirement.

“A pilot partially gives schools time, as **Michigan State** is doing, to benchmark students' academic performance...to determine whether the policy is worth continuing.”

Best Practices - Evaluating What Matters

How do we know we are achieving our desired outcomes?

Track our progress.

- Include quantitative and qualitative measures in our evaluation and assessment.
- Report both real-time and long-term outcomes.

How do we evaluate our outcomes implementation?

Consider that a policy, affecting students and your institution, requires both action research and a longitudinal study.

- Report quantitative measures aligned by your policy objectives—this is a new environment; be clear about what will be measured in the short-term and what will be measured longitudinally.
- Capture student and stakeholder experience data (qualitative), in the short-term and assess over time.
- Identify and address broader implications and unexpected consequences in real-time and over time; watch for disproportionate impacts.

Practical Advice - How do we know if we should keep our policy or change it?

Especially if we enacted our policy as a temporary policy?

We need to make time to review and evaluate our policies and outcomes.

Be careful about the conclusions we are drawing—test optional is not the only thing happening and admission policy is not made in isolation.

- Have we committed the appropriate resources (review, student success, etc.).
Watch for correlated and connected outcomes versus declaring causal outcomes.
- We are effectively in the midst of a broad longitudinal and action research study.

Go back to your mission and institutional context.

- Does the policy fit our institution and the students we serve or wish to serve?
- Knowing what we know now, would we have made the policy change/move?

Go back to our goals and objectives.

- Are we achieving our goals and objectives (because of or in spite of the policy)?

How Can Test Optional Inform Broader Evaluation and Practice?

We need to be careful about declaring success before we've defined the outcome.
We need to consider and evaluate admissions and enrollment objectives and outcomes more broadly.

We need time, which we don't have, to do good research on the longer-term, outcome effects of test-optional policy.
We need to clarify the reasons behind our decisions and evaluate associated outcomes (quantitatively and qualitatively).

We need to constantly ask ourselves why and how we use these tests in our processes.
We need to take a step back and carefully review all of our admissions policies and processes, not only those associated with testing.

We need institutions to be open with their experience, so we can each learn from one another.
We all need to be honest about the various factors that play a role in our admission decisions—and acknowledge how and why the number of applicants, space on campus, student success resources—all of those considerations do matter. We need to make time for thoughtful longitudinal research of what is important, knowing that we need to engage in ongoing, iterative action research to meet our institution and student needs.

So, where do we go from here?

We have an opportunity to apply our best practices, learnings, and evaluation of test-optional and consider more broadly what is most important and effective in our overall admissions and enrollment processes.

“A mindset that consistently challenges assumptions is critical to the work of improving equity in postsecondary educational access.”

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