

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TEST-OPTIONAL MOVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the history of higher education's test-optional movement, two examples from the University of California and Bates College stand out as watershed events.

The first occurred in 2001 when Richard Atkinson, president of the University of California, recommended that colleges stop using the SAT and switch to tests tied more closely to the high school curriculum. Between 2001 and 2005, studies conducted in California confirmed that high school grades are the best indicator of college performance, and this correlation becomes stronger as students progress toward graduation. Since the University of California system represents such a high number of students, testing companies have always paid attention to rhetoric and use of tests by this system.

The College Board responded in 2005 by redesigning and lengthening the SAT, and by eliminating the word analogies section. The "new" SAT (and ACT) also added writing sections to the tests. Despite these revisions, some colleges saw the testing companies as having failed to address the tests' "historic problems," including perceived biases. The College Board's own study in 2008 revealed that differences in predictive validity for subgroups of students persist even after the 2005 test redesign.

The second watershed event for test-optional admission occurred in 2004 when Bates College presented data on their test-optional experience. Bates College, a highly selective liberal arts college in Maine, has been test-optional since 1984, but has always required all students to submit their test scores upon matriculation to allow them to compare "submitters" to "non-submitters" for research purposes. Their twenty-year longitudinal data were presented at the 2004 National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC) conference, at which thousands of college and high school counselors were in attendance. Among many findings reported by Bates, two pieces of data stood out: graduation rates between submitters and non-submitters varied by only 0.1%, and average Bates GPAs varied by only 0.05%. In addition, non-submitters had slightly *higher* graduation rates. Even though SAT-I scores of non-submitters were 160 points lower than scores of submitters at Bates, these test performance discrepancies did not correlate to significant differences in widely-used measures of college success.

The Bates data renewed national interest in test-optional policies, and a number of selective colleges went test-optional after the results of the Bates study were released. The move to test-optional admission was initially clustered in small liberal arts colleges. In recent years, the list has become more varied in institutional type and size: Worcester Polytechnic Institute, College of the Holy Cross, Pitzer College, George Mason University, Fairfield University, Texas A&M, American University and New York University. In addition, there are many public university systems that admit students by considering class rank or high school grades instead of standardized test scores, for example: California State system (14 campuses), University of Texas (8 campuses), Washington State, University of Oklahoma, University of Oregon, University of Nebraska, University of Maine and University of Arizona. The University of Texas' Top 10% program is a prominent example where large numbers of students have been admitted by class rank, without regard to test scores. Texas administrators verify that this admission policy has increased diversity at the flagship institution, uplifting students and families in a region that depends on expanding economic and social opportunities.

Another important moment in the history of the test-optional movement was the 2008 release of the *Report of the Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission* published by the NACAC. The report challenges universities to “consider dropping the [standardized] admission test requirements if it is determined that the predictive utility of the test...support[s] 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.” Furthermore, the Commission encouraged colleges and universities to regularly question and evaluate the implications of standardized test requirements.

In an interview following the report’s publication, William R. Fitzsimmons, the dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard University who led the Commission, said, “It would be much better for the country to have students focusing on high school courses that, based on evidence, will prepare them well for college and also prepare them well for the real world beyond college, instead of their spending enormous amounts of time trying to game the SAT.”

Along with the lessons of early adopting test-optional institutions, several of the Commission’s recommendations resonated strongly at DePaul and prompted an evaluation of our practices in light of the growing body of research surrounding standardized tests and admission practices.

Originally published in Issue 6 – SPECIAL EDITION – of *Enrollment Matters*. (Released on March 18, 2011.)

Enrollment Matters, produced by DePaul’s Division of Enrollment Management and Marketing (EM&M), is intended to provide the university community with pertinent information about activities and initiatives that improve and enhance DePaul’s competitive market position and prominence.