



Higher Education Admissions and the COVID-19 Pandemic: The National Landscape

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created numerous challenges for higher education institutions to meet their respective admissions and enrollment goals. In response, many institutions implemented test-optional admissions policies, extended deposit deadlines, and modified enrollment fees, all with the hope of easing access and providing flexibility for students amid uncertainty. In this policy brief, we describe the national landscape of recent higher education policy changes and how such decisions may impact the future of higher education admissions. Further, we look back at policy decisions during the most recent economic downturn, the Great Recession, and examine how financial crises impact postsecondary enrollment. We also contextualize the issues facing today's students and institutions with those observed during the Great Recession.

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) depend heavily on student enrollment, a complex relationship which may fall victim to the COVID-19 pandemic. The education of undergraduate and graduate students not only provides HEIs with much of their institutional purpose, but also represents a crucial revenue source, tuition. In addition, students utilize and fund auxiliary campus services such as housing, food provision, and recreation by paying separate fees. When student enrollment falls, myriad areas within higher education suffer financial downturn.

In a whirlwind response to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, HEIs were forced to shut their doors in the Spring of 2020. This shutdown left prospective and incoming students unable to visit campuses, while students engaged in face-to-face instruction were forced to transition to online modalities. Uncertainty and frustration left many students questioning their respective higher education futures. A March survey found that 25.7% of high school seniors were rethinking their college choices because of the COVID-19 pandemic, while 32.9% said they wanted to consider options closer to home.¹ Many current students became frustrated with the quality and price of their now fully online education while some students went so far as to sue their respective institutions.² April predictions estimated higher education enrollment to decline as much as 20%.³ For example, a study of Virginia's community colleges found students who shifted to online learning during the middle of the Spring 2020 semester had an increased likelihood of failing and dropping out compared to students who had opted into online learning at the start of the semester.⁴

Further complicating the dire enrollment forecasts, campus closings also forced HEIs to shoulder millions of dollars of revenues losses after issuing refunds for unused campus services.⁵ State legislatures informed public institutions, many with already limited funding, that budgets would decrease further.⁶ California and Ohio, for instance, announced expected cuts of \$1.7 billion and \$110 million to their respective higher education budgets.⁷ Similarly, Colorado projected millions in budget decreases while simultaneously announcing they would have to forgo plans to forgive teachers' student debt.⁸ Compounding their fiscal budget concerns, many regional public colleges and universities, institutions which serve 40% of all undergraduates, had not fully recovered from the fallout of the Great Recession.⁹ Moreover, both public and private HEIs are relatively limited in their abilities to leverage institutional endowments for yearly shortfalls, as much of

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Special points of interest:

- Half of all four-year colleges and universities adopted test-optional policies for the Fall 2021 admissions cycle, the most widely adopted policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Of the 700 colleges and universities with a traditional May 1 student acceptance deadline, approximately 50% delayed their deadlines to June 1.
- Some higher education institutions chose to reduce or waive deposit fees for domestic and/or international students.
- Early enrollment reports indicate that the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic may impact higher education enrollment differently than previous economic downturns.

these funds are restricted and designated for specific purposes by donor agreements.¹⁰

Facing mounting pressures to meet enrollment goals for the incoming class of first-year students, many HEIs implemented three common policy adaptations: 1) the establishment of test-optional admissions practices; 2) the extension of decision deadlines; and 3) the discounting or elimination of required deposits. This policy brief will describe these changes at the national level, review enrollment policy decisions and outcomes following the Great Recession, and discuss how current changes may affect the future of higher education.

Test-Optional Admissions

Many HEIs maintain a tradition of requiring applicants to complete standardized entrance exams, such as the SAT or ACT. Often, admissions decisions are based, in part, on the belief that such scores provide a reliable and valid assessment tool that predicts future academic success in higher education. Research from ACT found students who achieve the minimum scores of the College Readiness Benchmarks have a 50% chance of earning a B or higher and at least a 75% chance of earning a C or higher in typical first-year credit-bearing college courses.¹¹ However, critics of test-based admissions policies argue they create inequities, particularly for racial minority, low-income, and first-generation students. Opting to deemphasize standardized testing prior to the pandemic, institutions including the University of Chicago, Wake Forest University, Bowdoin College, Bucknell University, Pitzer College, and Brandeis University all practice test-optional admissions policies.¹²

As the term suggests, HEIs with test-optional admissions do not require SAT or ACT scores. Test-optional admissions empower students to decide whether to submit standardized test scores as part of their admissions portfolios.¹³ Students who do submit scores are evaluated on those scores in addition to other submitted application materials.¹⁴ Previously, test-optional admissions benefited students who might score lower on standardized tests but fulfilled other criteria to meet admissions standards (e.g., GPA). This year, however, many institutions chose to employ test-optional admissions as a direct response to the limited availability, or in many cases the unavailability, of SAT and ACT testing.

In March, the COVID-19 pandemic forced SAT and ACT testing locations, many of which were located in PK-12 schools, to close.¹⁵ The continued shutdown forced testing dates for both exams to be

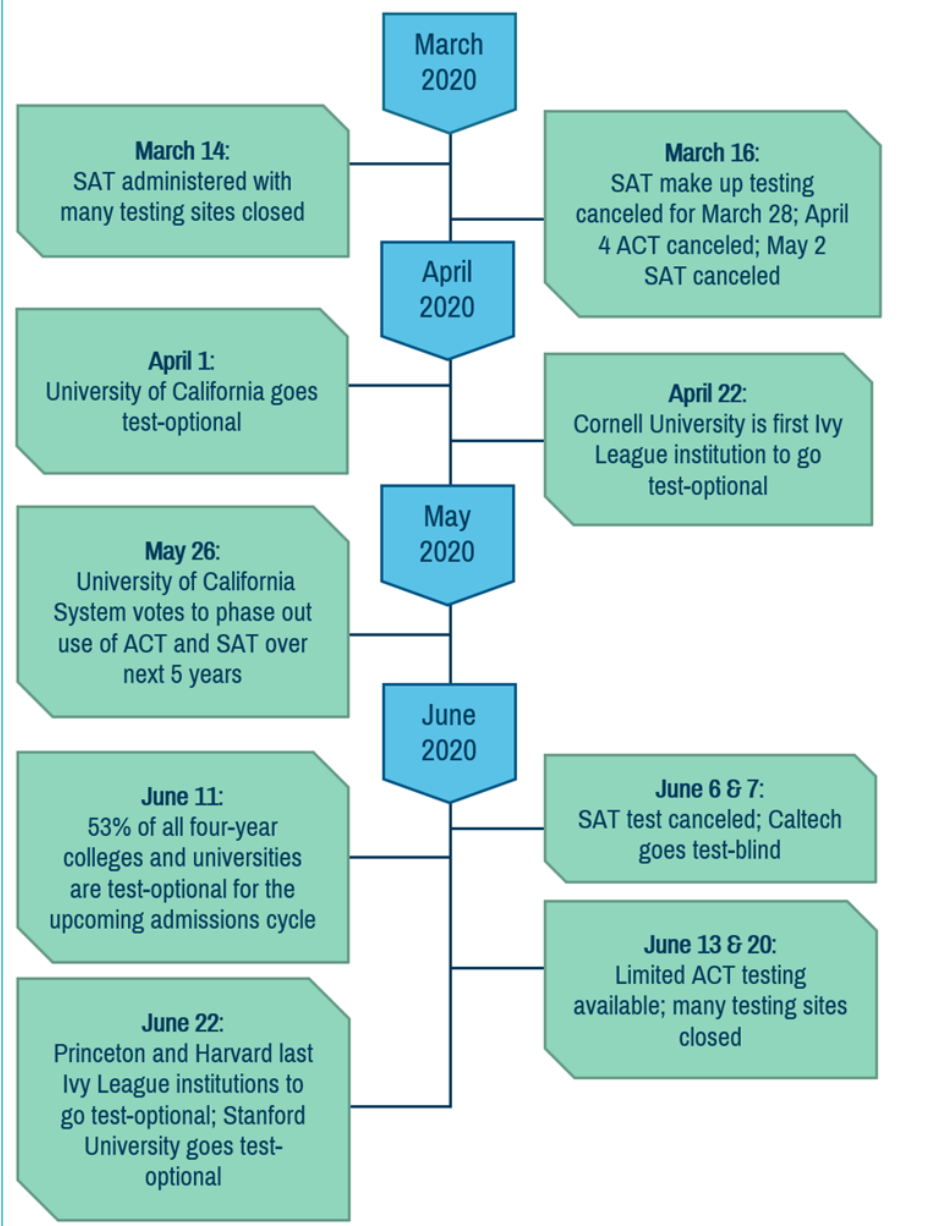
canceled entirely in April and May.¹⁶ With students unable to complete exams, HEIs began indicating greater flexibility in admissions requirements through test-optional policies. By the end of March, at least 17 institutions had switched to test-optional admissions.¹⁷ Early June brought additional complications for ACT and SAT testing, by which time only one-third of ACT testing locations had reopened.¹⁸ Priority SAT test availability, slots reserved for senior students still in need of a test score or students previously scheduled on canceled test dates, were met with online registration snafus.¹⁹ Recognizing these prolonged difficulties, all eight highly-selective Ivy League institutions implemented test-optional policies by mid-June, initiating a wave of similar interim policy changes.²⁰ The National Center for Fair and Open Testing reported that nearly 200 colleges and universities went test-optional this past spring, making this policy the most widely adopted response to the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education admissions.²¹ In total, half (1,240) of all four-year colleges and universities are test-optional for the Fall 2021 admissions cycle.²²

Most institutions have indicated these test-optional policies will be temporary, citing the COVID-19 pandemic as the reason for a one-year or two-year policy shift. Two highly-selective institutions, the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) and the University of California (UC) system, however, bucked this trend. Caltech chose to implement a two-year test-blind admissions policy in June, making it the most selective institution to make this policy change.²³ Test-blind admissions do not consider SAT or ACT scores from any students in admissions decisions, even if test scores are submitted.²⁴ The UC system initially announced that it would adopt a test-optional policy for one year on April 1; instead, it eventually voted to phase out the SAT and ACT requirement over the next five years while creating a standardized test that, “better aligns with the content the University expects students to have mastered for college readiness.”^{25,26} In September, however, a preliminary court injunction barred the UC system from considering SAT or ACT scores at all, forcing the adoption of a test-blind admissions policy.²⁷ Figure 1 shows a full timeline of standardized testing announcements and cancelations, along with major milestones in test-optional decisions.

Decision Deadlines & Deposit Changes

Known as National Candidates Reply Date, May 1 is the date many HEIs require accepted students to provide notice of their enrollment decisions.^{28,29}

Figure 1 : Timeline of Higher Education Policy Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic



Most institutions also require students to place a non-refundable deposit, usually ranging from \$50 to \$500, by this date to reserve their spot in the incoming class.³⁰ With many families facing uncertain financial futures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several institutions recognized that students and families required more time to make these important decisions.

Oregon State University was one of the first institutions to make this policy change, moving the decision deadline from May 1 to June 1.³¹ Other early adopters of this change included Loyola University Maryland, Hamline University, the Rochester Institute of Technology, Southwestern University, Williams College, and Texas Christian University.^{32,33} However, as of June 1, over 400 institutions without rolling admissions, such as community colleges, extended their enrollment and deposit deadlines to June 1.^{34,35} While smaller institutions seemed more likely candidates to use this policy lever, larger institutions such as the California State University system and George Mason University also adopted this policy.³⁶

Institutions weighing the implications of the policy change noted several associated logistical challenges, including organizing summer orientation sessions and

forecasting budgets, due to the uncertainty of the number of incoming students, particularly considering the common July 1 fiscal year start date.³⁷ In lieu of offering a blanket policy change, some institutions allowed one-off requests for extensions to enrollment decisions.³⁸ However, many underrepresented students, especially those from first-generation families, may be unaware of the availability for extensions. Equity considerations were cited specifically as a factor in some institutional decisions.³⁹ Of the 700 colleges and universities with a May 1 acceptance deadline, approximately 50% decided to allow students an extra month to decide.⁴⁰

In further recognizing the financial stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, some HEIs also chose to lower or waive deposit fees. The University of Nevada-Reno and the University of South Florida, which charge non-refundable fees of \$250 and \$200 respectively, announced they would waive deposit fees for students who had suffered negative financial ramifications due to COVID-19.⁴¹ Other institutions opted to reduce deposit amounts or lift deposit requirements altogether.^{42,43,44}

Some institutions also opted to waive deposit requirements for international students.⁴⁵ HEIs are particularly concerned about international student enrollment levels as these students usually pay full

tuition, thus representing a significant revenue source.⁴⁶ COVID-related travel restrictions and the suspension of visa processing by many U.S. consulates placed both international students and institutions in a precarious state.⁴⁷ U.S. immigration guidance further complicated matters by prohibiting new international students from enrolling in a fully online course load this fall.⁴⁸ The combination of these factors led many institutions to expect significant losses to international student enrollment. Indiana University, for example, indicated international student enrollment deposits declined 22%.⁴⁹ The University of Arizona projected losses of 80% for new international students and 30% for continuing international students, declines which would equate to a \$33.1 million projected revenue loss.⁵⁰ In an April letter to Congress, the American Council on Education projected that international enrollment would drop by 25% overall this year.⁵¹

Insights from the Great Recession

The Great Recession and its economic impacts provides a recent basis of comparison for the potential impacts of the current economic crisis. Overall, higher education enrollment fared well during the Great Recession. Between 2007 and 2010, the number of undergraduate students enrolled at HEIs increased by almost 2.5 million, or nearly 16%, from 15.6 million students to 18.1 million students.⁵² A significant increase to overall enrollment was not immediate; rather, the largest rate of increase (4.3%) emerged 18 months into the recession in 2009.⁵³

One analysis found that college attendance levels increased during the Great Recession, especially in states most affected by unemployment and declining home values.⁵⁴ Among four-year institutions, part-time student enrollment drove enrollment gains while full-time enrollment declined. Increases in attendance were concentrated among students of color.⁵⁵ The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) reported two-year institutions drove the overall enrollment increases between 2007 and 2009.⁵⁶ Specifically, the average yearly increase in enrollment in two-year institutions was 4.5%, which included an enrollment surge (8.3%) in 2009.⁵⁷ Much of the increase in enrollment was driven by older adults, rather than typical college-age students, who disproportionately tended to enroll in two-year community colleges and for-profit online schools.⁵⁸ Additional data and analyses from the NSC also highlighted distinct changes in the enrollment patterns of traditional-

age, first-time students.⁵⁹ Specifically, some traditional-age students entered community colleges who, in a better economy, may have chosen to enroll in other types of institutions.⁶⁰ Private four-year institutions maintained their share of the enrollment market during the Great Recession, while enrollment in public four-year institutions declined.⁶¹ Overall, however, enrollment changes were not as pronounced as had been forecasted initially.⁶²

Today's Context and Current Outlook

Some important contextual considerations are crucial to draw comparisons to enrollment trends during the Great Recession. First, federal policy, including the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, encouraged students to enroll in post-secondary education by increasing the amount of Pell Grants available to low-income students and by expanding student eligibility.⁶³ Currently, there do not exist similar public policy adjustments to encourage college enrollment as there have been no provisions in the 2020 relief package to increase grants or loans for future students.⁶⁴ Further, leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, the enrollment of traditional college-age students already had been declining in many areas of the country, whereas enrollment was increasing in the traditional college-age sector prior to 2008.⁶⁵

Still other challenges exist that may affect enrollment differently today than during the Great Recession. Institutional decisions on opening campuses—and keeping them open amid the pandemic—and the type of instruction available for students all may impact domestic student enrollment decisions. In addition, it will be extremely challenging for HEIs to enroll new international students. Finally, it is unlikely that there will be similar boosts in overall college enrollment through increased interest in two-year institutions. In August, community colleges predicted enrollment declines of five percent to as much as 30%.⁶⁶ Two months into the Fall semester, the NSC Research Center indicated community colleges had experienced a 9.4% drop in enrollment this Fall compared to Fall 2019.⁶⁷ The report denoted first-year student enrollment had dropped the most dramatically, down 22.7%.⁶⁸

In light of many of the aforementioned challenges including domestic and international student enrollment, Moody's Investors Service lowered its outlook on the higher education sector from "stable" to "negative," a similar status placed on the sector in 2009.^{69,70} This spring, Moody's predicted that colleges would face "unprecedented enrollment uncertainty."⁷¹ With 76% of HEIs reporting data, Fall enrollment levels indicate undergraduate enrollment has decreased 4.4%; international student enrollment has decreased at both the undergraduate level (14.9%) and graduate

level (7.8%).⁷² Overall postsecondary enrollment is down 3.3% relative to last year.⁷³ Therefore, despite enrollment increases witnessed previously during economic downturns including the Great Recession, contemporary enrollment figures suggest the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic may inflict further harm on HEIs rather than offer a potential enrollment respite.

Conclusions

Across the country, HEIs have altered established admissions policies, including standardized testing requirements, deposit deadlines, and enrollment fees in the hopes of lessening the financial uncertainty brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic downturn. Each of these decisions is intended to provide flexibility to promote post-secondary access for incoming and future students. Test-optional admissions have been the most common policy change nationally, with most institutions making one-year changes to their standardized testing requirements. Fewer institutions across the country have utilized other admissions policy changes, but many have indicated a willingness to accommodate the needs of students and their families in other ways. Though many of these changes have been adopted on a temporary basis, some institutions have indicated that they may sustain policy changes permanently or will reevaluate them in the coming year(s). As a result, some form of these policy changes may linger amid the uncertainty of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and its eventual aftermath.

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