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Exploring Test-Optional Admissions Policies: Patterns in Applications, Enrollment, and Diversity During the COVID-19

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Exploring Test-Optional Admissions Policies:

Patterns in Applications, Enrollment, and Diversity During the COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many aspects of higher education, including college admissions processes. Since 2020, numerous universities and colleges have adopted test-optional policies, allowing applicants to decide whether to submit standardized test scores. Although such policies have been in place at some institutions since 1998, research on their associations with student diversity and enrollment patterns has produced mixed findings. The widespread adoption of test-optional policies during the pandemic presents an opportunity to further examine their role in admissions. This study draws on admission data from a four-year, nonprofit, private university in the Midwest and uses logistic regression to explore patterns linked to the test-optional policy. Comparisons with pre-pandemic data suggest that the policy coincided with a broader applicant pool and increased applications from students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the diversity of the enrolled student body remained relatively unchanged. Across the dataset, admitted students with higher high school GPAs were more likely to enroll. Among these, Black students who submitted test scores demonstrated higher enrollment likelihood than their peers.

Keywords: Test-Optional policy, Higher Education, College Admission and Enrollment, COVID-19 Pandemic Impact

INTRODUCTION

Standardized testing has long been a central feature of higher education admissions, intended to provide insight into applicants' prior academic preparation and potential for success in college (College Board, 2019). In 2017 and 2018, more than four million students took standardized exams annually, but participation declined to 3.8 million in 2019 and fell further to 2.8 million in 2020, a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (ACT, 2021; College Board, 2021).

Despite their widespread use, standardized tests have drawn increasing criticism for their limited predictive value and for perpetuating inequities. Research shows that test performance often advantages white and higher-income students and contributes relatively little to predicting first-year GPA beyond what high school GPA already provides (Rask & Tiefenthaler, 2012; Rosner, 2012). In response, many institutions have reconsidered their reliance on standardized testing, with a marked expansion of test-optional policies during the pandemic. By 2020, over 1,600 institutions had implemented test-optional approaches, and many indicated interest in maintaining them permanently (Fair Test, 2021).

Test-optional policies are frequently discussed in terms of their potential associations with changes in applicant diversity, selectivity, and overall application volume. Scholars and practitioners argue that removing standardized testing as a requirement may lower barriers for underrepresented and low-income students, thereby making access to higher education more attainable (Espenshade & Chung, 2011). Institutions may also see strategic value in these policies, as they can increase applications and alter the reported academic profile of entering classes without mandating test scores (Ehrenberg, 2003).

For students, the option to withhold test scores can reduce economic and psychological barriers, allowing those with lower scores or limited test preparation resources to pursue applications they might otherwise have avoided (Liu et al., 2007). At the same time, the evidence on whether test-optional approaches are associated with measurable increases in enrollment diversity has been mixed, underscoring the need for further study (Rosner, 2012).

This study adds to that body of work by examining admission patterns at a nonprofit, private, four-year university in the Midwest. The institution adopted a test-optional policy in 2020, providing an opportunity to investigate shifts in application and enrollment during the 2020–2021 cycle. By comparing data from Fall 2020, when test scores were required, to Fall 2021, when they were optional, the analysis considers how applicant demographics and enrollment behaviors align with the policy change (Sacerdote, 2001; Winston & Zimmerman, 2004).

The research addresses the following questions:

- RQ1: What differences in race, gender, family income, high school GPA, institutional scholarship/grant, and distance from campus are observed between students who submitted test scores and those who did not in Fall 2021?
- RQ2: How is enrollment likelihood associated with test score submission status in Fall 2021, after accounting for race, gender, family income, high school GPA, institutional scholarship/grant, and distance from campus?
- RQ3: In what ways did applicant behaviors (applications, admissions, and yield) and demographic/academic characteristics vary between Fall 2020 (test-required) and Fall 2021 (test-optional)?
- RQ4: How was the probability of enrollment among admitted students related to the adoption of a test-optional policy when comparing Fall 2020 and Fall 2021, considering race, gender, family income, high school GPA, institutional scholarship/grant, and distance from campus?

This study uses logistic regression to examine how demographic, academic, and contextual characteristics are associated with application and enrollment outcomes before and after the adoption of the test-optional policy. Rather than claiming causal effects, the analyses are designed to identify relationships and patterns that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role test-optional policies may play in shaping admissions outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Arguments Against Standardized Tests

Standardized tests were originally designed to uniformly measure student success in post-secondary education, with testing companies maintaining that these assessments are impervious to coaching. However, evidence contradicts this, showing that coaching can slightly improve scores, and wealthier students often leverage expensive preparation resources and multiple test attempts to maximize their scores, creating a strong correlation between family income and test outcomes—stronger than the correlation between standardized scores and high school GPAs (National Association for College Admissions Counseling [NACAC], 2008; Rampell, 2009; Soares, 2012). Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that standardized tests disproportionately affect certain demographic groups, reflecting biases based on social class, race/ethnicity, and parental education levels, and consistently show a widening racial gap in scores (Hechinger, 2009; Soares, 2012). While the English and mathematics sections of the ACT are noted for their strong predictive value regarding college success, the science and reading sections do not predict academic success effectively (Jaschik, 2011). This inconsistency, highlighted in a study based on data from a single Ohio public university, suggests that the effectiveness of standardized tests in predicting college readiness may not be broadly representative at a national level.

Test-optional Policy Trends and Alternative Attributes of Standardized Tests

The trend toward test-optional admission policies in U.S. colleges has been gaining momentum, significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As early as 2008, over 280 four-year, nonprofit institutions had already embraced such policies, a movement catalyzed by findings that high school transcripts and certain standardized tests like the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exams often predict college success more reliably than traditional standardized tests (NACAC, 2008). This shift reflects a growing recognition that HSGPA is a more consistent indicator of academic potential, irrespective of the high school's quality.

Research by Espenshade and Chung (2011) highlights this trend, revealing that private institutions with test-optional policies saw marked improvements in enrollment and student performance, alongside increased social and racial diversity within their student bodies. Subsequent studies have deepened the understanding of these impacts. Belasco, Rosinger, and Hearn (2014) highlighted how such policies can promote equity in admissions at selective liberal arts colleges; Furuta (2017) and Rubin & González Canché (2019) examined their effects on demographic shifts in student populations; and Saboe & Terrizzi (2019) provided insights into how these policies influence graduate quality, selectivity, and diversity. More recently, Bennett (2021) analyzed evolving trends in application behaviors and student demographics, further evidencing the broad and transformative impacts of test-optional policies.

This evolving landscape was further shaped by significant events and publications, including the 2005 revision of the Scholastic Aptitude Test by the College Board, which spurred another 60 U.S. institutions to adopt test-optional policies (NACAC, 2012). NACAC's 2008 report played a pivotal role, urging universities to reassess the role of standardized test scores in admissions and consider the potential merits of a test-optional approach. This led to a widespread reevaluation of admissions models, as evidenced by Lawrence University and 59 other institutions moving to adopt test-optional policies in response (NACAC, 2008). The collective findings and institutional responses illustrate a significant shift towards more holistic and inclusive approaches to college admissions, emphasizing the varied and nuanced measures of student potential beyond standardized tests.

Different Opinions on Test-Optional Policies

Critics of test-optional policies often argue that these policies can be manipulated to artificially boost a college's national ranking. According to Hoover (2008, 2010), some believe that by not requiring a standard method for reporting test scores, institutions might only report higher scores submitted voluntarily by students, potentially inflating their average test scores and, by extension, their rankings. This suspicion is compounded by observations that test-optional policies often lead to an increase in applications, which skeptics suggest could be a strategy to enhance a college's appearance of selectivity

(Hoover, 2011). However, there is limited evidence to support the claim that colleges deliberately use test-optional policies to manipulate their standings. Instead, many institutions advocate that such policies help achieve greater diversity within their student bodies, which they consider a more significant indicator of success than mere rankings. This approach suggests a shift towards valuing inclusivity and broadening educational opportunities, aligning more closely with the educational mission of many colleges and universities.

Case Studies of Institutions Adopting Test-optional Policies

Although evaluations of test-optional policies have been limited, existing studies offer a crucial empirical foundation for research in this area. Most of these analyses are small-scale, descriptive examinations of specific institutional contexts. Among the most significant are studies at Bates, Bowdoin, and Mount Holyoke, which provide a comprehensive view of the effects of SAT-optional policies (Hiss, 2001; Robinson & Monks, 2005; Schaffner, 1985). For instance, Bates College adopted a test-optional policy in 1984, leading to a near doubling of its applicant pool by 2004 and a substantial increase in diversity, with minority enrollment rising from four percent to nine percent from 1983 to 2001 (Hiss, 2001; Hoover, 2012). Similarly, after Bowdoin College initiated a test-optional policy in 1970, it saw a significant surge in applications, particularly from those not submitting test scores, suggesting a correlation between the policy and applicant behavior (Schaffner, 1985). This trend was further evidenced when Bowdoin adjusted its policy to recommend test scores in 1974, resulting in a 51% drop in non-submitters in just one year.

Mount Holyoke's experience following its adoption of a test-optional policy in the early 2000s also highlights these trends. The college observed a 7% increase in applications, including significant rises among Black and Latina applicants, with the proportion of applicants not submitting test scores reaching about a quarter of the total applicant pool (Robinson & Monks, 2005). These studies, while descriptive, highlight the responsiveness of applicants to test-optional policies and suggest these policies can enhance the diversity and size of an institution's applicant pool.

Despite the valuable insights these case studies provide, they primarily offer descriptive evidence of the impact of test-optional policies on application trends rather than causal inferences. This limitation points to a broader gap in the research on how such policies influence enrollment preferences more generally. The present study aims to build on this foundation by examining differences between test score submitters and non-submitters, exploring how individual enrollment decisions under test-optional policies can broaden the diversity and increase the size of an institution's applicant pool and student body.

COVID-19 Impact and Recent Developments

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted standardized testing and college admissions policies, leading to the widespread adoption of test-optional policies after many SAT and ACT test dates were canceled in 2020. Originally viewed as a temporary measure, these policies have not only persisted but have also expanded in the post-pandemic years, prompting a reevaluation of long-standing admissions strategies (Ingersoll, 2020).

In response, institutions have explored alternative assessment methods, developing new evaluation criteria and holistic review processes to assess applicants in the absence of standardized test scores. This shift has facilitated a broader understanding of a student's potential, focusing on qualitative attributes and overall academic readiness. Additionally, the global impact of these policies is now a crucial area of research, particularly regarding their effects on international student admissions and the diversity of the student body. Researchers are also investigating the long-term sustainability of test-optional policies, aiming to determine their lasting effects on admissions processes, student success, and institutional diversity. These ongoing studies aim to ascertain whether the initial benefits of these policies during the pandemic will extend into future educational practices, marking a significant shift toward inclusivity and flexibility in higher education.

Test-optional Policy Adoption During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the context of the pandemic, test-optional policy implementation in college admissions is often rooted in logistical, ethical, and students' welfare concerns. According to a report by test preparation firm Compass Education Group (2020), SAT and ACT test dates for the days between mid-March and mid-June of 2020 had been canceled, with additional dates planned for Fall 2020 if weather permits (Ingersoll, 2020). The possibility of at-home standardized testing in Fall 2020 was speculated, however, the College Board leadership said that was extremely unlikely (Hartocollis, 2020). A number of admissions officers expressed concern about the impact of canceled or altered high school semesters on test performance as well as the potential for disruptions to be more significant for students from less wealthy families and underrepresented groups (Bauer-Wolf, 2020). Additionally, dean of admissions at Tufts University mentioned students' general well-being and mental health as important factors, noting that a standardized test for college admissions shouldn't be the forerunner in students' minds (Lorin, 2020). The pandemic-related concerns added to existing issues that institutions already faced in regards to equity and enrollment prospects. The president of St. Bonaventure University reported that the institution was losing applicants to test-optional institutions before the pandemic (Buckley, 2020).

As the COVID-19 pandemic lingers, more institutions continue to waive standardized test scores in their admissions requirements. According to Fair Test, as of February 2022, over 1,800 colleges and universities in the United States had extended their test-optional policies through the 2021–2022 application cycle, with some even moving to optional test scores permanently (Fair Test, 2022). For the 2021–2022 admissions cycle, 75% of four-year colleges and universities did not require standardized test scores.

Institutions' Different Approaches Toward Test-optional Implementation

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the evolution of test-optional policies in higher education, though many of these changes build on existing frameworks established before the pandemic.

While the core principles of test-optional admissions remain largely consistent, institutions are increasingly diverging in how they implement these policies. Some, like Pennsylvania State University and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, have opted for temporary, pilot test-optional policies lasting three years to gauge long-term viability and impact (Fair Test, 2022). Others, such as Arkansas State University, apply conditional test-optional policies that still require standardized tests from students with GPAs below 3.0, aiming to maintain academic standards (Brewer, 2021).

Moreover, institutions are exploring innovative ways to adapt to these policies by integrating alternative assessment methods that align more closely with their unique educational missions. For example, DePaul University has allowed applicants who do not submit standardized test scores to instead answer essay prompts that evaluate noncognitive traits such as leadership, service, and long-term goal achievement since 2011 (Hoover, 2011). Similarly, during the pandemic, Newberry College permitted students unable to submit scores to provide personal statements as substitutes, indicating a flexible approach to admissions assessments (Jaschik, 2020).

These adaptations highlight a broader shift towards holistic admissions processes, where a variety of factors, including HSGPA, writing quality, curriculum rigor, community contributions, and coursework at community colleges, are considered to assess a candidate's potential more comprehensively (University of Redlands, 2020). Institutions like Chapman University and Redlands University have reported that internal data reviews show HSGPA to be a more reliable indicator of student performance than standardized test scores, reinforcing the value of a more rounded evaluation criteria (Chapman University, 2020; Jaschik, 2020).

In summary, the shift towards test-optional admissions has not only been a response to immediate challenges posed by the pandemic but also part of a broader reevaluation of how colleges assess and value potential students. As these policies become more embedded, ongoing research into their effects on equity, diversity, and student success is crucial, promising to offer insights that could reshape admissions strategies in the years to come.

METHODS

Data

Data for this study were drawn from the institution's customer relationship management system, Slate, which records student demographic information, SAT and ACT scores, high school GPA (HSGPA), test-optional status, residential distance from campus, and admission outcomes. All records were de-identified and archived prior to the initiation of this study. The analysis examines applicant data from the Fall 2020 and Fall 2021 admission cycles to explore patterns associated with the adoption of the test-optional policy.

During the Fall 2020 cycle, applicants were high school seniors in 2019–2020, when test submission was required. That year, 28,772 applicants were recorded, of whom 17,664 were admitted and 2,125 enrolled. In Fall 2021, after the test-optional policy was implemented during the pandemic, two groups emerged: test score submitters and non-submitters. In total, there were 39,038 applicants (15,290 submitters; 23,748 non-submitters), with 29,130 admitted (13,285 submitters; 15,845 non-submitters) and 2,868 enrolled (1,429 submitters; 1,439 non-submitters).

Variables

Two main variables guide the analyses: test score submission status and enrollment decision. TESTOPT is a dichotomous indicator of whether an applicant submitted test scores (1 = submitted, 0 = not submitted). ENROLL is a dichotomous outcome reflecting whether an admitted student enrolled (1 = enrolled, 0 = not enrolled). Mean enrollment rates across groups were calculated to describe patterns linked to test-optional participation.

Covariates

Seven covariates were drawn from Perna's (2006) college choice model framework. High school GPA (HSGPA) was reported on a four-point scale with adjustments for weighted grading systems. Family income (FAMILYINC), derived from FAFSA, served as a proxy for socioeconomic status. Race (RACE) was categorized into mutually exclusive groups (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian) following IPEDS standards. Gender (GENDER) was coded as Female or Male. ACT/SAT superscore (TESTSCORE) was constructed from the highest subject scores across multiple test attempts, with SAT scores converted to the ACT scale. Institutional scholarship/grant (INSTFINAID) represented the amount awarded at admission. Residential distance from campus (PROXIMITY) measured applicants' proximity in miles. Applicants from non-reporting or homeschool environments were excluded for data consistency. These variables provide a framework for examining how demographic, academic, and contextual factors align with student application and enrollment outcomes.

Analysis

RQ1 and RQ3 involve descriptive statistical comparisons of application counts, admission offers, enrollments, yield rates, and applicant characteristics (HSGPA, RACE, GENDER, FAMILYINC, TESTSCORE, INSTFINAID, PROXIMITY). To assess differences between submitters and non-submitters, and between pre- and post-policy cycles, two-sample t-tests and z-tests were conducted.

RQ2 and RQ4 examine how the likelihood of enrollment was associated with applicant characteristics. Logistic regression models were estimated separately for Fall 2020 and Fall 2021. Predictors included HSGPA, RACE, GENDER, FAMILYINC, TESTSCORE, INSTFINAID, and PROXIMITY. For Fall 2021, TESTOPT was also included. The dependent variable was students' enrollment decision. The model takes the form:

$$\log\left(\frac{p}{1-p}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \cdots + \beta_k x_k$$

Reference groups were chosen based on prevalence: White for RACE, Female for GENDER, and Submitters for TESTOPT.

RESULTS

RQ1 asked whether differences existed in average family income (FAMILYINC), high school GPA (HSGPA), race, gender, admission rates, and yield rates between test score submitters and non-submitters in Fall 2021. Table 1 provides a statistical summary of these variables. Two-sample t-tests and z-tests were used to compare the two groups.

[Table 1]

Across 34,308 applicants, submitters (n = 13,871) reported higher average family incomes ($151,370 vs. $102,601, $p < 0.001$) and GPAs (3.95 vs. 3.68, $p < 0.001$) than non-submitters (n = 20,437). These differences were reflected in admissions outcomes: submitters had higher admission rates (88.8% vs. 71.3%, $p < 0.001$) and higher yield rates (10.9% vs. 9.0%, $p < 0.001$). Submission behavior also differed by race and, to a lesser extent, gender. White and Asian applicants were more likely to submit scores ($p < 0.001$), while Black and Hispanic applicants were less likely to do so ($p < 0.001$). Gender differences were modest, with roughly 40% of both male and female applicants submitting scores. These group-level differences carried through the admissions cycle. Submitters were admitted at higher rates, received larger average scholarship/grant packages ($22,668 vs. $20,157, $p < 0.001$), and maintained higher socioeconomic profiles through enrollment ($206,453 vs. $150,913, $p < 0.001$). Yield rates also remained higher for submitters. Taken together, these patterns suggest that while test-optional policies may allow more students from underrepresented or lower-income backgrounds to apply, differences by socioeconomic status and race remain apparent at each stage of the admissions process.

RQ2 examined whether factors associated with enrollment differed between submitters and non-submitters in Fall 2021. Separate logistic regression models were estimated for each group (Enrolled = 1, Not Enrolled = 0). Predictors included FAMILYINC, HSGPA, RACE, GENDER, and PROXIMITY,

with TESTSCORE added for submitters and INSTFINAID included for non-submitters. Results are presented in Table 2.

[Table 2]

Among submitters, higher family income was positively associated with enrollment ($\beta = 0.121$, $p < 0.001$). By contrast, higher HSGPA was negatively associated with enrollment ($\beta = –0.259$, $p < 0.001$). Racial differences emerged: Black ($\beta = –0.523$, $p < 0.05$) and Hispanic ($\beta = –0.241$, $p < 0.05$) applicants had lower log-odds of enrollment relative to White applicants. Living farther from campus was also associated with lower enrollment ($\beta = –0.151$, $p < 0.05$). For non-submitters, HSGPA was again negatively related to enrollment ($\beta = –0.672$, $p < 0.05$), while institutional financial aid was positively associated ($\beta = 0.712$, $p < 0.01$). Racial differences were pronounced, with Black applicants less likely to enroll than White applicants ($\beta = –2.352$, $p < 0.05$). These findings highlight distinct enrollment patterns across groups. Family income, GPA, financial aid, and race were associated with different enrollment outcomes depending on whether applicants submitted test scores.

RQ3 considered whether applicant behaviors shifted between Fall 2020 (test-required) and Fall 2021 (test-optional). Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 3.

[Table 3]

Applications increased from 28,772 in Fall 2020 to 39,038 in Fall 2021. A smaller proportion of applicants submitted test scores in 2021, but the average score among submitters rose significantly ($p < 0.001$), consistent with prior research suggesting that students with higher scores are more likely to self-report under test-optional conditions (Robinson & Monks, 2005). Average HSGPA declined in 2021, reflecting a broader distribution of academic preparation among applicants. Socioeconomic characteristics also shifted. Average family income declined among applicants and admits in 2021 ($p < 0.01$), though the average income of enrolled students increased compared to 2020 ($178,562 vs. $169,831, $p < 0.001$).

This pattern suggests that while lower-income students were more likely to apply and be admitted in 2021, higher-income students were more likely to enroll. Racial representation showed mixed results. The number of admitted Black and Hispanic students increased significantly ($p < 0.01$), yet these gains did not translate into proportional increases in enrollment. White students accounted for the largest enrollment growth between 2020 and 2021 (1,584 vs. 1,136).

RQ4 analyzed whether enrollment predictors differed between Fall 2020 and Fall 2021. Logistic regression models were estimated for each year, with predictors including FAMILYINC, HSGPA, RACE, GENDER, TESTSCORE, INSTFINAID, and PROXIMITY, and TESTOPT added in 2021. Results are summarized in Table 4.

[Table 4]

In 2020, higher family income was positively associated with enrollment ($\beta = 0.063$, $p < 0.05$), while HSGPA was negatively associated ($\beta = –0.120$, $p < 0.05$). Asian applicants were more likely to enroll than White applicants ($\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.05$). Distance from campus reduced enrollment likelihood ($\beta = –0.118$, $p < 0.05$), and institutional financial aid had a modest positive association ($\beta = 0.134$, $p < 0.05$). By 2021, the role of family income strengthened ($\beta = 0.120$, $p < 0.001$), and the negative association with HSGPA became more pronounced ($\beta = –0.299$, $p < 0.001$). Racial disparities widened, with Black ($\beta = –0.642$, $p < 0.05$) and Hispanic ($\beta = –0.238$, $p < 0.05$) applicants less likely to enroll than White applicants. Proximity continued to matter ($\beta = –0.119$, $p < 0.05$). Financial aid, however, was no longer statistically significant. Importantly, non-submitters had higher odds of enrollment than submitters ($\beta = 1.603$, $p < 0.001$).

Across analyses, patterns suggest that test-optional policies were associated with increased application volume and greater representation of students from lower-income and racially minoritized backgrounds at the applicant and admit stages. However, disparities in enrollment remained, with higher-income and White students more likely to accept admission offers. These results indicate that while test-

optional policies align with broader participation at the application stage, they may not, on their own, be sufficient to alter longer-term enrollment patterns across all groups.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how admissions patterns at a nonprofit, private, four-year college in the Midwest shifted after the adoption of a test-optional policy. By comparing Fall 2020 (pre-policy) and Fall 2021 (post-policy), the analyses highlight associations between test-optional practices and application, admission, and enrollment outcomes.

Consistent with prior work (e.g., Hoover, 2011; Robinson & Monks, 2005), the applicant pool in Fall 2021 was substantially larger than in Fall 2020, with increases of 26% in applications, 40% in admits, and 27% in enrollees. These results suggest that test-optional policies may coincide with broader participation at the application stage. However, changes in racial diversity at the enrollment stage were less pronounced. Although the number of admitted Black and Hispanic students rose, their enrollment proportions did not increase at the same rate, echoing earlier findings that test-optional approaches have mixed associations with student body diversity (Sacerdote, 2001; Winston & Zimmerman, 2004).

Socioeconomic patterns also emerged. The average family income among applicants and admits declined in 2021 relative to 2020, suggesting that more students from lower-income backgrounds entered the admissions pipeline. At the same time, the average family income of enrolled students rose, indicating that many lower-income students did not ultimately matriculate. This pattern aligns with theories that test-optional policies may expand initial access but do not necessarily offset financial and structural factors influencing enrollment (Liu, Ehrenberg, & Mrdjenovic, 2007).

Regression analyses further illustrate the complexity of enrollment decisions under a test-optional framework. Family income remained a strong predictor of enrollment, and racial differences in matriculation became more pronounced, with Black and Hispanic students less likely to enroll than their White peers despite admission offers. The finding that non-submitters in 2021 had higher odds of

enrollment than submitters suggests that the absence of a test requirement may have encouraged some students—particularly those uncertain about their scores—to accept admission offers. Still, these shifts were not evenly distributed across groups, underscoring the persistence of inequities in college access.

Limitations and Further Research

The present analysis is based on a single institution and two consecutive admission cycles. While the case offers insight into how test-optional policies align with application and enrollment patterns at one Midwestern private college, the findings should not be generalized to all higher education contexts. Instead, they provide a basis for reflection at institutions with similar profiles.

Moreover, this study focuses on short-term outcomes—applications, admissions, and initial enrollment. Future research should assess how test-optional policies relate to longer-term outcomes such as student GPA, retention, graduation, and satisfaction. Such work could help clarify how the observed associations at the admissions stage connect to students' academic trajectories and institutional equity goals.

CONCLUSION

Prior research has suggested that test-optional policies may be associated with larger and more diverse applicant pools (Schaffner, 1985; Robinson & Monks, 2005). This study examined whether such patterns appeared at a nonprofit, four-year private institution in the Midwest. Guided by previous findings, the analysis explored how applicant, admit, and enrollment outcomes differed across student groups before and after the adoption of a test-optional approach.

The results show that application volume, admission offers, and enrollment counts rose in Fall 2021 compared to Fall 2020. However, the anticipated broad gains in racial and socioeconomic diversity were less evident. While more students from lower-income and racially minoritized backgrounds entered the applicant and admit pools, their representation did not increase proportionally in the enrolled population. Higher-income students continued to make up the majority of enrollees, and racial disparities in enrollment remained.

Nationally, over 1,600 institutions now identify as test-optional (FairTest, 2022), and such policies are often discussed as a strategy to reduce inequities linked to standardized testing (Neil & Guisbond, 2014). The findings here suggest that test-optional policies may align with expanded access at the application stage, but enrollment outcomes remain uneven. Students with greater resources—financial, informational, and strategic—may be better positioned to decide whether to submit scores, apply widely, and manage financial aid negotiations. Students with fewer resources may still encounter barriers that shape their final enrollment choices.

The pandemic context also shaped these dynamics. Limited test access in 2020–2021 meant that score submission itself could signal commitment or preparedness, potentially advantaging students with the means to test and retest. As a result, even within a test-optional framework, higher-income students retained stronger positioning in admissions and enrollment decisions.

Overall, the study highlights that while test-optional policies can open pathways for broader participation in the admissions process, they do not on their own resolve the structural inequities that influence who ultimately enrolls. Future work should examine longer-term outcomes, such as persistence and graduation, to better understand how test-optional approaches interact with broader equity goals in higher education.

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TABLES

Table 1.

Summary measures of test score submitters and non-submitters in the Fall 2021 admission pool.

Metrics	APPLICANTS (n=34,308)			ADMITS (n=26,880)			ENROLLED (N=2,653)		
	Submitters	**Non-submitters**	***p***	**Submitters**	**Non-submitters**	***p***	**Submitters**	**Non-submitters**	***p***
# of students	13,871	20,437	-	12,315	14,565	-	1,340	1,313	-
FAMILYINC	$151,370	$102,601	<0.001	$151,501	$102,890	<0.001	$206,453	$150,913	<0.001
TESTSCORE	27.56	-	-	28.09	-	-	27.83	-	-
HSGPA	3.95	3.68	<0.001	4.00	3.81	<0.001	3.89	3.76	<0.001
RACE									
White	8,292	8,169	<0.001	7,616	6,480	<0.001	922	662	<0.001
Black	856	3,292	<0.001	635	1,767	<0.001	40	146	<0.001
Hispanic	2,583	7,036	<0.001	2,091	4,726	<0.001	185	338	<0.001
Asian	2,140	1,940	<0.001	1,973	1,592	<0.001	193	167	0.14
GENDER									
Female	9,744	13,618	<0.001	8,387	10,592	<0.001	805	1,051	<0.001
Male	4,128	6,818	<0.01	3,928	3,973	<0.001	449	348	<0.001
INSTFINAID	-	-	-	$22,668.43	$20,157.09	<0.001	$21,993.13	$19,726.64	<0.001
PROXIMITY	349	462	<0.001	354	439	<0.001	307	397	<0.001
ADMIT RATE	-	-	-	88.8%	71.3%	<0.001	-	-	-
YIELD RATE	-	-	-	-	-	-	10.9%	9.0%	<0.001

Table 2.

Coefficients for predicting enrollment for admitted students who are test scores submitters (TESTOPT=1) vs. non-submitters (TESTOPT = 0)

Metrics	Submitters						Non-Submitters					
	coef	**std err**	**z**	**p>|z|**	**[0.025**	**0.975]**	**coef**	**std err**	**z**	**p>|z|**	**[0.025**	**0.975]**
Intercept	-1.730	0.053	-32.523	<0.001	-1.834	-1.625	0.162	0.212	0.764	0.445	-0.254	0.578
FAMILYINC	0.121	0.031	3.907	<0.001	0.061	0.182	0.143	0.170	0.842	0.400	-0.190	0.476
TESTSCORE	0.050	0.047	1.073	0.283	-0.041	0.141	-	-	-	-	-	-
HSGPA	-0.259	0.065	-3.990	<0.001	-0.385	-0.131	-0.672	0.284	-2.369	<0.05	-1.228	-0.116
RACE (RG: White)												
Black	-0.523	0.211	-2.476	<0.05	-0.938	-0.109	-2.352	1.109	-2.121	0.034	-4.525	-0.178
Hispanic	-0.241	0.116	-2.077	<0.05	-0.468	-0.014	-0.581	0.477	-1.216	0.224	-1.516	0.355
Asian	0.151	0.100	1.509	0.131	-0.045	0.346	-1.021	0.547	-1.868	0.062	-2.093	0.050
GENDER (RG: Female)												
Male	-0.055	0.080	-0.684	0.494	-0.211	0.102	-0.054	0.336	-0.160	0.873	-0.711	0.604
INSTFINAID	0.034	0.065	0.519	0.604	-0.093	0.161	0.712	0.272	2.613	<0.05	0.178	1.246
PROXIMITY	-0.151	0.046	-3.264	<0.05	-0.242	-0.060	0.285	0.158	1.797	0.072	-0.026	0.595

Table 3.

Comparison of summary measures for Fall 2020 and Fall 2021 admission pools.

Metrics	**APPLICANTS**			**ADMITS**			**ENROLLED**		
	Fall 2020	**Fall 2021**	***p***	**Fall 2020**	**Fall 2021**	***p***	**Fall 2020**	**Fall 2021**	***p***
# of students	25,276	34,308	-	16,239	26,880	-	1,928	2,653	-
FAMILYINC	$143,085.96	$124,831.60	<0.001	$143,386.62	$125,099.19	<0.001	$169,830.60	$178,561.85	<0.001
TESTSCORE	25.74	27.34	<0.001	27.05	28.08	<0.001	26.89	27.81	<0.001
HSGPA	3.83	3.80	<0.001	3.92	3.90	<0.001	3.90	3.82	<0.001
RACE									
White	12,383	16,461	0.02	9,238	14,096	<0.001	1,136	1,584	0.22
Black	2,846	4,148	<0.001	1,064	2,402	<0.001	118	186	0.19
Hispanic	6,984	9,619	0.28	3,751	6,817	<0.001	363	523	0.31
Asian	3,063	4,080	0.42	2,186	3,565	0.64	311	360	0.04
GENDER									
Female	17,103	23,362	<0.001	11,216	18,979	<0.001	1,289	1,856	<0.001
Male	8,173	10,946	<0.001	5,023	7,901	<0.001	639	797	<0.001
INSTFINAID	-	-		$21,120.75	$22,546.32	<0.001	$21,143.90	$22,077.89	<0.001
PROXIMITY	426	420	<0.001	349	323	<0.001	307	305	<0.001
ADMIT RATE	-	-	-	64.2%	78.3%	<0.001	-	-	-
YIELD RATE	-	-	-	-	-	-	11.9%	9.9%	<0.001

Table 4.

Enrollment probability model comparison for admitted students on Fall 2020 and Fall 2021.

Metrics	Fall 2020				Fall 2021			
	coef	**std err**	**z**	**P>|z|**	**coef**	**std err**	**z**	**P>|z|**
Intercept	-1.539	0.048	-32.266	0.000	-1.713	0.052	-32.732	0.000
FAMILYINC	0.063	0.032	1.969	0.049	0.120	0.030	3.918	0.000
TESTSCORE	-0.062	0.044	-1.398	0.162	0.071	0.045	1.556	0.120
HSGPA	-0.120	0.057	-2.098	0.036	-0.299	0.063	-4.767	0.000
RACE (RG: White)								
Asian	0.285	0.094	3.020	0.003	0.112	0.098	1.143	0.253
Black	0.096	0.151	0.638	0.523	-0.642	0.213	-3.017	0.003
Hispanic	-0.075	0.091	-0.829	0.407	-0.238	0.113	-2.115	0.034
GENDER (RG: Female)								
Male	0.074	0.072	1.029	0.303	-0.075	0.078	-0.967	0.333
INSTFINAID	0.134	0.064	2.103	0.035	0.072	0.063	1.140	0.254
PROXIMITY	-0.118	0.037	-3.169	0.002	-0.119	0.042	-2.805	0.005
TESTOPT (RG: Submitters)								
Non-Submitters	-	-	-	-	1.603	0.153	10.461	0.000

**Fall 2021 involves both test score submitters and non-submitters.*