

APPLYING TEST-OPTIONAL: A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

by

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Introduction and Research Question

In the past few years a growing number of colleges and universities have adopted test-optional admission policies meaning that they are no longer requiring a standardized test score as part of their admission application. 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. This has, in part,

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

Description of the Project

Largely supported by the social cognitive theory of self-regulation (Zimmermann, 2001) and Satana and Rowland's 2016 Personal Theory of Brief Counseling, this guide aims to provide students with the resources and background they need to discern the testing policies at each school they are researching. These resources can also be used by adults, like parents, teachers or counselors, who are helping students navigate the college application process. The guide begins with a description of the most common types of test-optional policies that a student might encounter, followed by how applying as a test-optional candidate might influence other parts of their application. Next, students will find a list of questions they can ask of admission professionals to get a better understanding of the nuances of a particular school's test policies. Following this is a worksheet where students can track the testing policies at each school. Finally, the guide ends with suggestions for further reading to learn more about the history of testing and the test-optional movement.

Explanation of the Project Format

This guide is available in two different formats in an attempt to make the information as device-neutral as possible. Firstly as a pdf that can be printed, handed out, emailed, saved in shared drives, etc. Secondly, I have turned this guide into a website that can be accessed on any computer or mobile device. Additionally, the tracking worksheet is also available in a digital format so students can fill it out independently of the entire guide. 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.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this guide is part of my response to my research question: *Why might test-optional admission be beneficial and what does that mean for a student's application?* My hope is that this guide gives students and their support the information they need to be more informed participants in the college application process.

References

Santana, M. M., & Rowland, K. D. (2016). Personal theory of brief counseling in a high school setting . *Georgia School Counselors Association Journal*, (23), 68-73.

Zimmerman, B. J. (2001). Theories of self-regulated learning and academic achievement: An overview and analysis. (pp. 1-37). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers

Applying Test-Optional

A Resource Guide for Students

An online version of this guide can be found at
<https://sites.google.com/hamline.edu/applyingtestoptional>

If you have questions or feedback about this guide, you can email Emma Scott at escott02@hamline.edu or fill out a feedback form here: <https://bit.ly/2MydHIO>. Responses to this form will be anonymous unless you choose to provide your name and contact information.

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What is test-optional?

Test-Optional

At its core, test-optional means precisely what it sounds like. Students who choose to apply as test-optional candidates will not be required to submit a standardized test score, like the ACT or SAT. You may hear this called a number of different things, like “testing not required” for example, but “test-optional” is the most common phrasing.

Test-Optional for what?

There is no universal “test-optional” policy. Each school has its own rules on testing and what situations they may require it for. Some may never require a test score, some may require it for scholarships, and some may require you to submit a test score before matriculation (starting school) even if you are not required to submit a test score for your admission application.

You still might need to submit a test score

Many test-optional schools still have test requirements for some students. It is quite normal for international students and/or homeschooled students to still need to submit a standardized test score with their admission application. This is not true at every school, so it is important to ask your admission counselor for further details.

Test-Optional Adjacent

As you are researching and applying to schools, you may encounter many other admission/testing policies that are similar or related to test-optional policies but are a little different. Here is a selection of some of the most popular:

Test-Flexible: An ACT or SAT is not required, but other exams like AP tests or SAT subject tests might be.

Percent Plans: Under a percent plan, students who are in a certain percentage of their graduating class are automatically admitted. These students may still be required to submit a test-score with their application but it is essentially not a factor in their admission decision.

De-Emphasizing the Test: A test score is still required for an admission application but is not a highly important factor used to determine admission.

Test-Free: Test scores are never used as part of the admission decision. Even if a student submits a test score it will not be reviewed as part of the admission decision. You may also hear this referred to as Test-Blind (sic).

Other parts of the application

It is important to understand that schools, correctly or not, have been using standardized test scores as an indicator of academic preparedness. By removing that academic marker, they may feel like they have a harder time understanding your academic ability. Your job, then, as an applicant is to make sure that you provide enough academic information in your application so that the admission committee has what it needs to make a decision. Here are a few things you will want to consider as you submit different parts of your application.

Application

Most applications will provide a space for you to self-report your standardized test scores. Decide in advance if you want to provide those. Your application form is also likely where you will mark if you want to apply as a test-optional candidate. Please make sure to list *all* of your activities on your application- these should include your academic, extra/co-curricular, and personal activities. You should not assume your academic accomplishments will be adequately covered by your recommender. You should introduce them yourself and allow other parts of your application to reinforce your academic skills.

Essay/Personal Statements

There are several different places in your application where you may be asked to submit a writing sample. Most people are familiar with the regular admission essay, but many applications also have an “additional information” section for you to use. This is where you can put information not adequately covered in the rest of your application. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many applications have also introduced a “Community Disruption” section where you directly share how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected you. These are all places where you can elaborate on your academic experience. Make sure you fully address any red flags or areas of concern on your transcript. Without the extra academic factor of a test score, it can be harder for admissions counselors to put your academic performance in context unless you provide it.

Letter of Recommendation

At least one of your recommendations needs to be from an academic source in a core academic subject. This recommendation should address your academic strengths and performance in the classroom. Admission offices will be able to provide you with guidance on how many letters of recommendation you submit as it varies from school to school. However, you should feel confident that your recommendation writer can provide the admission committee with more details and first hand experience of your academic skills.

Transcript

Take a hard look at your transcript to see if there is anything that stands out that you will want to address in your application. Pay attention to any rough terms, grade trends in particular subject areas, and overall trends across all years of high school. A counselor, advisor, or trusted teacher may be able to help with this. Some high schools will include your standardized test score on your transcript that they send to admission offices. Check with your guidance counselor or student services office to see if that is the case at your school.

Interview

If you are being asked to come in for an admission interview- it is important to understand why. Is it a normal part of the admission process, or has the admission committee pended you for further information? To pend a student means that the admission committee has done an initial review of a student's application but needs more information in order to make a decision. Understanding the difference between these two processes will help you better prepare for your interview. In a standard admission interview it is a chance for the admission office to learn more about you as a whole student and for you to learn more about the university. In an interview for a pended student, the admission representative will likely want to address specific details of your application, like your academic or behavioral record for example, to determine your college readiness.

Questions to ask

Testing policies and requirements are extremely varied- each school has taken a slightly different approach. This is why it is so important to research each school you are considering. The following questions will help you understand the testing policies and requirements at each school. These can be answered through a combination of online research and direct contact with an admission counselor. Not every admission counselor will know the answer to every question right away, so do not hesitate to politely ask them to look into the answer and follow up with you after your meeting.

At what point do I have to decide if I want to use a test-score in my application?

Can I change my mind whenever I want or am I locked into that path after a certain point?

What happens if I want to or say that I'm going to take a test but am physically unable to i.e testing site shuts down?

Are there groups of students, like international students or homeschooled students, who are still required to submit a test score?

How do I decide whether or not to send in a test score for your school?

What percentage of your applicants are submitting a test score?

What is the average test score of those submitted?

If I don't submit a score- what factors will you use to review my application?

How will applying test-optional impact my merit scholarships?

Are there certain scholarships that still require a test score?

Do I need a test score to matriculate?

Do you plan to return to required testing once the pandemic is over?

Who should I contact if I have follow-up questions about my application? What is their contact info?

Tracking Worksheet

You can access a full-page/digital version of this worksheet at <https://bit.ly/3c7tRmC>

School:
Test-Optional for
Admission:
Scholarships:
Matriculation:
My contact person:

Additional Notes:

School:
Test-Optional for
Admission:
Scholarships:
Matriculation:
My contact person:

Additional Notes:

School:
Test-Optional for
Admission:
Scholarships:
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Additional Notes:

Further Reading

Interested in learning more about standardized testing, its history, and the test-optional movement? The following selection of readings are a great place to start.

The Big Test by Nicholas Lemann, originally published in 2000 is considered one of the seminal works in the literature about testing. In this book, Lemann explores the history of the development of standardized testing and asks readers to consider the social, moral, and political questions that surround standardized testing and the SAT.

Lemann, N. (2000). *The big test : The secret history of the american meritocracy* (1st ed.). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Edited by Jack Buckley, Lynn Letukas, and Ben Wildavsky, *Measuring Success: Testing, Grades, and the Future of College Admissions (2018)* is a collection of articles that explores the current usage of standardized testing, the rise of test-optional admission practices, and how these trends have an impact on the landscape of college admissions. Over 20 authors contributed to this text, providing a comprehensive look how standardized testing is used in admissions.

Buckley, Jack, et al. *Measuring Success: Testing, Grades, and the Future of College Admissions*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.

Providence College was an early adopter of a test-optional policy. In his 2007 article *Test-optional admission at a liberal arts college: A founding mission affirmed*, university president Father Brian Shanley discusses the decision as a way to live up to Providence's goals to make education more accessible to more students.

Shanley, B. J. (2007). *Test-optional admission at a liberal arts college: A founding mission affirmed*<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.77.4.b7m60878574m76w2>