

Test-Optional Applications Aren't Always What They Seem



By Nikkee Porcaro

In June, The University of Chicago made headlines by becoming the first top-10 school to drop its standardized testing requirement in the undergraduate application process. Thus, students can apply to this prestigious school without submitting ACT or SAT scores. UChicago has long been known as a quirky institution, famous (or infamous, depending on your viewpoint) for their wacky, meta-type essays and uber-liberal student body. Anti-testers rejoiced, saying this move levels the playing field. With growing outcry about privilege in the college admissions arena, is this move really the boon it appears to be?

Telling a student to skip the ACT or SAT narrows his or her choices to test-optional institutions, which eliminates many relatively affordable state schools. It can also put them out of the running for certain scholarships that require such scores in the decision process, like National Merit. Looking down the road, there are some graduate school programs that will accept ACT/SAT scores within a certain period, eliminating the need to take harder standardized tests like the GRE or GMAT. Learning

the strategies for and having experience with high-school-level standardized tests makes the graduate school testing process markedly easier. Finally, in a situation with fewer requirements, more students will apply, which means a larger applicant pool. More competition in an already-competitive process? I'm just not seeing the appeal.



But let's pretend you find all of those factors negligible. How do admissions work when there's no singular standard by which to evaluate students? How do you compare a Long Island student's 4.5 GPA to an Alabama student's 4.5 GPA? How does a college know which school's

grades are inflated, which school's courses are "guts," and which student truly earned his or her 4.5? Answer: they don't. (A recent survey reported that half of American high school students have an "A" average. Grade inflation is a real problem — more on this next month.) It also means that even if the grades are there, the rest of a student's academic profile must be stellar. A few varsity sports teams, membership in a Jewish organization, and a couple clubs may not cut it anymore. Application essays must be creative, witty, unique, and revealing. Recommendation letters should shine above the other 50,000 received. It almost seems as if a policy designed to alleviate workload and anxiety may, in fact, do the opposite.

But there's more. This may sound cynical, but I always like to follow the money ... and in this case, the rankings. Schools may have some less altruistic reasons to implement this policy, according to 2015 article on the subject from National Public Radio (NPR): More applications means they can reject more students, which makes them look more selective in the U.S. News & World Report rankings. And, as any parent who has gone through this process knows, applications are expensive — up to \$80 a pop. That means just

5,000 additional applicants could net a school an extra \$400,000.

Also keep in mind that for schools with test-optional policies, who is actually submitting their test scores? That's right: students who do well on the tests. Then, when schools calculate their average SAT scores (also used in the aforementioned rankings and publications designed to attract students and highlight their selectivity), the number is misleadingly inflated. Ah, altruism and equality.

As we've discussed in previous columns, standardized tests are not the be-all, end-all in the college admissions process, nor should they be. They're one way to measure mastery of particular basic skills needed to complete higher education and are used in conjunction with other factors in a holistic college process. Your student should absolutely make the choice that is best for him or her regarding test-optional school applications, but make sure you consider both sides of the argument and how they may affect your student's application and chances for admission.

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