


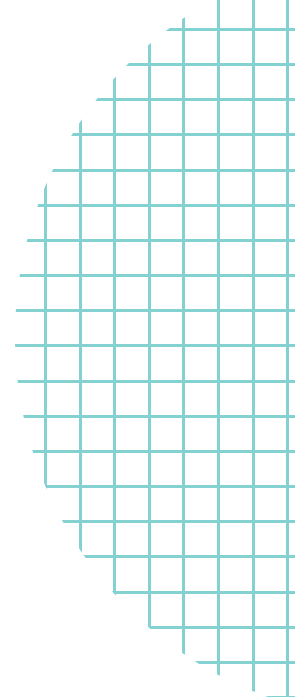
**COLLEGE  
ADMISSIONS  
FUTURES**  
CO-LABORATIVE

*POLICY BRIEF*

**VARIATION IN  
TEST-OPTIONAL  
ADMISSIONS AT  
SELECTIVE COLLEGES  
DURING THE PANDEMIC**



Kelly Rosinger, Dominique J. Baker, Joseph Sturm, Wan Yu, Julie J. Park, OiYan Poon, Brian H. Kim, and Stephanie Breen



## Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

## About Us

- **Kelly Rosinger** is an associate professor of education and public policy at Penn State University.
- **Dominique J. Baker** is an associate professor in the College of Education and Human Development's School of Education and the Joseph R. Biden, Jr. School of Public Policy and Administration at the University of Delaware.
- **Joseph Sturm** is a graduate research assistant with the College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative and a Ph.D. student at Penn State University.
- **Wan Yu** is a former graduate research assistant with the College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative.
- **Julie J. Park** is an associate professor in the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park.
- **OiYan Poon** is a faculty affiliate at the University of Maryland, College Park.
- **Brian H. Kim** is the director of data science, research, and analytics at the Common Application.
- **Stephanie Breen** is a former graduate research assistant with the College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative.

The College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative (CAF Co-Lab) is a multi-institutional partnership of faculty, researchers, and scholar-practitioners. Our research seeks to identify ways in which institutions and college admissions can be designed to advance equity. For more information and updates on research, see [www.cafcolab.org](http://www.cafcolab.org)



**Suggested citation:** Rosinger, K., Baker, D. J., Sturm, J., Yu, W., Park, J. J., Poon, O., Kim, B. H., & Breen, S. (2024). *Variation in Test-Optional Admissions at Selective Colleges During the Pandemic*. College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative. Accessible at [www.cafcolab.org](http://www.cafcolab.org)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The pandemic saw the rapid and widespread adoption of test-optional admissions policies that allowed applicants to choose whether to submit SAT or ACT scores to selective four-year colleges. This policy brief draws on detailed information about selective colleges' admissions testing policies to describe the proliferation of test-optional admissions policies during the pandemic period and highlight the variations in how colleges implemented test-optional policies.

★ We find that just 10% of selective colleges continued to require admissions test scores during the pandemic, relative to around 80% prior to the pandemic.

For colleges with “test-optional” admissions during the pandemic, we found substantial variation in the type of policy colleges implemented, the extent to which the policy extended to all applicants, and the extent to which the policy extended to other selection processes, such as merit scholarship consideration. We also found that **even when colleges were test optional, the language they used often still strongly encouraged or recommended that some groups of students** (e.g., international applicants, applicants hoping to receive merit scholarships) submit test scores, making it difficult to know the extent to which institutions were test optional.

We recommend that colleges simplify, standardize, and streamline information about admissions testing policies for students, families, and high school counselors.



## The Growth of Test-Optional Admissions

Recent research and policy attention have examined how selective college admissions practices serve to interrupt or reproduce racial and economic inequities in enrollment.<sup>1,2</sup> Standardized test scores are perhaps one of the most contested features of selective college admissions. Concerns that SAT and ACT scores disadvantage low-income and racially minoritized students<sup>3</sup> coupled with research indicating test scores offer little insight beyond high school GPA into college success<sup>4</sup> have raised questions about their role in the admissions process.

In response, a growing number of selective colleges have adopted test-optional admissions policies that allow applicants to choose whether to submit SAT or ACT scores. The test-optional movement began with a handful of selective liberal arts colleges—starting in the late 1960s and gaining momentum in the late 1990s and early 2000s—and has since expanded to include some of the most selective institutions, including research and public universities. In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of college entrance exams and spurred hundreds of four-year colleges to enact test-optional policies for the upcoming year. The National Center for Fair & Open Testing reported that most of the nation’s four-year colleges were test optional or test free in the wake of testing disruptions. This included several state systems: the University of California and the California State University systems, the State University of New York, Oregon’s public colleges, and others.

In this policy brief, we describe the rapid and widespread adoption of test-optional policies during the pandemic and illuminate variations in how institutions implemented test-optional admissions. We set out to examine two primary questions:

- 1. To what extent did selective colleges go “test optional” during the pandemic?**
- 2. To what extent did selective colleges vary in how they implemented “test-optional” policies?**

<sup>1</sup> Bastedo, M. N., Bowman, N. A., Glasener, K. M., & Kelly, J. L. (2018). What are we talking about when we talk about holistic review? Selective college admissions and its effects on low-SES students. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 89(5), 782-805.

<sup>2</sup> Rosinger, K., Ford, K. S., & Choi, J. (2021). The role of selective college admissions criteria in interrupting or reproducing racial and economic inequities. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 92(1), 31-55.

<sup>3</sup> Korbin, J. L., Sathy, V., & Shaw, E. J. (2006). View of subgroup performance differences on the SAT reasoning test (Research Report 2006-5). *New York: College Board*.

<sup>4</sup> Allensworth, E. M., & Clark, K. (2020). High school GPAs and ACT scores as predictors of college completion: Examining assumptions about consistency across high schools. *Educational Researcher*, 49(3), 198-211.

## The Study and Data

To answer these questions, we gathered information on 185 selective colleges' admissions testing policies for the 2020-2021 admissions cycle for applicants applying to enroll in fall 2021. This was the first full admissions cycle following the pandemic disrupting testing. We defined selective colleges as four-year, not-for-profit colleges that admitted fewer than 50% of applicants. This set of institutions includes the most selective private institutions, e.g., Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Stanford; public research institutions, e.g., the University of Michigan, University of Virginia, Georgia Institute of Technology, and several University of California campuses; and the most selective regional publics, e.g., California State University, Long Beach and several City University of New York campuses. We excluded special focus institutions (like art institutes) that frequently have unique admissions processes and two colleges for which we were unable to locate any information about testing policies. We collected information using the Internet Archive: Wayback Machine, a digital library of webpages, to capture historical websites from the 2020-2021 admissions cycle about each college's admissions testing policy for fall 2021 applicants.

For each college, we gathered information on the *type of testing policy* the college had in place:

- ★ **Test free** (in which applicants did not submit SAT or ACT test scores and the college did not review scores)
- ★ **Test optional** (in which applicants could choose to submit scores and colleges considered scores as part of the application for students who chose to submit)
- ★ **Test flexible** (in which applicants who chose to apply without SAT or ACT scores were required to submit an alternate test or other materials for admissions considerations), or
- ★ **Test required** (in which applicants were required to submit SAT or ACT scores).

We also captured information on whether colleges with any type of test-optional policy (that is, test free, test optional, or test flexible) placed *restrictions on who could apply under the policy*. For example, colleges may have required international students, homeschooled students, or students with grades below some threshold to submit scores. Related, we collected information on whether colleges *extended their test-optional policy to other processes*, such as for honors program admission, merit scholarship consideration, or for eventual matriculation at the institution. We also captured whether testing policies implemented during the pandemic were announced as temporary or pilot programs or as a permanent change to admissions. Finally, we collected information on whether each college had a prior test-optional policy and the year it was enacted.

## Findings

**During the pandemic, around 75% of selective colleges were test optional, 10% continued requiring SAT or ACT scores, 10% were test free, and a handful were test flexible.**

The pandemic period represented a widespread, though not complete, movement toward “test-optional” admissions with around 90% of selective colleges having some type of test-optional policy. Prior to 2021, just over 20% of selective colleges included in our study had a “test-optional” policy.

We found that most of the test-optional policies that existed during the pandemic were temporary or operated on a pilot basis. Just 30% of colleges with some type of test-optional policy in 2021 had a made permanent change to their admissions policy (including those colleges that had a made permanent shifts prior to the pandemic). Among selective colleges that previously required test scores for admissions consideration, just 15% announced a permanent shift to a test-flexible, test-optional, or test-free policy during the pandemic, though many later revised or extended their policies.

Most of the test-optional policies during the pandemic applied to *all* first-year applicants, but 13% of “test-optional” colleges still required SAT or ACT scores from international applicants, homeschooled applicants, applicants below a specified GPA threshold, or applicants to particular programs. **Even**

**at colleges that were “test optional,” some still strongly recommended or encouraged some groups of students to submit scores, potentially adding to confusion among applicants over whether to take or submit the SAT or ACT.**

In addition, even if the SAT and ACT were optional for admissions, some colleges still required scores for honors program admission, merit scholarship consideration, or matriculation. **Around 20% of colleges with “test-optional” admissions during the pandemic continued to require test scores for honors program admission or scholarship consideration.** One college, for example, informed students that “ACT and/or SAT scores are NOT required for admission to the College. However, test scores are considered for entry to select programs and some scholarships.” In these cases, students who had not taken the SAT or ACT or who did not submit scores were not considered for honors programs or scholarships. A handful of selective colleges with some kind of test-optional policy still required matriculants to submit test scores, indicating that even though test scores were optional for admission, they were not optional for ultimate enrollment.



Further, even if scores were ultimately optional for honors program admission, merit scholarship consideration, or matriculation, the language on websites was often confusing or unclear regarding whether students should submit scores. For example, one college noted that it “will observe its test-optional decision over the next 4 years. For this reason, and because standardized tests may be used as a foundation for class placement, all entering students will be asked to submit their scores, even if they are admitted through test-optional means.” In this case, it was not clear whether students without an SAT or ACT score would be able to matriculate.

### Key Takeaways and Recommendations

Our comprehensive study of test-optional admissions policies at selective colleges during the pandemic offers several key takeaways.

- **First**, testing policies looked very different across colleges during the pandemic. They differed in the extent to which scores were optional, whether the policy was temporary versus permanent, whether the policy extended to all applicants, and whether scores were required for honors or scholarship consideration.
- **Second**, even if colleges were test optional, information about submitting test scores was often unclear or confusing. For instance, many test-optional colleges still strongly recommended or encouraged some applicants to submit test scores, making it hard to know how optional tests really were. In addition, restrictions on who could apply under test-optional policies and whether scores were required for honors, scholarships, or enrollment may add to confusion about test-optional policies.
- **Finally**, the different approaches to test-optional admissions that selective colleges implemented during the pandemic have implications for the extent to which “test-optional” admissions expands college access and promotes enrollment among low-income and racially minoritized students.



Based on our findings, we offer several policy recommendations aimed at helping students, families, and high school counselors more easily navigate the admissions process.

- **Offer consistent and clear information** across institutional websites regarding what type of testing policy the college has, who is eligible to apply under the testing policy (and who is restricted from applying under it), and whether and how test scores are used for other selection processes, such as merit scholarship consideration or honors program selection.
- **Clarify language** across institutions regarding **what is meant by test-optional, test-flexible, and test-free admissions** and encourage institutions to use this consistent language in describing their testing policy.
- **Be cautious in labeling** SAT or ACT scores as simultaneously “optional” and “strongly recommended.”

