

## Session 2: Best Practices Panel 2

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**CERPP CONFERENCE 2022:**

**Best Practices  
in Test-Optional Admissions**

February 8 - 9

## Transitioning From Testing to a Test-Free Admission Environment

**Youlonda Copeland-Morgan**  
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**July 2018** President Napolitano asked the Academic Senate to examine the current use of testing for UC admission and determine whether any changes in admission testing policies and practices are necessary

**January 2019** UC Academic Senate formed Standardized Testing Task Force (STTF)

**January 2020** STTF releases Report recommending that UC develop a new assessment

**March 2020** Regents suspended standardized tests for fall 2021 freshman admission to mitigate the impact of COVID-19

**May 2020** Regents suspended standardized tests for undergraduate admission until fall 2024

President Napolitano asks UC Provost Brown to lead a feasibility study to see if a new test could be identified or created by fall 2025—if a new test was not feasible by fall 2025, standardized testing would be eliminated

**January 2021** Regents reviewed the Report from the Feasibility Committee (FSSC) finding that a new test could not be developed by 2025

**May 2021** Regents announce UC will be test-blind through at least 2024

**November 2021** Regents end standardized testing for admission

# Session 2: Best Practices Panel 2

## Vanderbilt Admissions: Equitable Admissions Processes in the Test- Optional Era

**Douglas L. Christiansen**, Vice Provost for  
University Enrollment Affairs, Vanderbilt  
University



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# Overview

- National Concerns – Admissions Research Consortium (ARC)
- Vanderbilt Admissions - Philosophy, Mission, Holistic Evaluation Process, and Vectors of Review
- Vanderbilt's Approach to Test-Optional Admissions for Fall 2021
- How Do We Make Equitable Admissions Decisions Given Two Admissions Pools – With Testing and Without Testing
- Key Takeaways / Key Metrics
- Going Forward to Ensure Success

# National Admissions Concerns During the Global Pandemic

**The COVID-19 pandemic** forced colleges and universities to quickly adjust application and admissions and financial aid policies, practices, and processes. Higher education members requested that the College Board coordinate and support an admissions research effort to help institutions gain insight into their own and their peers' processes and outcomes, as well as student behavior, to inform future practice and policy.

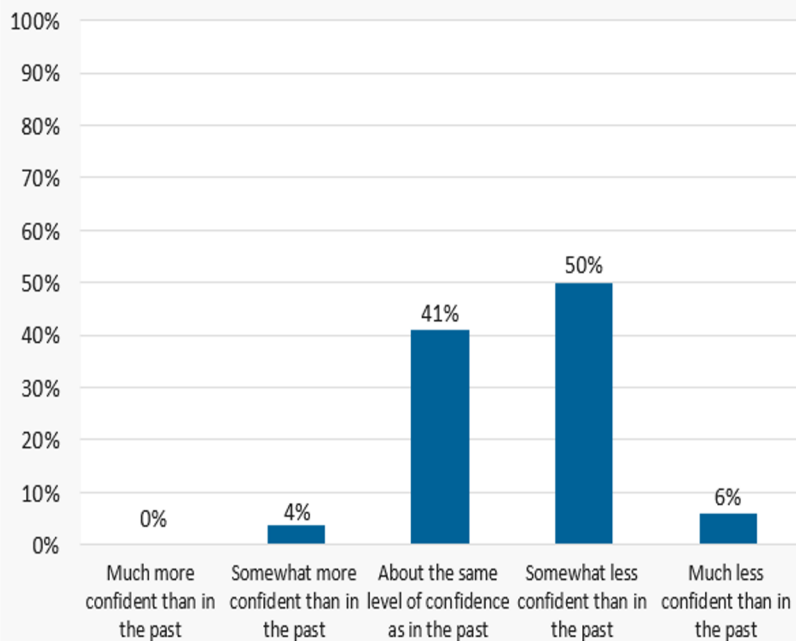
**The College Board** launched the member-led **Admissions Research Consortium (ARC)** to enable enrollment leaders to better understand their own experience of the 2020-2021 admissions cycle and put their experience in the context of other institutions and the national landscape.

**The goal** of this project is to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative institutional data, providing both confidential institution-level insights and benchmark information that will enable participating institutions to compare their 2020-21 processes and outcomes to peer institutions. ARC designed a simple, proven model for the project that leverages secure portals and processes from ACES and Landscape to make participation streamlined and straightforward for institutions.



Unsurprisingly, over half of respondents reported feeling somewhat or much less confident making admissions decisions in the 2020-2021 cycle.

In comparison to previous years, how confident were you in making admissions decisions in the 2020-2021 cycle?



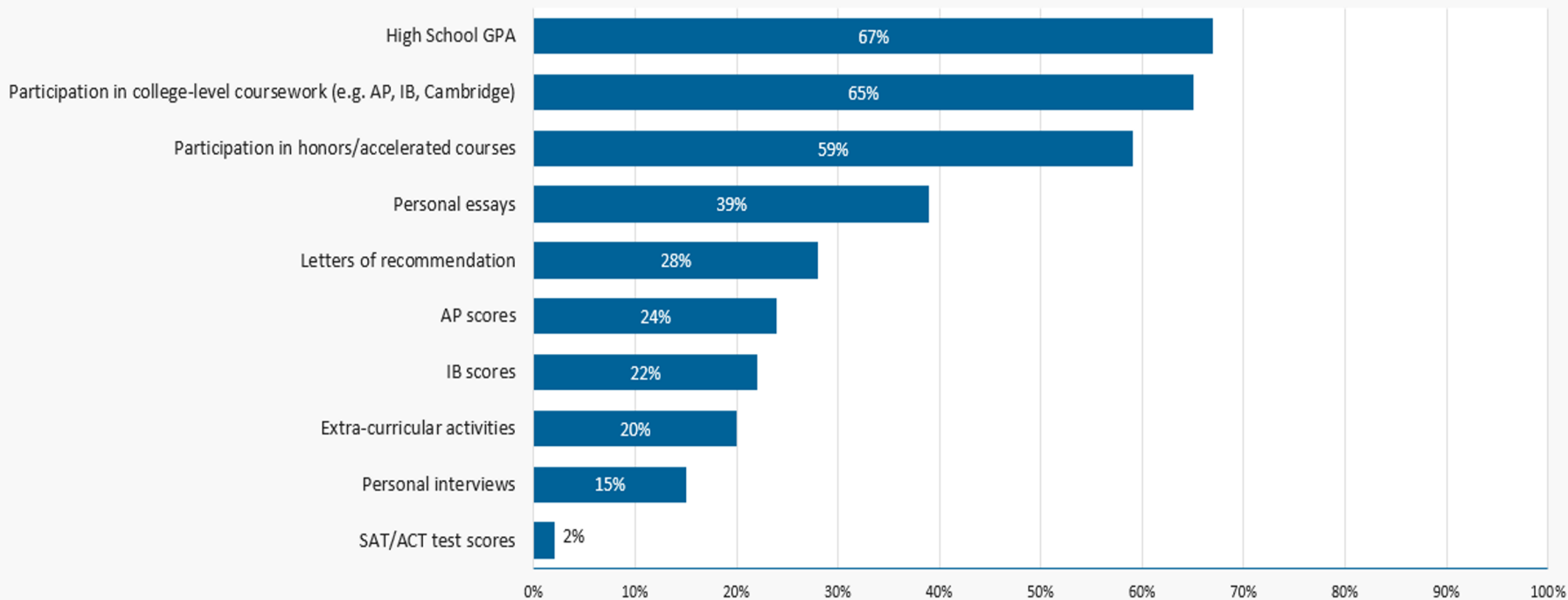
“We were building the airplane while flying it.”

### Biggest challenges:

- (New) test optional policies
- Increases in applications and/or late surges in applications
- Changes to application data (higher/more similar GPAs; fewer or less distinguishable recommendations, etc.)
- Needing to introduce new ratings, weightings, indexes, etc., without the chance to test and validate them
- Managing staff virtually while asking them to do their jobs very differently
- Predicting...anything!

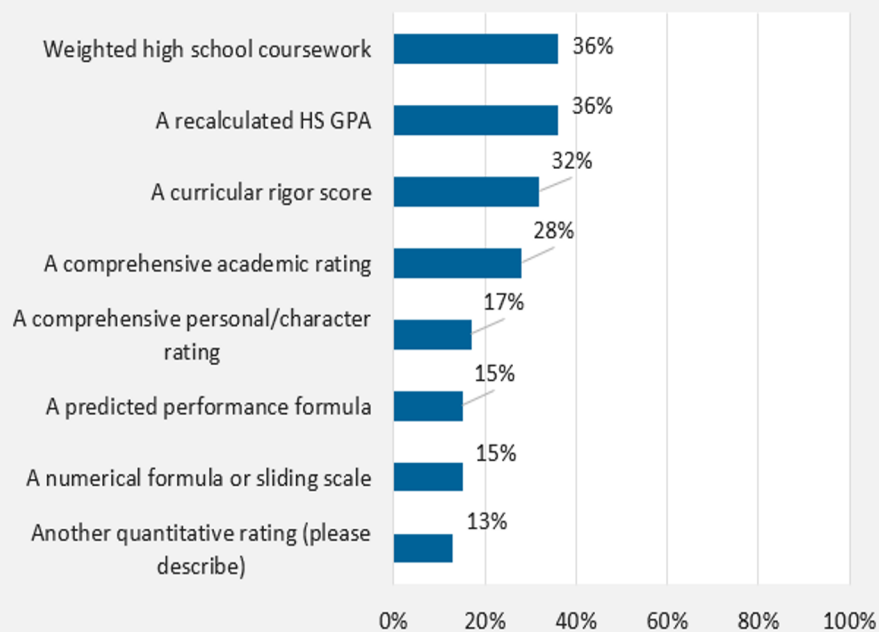
Key admission factors: uniformly stronger reliance on grades and coursework; more mixed responses on letters of recommendation and extra-curriculars.

In the 2020-2021 cycle, we relied somewhat or much more heavily on the following factors:



## In addition to adjusting the weight of admission factors, participants made changes to how they evaluated applications

In the 2020-2021 cycle, we relied more heavily on the following methods when considering applications for admission:



A substantial number of respondents reported either adjusting or introducing new ratings and other quantitative measures this year.

Examples of how schools adjusted their calculations and weightings for GPA and course rigor include:

- “an alternative calculation for a math and verbal index using weighted HS performance”
- “we adopted a standardized weighting of GPAs this year”
- “we recalculated GPA into a weighted GPA to incorporate course rigor”
- “we expanded our rigor rating to included advanced courses in the arts and music”

Across all these changes, a strong majority of respondents (70% - 95+%) reported planning to carry these changes through to future years.

## Guiding Philosophy

- At Vanderbilt, we believe in the importance of providing personal attention to each individual, within the context of a high volume, highly selective admissions process. Every applicant is treated with dignity and respect, and we train our readers to find reasons to admit each candidate rather than reasons to deny.
- **In the test-optional era our guiding philosophy must also make admissions equitable by maintaining a level playing field for all applicants regardless of whether or not they submit test scores.**

## Mission Statement

- The mission of the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at Vanderbilt is the recruitment, selection and enrollment of degree-seeking freshman and transfer students for the undergraduate programs at Vanderbilt University.
- We seek intellectually curious, academically talented students who will contribute to the campus life and the community beyond Vanderbilt.
- We value highly personalized service within the context of a high-volume admissions process, a holistic, student-centered approach to highly selective admissions, and a diverse student body.

# Vanderbilt Holistic Evaluation Process

## Critical Attributes:

- Inquisitive Mind
- Analytical Thinker
- Innovative Academic
- Entrepreneurial
- Collaborative Attitude
- Strategic
- Service Oriented
- Problem Solver
- Natural Leader

## Vanderbilt Evaluates:

- Academic Achievement
- Standardized Test Scores (if submitted)
- Essay
- Recommendation Letters
- Extracurricular Activities, Leadership, and Engagement

No single attribute determines an admit or deny decision

## Existing Vectors of Review

**Academic Rating** – Comprises academic achievement (considering high school curriculum, rigor, trend, real or estimated rank, contextually based) and standardized testing.

**Personal Rating** – An at-a-glance summary of the applicant’s high school and community participation and potential for involvement in the Vanderbilt community.

**School Fit Rating** – An evaluation of how likely the applicant is to make a valuable contribution to their chosen school/program.

**Overall Rating** – An overall indication of the applicant’s ability to have an impact within (or beyond) our community on a variety of levels.

# Vanderbilt's Approach to Test-Optional Admissions for Fall 2021

- Consulted with faculty, campus stakeholders, and administrators.
- Task Force charged to understand how to move forward in this test-optional world.
- Task Force examined potential changes to our processes, systems, file flow, and human resources.
- Task Force developed and tested new rubrics, modified based on feedback, validated with institutional research and strategy expertise.
- Extra steps taken to monitor the integrity of the process and confirm that equity was maintained.

# Change the components that comprise the Academic Rating.

- Academic Rating has historically incorporated testing as one of many data points. Other data points include high school curriculum, rigor, trend, real or estimated rank, (contextually based) and standardized testing, while leaving room for professional judgement.
- Given the uncertainty of how many students would apply without test scores, the decision was made to modify the rubric used to determine the Academic Rating.
- What could replace testing within the context of the rubric?



## Summer of Pilot Tests for New Academic Rating

- Admissions leadership partnered with Institutional Research to break apart, reimagine, and develop a new Academic Rating rubric.
- Many new versions of the rubric were developed – “fits and starts.”
- The new versions of the Academic Rating rubric were pilot tested by a cross section of admissions officers – variety of experience levels and demographics were considered.
- A representative cross section of application files were utilized in the pilot studies.
- Testing began in May 2020 and continued through October 2020 when the reading season began.

## Summer of Pilot Tests for New Academic Rating

### **During the pilot testing we grappled with these questions as we worked through a new Academic Rating.**

- What qualitative approach would readers use when testing is not available? Exercises conducted to uncover and document what they used instead and why.
- Could an empirical Academic Rating be computed that was non-qualitative? Admissions officers would then adjust the Academic Rating based on the context of the file.
- Could we quantify academic rigor so it could be used as a data point rather than part of subjective review of academic performance? If so, should rigor be included in the Academic Rating rubric?
- What if we included a GPA that was on the same scale for all applicants – a recalculated HSGPA on a 4.0 scale?

NUMEROUS studies were conducted with MANY versions of a new Academic Rating rubric that considered not just what variables could be included, but how to consider them in the review process.

By October 2020, the final version of our rubric was version 16.5!

# Historical Academic Rating versus New Academic Rating

## Historical Academic Rating

- Test Scores
- Class Rank - Real or Estimated
- High School Context
- ★ Professional Judgement – Lens used to interpret data points above

## New Academic Rating with Test-Optional process

- HSGPA (unweighted, core classes, 4.0 scale)
- Class Rank - Real or Estimated
- High School Context
- Test Scores (only if provided)
- Rigor of Curriculum (always specific to the high school)
- ★ Professional Judgement – Lens used to interpret data points above

A minimum of two admissions professionals evaluate **every** Academic Rating for accuracy.

- Strong commitment to the Holistic Admissions Review Process.
- Our decision making is built around “file flow” and our notification plans (ED1, ED2, Regular Decision).
- System is built each year to intentionally route files to appropriate locations during the review process relative to many factors.
- Each notification plan period has a point at which we evaluate where we stand: prior to committee, committee itself, and then shaping the class.
  - We built equity in decision making relative to those providing test scores, and those who did not submit scores, at each of these decision points.
- Lots to consider as we built this equity because test score submission varies widely relative to demographics, VU school, etc.

## Vanderbilt Key Takeaways

- Philosophically, start with the idea that students who do not submit tests need to be viewed with the same positive lens as those that submit tests, and not viewed as lessor in any way. Context matters.
- Design a communications plan for campus stakeholders re: changes. Admissions needs to prepare and coach the broader university audience to shift focus for academic programs/placements/merit scholarships historically informed by testing.
- Equity requires a level starting place for those with and without tests, and holistic approach checks throughout the admissions cycle that the process remains fair are needed.
- Base rates of who submits test change by gender, race and ethnicity, and program.
- Reading process and systems changes are time consuming and expensive, and labor intensive.
- Start your changes early, you will run out of time.
- Key metrics can be maintained with a shift to Test-Optional admissions.

## Measuring Key Metrics and Outcomes for Fall 2021

- 29.7% increase in Applications (47,152)
- 4.5% decrease in Selectivity (7.1%)
- 8.4% increase in Yield (48.6%)
- Slight increase SAT Mid-50% scores (1480-1570) for those submitting scores.
- Increase in ACT Mid-50% scores (34-35) for those submitting scores.
- 90.5% of admitted class are in Top 10% of their H.S. class.
- Average rank in class is 5.7%
- 1% increase in percentage of Pell recipients in fall entering cohort (19%)
- Maintained regional US representation in entering fall 2021 cohort (1,218 high schools represented.)
- Increased minority student population 0.7% to 48.2%, the highest in university history.
- Highest percentage of first-generation students (12.2%) in university history.

## Going Forward to Ensure Success

### Key indicators for measuring student success as we move forward:

- Mid-term deficiencies
- Overall, first-year GPA
- Grades in STEM courses
- Intra-university transfer rates (e.g., are students leaving the School of Engineering for an Arts & Science major)
- Retention rates and eventually graduation rates
- Transfer out rates (i.e., where do students enroll if leave Vanderbilt)

# Reducing and Reimagining the Role of Testing:

## Guiding Principles on Implementing Test-Optional Academic Review at Tufts

JT Duck

Dean of Admissions

Tufts University

Office of Undergraduate Admissions



How Admissions Offices have assessed academic performance has been evolving long before hundreds of us suddenly introduced test-optional policies in 2020.

We made adjustments to our processes with every new iteration of the ACT or SAT, with the decline of the use of Subject Tests, with the expansion of our recruitment efforts into new territories with different curriculums and assessments, and with research into persistence, graduation, and success rates on our campuses.

Evolving our review processes is not new, and adjusting how we conduct an academic review can change throughout the day because of local school context and offerings.

## Curriculums:

Advanced Placement (AP)  
International Baccalaureate (IB)  
Dual Enrollment w/ Colleges  
Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE)  
Advanced Levels (A-Levels)  
French Baccalaureate (French Bac)  
Mastery Transcript  
School-designated Advanced Coursework  
Etc...

## Supplementary Materials

1, 2, 3, or more recommendations  
Alumni Interviews  
Portfolios  
Etc...

## Grading Scales:

A, B, C, D, F  
100-point scale  
4.0 scale  
5.0 scale  
6.0 scale  
HH+, HH, H+, H, HP+, HP, P  
Unweighted / Weighted  
Written narratives in lieu of grades  
Etc...

**Additional context:** The polish of college counseling, external proofreaders, access to educational capital, etc...

Given differentiated access to test preparation, persistent opportunity gaps, and different curricular emphases, standardized tests are not ‘consistent’ across all applicants

**From the application materials available to us, and through a holistic, individualized application review, we strive to:**

Determine how well prepared each candidate is for the rigors of our academic program

How strongly each candidate has performed relative to their opportunities, context, and resources

How that preparation and performance, alongside other contributions to our residential community, fits into our overall applicant pool and enrollment goals that year as we seek to build a class that will serve the mission of our institution.

***March 24, 2020:***

## **Tufts University Introduces 3-Year SAT & ACT Test-Optional Policy**

- Interrupted access to the exams
- Mental & physical health crisis that was unfolding; 3-year pilot allowed us to remove testing as a concern for all current high school students
- 3-year pilot allows Tufts to gather data to assess and inform whether to reinstate a testing requirement
- Commitment to examining our policies to ensure access

***March 24, 2020:***

## **Tufts University Introduces 3-Year SAT & ACT Test-Optional Policy**

“We periodically revisit our admissions requirements to determine whether they continue to support our efforts to identify the very best and most compelling students for Tufts University. While the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on SAT and ACT testing opportunities contributed to the urgency of this policy, this decision aligns with our ongoing efforts to critically examine our policies, and to promote maximum access to a Tufts education to high-achieving students of all backgrounds and identities from across the country and around the world.”

We announced the test-optional policy months before we knew what it would look like in practice.

As we developed a test-optional review process, we were influenced by the realities of test-taking in 2020 and the perspectives of students and the school counseling community

## **School Counselor, June 2020:**

**“You will see a test score. On your computers it’ll say 1410.**

What you won’t see is the anguish of some, who didn’t hear their March test center was cancelled, so drove to the school that morning and were confused and frustrated. Or the compounding frustration of those students when they found out that in other states, kids took the test.

**Your reader sheet will show a 670 reading, 740 math. It’ll look normal.**

What you won’t see is the hour online trying to switch registration to June, wondering if the test prep class that led up to the March test should be repeated. The time on college confidential trying to figure out if jettisoning the subject tests you’d planned for June will hurt at the dream school.



## **Sure, you're getting fewer AP scores and subject test scores, but you'll see that 1410.**

What you won't see is the decision to add the June ACT, in hopes of getting a test, any test. You won't see the kick in the gut when the June SAT is cancelled. "Sure, lots of colleges are going test optional, but not my dream school. I should've taken the SAT last November. I blew it." You won't see the daily hope of "they haven't cancelled the June ACT, maybe it'll be on!" And have that hope gradually transform into "No way they can hold the ACT in June right? But the website says it's on, so I'll keep studying I guess." "The college counselor telling me there's almost no way the June test will happen, but my parents say it's not cancelled yet, so I'll keep studying."

## **You'll be able to sort applicant spreadsheets by the SAT, to run mid 50% reports, and you'll see your reading process go as normal.**

What you won't see is the student of color in the Bay Area whose world was torn apart in late May/early June. Who protested, organized, and fought for social justice. Who finally came up for air three weeks later to realize that there were no seats left in a 3 hour radius for August, September, or October.

**You'll see that 1410, and you'll think "Well, we did it, we held our ground and were right in the end. The students could test."**

You won't see the student scoring 200 points lower than she does on practice tests. Four hours in a mask is throwing her off her game, and the student behind her keeps coughing. She needs to use the restroom but doesn't want to touch all the doors it would require to get there. It's all so distracting. And sadly this was the only test before ED that she could find.

You won't see the student behind her who is coughing. He's had a cough for two days, a mild fever for one. He feels guilty for being at this test, but it's his one shot, and it's his dream school. So he takes the test, and hopes it's just a regular flu.

He got that 1410 for you.

Are we sure it was worth it?

To test-optional colleges - I applaud you.

But know that in many cases, ***that's not going to be enough to make this fair.***

My hope is that you all become experts on which regions filled up, and on how superscoring can move testing up with each test. You simply can't look at a 1400 and say that student is stronger than one with a 1350 (I mean, you never really could...) without knowing how many times they took the exam, when they took the exam, how many times they would've liked to take the exam, what it's like taking the exam in a pandemic, in a mask, in more stress than any young person should see.

In going test optional, you will still use scores for many students, and you need to use them with more care than ever before."

David Rion,  
Director of College Counseling  
Loomis Chaffee School, Windsor, CT

## **Committee-Based Evaluation @ Tufts**

Two (or more) admissions officers review each application together, discuss each applicant's academic performance and potential, community engagements, voice and potential contributions to our community, and determine whether the applicant should move forward for further consideration.

Competitive applicants move through iterative committee processes with ever-larger committees evaluating the entire application, reconfirming the academic and community engagement evaluations/ratings, and deciding whether to recommend admission.

**This model strives to reduce the bias of a single-reader model, builds in opportunities for cross-training and calibration, and strengthens staff connection and team-building.**

### **Focus of Academic Review *Prior* to Test-Optional:**

Curricular Rigor, Grades & Performance, Standardized Testing, Preparation for Area of Academic Interest, Academic Motivation/Curiosity as demonstrated in student self-representation and/or by teacher evaluations

*Consistent for all applicants, within local context and using professional judgement*

### **Focus of Academic Review *During* Test-Optional:**

Curricular Rigor, Grades & Performance, Standardized Testing, Preparation for Area of Academic Interest, Academic Motivation/Curiosity as demonstrated in student self-representation and/or by teacher evaluations

*Consistent for all applicants, within local context and using professional judgement*

Consideration of standardized testing, for those who submitted it, becomes *separate* from our primary academic review, instead of embedded in it.

Our goal is to make our academic review process as equitable as possible, and not advantage or disadvantage applicants because they do or do not have scores in their application.

We did not want to have academic ratings that meant different things based on whether or not scores were present.

**Our academic rating is now a school-based rating for all applicants.**

## **Standardized Test training for our team included:**

- the inaccessibility of the exams
- the lengths to which applicants sometimes went to take a test
- the scores we are seeing were often earned under difficult circumstances and may not represent an applicant's best performance
- SAT/ACT concordance and superscoring
- College Board data on SAT participation and performance rates by different groups of test-takers, including by highest level of parental education, first language learned, race/ethnicity, gender, and fee waiver usage
- historic testing profiles for applicants and admitted/enrolled students to our institution
- historic data on anonymized academic profiles of students who had significant difficulty in introductory STEM courses once enrolled

**No score cut-offs or targets were given to admissions officers; rather, committees are asked to consider scores as they would any other credential: with the appropriate context for each applicant.**

First-Year Applications for Class of 2024: 23,000+  
First-Year Applications for Class of 2025: 31,000+ (35% increase)  
First-Year Applications for Class of 2026: 34,800+ (12% increase)  
*50% increase in two years across all undergraduate schools/programs*

Applications from Black, Multiracial, and Latinx students have grown faster than the overall pool in that time.

First-generation-to-college applications are up 67% in two years

International student applications are up 76% in two years

~50% of applicants have submitted scores each of the last two years

***We are reviewing thousands more applications than ever before, from a more compositionally diverse pool than ever before, with different information than we have historically had. And we think we're doing it pretty well.***



## **Assessment of Test-Optional Pilot (some potential considerations)**

Acknowledgment that we are experiencing a mental health crisis, many secondary schools used Pass/Fail grading or modified curricular expectations during the pandemic, students can learn differently in in-person/virtual formats, pandemic surges and pandemic policies in different parts of the country impact high school (and college) performance

- Examination of differentiation of performance and persistence for submitters vs non-submitters
- Examination of academic pathways/majors of submitters vs non-submitters
- Examination of community contributions of submitters vs non-submitters
- Examination of impact of test-optional policy on building a compositionally diverse applicant pool and enrolled student body
- Examination of committee deliberations and admissions officer experience in a test-optional app review environment

# Q & A

Please submit your question in the  
Q & A section of the Zoom webinar.

**OR**

Add your questions on the [Ukova](#) platform  
on the right side of your screen.

# Transition to Breakouts

Thank you for an engaging Q&A session!

At this point, we will transition to  
**Breakouts**

Please return to the [Ukova](#) agenda and  
select the next session.

*Note: Please wait in the Zoom waiting room until the host starts the session at the scheduled time.*