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The Other Side of 'Test Optional'

By LYNN O'SHAUGHNESSY

When colleges announce they're making entrance exams optional, they publicly embrace a holistic stance: standardized tests are incomplete scorecards on how a student will fare in college; they favor families who can afford test prep, while minority students tend not to do well.

Cynics cite additional motives.

"Evidence suggests there are also marketing and competitive issues at play," says Jonathan P. Epstein, a senior consultant at Maguire Associates specializing in enrollment and admissions. "After three beers and in a private moment, schools might acknowledge it."

In a report published this month in The Journal of College Admission, Mr. Epstein examines how dropping the SAT and ACT requirement for prospective students can affect recruitment and enrollment.

Of the more than 800 test-optional institutions listed by the advocacy group FairTest, many are technical or religious schools, or have open admissions. But about three dozen are selective liberal arts colleges, including Smith and Bowdoin, and more join the trend each year.

"With colleges and universities engaged in intense competition to recruit ever more talented and diverse students," Mr. Epstein says, "test-optional policies become alluring." One advantage is that they generate significantly more applicants, and more ethnically diverse ones.

But there are others: the crush of applications makes colleges look more selective, and because low-scorers are less likely to share their results with admissions officers, score averages can be artificially higher. That's information students scrutinize when deciding where to apply. Applicants should also know that some colleges continue to use standardized test scores to divide up merit aid.

The bottom line is to ask how a college handles its policy.

WANT MERIT AID? SEND SCORES.

"We don't know how widespread it is, but we suspect a significant number of schools that are test-optional do use test scores for some merit scholarships," says Robert Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest. While quick to plug the benefits of being test-optional, he acknowledges, "This is a problem that we are gravely concerned about."

To gauge the extent of the trend, I contacted the 37 top liberal arts colleges on U.S. News & World Report's2009 rankings that had test-optional policies. Eight require SAT or ACT scores for one or more of their merit scholarships (though not need-based aid). They are: Dickinson, Gettysburg, Goucher, Gustavus Adolphus, Hobart and William Smith, Lake Forest, Muhlenberg and Lawrence University.

Admission directors at institutions that don't mandate scores for their merit scholarships express incredulity at the practice: if the tests are a valid measure of who should and shouldn't get merit aid, why not require them for all students?

"You can't say, 'Tests are not a good tool in the process,' and then say, 'If you don't submit you can't qualify for merit aid,' " says DebraShaver, director of admission at Smith, which just admitted its first freshmen class under its test-optional program. "I don't want to pass judgment on institutions, but it doesn't make sense."

Robert J. Massa, until recently vice president for enrollment and college relations at Dickinson, in Carlisle, Pa., sees nothing hypocritical in requiring students who don't qualify for financial aid to produce scores to qualify for merit money. The only reason colleges give the aid to affluent students, he says, is to keep the competition from grabbing them. And the competition won't be throwing merit money at low scorers. "Why on earth would we award a non-need scholarship to someone who is not going to get funds from a similar institution?" Mr. Massa asks.

Chris Hooker-Haring, the dean of admission and financial aid at Muhlenberg, in Allentown, Pa.,says his college reserves merit awards for students who excel at all the admission benchmarks."We want every single credential in a student file to suggest he or she is an academic pacesetter if we are to invest in them with non-need-based aid," he says.

VIEW SELECTIVITY SELECTIVELY.

Colleges making the switch usually see an immediate 10 percent to 20 percent application bump; the bigger pile of rejection letters could give the illusion that the college is more selective. Typically, Mr. Epstein says, "it would cost institutions tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional recruitment expense to achieve such an applicant boost." He says the same for a gain of 20 to 30 points in SAT averages.

LOOK BEYOND (INCOMPLETE) AVERAGES.

Test-optional practices have caused some griping among administrators at institutions that haven't budged on standardized test requirements. Tony Bankston, the dean of admissions at Illinois Wesleyan University, is in this camp. He says he has watched the reported average test scores of peer institutions increase in recent years because the colleges aren't plugging in the results of freshmen who don't submit scores. The scores, published in guidebooks, rankings and on the colleges' own Web sites, can make a college appear to be more of an academic heavyweight. The more nonsubmitters, the higher the average (in the first few years, Mr. Epstein reports, 25 percent to 40 percent of applicants don't submit scores).

"I don't think we can ignore the gamesmanship," Mr. Bankston says. "Schools are saying we want to count your test scores when we like your test scores."

How much of a lift can colleges get if they ignore some scores? Mr. Epstein says that applicants who don't divulge their SAT results generally score 100 to 150 points lower than a typical submitter. He bases this estimate on the experiences of Bates College, which went optional in the '80s, and several institutions that shared data with him. If 25 percent to 50 percent of a freshman class didn't send in results, he concludes, reported scores could increase 25 to 75 points.

Here's an example of this phenomenon: Before Mount Holyoke went test-optional, in 2001, its middle 50-percent SAT range (a frequently cited test barometer) was 1170-1360. A few years later, with roughly 70 percent of freshmen submitting scores, the range jumped 60 points on both ends.

Mr. Epstein found Muhlenberg to be the only liberal arts college in U.S. News's top tier that chases down missing scores and plugs them into its SAT/ACT average. At least two test-optional universities, Providence College and Wake Forest University, also report averages involving all freshmen.

Because of its policy, Muhlenberg did take a hit on its published SAT scores. Its average math/verbal score is 1220, but if it had ignored the scores not submitted with applications,

it would be 1250, Mr. Hooker-Haring says. "To me, one of the dangers in not publishing an all-inclusive profile is that you may be artificially discouraging kids whose scores are closer to the true profile." That is, they may decide a college isn't a good fit when it actually is.

To avoid the appearance of pumping up its reported scores, Wake Forest made a commitment to track down entering freshmen's scores when it decided to go test-optional. This fall's class will be the first admitted under the program.

"We didn't want this to appear that we were trying to game the system and make our score look higher," says Martha Allman, the director of admissions.

John Young, director of admissions at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, in upstate New York, says his college hasn't tried to retrieve missing scores for practical reasons. First, there's the logistics, with no guarantee students will cooperate. Second, he says, scores from before its test-optional policy was put into place, for fall 2006, aren't much different from current ones. The average SAT score at Hobart and William Smith increased to 1210 from 1190 (nationally, SAT averages declined over the same period). "If your student body is very different because of the SAT-optional policy, I guess I could see then that it would make sense to go after the scores," Mr. Young says. As for rankings, Hobart and William Smith's placement has not improved since the change in policy.

Robert Morse, the director of data research for U.S. News, says that scores represent only 7.5 percent of the ranking; the ability to reject more applicants, he says, would have even less impact. Selectivity, as measured by an institution's acceptance rate, influences 1.5 percent of the ranking.

Would the magazine consider asking colleges for all their scores? "It's something we might do," Mr. Morse replies. "But I don't have any idea how cooperative schools would be."

Lynn O'Shaughnessy is author of "The College Solution: A Guide for Everyone Looking for the Right School at the Right Price."