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Test-Optional Admission: Why and How?

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TEST-OPTIONAL ADMISSION: WHY AND HOW

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of
Arts in Education.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A Barrier to Entry

Over my six years as a college admission counselor, I have often been frustrated with students' lack of access. Over and over again students are faced with barriers out of their control that make getting into college difficult. As admission counselors, we sometimes feel powerless to do anything; maybe if this student had gotten better advising, if their school was better funded, if they did not have to work to support their family, if they had the same resources as their privileged peers, their applications would be different. Maybe we could admit them to our university. We know they could do well here, but feel like they have been let down by a system meant to support them. These are exactly the type of students who would benefit the most from a college education, but these barriers make it difficult.

One of these barriers to entry is a standardized test score. Students from underserved populations tend to underperform on standardized testing (Mattern, Shaw, & Kobrin, 2011; Sanchez & Mattern, 2018). I see this over and over again in my work, students with GPAs clearly within our range of admissibility, but because of their test scores, they are either denied or placed in conditional admission programs. For many years, there has been a small but steady movement towards test-optional admission—meaning a student would not have to submit a standardized test score as part of their admission application. This is something I have become very passionate about. Removing test-scores from the application is a simple way for schools to remove one

barrier to a college education. This has led me to my research question: *Why might test-optional admission be beneficial and what does that mean for a student's application?*

My Background

I work at a small, private, liberal arts college in a mid-size city where we engage with social justice, activism, and equity issues both in and out of the classroom. In the admission process, we recruit a large number of students who are low income, students of color, and/or first-generation college students. Many of these students are immigrants or children of immigrants. Maybe these students do not speak English at home, or they cannot afford to take the test more than once, or they don't have access to any sort of test prep. Many of these students could greatly benefit from a test-optional admission policy. We know, based on their grades, they have been successful academically but their low test score is holding them back.

My university has been talking about going test-optional for as long as I can remember. We believe it is important to recruit a diverse incoming class and a test-optional policy could be one way for us to make private school education more available to more students. Most of the leadership in the admission office agreed a test-optional policy was the right move to be more equitable in our enrollment practices.

At my university, and most universities across the country, it's no simple process to make large scale changes to admission criteria. The bureaucracy of any institution means that change can often be slow. Still, it felt like change would come eventually. As more schools, including some of our direct competitors, adopted a test-optional policy, it

felt like the writing was on the wall. Eventually, we would have no choice but to approve a test-optional policy for our university. We thought it would happen someday but had no idea when the change would come.

Perpetuating Inequities

I sit in my office reading admission applications and come across more students who would benefit from test-optional admission. Without a test-score in their application, these students could switch from inadmissible to admissible, or may move out of a conditional admission program, or might qualify for a higher scholarship which can make a private education financially feasible.

One student has parents who immigrated from another country. English is not spoken in her home, and she did not learn English until starting public school. Because of this, she has always struggled with standardized testing and her ACT score is no different. Her grades are good, she has taken a solid college preparatory curriculum and done well. She is active in other areas— has a part-time job, is involved in clubs and organizations, and volunteers. The only red flag on her application is her ACT score. Without an ACT score, she would be admitted with a large merit scholarship. With her ACT score, she receives a much smaller scholarship and is considered offered a spot in one in one of our conditional admission programs, not regular admission.

Another application, another student who would benefit from test-optional. This student struggles financially. He works over 30 hours a week to help support his family. His school provides a free test day, but he did not score very well on that day because he did not have access to test prep and was tired from work the night before. He cannot

afford to pay for another test and cannot take the time off of work on a Saturday to take the test again. His grades are okay, but not as strong as they could be because he does not have much time to study. Without an ACT score, he would be admissible in one of our conditional admission programs. These programs are designed to help students transition to college, make sure they have the support they need and make sure their study skills are where they need to be. However, due to his poor test score, this student is not admissible.

Another student suffers from test anxiety. They did not have any accommodations while taking the test, so their scores are pretty low. They come from a good high school who has been able to support them in classes so their grades are strong. The student is inquisitive, engaging, and excited about the kind of holistic learning we offer. Their low test score discourages them from considering a variety of schools. They think they will not get in with their test score, so they do not even apply. They end up at a community college where they do not feel challenged or engaged. Eventually, they transfer to a college that fits their needs better, but they could have been there from the beginning if the school was test-optional and the student did not have to worry about their ACT score.

These are just a few examples of the many students who could have benefitted from test-optional admission. These are the types of students I interact with every day; sometimes in a meeting, phone call, high school visit, college fair, or with their admission application. Because of things outside of their control, their test scores do not line up with their actual academic ability. By removing the test score from the application requirements we could make a college degree more accessible to more deserving students.

COVID Curveball

COVID-19 changed everything in 2020 and college admission was not excluded. ACT and SAT tests across the country were canceled. Most high school students take their test in the spring of their junior year which means nearly every member of the Class of 2021 was left high and dry. Only those who prepared and tested early, likely the most privileged, even had test scores. This flipped the conversation around test-optional admission on its head.

Nearly every school has gone test-optional for the Fall 2020 applicant cycle. It is the norm for now, but because everything has happened so quickly there is no uniformity among schools. At my university, this unprecedented time was exactly what we needed to make test-optional happen—it gave the faculty the final push to approve the decision—hopefully making this a permanent admission policy. At other schools, it is very clear that their current test-optional policy is temporary and will go away once the pandemic eventually ends. Some schools have decided that students can apply without a test score but they will eventually need to submit one before they matriculate, or they might need a test score for merit scholarships, or maybe specific departmental scholarships. There are still other schools that are technically test-optional, but still hinting to students that they should probably take the test if they want to be competitive applicants. With all of this happening so quickly and so differently at every school, it has created a new kind of anxiety for students and families. It is hard for them to discern what test-optional actually means and what that means for their application process.

Project Plan

My project aims to help quell that anxiety and give students and families the resources they need to navigate this new world of test-optional. My capstone project is a resource guide for students and families that will explain test-optional admission in all its different iterations and walk through how that may impact the rest of a student's application (including, their essay, letter of recommendation, interview, and actual application form). I also include a worksheet where students can keep track of each school's information. They will be able to track the school's test policy for admission, matriculation, and scholarships, as well as note the contact information for the person at the school they should reach out to with questions. By encouraging students to gather this information as they are researching schools, it will help clarify their application plans and alleviate some of the stress of applying to college.

Summary

In summary, test scores are not the most predictive measure of college success for many high school students. (Bowen, Chingos, & McPhearson, 2009). There has been a slow movement towards test-optional admission that was accelerated by COVID-19. This rapid acceleration did not mean uniformity across the field leaving students confused as every school that adopted a test-optional policy adopted it slightly differently. With my project, I aim to alleviate some of that confusion by giving students the resources to understand test-optional admission generally and figure the specifics at each university they are applying to.

Chapter Two Overview

Chapter Two will be a literature review discussing the college admission process and test-optional admission as it pertains to my research question: *Why might test-optional admission be beneficial and what does that mean for a student's application?* I will provide research on the college application experience, the history of standardized testing, its modern outcomes, and the benefits to universities in adopting a test-optional admission policy. In Chapter Three, I will describe my resource guide project and its how it will be used by students and their support networks. I will explain the rationale for why I created a resource guide and its why it is in multiple forms. I will also discuss how I will assess the effectiveness of my work and collect personal and anonymous feedback. Chapter four will provide my reflection on the capstone process. I will also discuss the results and implications of the project I created, and the new things I learned along the way. I discuss how I will share my results and the limitations I encountered.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

My personal and professional experience as an admission counselor has brought me to the point of critically examining the use of standardized testing in the admission process. In this literature review, I explore the current research and literature surrounding this topic to help answer my research question: *Why might test-optional admission be beneficial and what does that mean for a student's application?* In order to more thoroughly answer this question, I explore several related subtopics.

In this literature review, I will start by discussing the college application process. This section helps provide context to the complicated, and often anxiety-inducing, process that students and admission professionals already engage in. Without understanding how the college admission process works, we cannot understand how it may be impacted by a test-optional admission policy.

The next section will cover the test-optional movement, including the history of standardized testing, how testing is used today, and the growth of the test-optional movement. It is important to examine this literature if we are to understand the impacts of a test-optional policy.

Finally, I will examine the role of the university and what benefits they may encounter when adopting a test-optional policy. These policy changes are often driven by both ideological and pragmatic forces. Understanding why a university may adopt a test-optional policy is critical to understanding the future of the test-optional movement.

Applying to College

Applying to college has always been a stressful experience for students and families. This is especially true for applicants from marginalized backgrounds who have not had historical access to universities and positive application processes (Klasik, 2012; Morton et al., 2018, Tierney, 2009). During the college application process, students are looking for the best fit for them financially, socially, emotionally, and academically. Colleges and universities are looking for candidates who will be successful at their institution and eventually become happy and involved alumni. Each of these populations, students and universities, have their own strategies to find exactly what they are looking for. These strategies, like everything else in 2020, have been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Student's Application Process

In a perfect world, a student's college search process starts early in their high school years. They spend 2-3 years researching colleges, honing in on what they are interested in, and preparing to apply to college. This culminates in their senior year as they apply to several colleges in the fall, and then spend the winter and spring weighing their options before ultimately deciding on the school that is the best fit for them (Johnson, 2020). However, there are many factors that may complicate this process.

General Application Anxiety

Applying to college can be an anxious experience for all involved. Students are trying to live up to the expectations set on them by their parents, society, and peers, and parents are trying to ensure the best possible future for their students. This is an

important, and therefore stressful process because a college education can provide social mobility for students, broadening their access beyond what their family may be able to provide (Kotzee & Martin, 2013)

All of this is happening while trying to keep on top of the complex deadlines and requirements for each college they are considering. On top of this college search process, a student is still trying to navigate the social complexities of being a high school senior and trying to successfully complete their high school education. It is understandable, then, that this is often a time of high anxiety (Hecklau, 2017)

Test Anxiety

In a ‘typical’ college application, most students will be required to submit a standardized test score— most commonly the ACT or SAT. These tests, normally taken in the student’s junior year, present another potential stumbling block for students on their path to a college decision. It is estimated that 30-50% of students report experiencing test-anxiety “often” or “almost always” and it appears to be on the rise (Lovett & Nelson, 2017). While it is unclear to what extent an average student’s test anxiety impacts their scores, it is still worth the effort to minimize a student’s anxiety. Doing so would increase a student’s mental well-being and help decrease the physical symptoms of test anxiety including lack of sleep, loss of appetite, sweating, and headaches. These symptoms are most present in the most high-stakes tests, like the ACT and SAT (Steedle, 2018).

Students from Underrepresented Backgrounds

Students from privileged backgrounds are more likely to successfully complete the many complicated steps required to enroll in college. Klasik (2012) highlighted that students from an underrepresented background are less likely to complete these steps. If they do, they are more likely to complete the process in a haphazard order or timeline. Underrepresented students lack the same social and cultural capital as their privileged peers about college access and knowledge about the process. Tierney (2009) wrote,

...most low-income students lack the support structures and networks that enable them to play about college in a manner akin to their well-off counterparts...Consequently, rather than a single decision point such that a low-income student can say and believe in the fall of the senior year “I am going to college,” the process of applying to college is a series of intertwined actions that take place over a longer period of time. (p. 92)

These barriers are not only external but internal as well. Students from underrepresented backgrounds often express concern about their academic preparation and their ability to pay for college. They understand that they are participating in a system that was not designed with them in mind which, understandably, heightens their anxiety about the process (Morton et al., 2018; Tierney, 2009).

It is not a lack of desire, or ability, keeping underrepresented students away from the college admission process, but rather a system of privilege and lack of access that stops them from successfully navigating the complicated process.

Assistance/Guidance

There are many support structures in place to help students navigate the challenges of applying to college and making their final decision. One of the most easily accessible resources is a student's high school counselor. Robinson and Roksa (2016) found that when a student sees their counselor, it is associated with an increased likelihood of attending a 4 or 2-year college. These impacts were seen the most among students whose parents did not have a college degree and students who engaged in this process the earliest in their high school career. Klasik (2012) suggested that students who visit with college representatives may also reap some of the same benefits.

One of the areas of the college search and decision process where students often need the highest level of support is while applying for financial aid. Students who are citizens can submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) which may potentially make them eligible for additional federal, state, or institutional aid. Completing the FAFSA can often be a confusing process, especially if a student and their family are not familiar with the application. Students and families who received support in filing their FAFSA see an increase in college enrollment and persistence (Bettinger et al, 2012).

High school counselors are also often responsible for creating a "college-going culture" in their school. In other words, they help build the assumption that all students will be continuing their education after high school. This is easiest when counselors have low case-loads and do not spend most of their time focusing on mental health counseling. Some schools have even created separate college counselors, to alleviate some of the responsibilities of guidance counselors. These college counselors can be responsible for a

number of college-related tasks including scheduling college representative visits, hosting college fairs, advising students on their college options, and helping students build, then narrow, their list of potential colleges (Robinson & Roksa, 2016).

From the other side

Students are one part of the college admission process, but there is an entire other entity to consider—the colleges themselves and the admission professionals who are in charge of making decisions about who is offered admission. Like students and families, these schools and counselors have their own approaches to the college admission process and their own anxieties about its outcomes.

Admission Philosophies

Admission committees have several approaches they can take when deciding how to offer admission to those who have applied. Kotzee and Martin (2013) described several of these philosophies. These ideologies can be boiled down to a competitive and non-competitive admission philosophy. Under a competitive admission philosophy, admission offers are a scarce commodity, they are given out only to a select few regardless of the number of qualified applicants. Admission professionals under this philosophy are concerned with finding the perfect students for their institutions at the exclusion of other applicants. This competitive philosophy is most often practiced at the most selective institutions.

Under a non-competitive admission philosophy, any student who meets the criteria of admission is offered a spot. Undergirding this philosophy is the understanding that not all students offered admission will ultimately enroll, but the opportunity is

offered to any qualified candidate. Of course, each university will set its own standards for what a student needs to do to be “qualified”. These standards are often influenced by the goals and ethos of the institution as a whole. Under this philosophy, students are not competing against each other for limited spots, but instead are demonstrating their own merits and admissibility (Kotzee & Martin, 2013).

Regardless of philosophies, universities are looking to attract and enroll the students who they think are the best for their school. How decisions are made, and the factors schools use to make those decisions, are coming under increased scrutiny. Many schools have incorporated the use of non-academic factors in their review process. At the most selective, competitive universities, these non-academic factors can be used to select the “right” students from a qualified applicant pool. In a non-competitive, less selective admission process, these non-academic factors can be used to admit students who, for one reason or another, might be on the cusp of admissibility (Hossler et al., 2019).

We’re anxious too

College admission professionals are also anxious about the admission process. We are often balancing many responsibilities depending on the time of year. In the fall, admission counselors travel their recruitment territory participating in college fairs, high school visits, and meeting with students— sometimes being gone for up to three months. On top of this travel, admission counselors are beginning the process of reviewing applications and trying to lay the groundwork for a personal connection with all of the prospective students. Balancing all of this, while being away from home, can be very stressful. We do all of this in order to ensure that we are bringing in enough of the right

students to our universities. Especially at tuition-driven institutions, we can start to feel the pressure of the importance of our jobs. At many schools— the work that the admission office does has a very real and direct impact on what the university is able to provide (Hecklau, 2017).

Spring is also a time of high stress for admission professionals. As students are making their decisions about where to go to college, they are often expressing their own, valid, anxieties about the process. Depending on the student these anxieties could be the cost of college, feeling unprepared for college-level work, moving away from home, and choosing from a number of college offers (Klasik, 2012; Morten et al., 2018). Many, if not all, of these concerns, are taken on by college admission counselors as they help students navigate the admission process.

COVID

The COVID-19 Pandemic beginning in 2020 impacted nearly every aspect of life in the United States, and college admission is no exception. Many colleges have pivoted to virtual recruitment events and students are taking much of their high school coursework online. This has upended the traditional recruitment and application processes leaving many students and counselors feeling overwhelmed and unsure of how to proceed (Stegmeir, 2020).

Most relevant to this research is that many high school juniors were unable to take standardized tests, opening the door for many universities to eliminate the test score from the application requirements. Some universities have made it clear that, if successful, this test-optional admission policy could continue into the future, while others have

emphasized that their test-optional policy is temporary and as soon as testing is able to happen again on a large scale, they will add an ACT or SAT score back into the list of required application material (Boeckenstedt, 2020).

The college application process is not simple for anyone. It is a complicated process whereby students search for the best fit for the and colleges search for the candidates they believe will be successful at their universities. This process is especially difficult for students from marginalized backgrounds who have not had historical access to universities and successful, well supported, application processes (Klasik, 2012; Morton et al., 2018, Tierney, 2009). Like everything else this year, the college application process has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; making an already confusing process even more so. It is this confusion that my resource guide aims to help alleviate. As schools deploy a variety of admission strategies, this guide aims to help students navigate and understand the process for themselves.

Test-Optional Admission

In recent decades, there has been a growing movement in higher education and college admissions. Many schools are considering a test-optional admission policy. Under such a policy, a student applying to a school would not have to submit a standardized test score. The history of using a standardized test in the admission application is long and has become contentious (Lemann, 2004). While some still believe that including a test-score in an application is still important, there is a growing body of evidence that shows that standardized testing may not be the most accurate measure of a student's success; especially if that student comes from an already marginalized background.

History of Standardized Testing

Standardized testing for general intelligence, rather than in specific knowledge areas is not a new phenomenon. French Psychologist Alfred Binet developed his first intelligence test in 1905. Initially designed to be used as a way to identify students who needed extra help in school it was eventually used as a way to test someone's general intelligence, or their innate mental capacity (Lemann, 2000, pp. 17-23). This test developed by Binet would become the Intelligent Quotient, or IQ, test we are quite familiar with.

Military Test.

During WWI, this IQ test was given to all incoming recruits. This was the first mass-deployment of such a test. Eventually, this test would become known as the Army Alpha Test (Lemann, 2000, pp. 29-32). The discrepancies between different races on this test would bolster eugenicists and the American Eugenics Movement for years to come. In their mind, these test results were “proof positive of Anglo-Saxon, white superiority, in an intellectual endowment.” (Rury, 1988, p 57). It is this Army Alpha test that would eventually be adapted into the Scholastic Aptitude Test, better known as the SAT, by Carl Campbell Bringham.

University Entrance Exam.

In 1900 the College Entrance Exam was founded, the organization that would eventually become the modern College Board. Their goal was to standardize college admission for their member institutions. For years after their founding, these institutions were largely the most selective private colleges on the East Coast. It is this board that first

administered Bringham's Scholastic Aptitude Test to high school students in 1926 to measure their general intelligence. Before this, most college entrance exams measured specific knowledge rather than general intelligence. (Lawrence et al, 2003). Harvard University's President, James Bryant Contant, was the first to use this test to determine recipients of a top scholarship. It was Contant who is largely responsible for encouraging other schools to adopt the SAT as part of their admission process.

The spread of SAT adoption was relatively slow, by 1942 only 10,000 students had been administered the test, again largely at the selective east coast schools who had founded the College Entrance Exam organization. Slowly but surely testing grew in popularity. In 1967, the University of California required the SAT for all applicants, effectively cementing the popularity of standardized testing in the college admission process (Lemann, 2004; Maguire, 2018).

A Tool for Exclusion.

It is important to note that two of the most influential men in the story of standardized admission testing did not have inclusion in mind when developing their work. Carl Campbell Bringham, like most well-known supporters of IQ testing at the time, was an ardent eugenicist (Omori, 2018). He believed that the army intelligence test bore out the ideas of eugenics and supported this racist ideology. He was among the first to administer an adapted version of the army aptitude test to a small group of students for the purposes of college admission and merit scholarships. It is his adaptation of the Army Aptitude Test that would become the SAT (Leman, 2000, 25-35; Rury, 1988).

The other key figure in this story is Harvard President James Bryant Contant, the man largely responsible for the initial spread of the SAT. Contant felt that too many students were attending college. He was strongly opposed to the GI Bill's educational benefits and envisioned higher education as a highly elite, highly selective system where only a small number of rigorously tested students would be able to go to college (as cited in Lemann, 2004).

The Modern Standardized Test

The modern use of standardized tests in the admission process is complex. There is a growing body of research that suggests that these tests, primarily ACT and SAT, may not be the most indicative measure of a student's ability to be successful in a college or university setting.

How Test Scores are Used.

Standardized testing is used throughout the American education system. In the admission process, perhaps erroneously, they are seen to be a measure of a student's general academic preparedness separate from their high school curriculum and performance. This is different from other tests, like SAT II and AP tests, which test student knowledge in a specific academic area. In some circles, you may hear these called 'subject tests' (Atkinson, 2011).

These assumptions that standardized testing measures a student's aptitude are becoming increasingly called into question. Most researchers see these tests as measuring a student's achievement, not their aptitude. As Ferguson (2004) put it "their content is

based solely on the academic knowledge and skills typically taught in high school college-preparatory programs” (p. 26).

When those standardized tests are applied to the admission process, they are used as a shorthand predictor for a student’s likely grades, success at the college level, and potentially their real-world success after graduation (Sackett & Kuncell, 2018). As the name implies, they are seen as a standardized way, or “common yardstick” (Shaw, 2018 p. 43) for admission officers to evaluate and compare a student’s academic performance and. They are also often used to award coveted merit or academic-based scholarships. These have become increasingly important in the world of rising education costs (Jacobs et al., 2018)

Underperformance.

Many studies have shown that certain groups tend to underperform on standardized testing when compared to what their high school GPAs would predict. Most often these students are female, minority, low SES, or non-native English speakers (Mattern et al, 2011; Sanchez & Mattern, 2018). A student's race and socioeconomic status tended to have the most impact on their testing outcomes. Even when all other factors are controlled, non-white students and students from lower economic backgrounds perform lower on standardized testing than their white or wealthy peers. While these factors may also influence a student’s GPA, it has an even stronger impact on their standardized test scores (Bowen et. al, 2009).

Even those who still favor using standardized tests in admission programs still acknowledge there is a discrepancy in performance, especially among students from

different socioeconomic statuses. Sackett and Kuncel (2018), who concluded that standardized testing is important to the admission decision write, “Having wealthy parents gives a leg up” (p. 27). Of course, removing the test score would not eliminate the benefit that wealthy students incur in the education system, but it can be one step to closing the gap.

Students who underperform on standardized testing also enroll in college at rates that are lower than what their GPA might predict. While these students, with higher GPAs but lower test scores, may have previously been more likely to enroll at a two-year college, a test-optional admission policy could increase access to four-year college enrollment for these students (Sanchez & Mattern, 2018).

Overperformance.

Often included in discussions about who underperforms on standardized testing are mentions of who overperforms. The evidence for this overperformance is not quite as strong, nor is it usually the focus of the research, but it is still interesting to consider.

While the effects are not as large, white, wealthy, male students tend to over-perform on standardized testing (Sanchez & Mattern, 2018). These testing discrepancies are often smaller than their non-white, lower SES peers, as these students are the most likely to also have higher GPAs (Bowen et al., 2009).

Are grades enough?

Before we remove the test score from the application, it must be asked if grades alone are enough of a predictor of success. Many point to grade inflation as a reason to keep standardized testing in the admission process (Hurwitz & Lee, 2019). While grade

inflation does complicate the work of admission professionals in decision making, evidence still shows that high school grades are an extremely strong, highly significant, predictor of a student's collegiate success, regardless of the high school (Bowen et al, 2009; Hiss & Franks, 2013).

Many researchers, especially those who oppose a test-optional admission policy, believe that solely using high school GPA is not enough when making an admission decision (Mattern et al., 2011; Sackett and Kuncel, 2018). What they are neglecting to consider is that there are many more factors to be used in an admission decision beyond a standardized test score and high school GPA. Using a combination of high school GPA and non-academic factors (Hossler et al., 2019) could be sufficient for admission counselors when making decisions.

So, if the research shows that a student's high school GPA is still a strong predictor of success (Bowen et al, 2009; Hiss & Franks, 2013), while test scores can be influenced by a student's background and not their ability (Mattern et al., 2011; Sanchez & Mattern, 2018), the logic stands that removing the test score from the admission application would not hurt students, but only provide those students from a disenfranchised background a higher chance of equal access. Bowen et al. (2009), in what is considered a seminal work in this area summarizes it well, "When test scores do not provide much additional information about likely outcomes, putting heavy weight on them has the (no doubt unintended) effect of giving an admissions boost to children from high-SES families" (p. 209).

The Test-Optional Movement

The test-optional movement is itself a complicated movement. It has its own history, which has been drastically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is full of nuances, and complexities that need to be explored.

History of Test-Optional

The test-optional movement began earlier than some might think— not very long after standardized admission testing became the norm. It is largely agreed that Bowdoin College was the first to remove the SAT testing in 1969. Following the social upheaval of the 1960s, Bowdoin’s president highlighted this change as part of his plan to center the “human quality of its students” (Lucido, 2018, p 147). It took quite a while for the next major institution to adopt a test-optional policy, with Bates College eliminating the testing requirement in 1984 (Lucido, 2018, pp. 147-150).

The test-optional admission movement continued to grow and pick up steam into the 1990s with several high-profile schools adopting the policy, each coming to that decision based on their own priorities and experiences (Furuta, 2017). At the same time, there was a shift in high school graduation trends as more students of color and first-generation college students successfully completed high school than ever before. Test-optional admission policies provided a chance for institutions to attract this new type of high school graduate as rates of ‘traditional’ (read, white) college-going students continued to drop. (Lucido, 2018; Maguire, 2018).

Momentum really started to pick up for the test-optional movement in 2005 and the release of the latest version of the SAT— this version offered little change other than

the addition of a writing section. This provided an opportunity for many universities to have conversations about the role of standardized testing at their school. Testing, and test-optional admission, quickly became the main point of conversation in the field and was central to the National Association for College Admission Counselor 2006 conference. Over the early-mid 2000s more and more colleges and universities adopted a test-optional policy, including several prominent private colleges. (Epstein, 2009). From the beginning of the movement until 2020, it was largely private liberal arts colleges that considered and adopted a test-optional policy (Hiss & Franks, 2013).

COVID.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 impacted nearly every aspect of American life. Education, standardized testing, and college admission were certainly not exempted from drastic changes. Millions of students, largely high school juniors, had their standardized testing date canceled leaving most without an option to take this important test. As a result, many (if not most) colleges in the country adopted a test-optional admission policy for the Fall 2021 entering class, those students who would typically begin their application process in the Fall of 2020 (Boeckenstedt, 2020).

However, just because many colleges adopted a test-optional policy, it does not mean that every policy is the same. Many schools have adopted policies that are just different enough to cause mass confusion among college applicants. For example, some schools have said they are test-optional for the admission process but will need students to submit a standardized test score before matriculation. Another example is a school that says they are test-optional, but still require a test score for certain (often the most

prestigious) scholarships. There has also been variation in how long schools plan to keep their new test-optional policies. Some plan to keep the policy for the foreseeable future, while others have made it clear that these policies are only temporary and will disappear once students are once again able to have regular access to standardized testing dates (Journal of College Admission, Fall 2020). These differences, on top of all the other chaos of 2020, means that students are more confused than ever.

What is and is not Test-Optional.

So what exactly is a test-optional admission policy? At its most basic, a test-optional admission policy gives the students the choice as to whether they will submit a standardized test, usually the ACT or SAT, as part of their admission application. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, at schools with a test-optional policy, usually around one-third of students chose this path while the majority of students chose to still submit their standardized test score. Research shows that these non-submitting students performed just as well as their test-score submitting counterparts (Hiss & Franks, 2013). Under most traditional test-optional policies, some subsets of the applicant pool still need to submit a standardized test score. Most commonly these are home-schooled students without substantial PSEO or college experience and international students (Maguire, 2018).

There are also a number of policies that are similar to test-optional, but not quite the same. One of these related policies is a test-flexible policy. Unlike a test-optional policy, which gives all students the option to not submit a test score; under a test-flexible

admission policy, only students who meet certain criteria like a high GPA, or a certain class rank percentage are given the option (Rubin & Canche, 2019).

Similarly, there are many universities, especially public universities, that have adopted a “percent plan”. Under these plans, students who are in a certain percentage of their graduating class are automatically offered admission. While it is still required for these students to submit a test score with their application, it is essentially not a factor in their admission prospects (Zwick, 2018). Often these test policies have negative impacts on the diversity of the enrolled student class, muddying the waters in the conversation about test-optional admission and its goals (Rubin & Canche, 2019; Zwick, 2018).

With all these questions in mind, there is a small group within the test-optional admission movement that is advocating for an even more radical policy—test-free. A test-free admission policy means that no student would submit a standardized test score, all applications would be reviewed without them. As more and more people express concerns over the use of testing in admission—it is possible that test-free could be the future of the test-optional movement (Epstein, 2009).

As the test-optional movement continues to grow, it is important to understand that this movement does not come out of nowhere. It is a response to the long, often exclusionary, history of standardized testing (Lemann, 2004). Even in modern settings, the testing performance is unbalanced and influenced by a student’s race and socioeconomic status (Mattern et al, 2011; Sanchez & Mattern, 2018). As more schools move away from standardized testing in the admission process, a practice sped up by

COVID-19, students will need clarity on why the test score is being removed and how it will impact their application. This clarity is what my capstone and project aim to provide.

Benefits to Universities

Adopting a test-optional policy could have benefits for the university as well. Removing the barrier of a test-score from the application could lead to a more diverse applicant pool, which could lead to a more diverse student body, which is more reflective of the 21st-century population. The education of a diverse student body is often core to a university's mission so by removing the test score they are affirming their central ideology.

A University's Mission and Duty

A university's mission is its guiding principle. It is how they articulate their purpose and role in the world. Missions are part of how decisions are made and are central to how admissions work is done. Missions have a direct impact on how admission offices choose to offer spots to applicants and shape their incoming class (Hartley, 2002).

To that end, many schools have included in their mission and vision that it is their responsibility and commitment to educate and prepare students to work and live in the modern world. This work, in the 21st century, includes education about diversity and including diverse students in that education (Barcelo, 2010). It is estimated that we are facing a shortfall of college graduates so universities need to find ways to expand their enrollment to populations they have not previously served. The modern, college-educated workforce will be more diverse than ever before. In order to prepare students for this, universities themselves must prepare and educate diverse students (Soares, 2013).

Another important, although historically contested, imagination of the university is as a place of social good and mobility. Universities can provide a space where all members of society can have access to an education that will allow them to enter into higher levels of society than they may have previously lived in (Kotzee & Martin, 2013). This is a complicated issue. Just as universities can provide students with a level of social mobility, they can also be institutions of social closure—a place where one, likely already privileged group, “monopolizes advantages by closing off opportunities to another group of outsiders beneath it, which it defines as inferior and ineligible” (Swartz, 2008, p. 410). This social closure is most prevalent in the most elite colleges and universities (Swartz, 2008).

One way universities are working to avoid that social closure, increase diversity at their school, and affirm their central mission is to examine the barriers that have historically been exclusionary. Father Brian Shanley, former president of Providence College, wrote about the test-optional admission policy he oversaw the adoption of. Based on the university’s mission and their “unique Catholic and Dominican heritage...to care for the disadvantaged and respect the dignity of every person” (Shanley, 2007, p. 435). Father Shanley saw removing the test score from the application as a way to directly affirm their mission, give more students access to their education, and better prepare students for the world they would find once they left Providence (Shanley, 2007).

Change in Admission Strategy

Universities that adopt a test-optional admission policy will see a change in their admission and enrollment strategies. By not requiring students to submit a standardized

test score like the ACT or SAT, many colleges see an increased number of applicants from groups that had not previously applied leading to an overall larger applicant pool (Rubin & Canche, 2019).

Under a test-optional policy, universities often use more non-academic factors in their applicant review—allowing for more nuanced decisions to be made and for reviewers to take other factors (like race, gender, geography, educational opportunity, and extracurricular activities) into consideration when choosing whether or not to offer admission to an applicant. This is not to say that these factors are not considered when a student is applying with a test score, but without a test score, they become centralized in the review process (Hossler et al., 2019; Rubin & Canche, 2019).

It is also possible that a test-optional admission policy may increase retention at some universities. The data is small but interesting. By not including test scores in scholarship calculations, students may receive larger merit-based scholarships, easing some of the financial burdens of a college education. Another potential retention benefit is due to the change in the review process. By focusing on a more holistic review process, and not using a standardized test as a “cut point” (Cortes, 2013, p. 61), universities are more likely to find and admit the students who are the best fit for their school and therefore the most likely to retain (Cortes, 2013).

While not the case for all universities, a test-optional admission policy may also be a way for universities to have a small increase in revenue. Some universities require a student to submit a fee upon submitting their application. With an increased number of applicants, the money generated from these application fees would obviously increase.

While not a large income source, and only a factor at some schools, this is another thing for a university to consider when making the decision about a test-optional admission policy (Rubin & Canche, 2019).

Diverse Study Body

Perhaps one the biggest, and most appealing benefits a university might see in adopting a test-optional admission policy is an increase in diversity among their student body (Barcelo, 2010; Cortes, 2013). If the only change a university makes is making the test score optional, they will see relatively small changes in the makeup of their student body (Sweitzer et al., 2018). Some conflicting studies found that there was no change to the diversity of a university when a test-optional admission policy was adopted as highly selective universities continue to use other factors to maintain their selectivity and student profile (Barcelo, 2010).

Where universities see the most change is when they pair a test-optional admission policy with other institutional changes to admission review and financial aid processes. This makes the most impact at universities that are not among the most elite in the country (Barcelo, 2010; Cortes, 2013).

However, not all test-optional plans are created equal. Some may actually do more harm than good. Some universities use ‘percent plans’ as part of their enrollment strategy. While not technically ‘test-optional’ a ‘percent plan’ does not take a student’s test score into account. It is still often required, but often not actually used in the admission decision. Under a ‘percent plan,’ students in the highest percentage of their graduating class (often the top 10%) are automatically granted admission. These students

are admitted first and then ‘regular’ admission standards are used to fill the rest of the incoming class. While these percent plans were originally hailed as a way to increase diversity, they actually did the opposite— decreasing the number of Black and Hispanic students enrolled. While these plans may increase enrollment diversity among the students admitted as part of the top 10%, the admission criteria applied to the rest of the applicants means that overall diversity was lowered (Zwick, 2018).

Increasing diversity should be important to the core role of the university. The job of a university is to prepare students for the ‘real world’ and what comes next (Kotzee & Martin, 2013). That ‘real world’ is increasingly diverse. On top of this, there is predicted to be a shortage of college graduates by the year 2025. Universities can no longer afford to rest on their laurels and educate the same type of student they always have. If they want to do good and prepare students, they must educate and prepare a diverse student population (Soares, 2013).

Adopting a test-optional admission policy can potentially bring many benefits to a university including increasing diversity and affirming their mission. This capstone provides reasons why universities should consider making that decision and my project provides support for students navigating the college admission process as schools adopt test-optional policies.

Chapter Summary

Standardized testing and applying to college is a complex issue. Standardized testing has a long and complex history and is tied up in complicated ideas about intelligence and aptitude. In modern testing, we find that testing may not be the most

effective way to measure a student's ability; it can be highly influenced by a student's background. Removing a standardized test score from a student's application can lead to benefits for both students and universities- increasing diversity at schools, providing more access for students, and encouraging more students to attend college. While this process may not be easy, and a test-optional policy is certainly not universally favored, it can be one way to remove barriers to students pursuing education and can affirm a university's commitment to educating a wide variety of students.

Chapter 3 Overview

In Chapter three, I will describe my project that aims to answer my research question: *Why might test-optional admission be beneficial and what does that mean for a student's application?* I will use what I have learned through my literature review and professional experience to explain the rationale for my project and chosen project format: a resource guide for students applying to test-optional colleges. I will then describe my project in detail, touching on why I chose this particular format. Next, I will discuss my settings and target audience as well as how I will determine the effectiveness of my project. Finally, I will lay out the timeline in which my project will be completed and implemented. Chapter four will provide my reflection on the capstone process. I will also discuss the results and implications of the project I created, and the new things I learned along the way. I discuss how I will share my results and the limitations I encountered.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Throughout my time as an admission counselor, I have come to the conclusion that there are many students who are not served by including a standardized test as a part of their admission application. A growing number of colleges and universities, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic have been removing this material from their application requirements. This has led me to my research question: *Why might test-optional admission be beneficial and what does that mean for a student's application?*

This chapter discusses the details of my project including the rationale behind my project and its format and a description of the resource guide I created. I also discuss the setting and target audience for my project as well as the timeline I used to complete it.

I created a resource guide for students and families that will explain test-optional admission and walk through how that may impact the rest of a student's application. Included in this guide is a worksheet where students can keep track of each school's information. Students are able to track the school's test policy for admission, scholarships, and matriculation as well as note the contact information for the person at the school they should contact with questions. In order for this guide to be as easy as possible to access, I created it in two separate forms— a document that can be shared/saved/printed, etc, and a website that can be accessed from any device.

Rationale

This project was largely supported by the social cognitive theory of self-regulation. This theory highlights the importance of students being able to manage their own thoughts, resources, and abilities and channel them into skills that are useful for the task at hand (Zimmerman, 2001). By creating a resource guide, we are giving students an appropriate resource to use in this endeavor. This is a tool to allow students to be better informed and more active in their own college decision.

This project was also heavily influenced by Satana and Rowland's (2016) Personal Theory of Brief Counseling, which highlighted empowering students to reach their own goals given the little amount of time they may have with professional counseling/guidance staff at school. This was especially important to me as the state I work in has one of the worst students to counselor ratios in the country (Patel & Clinedinst, 2018), meaning that students often have very little face to face time with their counselor. This resource guide is meant to help fill that gap between what students need and what their counselors are able to provide.

This is exactly why I chose to create a resource guide and a website. My goal was to create a resource that was easily accessible by students, parents, staff, and any other community member who may benefit from the information. It is something that can be easily posted or linked on a website, shared in an email, bookmarked, or saved in a shared drive. The priority is to create a resource that is simple enough to be used easily but has enough information to be helpful. It was also important to me to create a guide that was device neutral; it could be used on any laptop, tablet, or phone that a student was

using or could be printed out and used as a paper resource. Again, this makes sure there are as few barriers as possible to this resource being used by a wide audience of students. The resource guide format successfully accomplishes all these goals; it is easy to understand, easy to share, and easy to use.

Project Description

I developed a resource guide for students applying to college. This resource guide begins with a brief description of the different types of admission policies that may fall under the umbrella of “test-optional” and other policies that are often included in the discussion around test-optional admission. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic many schools had to very quickly shift to a test-optional policy creating little uniformity across schools. This has created quite a bit of confusion among students.

The next section describes how test-optional may impact the rest of a student’s application. I addressed materials like a student’s essay, letter of recommendation, transcript, and an interview should they need to do one. A subsequent section gives students examples of questions to ask of schools they are applying to so they may better understand the testing policies at that school.

The resource guide also has a worksheet for students to keep track of important information. They will be able to track the test score policy for each university they are applying; figuring out whether that score is needed for admission, scholarships, or matriculation as well as note the contact information of the person they should contact at each university should they have questions. This worksheet is available in the guide, but also as a stand-alone document that students can either print and fill out by hand or fill

out electronically. This separate document, along with the entire guide, is available on the website for download.

Finally, I have created a section of suggestions for further reading— these are books, articles, or collections of articles that I think will help students, staff, and families have a better understanding of the history of testing, modern testing outcomes, and the ideology and current landscape of the current test-optional movement.

Setting and Target Audience

The setting for this project is undefined. This is a resource guide that is shared with students that come from a wide variety of high schools who are applying to a wide variety of schools. To share this guide with students I provided it first to high school college counselors. Through my work as an admission counselor, I already have an established relationship with many high school college counselors while recruiting their students and through our professional organization. These high school counselors can then share this resource with their students as they counsel them through the college application process.

This guide can also be used as a resource by other sources who help students navigate the college search process. These resources could include parents, high school counselors, independent college counselors, and community-based organizations such as AVID and College Possible. It was important to me to make sure this resource guide contains information that is not specific to one type of school but could be used by many students applying to many different types of post-secondary institutions.

In the future, I would like to reproduce this guide in a number of languages but due to financial constraints that was not possible at this time.

Assessment of Effectiveness

Assessing the effectiveness of this project is somewhat difficult because it is not something that students and I will be using at the same time, it is something they will largely be using independently.

In order to collect feedback, I have included my contact information as well as an anonymous feedback form in the guide and on the website in order to encourage users to reach out and provide helpful feedback about how the resource guide is being used and how it has increased student's self reliance in the college admission process. I purposely created an anonymous form to give the option for users to be as honest as possible in their responses.

Timeline

This guide is intended to help students navigate the complicated process of applying to college by allowing them to better understand the requirements of the schools they are applying to. This project was completed over the spring 2021 semester which ran from January 25th, 2021 until May 1st, 2021.

In order to ensure I would complete this project on time, I started the project class by creating a detailed outline for the resource guide using the information I had gathered from the research design class, other classes throughout the program, and professional resources I had been gathering throughout the year. I used this outline to create deadlines for the completion of each section as well as a schedule for my completed draft to be

reviewed by my content expert, making sure to give her plenty of time given the demands on her time during the busy spring recruitment season. Based on feedback from my content expert, I used the final month of the semester to edit and revise my project. This resource guide will then be able to be used by students applying to college in the fall 2021 admission cycle and beyond.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the rationale for my project as well as identified the participants and timeline. This is in response to my research question: *Why might test-optional admission be beneficial and what does that mean for a student's application?* This guide has been developed to support high school students through the stressful college application process. It can also be used by other resources that support those same students; namely parents/families and high school college counselors.

Chapter four provides my reflection on the capstone process. I will also discuss the results and implications of the project I created, and the new things I learned along the way. I discuss how I will share my results and the limitations I encountered.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

Introduction

Over the past six years of working in college admissions, I have come to the conclusion that many students are not being well-served by standardized testing. This has led me to my research question: *Why might test-optional admission be beneficial and what does that mean for a student's application?* The first part of that question, why might test-optional admission be beneficial, has largely been answered by this capstone and the literature review it contains. The second part of my research question, what does that mean for a student's application, was answered by my project where I created a resource guide and website for students who are applying as test optional candidates. This guide walks through different types of test-optional policies, how applying as a test-optional candidate might impact other parts of the application, questions to ask of admission professionals, and suggestions for further reading if a student/staff/teacher/family member wants to learn more about standardized testing, the current testing landscape, and the history of the test-optional movement. As a part of this guide, I also created a worksheet where students can keep track of the policies at each of the schools they are applying to.

In this chapter I will revisit the literature review from Chapter 2 and discuss how different themes played out in my project. I will then examine the implications of my project and how it might inform policy and decision makers moving forward. From there I will explore future projects and recommendations for future work and how I will

communicate my results to the larger community. Finally, I will discuss how my project has provided a benefit to my community and a reflection on the process of writing my capstone and creating my project.

Revisiting the Research

In my literature review, I covered many themes around standardized testing and the test-optional movement from both the student and university perspective. There are several themes that really stood out to me and influenced the course of my project.

The first theme that was foundational to my project is that students are lacking the support they need in school. This is no fault of the individual counselors, they are just overwhelmed by the number of students on their roster. This is especially true in my home state of Minnesota, which has one of the highest student to counselor ratios in the country (Patel & Clinedinst, 2018). The more access to counseling and support a student has, the more successful they are likely to be in the college search and application process (Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Therefore students need to find other resources, outside of the traditional school counselor system, to navigate the application process. I wrote my guide to be one of those resources.

Another theme that came up again and again throughout the literature is that the modern application landscape is incredibly varied when it comes to testing. This was mentioned in almost every article that directly addressed the application process but is clearly encapsulated in the 2018 collection *Measuring Success: Testing, Grades, and the Future of College Admissions* edited by Jack Buckley, Lynn Letukas, and Ben Widavsky. This collection of articles from over 20 contributors tracks the modern landscape of

testing. Articles argue with one another, sometimes contradict, and generally demonstrate the complexity around testing and college admissions. This is confusing for me as an admission professional, and I regularly hear from my students that it is confusing for them as well.

This confusion has only been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. With testing cancelled, universities cancelling visits, and students doing school from home—everything related to the college admission process had become harder and even more confusing (Stegmeir, 2020). Particularly relevant to my work is the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on testing. As nearly all testing locations were closed, colleges and universities were forced to very quickly examine their own testing policies and many chose to adopt test-optional policies (Boeckenstedt, 2020). While, personally, I think this is a positive trend in the field, because of how quickly schools were forced to adopt new policies, every school did it slightly differently. The lack of uniformity created high levels of confusion. My guide aims to alleviate some of that confusion and allow students to be active participants in their application process.

Implications

This variation among schools is exactly where the implications of this project could have the most impact. As college and university decision makers consider adopting a test-optional policy, which I strongly hope they do, it is of utmost importance for them to try to develop some uniformity across the field. An easy way of doing this is to research what policies are being put in place at their peer institutions and creating their policies to be in line with those. With enough time and consideration, we can create

policies and trends that are easy for students and their support systems to understand. Another implication of this project, and other resources that aim to provide more information for students, is that it helps lessons the barrier to higher education. By providing more students, families, and advisors, with more and better resources it is possible for more students to find the best fit college for them.

Limitations

I did not encounter many, if any, unexpected setbacks that impacted my project. I have had a pretty good idea of my project for a while which really helped me stay focused on my work. The one thing that I did not expect is how the work snowballed into other forms. What started as just a resource guide, has become a resource guide, a website, and a digital worksheet. This really forced me to expand my thinking and learn brand new skills. A theme that came up again and again in my research, and will have an impact on my project is how much the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced test-optional admission. While ultimately I think the changes have been largely positive, the situation is still very new and still changing quite rapidly. Schools are still grappling with their test-optional admission decisions and figuring out if and how they are going to move forward with them. This means that as these policies shift, I will have to regularly update this guide with the most relevant and helpful information.

Future Related Projects and Recommendations

The most obvious next step to take with this project is to translate it into other languages. Due to financial constraints I was not able to hire translators this year, but it is a high priority for me moving forward. This new era of test-optional admission also

invites a number of possible studies about the application behavior of test-optional students and how test-optional policies may or may not affect admission rates, matriculation, retention, and graduation at different colleges and universities.

Communicating Results

This guide will largely be shared informally with my professional network. As an admission counselor, I have created a network of college counselors, community-based organization advisors, other admission professionals and school administrators that I work closely with. I am also considering how to adapt this research and project into a session for our annual professional development conference, but have not made any decisions about that yet.

Benefits to the Profession

As previously mentioned, the college application process is usually a confusing process that students often have to navigate on their own or with limited support from their high school counselor. This confusion has only increased during COVID-19 and the highly inconsistent testing and admission policies adopted by colleges and universities. This project aims to fill that gap. Most obviously it helps students by helping them navigate this complicated process more effectively. It also supports high school counselors as this guide can be another resource they keep in order to support students. Finally, it can also be a benefit to admission professionals like me because if students are more educated on the general of the college application process, we can spend more time diving into what makes our college or university unique. This allows students to

better understand the character of each school they are applying to and make a better college decision.

Summary

In this chapter I discussed how themes in my research impacted and influenced my project. My ultimate aim was to create a resource that can be used by students and enable them to be more informed and active participants in the college search and application process regardless of the support they were getting in their school.

There are certainly some limitations to my project, but I hope this guide contributes to the larger conversation around test-optional helps students in their college application and decision process.

When I started collecting test-optional research nearly two years ago, I had no idea what this capstone and project would become. In creating a response to my research question: *Why might test-optional admission be beneficial and what does that mean for a student's application?*, I have learned more than I ever expected. What has stood out the most to me is how standardized testing, especially in the admission process, is just one small part of the problem. It has its own dark and racist past with modern outcomes that are discrepant at best. It is a clear example of many of the things that are wrong with the education system today. However, I hope this can also be a place for change, that colleges and universities can be proactive in furthering access to higher education and improving the lives of students. I am happy that the work that I have done and the project I created can be part of those larger conversations.

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