

DePaul Goes Test-Optional

With the entering freshman class of 2012, DePaul became the largest private, not-for-profit university in the United States to implement a process that does not require the submission of any standardized test scores for admission. In doing so, DePaul joined a large and growing number of selective universities. While most applicants still submit test scores for admission, those who do not will be considered primarily on their high school record in college preparatory courses along with required essays that are designed to reveal proven predictors of student success—including leadership, long-term goal setting, perseverance and self-confidence.

Why Opt for Test-Optional?

DePaul has heeded the challenge put forth in the *Report of the Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission*, published by the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC), that encourages universities to “consider dropping the [standardized] admission test requirements if it is determined that the predictive utility of the test... support that decision and if the institution believes that standardized test results would not be necessary for other reasons such as course placement, advising or research.” NACAC is the largest body of professionals dedicated to assisting students in the transition from high school to college.

Research at DePaul and many other institutions over the last few decades has suggested that the best predictor of a student’s performance in college is his or her performance in a rigorous college preparatory program in high school. While both the ACT and SAT show propensity to predict freshman-level grades, the extent to which they co-vary with high school GPA diminishes the *incremental value* of the tests in the evaluation of candidates for admission. In addition, research confirms that neither ACT nor SAT scores predict whether a student will be retained for multiple years or graduate. This lack of predictive power of standardized test scores is especially acute for students who are underrepresented at four-year colleges.

Moreover, standardized test scores are strongly correlated with income, and scores vary dramatically across ethnic groups, raising questions about their fairness to all applicants. Also, a disproportionate reliance on standardized test scores causes many colleges to overlook applications from motivated, high-achieving students who may have a great deal to offer colleges, but who, for whatever reason, do not perform well on standardized tests.

Institutions that have implemented test-optional admission find that their enrolled classes are more diverse, and students who are non-submitters bring different strengths to the classroom and campus. Non-submitters tend to have equal or superior outcomes at selective colleges in terms of college grades, retention and graduation rates, compared with students who submitted test scores.

DePaul currently sits in a unique spot in higher education where few institutions are as correspondingly diverse as they are selective. DePaul is lauded in national rankings for higher-than-predicted graduation rates, given the university’s extraordinary student diversity and economic profile. It is expected that test-optional admission will continue to extend DePaul’s historic commitment to high-ability students who are from low-income families, who are the first in their families to pursue postsecondary education, and who are from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups—students who are served very well by DePaul, but who may not be inclined to consider applying to a four-year university. Like our peer adopters, we expect that non-submitters will bring different kinds of diversity to DePaul and will achieve similar or better success outcomes as students who submit test scores, achieving our characteristic balance of access and attainment.

How Will DePaul’s Test-Optional Program be Unique in Higher Education?

The groundwork for test-optional admission was put in place several years ago when DePaul introduced the use of “noncognitive variables” in the admission process. For three years, DePaul piloted the use of its DIAMOND essays based on the scholarship of Dr. William Sedlacek of the University of Maryland. These open-ended essays on the admission application are designed to elicit evidence of students’ background and characteristics that have been demonstrated to be better predictors of student success in college than standardized test scores. These essays will now be required for students electing to not submit ACT or SAT scores for admission review.

These noncognitive criteria are used by The Gates Foundation in selecting recipients of the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarships and at other public universities (most notably Oregon State University). DePaul's explicit use of these noncognitive factors in a university-wide admission and retention strategy is focused on both access and attainment. Our test-optional program underscores that what matters at DePaul is students' academic achievement and educational outcomes at the end of their college career, not just their profile at the outset. Rather than focusing on metrics that have become measures of prestige for highly selective colleges and universities, our pilot will contribute to the national conversation about using fairer and broader indicators of students' strengths and capabilities in admission decisions and keeping our primary focus on two educational outcomes and attainment—retention and degree completion.

This decision comes at a time of unprecedented growth in applications to DePaul's freshman class. It comes after DePaul has enrolled freshmen classes in recent years that have the best academic profile in its history, and with record levels of retention and academic performance in the first year of college. It also comes as DePaul continues its position as a trailblazer in economic and racial/ethnic diversity in its freshman class, with one-third of the freshman class identifying as a student of color, and a similar number qualifying for Pell Grants. Unlike other institutions that have moved to a test-optional policy because of concerns about diversity and enrollment success, DePaul takes this step from a position of strength with increasing demand, improving quality and an already diverse student profile.

Who Might Benefit from Test-Optional Admission?

The kinds of students who may benefit from this admission alternative include students whose first language is not English; students who are first in their families to attend college; and students who do not have unfettered financial access to test preparation, coaching and multiple test-takings. Our experience shows that many of these students do very well at DePaul when given the opportunity, if there is evidence of their ability to succeed academically in high school.

This new approach seeks to encourage a wider range of high-achieving students to consider a four-year degree at DePaul, including very talented and promising students who may be disadvantaged by admission criteria that over-emphasize standardized tests.

Additional information can be found at <http://www.depaul.edu/emm/TestOptional/index.asp>.