

How Test-Optional College Admissions Expanded during the COVID-19 Pandemic

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Darrell Lovell and Daniel Mallinson
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The COVID-19 pandemic prompted many colleges and universities to introduce test-optional admissions policies. Institutions that implemented these policies during the pandemic are more selective, less expensive, and more diverse than those that offered test-optional admissions before the pandemic.

Test-optional policies are seen as an avenue to increase diversity and equity on campuses by removing standardized testing from the admissions process.¹ Research on prepandemic adopters suggests minimal gains in this area, in large part because the adopters were mostly selective liberal arts colleges, which do not need the test to parse student applications.² But the pandemic opened the arena to many more public institutions with varying institutional profiles.

Data show that the number of four-year universities and colleges with test-optional policies has more than tripled (from 288 to 927) since spring 2020. Using data from FairTest and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, our analysis compares three groups—nonadopters (746 institutions), prepandemic adopters (288), and pandemic adopters (637)—to identify the profiles of institutions implementing the policies and the differences between these groups. Table 1 provides the breakdown of public and private (nonprofit) institutions that adopted test-optional admissions before the pandemic, during the pandemic, or never.

¹ Paul G. Rubin and Manuel S. González Canché, “Test-Flexible Admissions Policies and Student Enrollment Demographics: Examining a Public Research University,” *Review of Higher Education* 42, no. 4 (Summer 2019): 1337; Kelly Ochs Rosinger, Karly Sarita Ford, and Junghee Choi, “The Role of Selective College Admissions Criteria in Interrupting or Reproducing Racial and Economic Inequities,” *Journal of Higher Education* 92, no. 1 (2021): 33; and Matt Saboe and Sabrina Terrizzi, “SAT Optional Policies: Do They Influence Graduate Quality, Selectivity, or Diversity?” *Economics Letters* 174 (January 2019): 13.

² Christopher T. Bennett, “Untested Admissions: Examining Changes in Application Behaviors and Student Demographics under Test-Optional Policies,” *American Educational Research Journal*; and Steven Syverson, “The Role of Standardized Tests in College Admissions: Test-Optional Admissions,” *New Directions for Student Services* 118 (Summer 2007): 55.

TABLE 1

Institutions That Did or Did Not Adopt Test-Optional Admissions Policies

	Private nonprofit institutions	Public institutions
Prepandemic adopters	236 (21%)	52 (19%)
Pandemic adopters	338 (31%)	299 (52%)
Nonadopters	526 (48%)	220 (39%)
Total	1,100 (100%)	571 (100%)

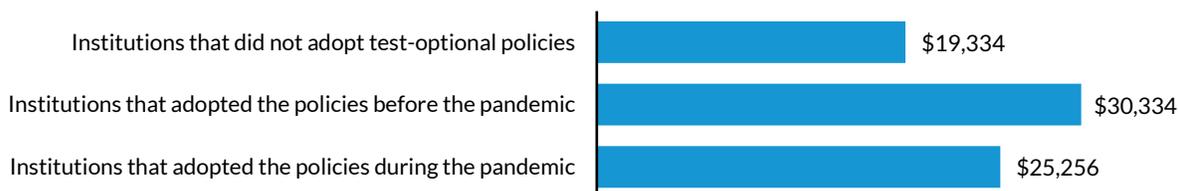
Source: Authors’ calculations from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, accessed via the Urban Institute’s Education Data Portal, and FairTest data.

Three key trends emerge:

1. Prepandemic adopters had, on average, higher tuition and fees than both pandemic adopters and all remaining nonadopters. Though nonadopters have lower tuition and fees than institutions with test-optional policies, the current landscape is becoming more accessible to students looking for schools with lower tuition.

FIGURE 1

Average Tuition and Fees



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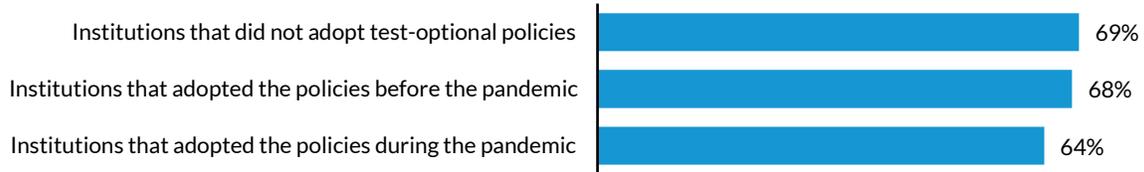
Source: Authors’ calculations from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, accessed via the Urban Institute’s Education Data Portal, and FairTest data.

2. Pandemic adopters were more selective than prepandemic adopters and nonadopters. Though the tuition numbers might suggest an increase in access, selectivity contradicts that notion. Many institutions that adopted test-optional policies during the pandemic did so out of necessity. After all, with the college boards shut down, there were no scores to evaluate.

FIGURE 2

Admissions Selectivity

Students who were accepted / students who applied



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Source: Authors’ calculations from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, accessed via the Urban Institute’s Education Data Portal, and FairTest data.

Pandemic adopters are more selective in terms of admissions rates, on average, than prepandemic adopters. Although the tuition profiles of test-optional institutions became less restrictive to applicants, these data suggest it is no easier to gain admission to such institutions.

3. The pandemic greatly increased the number of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) with test-optional policies. Three percent of the pandemic adopters are HBCUs, matching their 3 percent share of all colleges and universities. Of the 62 HBCUs in our dataset, only one had adopted a test-optional policy before the pandemic. During the pandemic, 19 more joined, representing 30 percent all HBCUs.

The pandemic prompted more institutions with lower tuition to implement the policy. More selective institutions are also dropping standardized test score requirements. Though tuition differences between nonadopters and adopters are still large, the pandemic has increased access to institutions that are more selective and have higher graduation rates. The expansion of test-optional policies during the pandemic will provide more opportunities for students who are seeking to enter college without standardized test scores.

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