



How Optional is “Test-Optional”?

First, some definitions

If a college is test-optional, that means they do not require applicants to include scores from the ACT or SAT as part of their application. However, students may include those tests if they feel the scores accurately represent their abilities as a student. If a student decides not to include test scores, they will be evaluated on the other elements of their application, such as grades, extracurricular activities, and essays, and will not be penalized for not including test scores. A few colleges are “test-blind,” which means they will not consider test scores even if they’re included in the application.

The landscape pre-Covid-19

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020 was shaping up to be a big year for the test-optional movement. In just the first two months of 2020, 12 colleges in the United States had already announced they were joining the more than 1,000 institutions evaluating students by something other than test scores. These colleges increasingly recognized that high school grades could predict a student’s college success as well or better than test scores could, without the obvious social, economic, and racial disparities present in SAT and ACT results. However, most colleges continued to require SAT/ACT scores as part of their first-year student applications.

The new reality

Covid-19 upended the gradual uptake of test-optional policies. The College Board (the makers of the SAT) and ACT Inc were forced to cancel several tests in a row, making it difficult for many students to take any tests at all. As of now, it is unclear when and how testing will resume. Given that landscape, there has been a rush to announce test-optional and test-blind policies (we see you, California State University!) for at least the 2020-21 application cycle, and many colleges are making that switch permanent. If SAT and ACT testing continues to be unavailable to many students, the ranks of test-optional colleges will continue to increase throughout the summer and fall.

Our advice

Almost every college that has announced a new testing policy has become test-optional, **not** test-blind. That means that if you have test scores that are higher than the median and they are above-average for accepted students at the college you’re applying to, you should probably still send them. If you’re unable to take the ACT or SAT safely and comfortably, you should feel confident that you will not be penalized at test-optional colleges for not having done so. You can find an updated list of test-optional institutions at www.fairtest.org.