

Test-Optional Admissions at Penn State

Ortiz, Mitole, Mohamed, Rodriguez, Williams

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Executive Summary: Michael

The purpose of this paper is to propose alternative solutions to the problems presented by standardized testing, as it relates to undergraduate admission. In this paper, we will analyze the socio-economic determinants of standardized testing performance, including but not limited to: high school quality, test preparation availability, test costs and fees, and test offerings. Our intention is to appeal to the admissions committee of The Pennsylvania State University, so as to bring about change in their admissions structure and the way they review applicants. Some of the recommendations we advise are: reducing the influence of test scores on admissions while gradually phasing into an optional mode of assessment.

Our proposed method of address is informed by Goal 4 & 10 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. With these goals in mind, a comprehensive review on the literature surrounding standardized testing is conducted, and it is from this analysis that we derive our recommendation.

At bottom, our ultimate recommendation is reasonable and multifarious. Benchmarking, to our minds, is the best way for Penn State to develop a standardized testing admissions strategy suitable for its prospective students and admissions staff. This is because benchmarking involves comparing our current efforts with schools similar and dissimilar to ours. In our paper, we propose noteworthy examples of the intentional changes NYU, UChicago, and the UC school system have implemented in their respective environments to bring about positive results.

Background

Since their inception in the late 1800's, standardized tests have been a way to ascertain student preparedness for higher levels of education. In the domain of university education, standardized tests were introduced in 1890 after the president of Harvard College proposed a national entrance exam for American colleges. In response, the College Entrance Examination Board was established. After many iterative transformations the CEEB became what we know it as today, the College Board, in 1916. The College Board in this early stage was interested in testing students in 6 subject areas--including writing competency and translation of foreign languages. By 1926, its focus narrowed. The 1926 Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) contained 300 questions that examined vocabulary and basic arithmetic ability, and quickly became the prerequisite to college eligibility in the United States.

It was not long until the standardized testing procedures that were *de rigueur* for college admissions became a primary determinant for a prospective student's college choices, and there reasons for that are manifold. To start, standardized tests are marketed as being the best predictor of student first-year success, retention, and graduation. While the veracity of that has yet to be indubitably established, we do know that standardized tests are a reasonably objective indicator of whether a student is ready for college. Heretofore, standardized tests afford scholarships to students, and for some, drastically reduce the cost. On the part of college admissions committee, standardized exams are disaffected by the grade inflation and variation of difficulty in high schools around the country; they instead enable for the stratification, and to some degree, *separation* of students--as some may take standardized tests and multiple subject tests (standardized tests in a single subject). Resultantly, we see that the admissions systems in higher education have been fashioned around standardized exams. It is far deeper than just a component

of one's application. It is a world of opportunity: scholastically, financially, socially, and vocationally. It would be a mistake, however, to be convinced that this opportunity presents itself the same to all people.

A common view held by those against standardized testing is that they contain racial, class, gender, and culture barriers. They cite: African American and Latino students in 2019 scoring below SAT College Readiness Benchmarks and that the mean SAT scores of students whose parents did not attend college decrease year over year. In other words, the SAT does not examine college potential, but instead reflects the complicating factors of a student's background that are hindrances to their utmost achievement.

The College Board is not unfamiliar with its detractors, too. They have begun to administer exams on school days (to reach underrepresented students) and waive more exam fees. They have also begun to add "disadvantage scores" to their score calculations. Put simply the disadvantage score is scaled from 1-100 and looks at neighborhood crime rates, housing values and vacancies, the community's average educational attainment, and poverty levels. While this score doesn't adjust their composite SAT mark, it allows admissions officers to see "what's behind the test". To their chagrin, that is not enough to avail themselves of the growing unpopularity of the SAT. In the last year, 47 colleges and universities have stopped requiring the SAT scores of their applicants. We are now in a reality in which 40 percent of all 4-year university do not require the testing scores of their applicants.

As auspicious as this may sound for some, it is not obvious that standardized tests are done forever. The UC school system is aiming to develop a replacement exam for its admissions. If other universities follow suit, we may, instead of seeing a universal standardized test, see a preponderance of de-facto ones from different schools.

Pursuant to making higher education more accessible and the process more conducive to student success, a critical review of the utility of standardized testing is imperative--and will be undertaken over the scope of this paper.

UN Goals

The problem of inequity created by standardized testing is important in relation to two specific United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development during a summit that occurred between September 25th-27th in 2015, which includes a multitude of SDGs. The intended purpose of this international adoption was to reach the greater goal of ensuring a more equitable and just global society. In an unprecedented display of global cooperation due to the looming, multiple crises that are inflicting global communities, the general body of international leaders came together to commit to the alleviation of the ailments that are presently affecting society as a whole.

We have come to identify the main two integral components of the Sustainable Development Goals, those being: Goal 4, which calls for the institution of a quality education and Goal 10, reducing inequality within a country. Our ultimate mission and purpose in advancing these goals within the paper specifically relate to the idea of gradually advocating for Penn State Admissions to adopt an optional approach for standardized tests heavily utilized by universities, such as the ACT/SAT. With Goal 4, we aim to emphasize the general idea that access to college should be equal. With standardized tests, there are varying disparities in underrepresented communities exemplified by Target 4.5, which eliminates barriers for the “vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations” (United Nations). Depending on geographic location, there are different levels of funding in relation to schools that can be directly correlated to property taxes.

With the property taxes varying, there is a propensity for low-income communities, who sometimes statistically yield higher numbers of residents from underrepresented communities, there is a higher probability of barriers being erected.

Literature Review

Since the beginning of the last decade, there has been a gradual inclination for college admissions offices to transition to a test-optional admissions policy. However, before that and even still today, many universities utilize the SAT/ACT to determine the worthiness of a student in regards to analyzing their academic background and prowess. In relation to standardized tests determining collegiate durability, there are many instances in which socioeconomic background would prevent students from entering college with their testing scores. “Schools more committed to enlarged conceptions of student personhood are more likely to adopt a test-optional policy, in order to recruit students who fit the distinctive characteristics of their school identity...and there is an emphasis on economic motives with standardized testing” (Furuta, 2017). There are a variety of factors that have resulted in the evolution in perception of standardized testing in relation to socioeconomic background.

With measuring the SAT/ACT, there is an established methodology to consistently evaluate prospective students, a methodology that has persisted for the past five decades. Logically, universities have weighted standardized tests heavily to procure a baseline assessment of the student’s academic capabilities. This is a universal fact, and it has been since World War II. With the surge of veterans taking advantage of the educational benefits that were provided by the original G.I. Bill, university admissions offices were forced to conceptualize more stringent methods of determining policy regarding admitted students (Steven Rosales, 2017, 137-138). One important facet of this chronological review of the history within the realms of admissions policy is that there was only one consequential change that occurred in 1969, the first change of its kind, that resulted in Bowdoin College eliminating standardized testing requirements. The original reasoning that was conveyed by the college was due to “the College [being] concerned

that the test was not a fair and accurate way to evaluate all students” (Bowdoin College). There has been a deviation that has led to colleges and universities to holistically evaluate the student rather than simplify their admissions policies to determine admission based on the quantitative score on their SAT/ACT.

The trend of test-optional colleges and universities has been seemingly evenly divided. “The trend toward test optional college admissions policies has grown only since the 1990s and early 2000s. Finally, among the more selective colleges and universities, the relative weight of the SAT in the overall admissions process increased during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, standardized tests, like the SAT, seem to be declining in importance for some schools while becoming increasingly important to others” (ibid. p. 237). This is a vast growth compared to the first college to move to test-optional requirements, in 1969.

This, in fact, has resulted in evolutionary thought in the overall idea of legitimacy to these standardized admissions tests being a predictor of performance to students who may apply to the institution. It can be noted that there has been a burgeoning number of colleges and universities who have been gradually transitioning to this method of determination, especially in the era of Covid-19. Differences in socioeconomic status can prevent a true and equitable determination of a student’s academic abilities, given the multitude of factors that may play a role.

While the SAT and ACT exams have been a large basis for admissions into colleges, the examination process inevitably disadvantages students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. There is a clear correlation between socioeconomic status and success on the SAT and ACT exams. There has been extensive research into the concept of “shadow education -- refers to educational activities, such as tutoring or extra classes, occurring outside the formal educational

channels of an education system” (Buchmann et. al. 2010). This practice of shadow education is seen often in college admissions through the preparation for admission exams, and highlights inequalities in who can afford test preparation and who cannot, and thus who can be admitted into more selective four year colleges and who cannot. These inequalities translate to lower exam scores for students of lower socioeconomic status. The authors of this research paper extensively analyzed data pertaining to test preparation, family income, and SAT scores.

According to this research, there are significant differences in SAT scores by family income and test preparation. The most expensive test preparation, like a private tutor, leads to the greatest increase in scores (Buchmann et. al. 2010). This demonstrates that the more wealthy a student’s family is, the more that student can improve their SAT scores due to their test preparation. Students who cannot afford to have access to these resources then cannot improve their scores as much as their peers who can afford it. This research concludes that “these shadow education activities have important implications for test performance and selective college enrollment” (Buchmann et. al. 2010). Not being able to afford more expensive and effective test preparation options leads to even more long lasting inequalities for students with lower socioeconomic statuses. It can lead to lower test scores, which then can impact what colleges the student can get into and even further into the future, what jobs they can obtain.

The adaptation of test optional policies for the admissions processes of universities can be a step in the right direction for improving college access for students of lower socioeconomic status. Test optional policies would make it so that students applying would have the option to send in their SAT/ACT scores or not, or to send in other supplementary scores like AP exams, IB exams, or SAT II Subject Tests. In a book written about the SAT exams, the author writes: “Not only is the applicant pool resized and reshaped by moving to a test-optional admissions policy,

but the likelihood that a student with low admissions test scores will be admitted is higher” (Soares 2011). As explored previously, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have lower test scores. Therefore, test-optional admissions policies increase the chances of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds of being admitted to colleges. Test-optional policies can make higher education more accessible for these students, who are already underrepresented in universities.

There is not much extensive research established on the way that these policies would change the demographics of universities. However, the limited research that has been done demonstrates that the population of lower socioeconomic status students can increase with the adoption of test-optional admissions. The same book aforementioned states, “the results show unambiguously that increased racial and socioeconomic diversity can be achieved by switching to test-optional admissions policies” (Soares 2011). Higher education is still so out of reach for students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many factors play into this, but moving toward test-optional admissions can be a step in the right direction toward making college more accessible to all. Making higher education accessible for students from lower socioeconomic statuses is very important for reducing inequalities in college and increasing representation of these students.

Analysis of Findings

New York University, which claims to be the number one university for international students, has more than 230 areas of study, and a 95% rate of employment or entrance into graduate school after graduation has many options in place of submitting SAT or ACT scores (NYU Web Communications) At NYU, you are able to submit either your SAT, ACT, IB Diploma, three SAT Subject Test scores, three AP Exam scores, or three IB higher-level exam scores (NYU Web Communications). Giving students the option to pick between which test scores they want to submit gives them more flexibility and a chance to improve their application if one of their test scores was low while another was higher. More choices for test submission also make it easier for international students that have a harder time accessing the SAT or ACT test abroad.

Alongside the many options that NYU already had in place, they have implemented an option to make test scores optional for the 2021 - 2022 academic year. According to the NYU admissions website, NYU will not disadvantage anyone who does not submit test scores during this application cycle and are focused on making the application process equitable for those that faced hardships during COVID-19 (NYU Web Communications). NYU had the same approach for the 2020 - 2021 academic year as many people were unable to take their SAT or ACT exams.

A study into test-optional university admissions processes with data from 28 colleges and 955,774 applications provides some backing to the claims that a test-optional system is more equitable (Making the Case for Test Optional). The study shows that applications to these universities increased, more black and Latino students applied, more minorities chose to not submit test scores than their white counterparts, and graduation rates did not decline (Making the

Case for Test Optional). If universities have the option and capability to make SAT and ACT test scores optional, then they have the chance of increasing applications, admissions, and diversity.

The University of Chicago, one of the best ranked liberal arts colleges in the United States, is another university with a plethora of options in regards to submitting test results for applications. Students applying to the university can submit their SAT/ACT scores or not, and can submit supplemental materials regardless of whether or not they submit their test scores. Supplemental materials can include AP exam scores, SAT-II subject tests, creative writing, arts performances, capstone and research projects (1). The wide variety of options allows students who are applying to have more control over what their application consists of.

The University of Chicago announced that it would become test optional in its admission process in 2018, and began implementing that policy in 2019 with the Class of 2023 applications (Madhani 2018). In the first year after implementation, the university has seen success in increasing its population of first generation and low income students by 20% (Jaschik 2019). The test optional policy, along with other policies in its Empower program, was able to increase the demographics of underrepresented students. An article in the Washington post writes “‘Testing is not the be-all and the end-all,’ said James G. Nondorf, U-Chicago’s dean of admissions and financial aid. He said he didn’t want ‘one little test score’ to end up ‘scaring students off’ who are otherwise qualified” (Anderson 2018). This policy takes into account that for some students, test scores do not accurately reflect their college readiness. Additionally, “studies have found a strong link between scores and economic background. Privileged students, with wider access to books, museums, tutors and other forms of cultural or academic enrichment, tend to get higher marks” (Anderson 2018). Students have more flexibility to define their applications how they want to, and not through standardized testing that can be difficult to succeed on without the

financial resources to prepare for these exams. If more universities adopt this policy, it would be removing a large barrier for students in lower socioeconomic statuses.

Policy Options

At the moment, many universities have gone test optional, because of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, universities across the country have started to realize the inequities that standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT present. Thus encouraging them to become test optional. This is where the university will accept applications, but the applicant would not have to submit an SAT/ACT score to apply. If a student chooses to submit one then it will be used in favor of their application, if they choose not to then they will not be punished for it. Several universities, for example, The George Washington University and The University of Chicago are both universities that went test-optional prior to the pandemic.

Aside from going test optional, there are a couple of alternatives that other universities have implemented/going to implement in order to reduce inequalities. Universities have employed various options in order to choose what would work best for their students. Some universities have a flexible testing policy, some universities allow students to submit portfolios, and a few universities are moving towards a test blind way of application.

New York University has a flexible testing policy. This means that, while some form of test scores are required to apply, students can choose which scores they would like to send to the university. Scores students can send include, but are not limited to: SAT, ACT, 3 SAT Subject test, 3 AP Exam Scores, or an IB Diploma. Each test has its own requirements that the student must send in order to count for the application. For example, students that take AP Exams must submit: 1 Literature or Humanities, 1 Math & Science, and the last can be the exam of their choosing. (New York University)

Some universities are becoming test blind. This is rare, but slowly more and more universities are leaning towards getting rid of students submitting standardized testing scores.

Since Hampshire College's opening in 1970, they have been a test optional university. In 2014, Hampshire college became completely test blind. Even if a student were to submit test scores at Hampshire, they would not have any weight on the student's application. Hampshire notes that the SAT/ACT “reflect(s) family economic status rather than potential for college success”. Hampshire takes a holistic look at students' transcripts, essays, letters of recommendation, interviews, and activities outside the classroom. They want to see that students have taken college prep classes, have disciplined work habits, activities with community engagement, leadership, and more. Despite not accepting SAT/ACT scores, Hampshire does accept AP exam scores, SAT Subject test scores, and IB test scores. (Hampshire College) The University of California (UC's) are also starting to go test blind. In 2021 and 2022 the UC's are going test optional. In 2023 and 2024 the UC's will be going test blind. In 2025, the UC's will instate their own exam that would replace the SAT/ACT, for all potential California state students that wish to apply to the UC's. Albeit, there is limited information about this new test that will be instituted. It is unknown what test out-of-state and international students will be required to take.

(PrepScholar)

Any of these options would be beneficial in reducing inequalities for students. Not having to report SAT/ACT scores will help level the playing field when students are applying to colleges. By reducing this inequality and thus giving more students that chance to apply to college, will then allow them to be able to get a quality education from top tier universities.

Entering Class	SAT/ACT Elimination Phase	What It Means	How SAT & ACT Scores Could Be Used
2021	Test Optional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All students can submit their SAT/ACT scores, but it's not required Students won't be penalized for <i>not</i> submitting SAT/ACT scores The SAT/ACT Writing tests are no longer required SAT/ACT scores no longer considered for Regents or Chancellor's scholarships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other scholarships (not Chancellor's or Regents) Course placement Statewide eligibility for admissions guarantee**
2022	Test Optional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All students can submit their SAT/ACT scores, but it's not required Students won't be penalized for <i>not</i> submitting SAT/ACT scores The SAT/ACT Writing tests are no longer required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scholarships Course placement Statewide eligibility for admissions guarantee**
2023	Test Blind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> California students can submit SAT/ACT scores, but they won't be considered in the admissions process Schools are expected to remain test optional for out-of-state and international students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scholarships Course placement Statewide eligibility for admissions guarantee**
2024	Test Blind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> California students can submit SAT/ACT scores, but they won't be considered in the admissions process Schools are expected to stay test optional for out-of-state and international students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scholarships Course placement Statewide eligibility for admissions guarantee**
2025	SAT/ACT Eliminated, New UC Exam Potentially Instated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UC completely eliminates the SAT/ACT requirement for California students If the new UC admissions test is available, California students will have to take it and submit those scores instead Unknown yet if out-of-state and international students will take new UC exam, submit ACT/SAT scores, or have no testing requirement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TBD

Figure 1. Table explaining how the UC's will move towards test blind applications. Includes each year's plan, what it means for the students and how SAT/ACT would be used if students submitted scores.

Demographics

This figure shows the summary of the Race and Ethnicity Statistics from an eight year period.

The more in-depth graphs are below this one.

Figure 2. Summary of Diversity Trends

SAT/ACT	University	Year Implemented*	Diversity Trend**
Test Optional	University of Chicago	Announced June 2018 Implemented 2019	AA: no change H/L: up A: up O: up W: down
Flexible Testing	NYU	2020 (pandemic)	AA: up H/L: up A: no change O: up W: down
Test Blind	Hampshire College	2014	AA: up H/L: no change A: no change O: no change W: down
No Implemented Policy	Temple (Prior to 2020)	N/A	AA: no change H/L: up A: up O: up W: down

*1st class was in 2023

**AA: African American/Black H/L: Hispanic/Latino
O: Other (2 or more races, American Indian/Alaska Native, Pacific Islander)
A: Asian W: White

The following graphs give percentage descriptions of Race and Ethnicity statistics for four different universities over an eight year period, from 2012 to 2018. All of the statistics came from Data USA, and all of the graphs were made by our team. The group “Other” was created for these graphs because the number of students in each individual category was miniscule compared to the number of students in the other categories. To make significant bars on the graphs, the groups were combined into one.

University of Chicago Race and Ethnicity Statistics Over an 8 year period

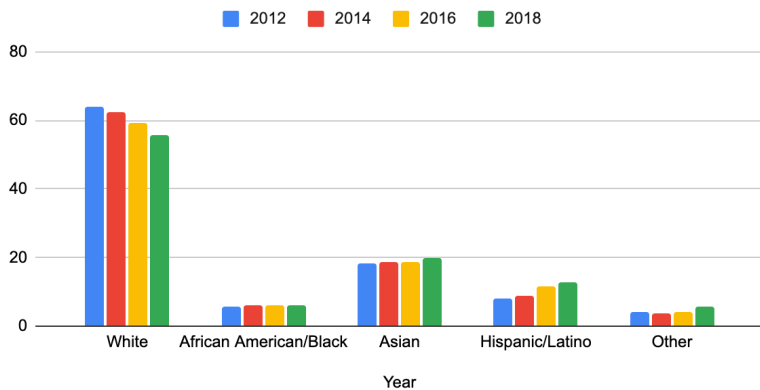


Figure 3. This graph shows the Race and Ethnicity statistics, in a percentage, over an 8 year period for the University of Chicago.

This first graph gives the statistics for the University of Chicago. It shows the overall changes in the university per every two years from 2012 to 2018. The most significant changes were that the percent of white students went down and the percent of Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and Other (students who identify as: 2 or more races, American Indian/Alaska Native, Pacific Islander) went up.

New York University Race and Ethnicity Statistics Over an 8 year period

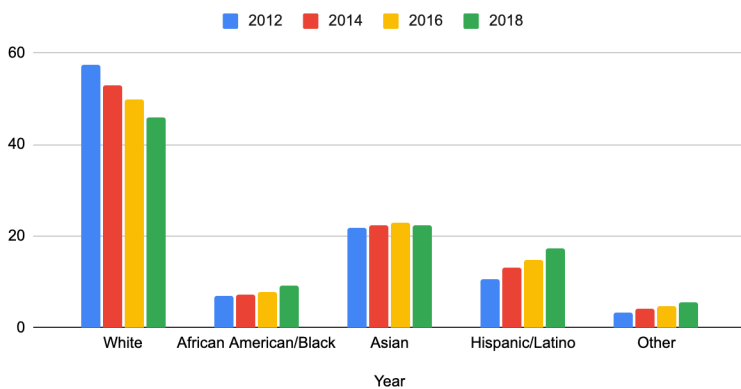


Figure 4. This graph shows the Race and Ethnicity statistics, in a percentage, over an 8 year period for New York University.

This second graph gives the statistics for New York University. It shows the overall changes in the university per every two years from 2012 to 2018. The most significant changes were that the

percent of white students went down and the percent of African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Other went up.

Hampshire College Race and Ethnicity Statistics Over an 8 year period

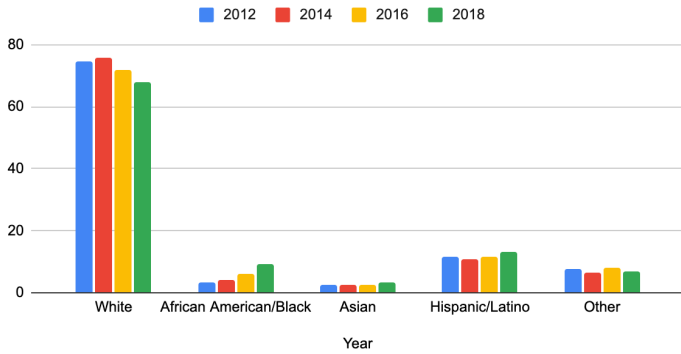


Figure 5. This graph shows the Race and Ethnicity statistics, in a percentage, over an 8 year period for Hampshire College.

This third graph gives the statistics for Hampshire College. It shows the overall changes in the university per every two years from 2012 to 2018. The most significant changes were that the percent of white students went down and the percent of African American students went up.

Temple University Race and Ethnicity Statistics Over an 8 year period

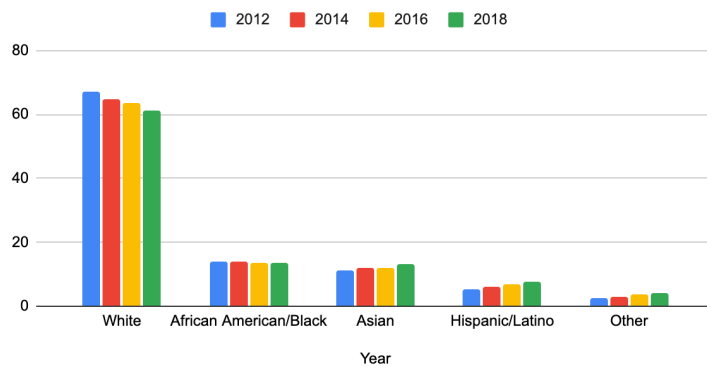


Figure 6. This graph shows the Race and Ethnicity statistics, in a percentage, over an 8 year period for Temple University.

The final graph gives the statistics for Temple University. It shows the overall changes in the university per every two years from 2012 to 2018. The most significant changes were that the percent of white students went down and the percent of Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and other went up.

Recommendations

As previously discussed, reliance on SAT/ACT exams for college admissions disadvantages students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Requiring these exams as a part of one's application creates a barrier for these students due to various factors pertaining to socioeconomic status. Some of these factors are the inability to afford preparation for these exams, coming from lower quality high schools, and the costs of taking these exams multiple times. These exams contribute to the persistent inequalities between the higher and lower social class.

After exploring test-optional admissions policies at other universities, it is apparent that these policies have created more opportunities for students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Although there has not been many large scale studies on the impact of these policies, many universities seem to have had success with creating more diverse demographics due to these policies. This is seen through the case studies of the University of Chicago and New York University. These examples along with other conducted studies show that these policies facilitate equity in higher education.

In order to reach the UN sustainability goal of reducing inequalities, as well as making quality higher education more accessible, Penn State must consider reducing the weight of these exams on the admissions process and phasing into a test-optional mode of assessing applicants. Through this course of action, Penn State can analyze the changes in the applicant pool and the student demographics, as well as retention and graduation rates. These statistics will help Penn State determine whether there are any negative impacts of adopting a test-optional policy.

Penn State has begun the process of becoming test-optional in their admissions. Due to the difficulties caused by COVID-19, Penn State did not require SAT/ACT exam scores to be submitted beginning in August of 2020 and will continue this policy until the fall of 2023. Since this policy is fairly new, there is limited data on the changes that arose due to test-optional admissions. It is recommended that Penn State closely explore changes in demographics within the last year to see how this policy has impacted the student body. Based on admitted students' FAFSA reports, the university can determine if there are more or less students from low-income backgrounds after making the SAT/ACT optional.

As this policy continues, Penn State should also analyze changes in retention rates and graduation rates. After a few more years of having test-optional admissions, these rates will be easier to determine. Both of these rates are indicators of college preparedness among the student body. While there are other factors that can influence why a student may transfer or not graduate, if the rates stay approximately the same, then the students being admitted are still adequately prepared for Penn State, despite admissions not requiring college entrance exams. Penn State can use this information to ensure that students are still able to meet the academic rigor of this university, without using the SAT and ACT as predictors of college success.

Additionally, Penn State should consider allowing applicants to submit other supplemental materials to get a more holistic view of the applicants. As seen in the policies of other universities, there are many other substitutes that students can submit instead of the SAT or ACT. Some universities allow students to submit materials such as AP exam scores, SAT subject tests, IB tests, writing or art samples, or research projects. Expanding the options for applicants can give students the flexibility to make their applications as strong as they can. These options can help reduce the barriers that are created as a result of socioeconomic statuses. A student who

can afford exam preparation may do well on the SAT or ACT and still submit their score, while a student who cannot afford that preparation will not be penalized for it and can submit other materials to prove their abilities to universities.

Although this policy sounds effective in theory, going test-optional and having flexibility in the supplemental materials that students can submit means reviewing applications will be much more time consuming. The universities with test-optional policies that were analyzed are much smaller universities than Penn State, and receive less applications than Penn State receives. According to Penn State's admissions website, Penn State receives over 70,000 first-year applications (Penn State Undergraduate Admissions). Due to the sheer volume of applications, adopting a test-optional policy would be difficult. However, there are ways that Penn State can adapt the admissions office to be able to review these applications. A large barrier to this policy is the lack of manpower in the admissions office. Penn State can help fix this by using automated systems or artificial intelligence in order to review numbers and statistics, such as transcripts and grade point averages. This will allow staff members to be reallocated toward reviewing more subjective materials that technology cannot review. Penn State can also hire more staff in the admissions office to assist with reviewing holistic applications.

These adjustments require money, which is always a concern when implementing a new policy. Penn State does have ways to obtain money for this policy though. Penn State can start this policy as a pilot program through the Office of Development and Alumni Relations. That office is specifically meant to secure gifts or donations that will advance the college's priorities (Office of Development and Alumni Relations). The university can ask for donations or endowments from alumni and other donors to support this policy and test its success.

As Penn State continues the test-optional policy that it has recently adopted, it is important that Penn State take the steps listed above to see how the policy influences the student demographics. If the policy leads to an increase in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds while keeping up retention and graduation rates, Penn State should keep this test-optional admissions policy and potentially expand the options for supplemental materials. These steps will reduce inequalities for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds since it will eliminate the barrier of paying for testing and test preparation.

Conclusion

There is no question that standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT can be a determiner of preparedness for higher education and future endeavors, however, this way of testing students relies highly on their educational background in high school. Students from lower income school districts with less resources to properly educate their students are immediately put at an advantage alongside those who cannot afford test preparation and materials. Although there have been some steps taken from College Board to improve test accessibility, there is more that can be done.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of Americans have had their eyes opened to the many disparities that exist within our country and educational system. Many students were left without broadband access as schools switched to remote learning, other students had to work more hours in order to provide for their family as their parents lost their jobs, and many fell behind in school as they were not given the resources they needed to succeed. However, this is a daily occurrence for students in lower income and rural school districts. Since there is a great number of students disadvantaged due to their financial situation or school district they live in, many schools such as New York University and Chicago University have implemented optional test policies or are allowing students to submit other forms of work to prove their academic excellence. These test optional policies are something that could be piloted in Penn State University's admissions office.

Implementing a test-optional policy at Penn State or allowing students to submit alternative forms of evaluation could greatly improve the chances for minority students and students from low-income communities the chance at a college education. This, however, is a

change that cannot happen overnight since the admissions office only has so many employees available to work. One way to implement this change would be to call for alumni volunteers to help evaluate college applications. Another option is to pilot this test-optional policy and hire a few more staff members to review more specialized applications if students choose to turn in something other than a test (for example a musical performance). These options, if implemented correctly, could be a step in the right direction.

If the goal is educational equity and opportunity for all, then many universities have a long way to go. However, a shift towards test optional policies is a way to begin making a change. This is something that won't happen overnight, but rather something that must be implemented in steps. A test optional policy can make the college experience and application process more equitable and fair for all.

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