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EDUCATION LIFE

The Test-Optional Surge

By CECILIA CAPUZZI SIMON OCT. 28, 2015

For those who argue that the SAT and ACT should be dropped as criteria for college admission, this has been an affirming year. Forty-seven colleges and universities have announced test-optional policies, bringing the total to more than 850, according to FairTest, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing.

There has also been a shift in the type and selectivity of institutions taking up the banner: 46 percent of top-tier liberal arts colleges, and a good number of large research universities, no longer require the tests. Temple, Montclair State, Brandeis, Wesleyan and George Washington University as well as Bryn Mawr and Ithaca College are just a few that have opened up their admissions processes since 2013.

The appeal is twofold. Dropping the SAT/ACT requirement typically increases applications — an additional 250 on average, according to a 2014 study at the University of Georgia. In theory, schools can then reject more applicants and appear more selective. And, with low scores out of the tabulation, the average test score — reported to U.S. News & World Report for its all-important rankings — rises.

That's a cynic's view, say admissions officials, noting that the policy also expands access to those who fare poorly on standardized tests, especially minorities and the socioeconomically disadvantaged. While studies show that the SAT and ACT predict freshman G.P.A. when combined with high school grade-point average, a new study has found that the caliber of student does not suffer when the test scores are eliminated.

William C. Hiss, former dean of admissions at Bates College, has studied the role

of the big tests in admissions decisions since before Bates went test-optional in 1984. Last year, he published a four-year study of 33 private and public test-optional colleges and universities. Of 123,000 students, 30 percent had been admitted without submitting test scores. He found no significant difference between nonsubmitters and submitters in graduation rates (0.6 percent lower for nonsubmitters) or cumulative G.P.A. (2.83 for nonsubmitters, 2.88 with test scores). Data also showed that nonsubmitters are more likely than submitters to be first-generation-to-college enrollees, underrepresented minorities, women, Pell Grant recipients and students with learning differences.

Are test-optional policies actually affecting diversity on campus? That depends on how you slice the data.

The University of Georgia study, which compared 180 selective liberal arts colleges, 32 of them test-optional, found no statistical difference in enrollment of low-income and underrepresented minority students. The report ruffled some feathers by questioning motives, suggesting colleges sought a rankings bump. “I’m sure there are schools out there with genuine altruistic desire — to climb the rankings and broaden the groups of students enrolled in their schools,” said Andrew S. Belasco, a visiting U.G.A. scholar when he led the study and head of a college counseling and test-prep service. “But it’s not happening.”

Dr. Hiss was one of those who took issue with the findings. He points to data from the 20 private schools and six public universities in his study, which showed an increase in underrepresented minorities of 6 percentage points, to 18 percent, from 2003 to 2010.

Wake Forest University, in Winston-Salem, N.C., went test-optional in 2009. “We struggled in the admissions committee for years,” said Martha Blevins Allman, dean of admissions. “What was the meaning of the difference between a 1250 and 1350 SAT score?” Their conclusion: The SAT measured family income, not ability.

Wake Forest points to Natalie Casimir, now a sophomore, as the kind of student test-optional attracts. Ms. Casimir, a Haitian-American whose parents did not graduate college, calls her 1580 (out of 2400) SAT score “an embarrassment” after graduating high school with a 4.0 G.P.A. She had to give up on her dream of

attending Cornell. Nor did she get into Davidson College, which requires test scores. Wake Forest gave her a full ride without seeing her score. Her current G.P.A. is 3.2.

Before Wake Forest dropped its test requirement, underrepresented minorities made up 12 percent of the freshman class. Six years later, their numbers had risen 4 percentage points. Test-optional is not a “silver bullet for increasing diversity,” Ms. Allman acknowledged. The policy is only a “first step to removing barriers.”

Dr. Hiss, though, finds Wake Forest’s increase to be “dramatic.” In his study, a large percentage of nonsubmitters were white, upscale students with access to admissions information and strategies. Minority students, he said, typically lack quality counseling to make them aware of the option, are cautious about expensive private institutions, and hesitate to move to other parts of the country.

Ithaca College stepped up recruiting at targeted high schools in New York and Boston after going test-optional in 2013. The prior year, underrepresented minorities made up 15 percent of the freshman class; now it’s 18 percent. It’s not surprising that Ithaca’s president, Thomas R. Rochon, would say, “I believe in standardized testing.” He used to direct the Graduate Record Examinations program. But he added, “I also believe in test-optional.” He is sure that test scores were distorting admissions decisions. “Some students really struggle with standardized testing, and scores don’t reflect their abilities.”

William N. Black, Temple’s senior vice provost, feared the same. The school just enrolled its first test-optional class. Of 30,037 applications (up 9 percent over last year), almost a quarter were nonsubmitters. With help from increased outreach, the number of Hispanic and black freshmen rose to 940 from 695 in 2013. “I think we have tapped into a riddle,” Dr. Black said. “There is a socioeconomic bias in standardized testing, and test-optional may be eliminating that.”

At least one member of the class chose not to submit because of a philosophical disagreement. Farid Elhadidy, who emigrated from Egypt when he was 12, knew his 1500 SAT score would get him into Temple, but when a friend scored 2100 after extensive tutoring, he was angry at what he considered an unfair system. “I didn’t have the ability to do that,” he said. “It was something I couldn’t control.”

Instead of submitting his score, he chose to answer four additional essay questions on Temple's test-optional application because the school would "appreciate my abilities, and not my parents' ability to pay for my scores." Temple placed him in its honors college, and provided a \$10,000-a-year scholarship and \$4,000 toward study abroad. s To Submit or Not to Submit?

Applying test-optional is not an easy "in" but an "alternative path," according to Andrew Flagel, senior vice president for students and enrollment at Brandeis University, where just under 1,000 of last year's 10,500 applicants applied sans scores. Brandeis, like many test-optional schools, requires applicants who don't supply ACT or SAT scores to submit other material (scores from Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate or SAT subject tests, or graded papers). Some colleges have cutoffs: George Mason University, for example, requires that a nonsubmitter have a 3.5 grade-point average and class rank in the top 20 percent. Home-schoolers are usually required to submit SAT or ACT scores, as are those applying to engineering, computer science or pre-med programs.

What if you have a borderline score? The rule of thumb: If you think the score might hurt, don't submit. Also, admissions directors say that SAT and ACT scores count less than students think. At Brandeis, where the average high school G.P.A. for admitted students is 3.8, Mr. Flagel said tests are a "tiny piece" of the evaluation, "simply another way to affirm what we are seeing in the record."

A high test score and a mediocre G.P.A. is a red flag — a sign that the student may not be working to potential.

Last year, Hampshire College announced it would go test-blind, and simply not look at test scores. Why don't others follow? Santiago Ybarra, Pitzer College associate director of admission, explained: "We do not want students who have spent a lot of time preparing for the exams to feel like we won't use it if they want to submit." Still, he said: "I often find myself telling students not to submit. I'm going to be spending much more time looking at your transcript for what patterns exist and what courses you've taken. It only takes a half a second to look at your SAT or ACT score."

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