

# Test-Optional Policies: Impacts to Date and Recommendations for Equity in Admissions

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## Abstract

Many institutions were forced by the COVID-19 pandemic to change admissions policies as a response to logistical challenges around testing. However, even as logistical challenges have resolved, pandemic-era changes to higher education testing policies which reduced or eliminated testing requirements have remained in place in many schools. Now, research evidence is beginning to emerge which looks at the effects that reductions to testing requirements are having on undergraduate admissions, making it possible to determine whether those policies are meeting their goals. This review examines the empirical evidence that has been gathered to date to identify trends in the effects of these testing policies and to make recommendations for increasing equity in admissions that institutions may wish to consider as they grapple with another change in higher education admissions: the striking down of race-conscious admissions. We find that test-optional admissions do not benefit equity in all cases, but that some contexts show more promise than others.

*Keywords:* test-optional, higher education admissions, affirmative action, equity

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## Test-Optional Policies: Impacts to Date and Recommendations for Equity in Admissions

Higher education admissions are in a period of great change. The COVID-19 public health emergency, and the recent U.S. Supreme Court cases concerning the future of race-conscious admissions (*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 2023; *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina et al.*, 2023), have brought both national attention and disruption to higher education admissions. Faced with challenges such as periodic campus shutdowns, legal changes to allowable practice, gaps in incoming students' academic records, cancelations of admissions test administrations, and the changing landscape of international education due to geopolitical factors (Lu, 2023), universities have been adapting their admissions practices in a bid to continue to attract large and diverse pools of applicants.

Although many institutions had already adopted test-optional or even test-free admissions policies prior to the COVID-19 shutdowns of 2020, the pandemic significantly accelerated institutions' decisions to go test-optional or test-free. By January 2023, more than 80% of U.S. colleges and universities did not require standardized tests for admissions (Churchill, 2023). The terms *test-optional* and *test-free* are used to describe a spectrum of approaches to how standardized tests are used for the purposes of admissions decisions, from institutions and programs which refuse all test scores, to institutions and programs where tests may be highly recommended, but not required for admission. Collectively, we refer to actions to decrease or remove existing testing requirements from the admissions process as *the test-reduction movement*.

Although the test-reduction movement predates the COVID-19 pandemic (Bennett, 2022; Pellegrino, 2022), the adoption of test-optional or test-free policies greatly accelerated during that time (Turk et al., 2020), even as the effects of adopting such a strategy have remained unclear. Improving equity is often a desired outcome and a major motivating factor for schools to adopt a test-reduction approach (Haviland et al., 2022). However, it is important to review the evidence that has been gathered so far on the effects of test-reduction admissions policies to determine whether these policies have been successful in achieving greater equity of outcomes. With the 2023 *Students for Fair Admissions* U.S. Supreme Court decisions making affirmative action-based approaches to diversity unlawful, understanding the effects of test-reduction admissions policies has only become more important.

While the rapid adoption of test-reduction strategies was seen as a necessary admissions strategy amid test administration disruptions during the fall 2020 cycle, it was a major system change initiated in a crisis and with only a limited evidentiary basis centered principally around liberal arts schools (e.g., Belasco et al., 2015). Three years later, research is now emerging that looks at the effects of test-reduction policies on equity in admissions, campus diversity, and other outcomes such as volume of applications, admissions yield, retention rate, graduation rate, and average standardized test scores (e.g., SAT, ACT) of incoming classes. This review synthesizes the empirical studies

which can begin to outline the overall effects that test-reduction strategies are having on higher education admissions to inform admissions strategies moving forward.

## Studies Included

This examination of the literature focuses on scholarship which directly explores the relationship between test-reduction policies and their effects on the demographic composition and size of applicant pools and, to a lesser extent, student outcomes after admission. To locate the studies used in this review, the authors began with seminal studies, and expanded our search through keyword search terms and snowball searches of studies citing or cited by these papers. Search terms included: test-optional, test-free, higher education admissions, equity, graduate admissions, undergraduate admissions, and various combinations of these terms.

As this is a review of emerging evidence, we did not strictly limit the studies included to those in peer-reviewed journals featuring experimental or quasi-experimental designs, but we also included relevant reports from professional organizations and institutional research offices. Due to the range of rigor in study design among the studies we considered, we discuss some cautions in interpreting study results. Our sample, shown in Table 1, includes 12 articles, with only two considering data collected in the context of the post-2020 increase in test-reduction policies. All of these articles are focused on bachelor's admissions. Currently, the literature on test-reduction policies in undergraduate admissions is more developed than that on graduate admissions, with a few exceptions (e.g., Kim et al., 2024). This is understandable, as graduate admissions policies can vary between professional, master's, and doctoral level degrees, and even from academic department to department within an institution. Historically, graduate admissions programs have had greater variation in terms of the number of programs that required tests at all, even within the same institution (i.e., while graduate programs have certainly undergone test reduction, many were already test-free by design).

## The Test-Optional Movement

### *Motivations for Test-Reduction Admissions Policies*

The roots of the test-reduction movement lie in selective liberal arts colleges (Bennett, 2022; Zwick, 2019), which began to implement test-reduction policies in the mid-1980s (Furuta, 2017; Paris & Wacker, 2023; Pellegrino, 2022). Stated motivations for early adopters of test-reduction policies included concerns about the biases and validity of standardized assessments, and a perception among adopting institutions that test-reduction policies could help enhance the ethnic and economic diversity of the student body without compromising academic quality (Belasco et al., 2015). These motivations continue to have a role in the test-reduction movement, as institutions may perceive the removal of test requirements as equivalent to the removal of a barrier in the higher education admissions process (Matheny, 2022) and, in the case of selective colleges,

Table 1. Summary of Studies

Study	Participants/ Methods	Source	Test Reduction Effects <sup>a</sup>
Belasco et al. (2015)	180 selective liberal arts institutions (1992–2010)  Difference-in-differences	Peer-reviewed article	Equity: Negative Enrollment: Positive
Bennett (2022)	217 selective private institutions (2005–2016)  Comparative interrupted time series & difference-in-differences	Peer-reviewed article	Equity: Positive Enrollment: Neutral
Felegi (2024)	71 private not-for-profit & 3 public institutions (2001–2018)  Difference-in-differences	Working paper	Equity: Mixed Enrollment: Neutral
Kang (2022)	510 selective institutions (2006–2019)  Difference-in-differences	Dissertation	Equity: Mixed Enrollment: Mixed
Osaki (2022)	149 selective liberal arts colleges (2001–2020)  Two-way fixed effects	Working paper	Equity: Mixed Enrollment: Neutral
Paris et al. (2022)	162 selective four-year public & private (2003–2016)  2x2 repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance	Peer-reviewed article	Equity: Neutral Enrollment: Positive
Pellegrino (2022)	28 selective large research institutions (2004–2018)  Difference-in-differences	Peer-reviewed article	Equity: Positive Enrollment: Negative

Study	Participants/ Methods	Source	Test Reduction Effects <sup>a</sup>
Rubin & González Canché (2019)	George Mason University case study (2004–2015)  Synthetic control method	Peer-reviewed article	Equity: Neutral Enrollment: Neutral
Saboe & Terrizzi (2019)	127 public & private institutions (2009–2014)  Difference-in- differences	Peer-reviewed article	Equity: Neutral Enrollment: Mixed
Schultz & Backstrom (2021)	3 campus SUNY case study (2008–2017)  Natural experiment	Report	Equity: Mixed Enrollment: Mixed
Sweitzer et al. (2018)	115 liberal arts institutions (1999–2014)  Propensity score matching	Book	Equity: Neutral Enrollment: Mixed
Syverson et al. (2018)	28 institutions mostly small, private (2008–2016)  Descriptive statistics, t-tests, chi-squares, Cohen's d	Report	Equity: Positive Enrollment: Positive

<sup>a</sup> Equity effects refer to impact on socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity of incoming class (e.g., number of Pell Grant recipients, representation of URM). Enrollment refers to impacts on volume and quality of applicants, overall admissions yield, and similar metrics.

the removal of a barrier to accessing an important pipeline for economic mobility (Bleemer, 2023). Other motivations tied to more pragmatic or image-focused facets of enrollment management have also been posited; these include goals to boost the number of applicants to an institution, to raise average standardized test scores, resulting in an improved school ranking (based on the idea that lower-scoring applicants will be less likely to submit scores; Belasco et al., 2015), and to generate positive publicity (Lucido, 2018). Once many schools began to adopt test-optional policies, social pressure to follow suit may have also played a factor in some decision making (Dessein et al., 2023).

**Acceleration Under COVID.** The number of institutions adopting test-reduction policies began to accelerate to a certain degree in the early 2000s (Pellegrino, 2022), but an unprecedented number adopted temporary or permanent test-reduction admissions

policies during the COVID-19 pandemic (Paris et al., 2022; Pellegrino, 2022). Time-limited logistical concerns directly tied to the pandemic, such as public health concerns, limited administrations of standardized assessments, and anticipated declines in student enrollment drove much of the move to enact test-reduction admissions policies in this timeframe (Paris et al., 2022; Turk et al., 2020). Correspondingly, many institutions initially framed their reduction in mandatory testing policies as temporary (Haviland et al., 2022), yet now that those policies have been implemented, and even with pandemic-related logistical challenges being resolved, most enrollment management professionals do not envision a return to prepandemic testing policies (Haviland et al., 2023; Inside Higher Ed, 2023).

Still despite this, testing policies continue to be updated. Postpandemic, two highly selective institutions (Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT] and Georgetown University) and a small number of public state university systems in the south (e.g., Tennessee, Georgia) resumed testing requirements permanently, though Georgia reversed course amid falling application numbers and concerns that the requirement would push students to enroll at public universities in nearby states. In early 2024, additional highly selective institutions including Dartmouth College, Yale University, Harvard University, Caltech, and Brown University also reinstated test-required policies while others (e.g., University of Pennsylvania) announced they would remain test optional at least for the upcoming application cycle. Some media outlets have speculated there is an emerging trend towards reinstating testing requirements at competitive institutions in particular. For now, however, the majority of competitive institutions as well as the majority of public state university systems continue to hold onto test-reduction policies, so it is prudent to examine the evidence that has been collected on the effectiveness of those policies across several metrics.

## **Effects of Test-Reduction Admissions Policies**

### *Effects on Volume and Quality of Applicants*

While one of the motivations for moving to test-reduction policies has been to increase the number of applications to an institution (Lucido, 2018), studies have been split as to whether this effect has been taking place. Several studies did report an increase in the volume of applications (Belasco et al., 2015; Epstein, 2009; Osaki, 2022; Paris et al., 2022; Schultz & Backstrom, 2021; Syverson, 2007; Syverson et al., 2018) and admissions yield (i.e., the number of accepted applicants who enroll; Kang, 2022; Paris et al., 2022) following adoption of such policies, yet other studies found that test-reduction policies had no significant effect on volume of applications (Bennett, 2022; Felegi, 2024; Saboe & Terrizzi, 2019; Sweitzer et al., 2018) or yield (Bennett, 2022; Pellegrino, 2022; Sweitzer et al., 2018; Zwick, 2017) or even had a negative effect on volume of applications and yield (Pellegrino, 2022). Other researchers found that adopting test-reduction policies led to an initial increase in applications which did not persist over time, and which was followed by a decrease in admissions yield (Saboe & Terrizzi, 2019).

A number of studies have found promising evidence of increased enrollment of first-time undergraduates following the adoption of a test-reduction policy among selective institutions, whether the study focused on private institutions (Bennett, 2022), larger research institutions (Pellegrino, 2022), or a mixture of public and private institutions (Paris et al., 2022). Yet Saboe and Terrizzi (2019) found that adopting test-reduction policies had little effect on many other generally desirable outcomes, including overall graduation rate and retention rate.

An increase in the average standardized test scores (of those who submitted scores) of an incoming class may be desirable for schools wishing to increase perceived selectivity or placement in college rankings (Belasco et al., 2015). Two studies, Sweitzer et al. (2018) and Belasco et al. (2015), found that liberal arts institutions experienced increased standardized test scores as an effect of their test-reduction policies. Yet, in their study focusing on a mix of private and public institutions, Saboe & Terrizzi (2019) found no such increase in test scores. Possible explanations for these differing findings include different timeframes (Sweitzer et al. and Belasco et al. cover an earlier time period than does Saboe & Terrizzi) or institution types (liberal arts vs. a mixture of institution types), but there is insufficient evidence to make any such claims conclusively.

### *Effects on Campus Diversity*

Although the adoption of test-reduction admissions policies on overall applications, enrollment, and student retention has been minimal in a global sense, from an equity lens it is perhaps more important to look at its effects on the makeup of the applicant pool and incoming class at adopting institutions to investigate whether, and in what way, adopting such policies has impacted diversity at those schools.

It is theorized that admissions tests may pose a particular barrier to underrepresented minority student groups (URMs) either due to financial challenges (Pellegrino, 2022), perceived unfairness (Walpole et al., 2005), or because racial performance differences on large-scale standardized admission tests may discourage applicants (Gómez, 2023; Holzer & Baum, 2017; Woo et al., 2022). Looking at the applications, enrollment, and success of underrepresented groups provides a clearer picture of the effect of test-reduction policies on equity in admissions than does looking at just general trends. Consider, for example, that attracting a larger pool of applicants in general does not necessarily increase equity if the institution continues to select applicants fitting the same profile that it always has.

Studies are mixed on the effects of test reduction in fostering improved representation of URMs. Some studies have found evidence of greater first-time enrollment among URMs (Bennett, 2022; Osaki, 2022; Pellegrino, 2022; Syverson et al., 2018), yet others found no effect on the enrollment of URMs over time (Belasco et al., 2015; Paris et al., 2022; Rubin & González Canché, 2019; Saboe & Terrizzi, 2019; Sweitzer et al., 2018). See Table 1 for additional details.

Economic equity is also a concern; research to date again showed inconsistent findings on whether test-reduction policies can improve participation of students from

less advantaged backgrounds. For example, some studies have found that adopting a test-reduction policy led to a modest increase in Pell Grant recipients enrolling (Bennett, 2022; Felegi, 2024; Osaki, 2022; Pellegrino, 2022; Syverson et al., 2018), while others have found that adopting such a policy had no effect in that regard (Belasco et al., 2015; Paris et al., 2022; Rubin & González Canché, 2019; Saboe & Terrizzi, 2019; Sweitzer et al., 2018). The time period included in the analysis may play a role in explaining these contrasting findings. Paris et al. (2022) points out that the number of Pell Grant recipients in the general population increased significantly during the Great Recession of the late aughts, for example, as increased federal funds were pumped into the Pell Grant program. A particular concern for economic equity is that as schools admit students with more economic need, the financial supports for those students to attend may not always be present. For example, Felegi (2024) found that institutions dispersed less financial aid per student after instituting test-reduction policies, and Syverson et al. (2018) found that schools with test-optional policies gave less financial aid to applicants who had not submitted a test score with their application.

Why do findings on the impact of test-reduction policies on campus diversity differ so widely? One key difference among studies is that each examined a different set of institutions (see Table 1). Another methodological difference which may help explain the difference in findings between these studies is the timeframe which was examined. For example, while Bennett (2022), Felegi (2024), Kang (2022), Osaki (2022), Paris et al. (2022), Pellegrino (2022) and Sweitzer et al.'s (2018) analyses each cover roughly the years from 2000 to 2020, each analysis starts and ends at a slightly different time. Soboe and Terrizzi's (2019) study covers a narrower period from 2009 to 2014, while Belasco et al.'s (2015) covers an earlier date range, from 1992 to 2010.

Policies were implemented at different times by different types of institutions, so the timeframe of these studies also affects the types of institutions they are likely to examine (Paris & Wacker, 2023)—for example, whereas many early adopters of test-reduction policies were private liberal arts institutions, COVID adopters tend to include more public institutions that have higher preexisting levels of ethnic diversity (Lovell & Mallison, 2024). Bennett (2022) reasons that earlier adopters of test-reduction policies may have been more likely to implement other shifts to recruitment and admissions policies concurrently than institutions which adopted more recently. Osaki (2022) finds that “warming effects on enrollment may be more prevalent among colleges adopting the policy relatively early” (p. 15) but proposes a different explanation for this trend. Colleges which have dropped testing requirements more recently may experience scant enrollment boosts essentially because there are already so many schools which do not require test scores, and that, therefore, dropping a testing requirement no longer makes a school stand out. Disentangling the impact of the various methodological differences on the impact of test-optional studies is still a needed area of focus for future research, especially as there are relatively few studies looking at impact in a postpandemic timeframe as of yet.

Even so, we can tentatively see some trends emerging which merit future investigation. Of the 12 studies in this review, two looked at a mixture of public and private

institutions (Paris et al., 2022; Saboe & Terrizzi, 2019), two were case studies at public institutions/university systems (Rubin & González Canché, 2019; Schultz & Backstrom, 2021), six looked at principally private institutions and/or small liberal arts schools (Belasco et al., 2015; Bennett, 2022; Felegi, 2024; Osaki, 2022; Sweitzer et al., 2018; Syverson et al., 2018), one looked at large research institutions (Pellegrino, 2022), and one looked separately at effects for liberal arts and for research institutions (Kang, 2022), as demonstrated in Table 1. Notably, both studies looking at effects on equity for large research institutions found that test reduction had a positive impact on equity. Yet, among studies that looked at impact on a mixture of public and private schools, that effect disappeared. Studies focusing on liberal arts institutions were split (including the analysis in Kang, 2022). In terms of promoting racial and socioeconomic diversity, four of the studies found positive effects (Bennett, 2022; Felegi, 2024; Osaki, 2022; Syverson et al., 2018) and three found no effect (Belasco et al., 2015; Kang, 2022; Sweitzer et al. 2018). Of the studies finding positive effects, it should be noted that in looking at descriptive trends among their target institutions, Syverson et al. (2018) did not compare against a control group to account for the broader diversification of society during their study timeframe which may have contributed to increased diversity in incoming classes regardless of testing policy. The two case studies included found mixed (Schultz & Backstrom, 2021) or no (Rubin & González Canché, 2019) effects of test optional on the diversity of incoming classes.

### *Overall Effects of Test-Reduction*

While test-reduced admissions have been occurring for years, it is still a relatively new area for academic study. The 12 papers we discussed herein represent the early findings emerging from the new era of test-optional and test-free admissions. However, given the rapid proliferation of test-reduction strategies during the pandemic, it is important now to take a step back and try to determine if these strategies are achieving the desired goals of colleges who adopt them, typically to improve access and diversity, and to increase applications.

Though some studies have shown positive effects in terms of application volume or campus diversity, evidence is mixed, and other studies have failed to find evidence of positive effects. Generally, the evidence aligns with Matheny's (2022) conclusion that test reduction is "no panacea for vast racial and social class inequalities in pre-college resources and preparation" (p. iii). Yet, further research is needed to understand the role of these policies in the current historic context—of the 12 studies we explored, only two examined data that were collected postpandemic. And with the recent removal of Affirmative Action from schools' toolkits, it is more important than ever to examine how these policies interact with diversity goals.

It is also important to understand the context in which the adoption of a test-reduction policy takes place. For example, from the existing literature, we see that larger, public schools, particularly those that are less selective (Kang, 2022), may observe greater increases in diversity which accompany test-reduction strategies than smaller, private schools. Examining the effects of test-reduction strategies in varying contexts will

be increasingly important moving forward as the profile of schools adopting these strategies changes to include increasingly more public, ethnically diverse, and selective institutions than in the past (Lovell & Mallison, 2024).

Broadly speaking, schools do not all begin test-reduction policies from the same place. Until recently, schools adopting such policies have tended to have lower structural diversity than test-requiring institutions both before and after instituting those policies, regardless of whether they began to make up that gap after adopting the policy change (Felegi, 2024; Kang, 2022). Schools that already have diverse classes may have less latitude (or motivation) to increase diversity metrics, while schools with less structural diversity have more opportunity for change. However, the situation is not as cut and dry as it sounds—a school that currently has less diversity may also be less attractive to underrepresented groups for a variety of reasons; reducing testing requirements may not be sufficient to make a school attractive without further changes to the institution itself (e.g., reductions in cost of attendance; social supports for minoritized groups). Although further study is needed, it is unlikely that small shifts to admissions practices alone can improve diversity goals for institutions of higher education in all schools.

## **Contextual Considerations for Test Reduction**

There is a need for the research community to continue to delve into and disentangle the effects of test-reduction policies in particular contexts. Because results of studies to date have shown such mixed effects, it could be fruitful to understand which types of implementations of test-reduction policies tend to be successful for reaching institutional goals and which do not. For example, in a recent study comparing the impact of test-reduction policies at liberal arts schools of varying degrees of selectivity, Osaki (2022) found that outcomes for URM students vary based on the characteristics of the institution to which they are admitted. Four- and six-year graduation rates for URM students at liberal arts schools were unaffected by the adoption of test-reduction policies at highly selective schools, but actually decreased at other schools which were more moderately selective.

Beyond understanding the impact of test-reduction policies, institutions must look to novel solutions to increase campus diversity and remove barriers to access.

## **Refining Current Practice**

### *Consideration of Context*

Research indicates that admissions approaches which consider the applicant in context may be more effective at promoting equitable admissions outcomes (Bastedo et al., 2023). For example, in a 2018 simulation study, Bastedo et al. found that admissions officers who subscribe to an understanding of admissions emphasizing educational and family contexts of applicants were significantly more likely than other admissions officers to admit a low-income applicant from an underserved high school into an entering class (Bastedo et al., 2018). Similarly, a case study at a medical school found that

considering applicant context led to increased admission of URM students (Wilson et al., 2019). Another pilot study showed that providing contextual information about students increased the probability of acceptance for students from the most challenging school and neighborhood backgrounds (Mabel et al., 2022), further suggesting that the admissions strategies which are most promising for fostering diversity and equity in admissions may be those which take into account educational context.

### *Additional Best Practices*

In addition to the consideration of context, there are various other best practices that should be followed to minimize adverse unintended consequences of implementing admissions policies. For example, grades and personal characteristics (Zwick, 2023), exams (National Association for College Admission Counseling [NACAC], 2020), and any other admissions component considered should be accompanied by a strong rationale and a study of the likely impact of its consideration. An admissions practice which is currently undergoing scrutiny at many schools is legacy admissions, a practice which tends to privilege the wealthy (Chetty et al., 2023; Liu, 2022). Transparency in what an institution values and in how applicants will be evaluated is an important fairness concern (Gooch et al., 2024; Liu, 2022; Zwick, 2023), and such information should be posted prominently where all applicants will see it, such as on an institution's application webpage (Ober et al., 2023; Sotelo et al., 2023). A necessary prerequisite for this kind of external transparency is internal clarity on the values of the program or institution and how those values will be measured (Gooch et al., 2024). With this information, programs may align admissions procedures to their mission or values (Ober et al., 2023), potentially through the use of rubrics, as recommended by the Council of Graduate Schools (Kent & McCarthy, 2016).

### **New Application Components**

A related avenue which is currently being pursued to incrementally improve admissions outcomes is the pursuit of new or additional application components. Noncognitive attributes, for example, are a point of emphasis for the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC, 2023), and may contribute to fairness and incremental validity when considered as part of a program of holistic admissions (Kuncel et al., 2001; Kyllonen et al., 2005; Niessen et al., 2017; Paris et al., 2023). Measuring such constructs without bias is, however, a challenge (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015) that remains to be surmounted if consideration of noncognitive attributes is to be an integral part of admissions. For example, if tied to high-stakes decisions such as admissions, there is a danger that measurement of any noncognitive attributes deemed to be desirable would be susceptible to faking or coaching (Holzman et al., 2021; Zwick, 2023). Higher education programs looking to pursue noncognitive attributes as admissions factors should do so with caution, ensuring that all students understand through which parts of their application they are expected to demonstrate evidence of possessing the noncognitive attributes the program seeks to measure (Gooch et al., 2024).

Methodological steps may also be taken to mitigate some concerns with measurement of noncognitive attributes, for example utilizing forced choice and situational judgment tasks in assessments (Holzman et al., 2021; Kuncel et al., 2020).

## Discussion

### Takeaways for Institutions Considering Test Reduction

For programs whose goals are to increase equity in their admissions processes, we find that moving to test-optional can at best be part of a larger program of reform to bring about increased equity in admissions (e.g., see Bennett, 2022; Matheny, 2022). Indeed, recruitment practices, support services for enrolled students, and other factors implemented by individual schools may be considered more direct ways to pursue diversity goals than reducing testing (Zwick, 2019). Concerningly, programs may be overly convinced of the effectiveness of a test-reduction policy and adopt it in isolation, believing it alone to be sufficient to bring equity to their admissions process. Adopting test reduction at the cost of other improvements risks sacrificing results for the appearance of equity (Belasco et al., 2015), as a test-reduction policy alone is not enough to bring about equity in admissions (Baker & Rosinger, 2020; Rosinger et al., 2022). Evidence suggests that enrollment professionals believe in the effectiveness of test-reduction policies, at least to the degree that the majority of their institutions are not considering a return to a test-required policy or strongly support continuing test-reduction policies (Haviland et al., 2023; Inside Higher Ed, 2023).

In this paper, we have suggested several promising routes for incrementally improving equity in admissions; yet no matter the intervention they adopt, institutions should take care that, in keeping with best practices, they conduct internal institutional research to better understand the effects their policies are having (Zwick, 2023). In particular, more research will be needed at the institutional level to determine the implications of test-reduction policies for internal allocation of resources (Zwick, 2019) such as scholarship or funding decisions and program placement.

Through careful internal research, institutions can reflect upon the effects test-reduction policies are having in their particular contexts. For example, as of the time this paper was drafted around April 2024, a number of selective institutions had reinstated standardized testing requirements, including MIT, Yale, Harvard, Brown, and Dartmouth. When communicating the decisions to reinstate testing requirements, these institutions cited evidence suggesting that in their contexts, test-optional policies were hurting students from less-advantaged backgrounds, because test scores help “identify socioeconomically disadvantaged students who lack access to advanced coursework or other enrichment opportunities that would otherwise demonstrate their readiness” (Schmill, 2022). The decisions to reinstate mandatory testing were based on evidence that such students were choosing not to submit test scores which would have helped their chance of admission (Brown University, 2024; Cascio et al., 2024) based on these

institutions' consideration of scores in context (i.e., relative to other students at the applicant's high school). Overall, these institutions saw admissions tests as flawed, but useful tools for admissions relative to other available tools, e.g., Dartmouth cites Chetty et al. (2023)'s finding that non-score test inputs, such as guidance counselor letters of recommendation, "*do not* predict college performance even though they *do* advantage more-advantaged applicants at elite institutions" (Cascio et al., 2024). It remains to be seen whether such findings apply more broadly across less-selective institutions.

## New Paradigms for Admissions

To this point, we have discussed relatively conventional approaches to increasing equity in admissions. Yet, this moment of great changes to the admissions landscape could also be taken as an opportunity to make a more radical departure from current practice. To be sure, larger changes are fraught with even greater possibilities of unintended consequences; but there are reasons to consider that now may be an appropriate time for principled experimentation. Already, before the Supreme Court decision ending race-conscious admissions, equity gaps existed. In states which previously banned affirmative action, even the best race-neutral strategies have failed to be as effective as race-conscious admissions for increasing URM and low-socioeconomic status representation (Bleemer, 2023). How much more so will this be the case in institutions across the country which do not have years of experience in implementing race-neutral strategies?

Zwick (2023) suggests a reconsideration of who 'merits' entry into selective higher education institutions. The prevailing approach has emphasized prediction of college success in terms of outcomes such as GPA and graduation rate—yet even in the current system where predictive power is emphasized, much of the variance in measures of college outcomes is unexplained by current admissions criteria (Paris & Heiser, 2022; Paris et al., 2023). Already, other definitions of 'merit' have been proposed, based on varying understandings of the purpose of higher education. For example, the Harvard Graduate School of Education has proposed an admissions system focused primarily on evaluation of applicants' community service and character, as opposed to a traditional focus on measures of academic readiness (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2016). Alternatively, an institution whose mission is to provide the most good to the public might wish to implement an admissions strategy targeting the students who will benefit most from its curricula (Zwick, 2023).

With any proposed admissions strategy, institutions will need to keep legal concerns in mind, particularly ramifications from the U.S. Supreme Court cases brought by Students for Fair Admissions. For example, an institution whose mission includes increasing diversity must now be cautious in gathering demographic data on applicants and must "ensure that the racial demographics of the applicant pool do not influence admissions decisions" (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2023 p. 5). Yet even under this ruling, institutions may consider alternate admissions criteria aimed at increasing diversity, for example, choosing to admit all students who

complete an academic program at a community college or other institution likely to enroll students from disadvantaged backgrounds (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2023) or securing increased financial aid to help promising students overcome financial hurdles to attend (e.g., see Castleman & Long, 2016).

## Final Considerations

Ultimately, the most important aspect of an admissions strategy may be that each part of the process and its repercussions are carefully considered. Whether an approach is thoughtfully constructed may make more of a difference than simply whether or not admissions tests are required. As we continue to monitor research on the subject and await future studies, schools can take proactive steps to reflect on their goals in test-reduction strategies and examine their institutional research data to understand if these goals are being met. If the goals are to produce bigger application pools, is this happening? If the goals are to produce more diverse classes, are they seeing more students from underrepresented backgrounds enter the applicant pool? Are these students being admitted? If admitted, are they enrolling? It will be just as critical to understand key outcomes metrics for these students: are they persisting and graduating at the same rates as other students? If the answer to the application and enrollment questions is yes, but the retention and graduation questions is no, schools must look beyond admissions policies to identify adjustments to their institutions that can create a better experience for these students.

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