IHEP

CHAPTER 5

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF STANDARDIZED TESTS

For nearly a century, colleges and universities have used standardized test scores as a measure of applicants' academic skills and a predictor of their future academic performance.[1] Standardized tests like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) exam were initially intended to help find the "diamond in the rough," or high-achieving students from underserved backgrounds.[2] Putting aside the bias embedded within the tests themselves, this very notion perpetuates the idea that only a few, rare students of color or students from low-income backgrounds are deserving of an education at a selective college.[3]

"The Most Important Door That Will Ever Open": Realizing the Mission of Higher Education through Equitable Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Policies

"There's talent everywhere. There's talent in rural America, there's talent in black and brown communities, and...the standard metrics that we may use to identify such talent are inadequate."

—Wendell D. Hall, PhD, during his tenure as senior director, higher education, The College Board

Today, standardized test scores serve as a gatekeeper to the upward mobility that higher education offers, on their face a neutral judge while, in practice, maintaining racial and socioeconomic disparities. Indeed, David Hawkins, Chief Education and Policy Officer at National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), characterized the use of the SAT and ACT as grounded in "layers upon layers of privilege."

Institutions use standardized tests in their admissions process for several reasons, including as a way to generate recruitment leads and as a strategy for assessing the large volume of applications they receive.[4] It is true that institutions face significant administrative pressures in their recruitment efforts (as discussed in Chapter 1) and, in some cases, receive overwhelming numbers of applications. However, these reasons do not reduce the inequities embedded within the SAT and ACT, especially for wealthy institutions with substantial admissions budgets. Institutions need to allocate the resources, financial and otherwise, required to review applications in an equity-minded way.

In the wake of widespread testing closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, just under 2.2 million students took the SAT in 2020, about 22,000 students fewer than the previous year.[5] The pandemic had a clear impact on students from low-income backgrounds: test takers using the fee waiver fell from 427,442 in 2019 to 376,468 in 2020.[6] Despite the drop in test-takers, highly selective public and private colleges saw increased application numbers for the 2021–22 academic year, suggesting that temporary test-optional policies adopted by many colleges due to the pandemic may have encouraged new applicants to these schools.[7]

STANDARDIZED TESTS PERPETUATE RACIAL BIAS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The SAT and ACT were adapted from undeniably racist standardized intelligence, or IQ, tests.[8] During World War I, the U.S. Army used some of the earliest aptitude tests on recruits, resulting in scores that varied based on race and ethnicity.[9] These scores were improperly used to claim that Black and immigrant recruits were of inferior intellect due to biological differences—a belief later used to justify policies of racial segregation.[10] In 1926, the SAT was created and adapted from the Army test to measure student intelligence and college readiness,[11] and the ACT followed in 1959.[12] While the SAT and ACT have since been revised, they are still used widely to determine who is qualified to attend which colleges, despite research demonstrating the tests' continued racial and cultural biases, the influence of inequitable K–12 funding and tracking policies, and the relative predictive value of standardized test scores on college performance.

Institutions need to allocate the resources, financial and otherwise, required to review applications in an equity-minded way.

College Rankings

The outsized influence of college rankings, like those published by *U.S. News & World Report,* is seen most clearly in conversations surrounding the role of standardized tests in admissions. This sentiment was repeated throughout our interviews with admissions experts: colleges and universities are hesitant to entirely remove standardized testing from the admissions process for fear of dropping in college rankings, selectivity, and prestige.

Five percent of *U.S. News & World Report's* ranking is based on the institution's standardized test scores. If fewer than 75 percent of students submit scores, the publication reduces the score awarded to that institution in this category, impacting its ranking.[13] While there has been some momentum behind infusing equity-minded metrics into college rankings, the rankings continue to be a force that incentivizes the use of inequitable recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies. Indeed, institutions that choose to put their ranking first and equity second risk limiting access for postsecondary education's most underrepresented students—Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds.

Research shows that racial and cultural biases persist in the modern-day versions of the tests.[14] For example, questions on which Black and Latinx students perform well are often omitted.[15] Too often, the test relies on questions that appear neutral but are actually based on the background knowledge that a typical White, middle-income student would possess. For instance, test question wording can affect how questions are interpreted. The use of idioms may be especially difficult for non-native English speakers, while words with multiple dictionary definitions may be used differently—though still accurately—by various cultural groups.[16] And while the College Board subjects test questions to rigorous analysis before they are added, independent researchers still find differences across racial groups on certain test items.[17] Such bias establishes and reinforces stereotypes about who is likely to perform well and is therefore qualified to attend an institution. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy if institutions then use test scores to make decisions about who and where to recruit for incoming classes.

For decades, policymakers have failed to equitably fund schools in underserved communities, depriving many students of color the educational resources that facilitate gaining high SAT or ACT scores.

In addition, persistent racial and socioeconomic disparities within the K–12 education system influence performance on the SAT and ACT. For decades, policymakers have failed to equitably fund schools in underserved communities, depriving many students of color the educational resources that facilitate gaining high SAT or ACT scores. One study found that across the country, school districts with more than 50 percent Black and Latinx enrollment are nearly twice as likely to require greater public funding to meet student needs (or a "funding gap") than districts with less than 50 percent Black and Latinx enrollment—on average roughly $5,000 per pupil.[18] Districts with the highest concentrations of poverty have an average funding gap of roughly $6,700 per pupil.[19] Black, Latinx, and low-income students in those districts have access to fewer resources that can prepare them to score well on the SAT or ACT.[20]

Finally, standardized tests aim to assess applicants' comprehension of academic content presumably covered from kindergarten through high school in the interest of predicting whether they will be successful in college if admitted.[21] If a student was not, in fact, exposed to that content, the test is not an appropriate tool. Relying on SAT scores can undervalue the potential of students of color, because evidence shows that high school grade point average is a much stronger predictor of college success both during and after a student's freshmen year. For example, a study commissioned by the University of California found that high school grades were a more reliable

predictor than test scores of a student's college GPA and the likelihood of graduating within four years.[22] Other studies have confirmed that when controlling for socioeconomic factors, high school grades—not the SAT—are more predictive of first-year college grades, second-year persistence, and five-year graduation rates.[23]

STANDARDIZED TESTS ARE EXPENSIVE AND PERPETUATE SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUITIES

Conversations about college affordability typically focus on rising tuition costs, food and housing insecurity, and racial disparities in student loan borrowing and default rates. However, students incur college-related costs well before they are admitted to a college or university—especially if they are seeking to boost their standardized test scores. The Varsity Blues scandal revealed just how much money some wealthy parents are willing to spend to ensure their children have the test scores necessary to gain admittance to well-resourced institutions. Indeed, preparing for and taking standardized tests can cost thousands of dollars (see Standardized Test Cost Calculator).

Standardized Test Cost Calculator

$52 - $70 per test

SAT AND ACT TEST COSTS

Applicants spend $52 ($68 including the essay)[24] for the SAT or $55 ($70 including the essay)[25] for the ACT.*

$15 - $60

SAT AND ACT ADDITIONAL COSTS

For example, applicants may be charged additional fees if they register late ($30) or if they need to change their test date or location ($30).[26]

$20 - $35

TEST PREP BOOKS COSTS

Applicants can purchase the official ACT and SAT study guides for approximately $20 to $35.[27]

$1,000 - $10,000

TEST PREP CLASSES/TUTORING

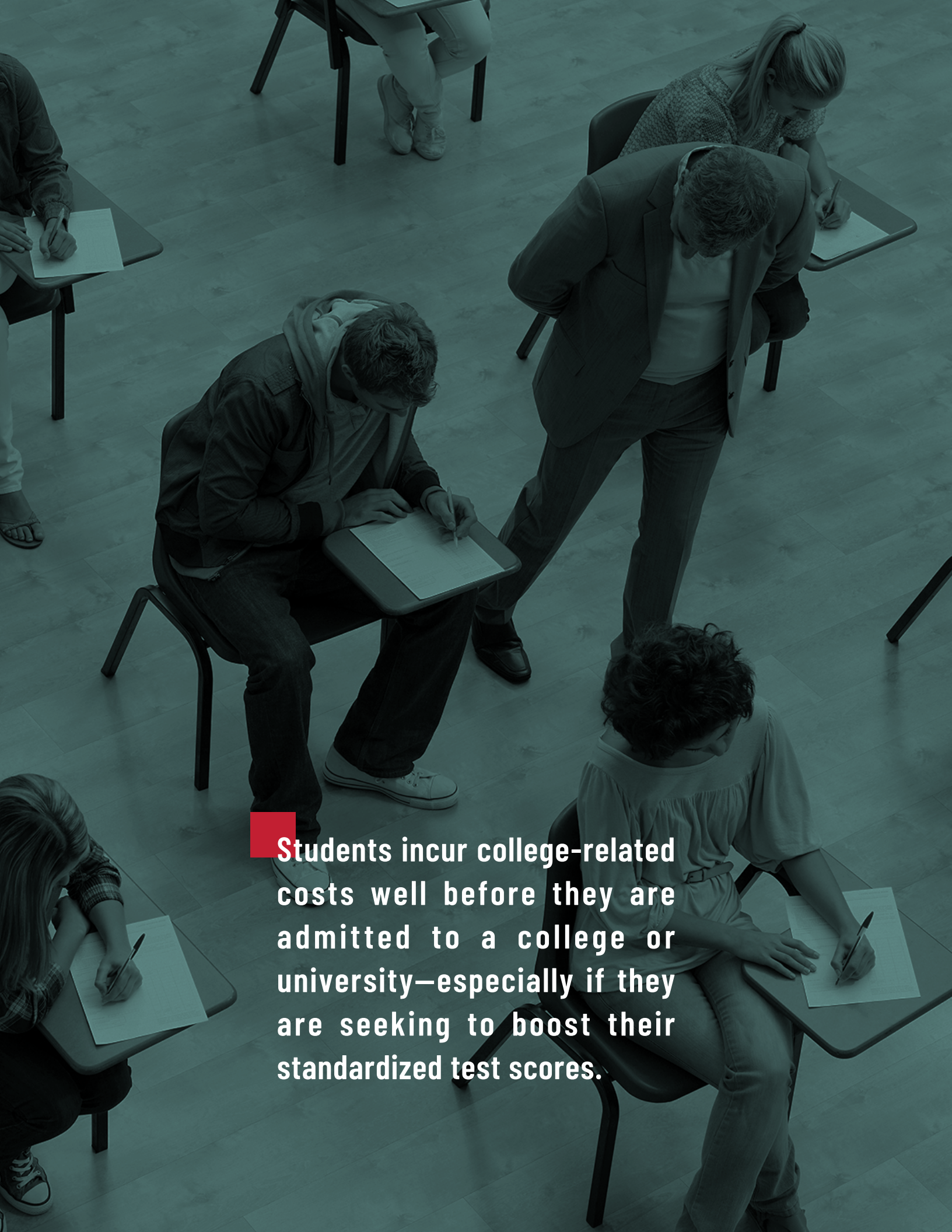
Preparatory classes range from $1,349 for the Princeton Review's SAT and ACT Guaranteed[28] classes to upwards of $10,000 with private tutoring companies. For instance, Arbor Bridge costs range from $213 an hour for 12 hours ($2,556 total) to $168 an hour for 60 hours ($10,080 total).[29]

$52 - $10,160**

ESTIMATED TOTAL COST

* Fee waivers are available for students who meet certain eligibility criteria and must be obtained through their high school guidance counselor or a representative of an authorized community-based organization.[30] Applicants cannot use fee waivers for more than two SAT registrations or four ACT registrations.[31]

**Total costs can be as low as $0 if, for example, the student is eligible for a fee waiver and does not purchase or participate in test-prep resources or classes.



Students incur college-related costs well before they are admitted to a college or university—especially if they are seeking to boost their standardized test scores.

Students who re-take standardized tests or participate in expensive test preparation tend to receive higher test scores.[32] Working with a private tutor—the costliest form of test preparation—is particularly effective at improving an applicant's retest score. Other, less expensive forms of test preparation activities, such as reviewing online test prep materials, have a smaller or negligible impact on scores.[33]

The College Board encourages students to re-take the test, due to the fact that 63 percent score higher on subsequent SAT exams.[34] High-income students are more likely to take college admissions tests multiple times.[35] This may be because applicants from low-income backgrounds can only use fee waivers to take the SAT twice or the ACT four times, meaning they must pay out of pocket for any additional testing.[36] This also means that students benefit by first taking the test early in high school, a strategy high-income students are more likely to employ because of their greater access to college counselors who advise them to test early and often.[37] In fact, students from low-income backgrounds may be less likely to take the test at all. In one study, just one-third of students from lower-income urban neighborhoods in Boston who planned to attend a four-year institution had taken an exam by the fall of their senior year, compared with 98 percent of students in a wealthier nearby suburb.[38]

Institutions may also require students to submit scores to be eligible for institutional non-need-based aid—even when test scores are not factored into admissions decisions.[39] Since students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation students are likely to opt out of sending their scores when given the option, these policies can limit their access to vital financial aid opportunities. Research reveals that it is harder for students who do not submit test scores to secure institutional non-need-based aid compared with those who submit scores.[40] For example, Hofstra University, which is test-optional for admissions, only considers students who submit test scores as eligible for the most generous non-need-based scholarships.[41] A study of 33 public and private test-optional colleges found that academically talented students who did not submit test scores—and were disproportionately first-generation students, Pell Grant recipients, and women—were less likely to receive non-need-based financial aid than those who did submit test scores.[42]

THE ROLE OF STANDARDIZED TESTS IN ADMISSIONS DECISIONS

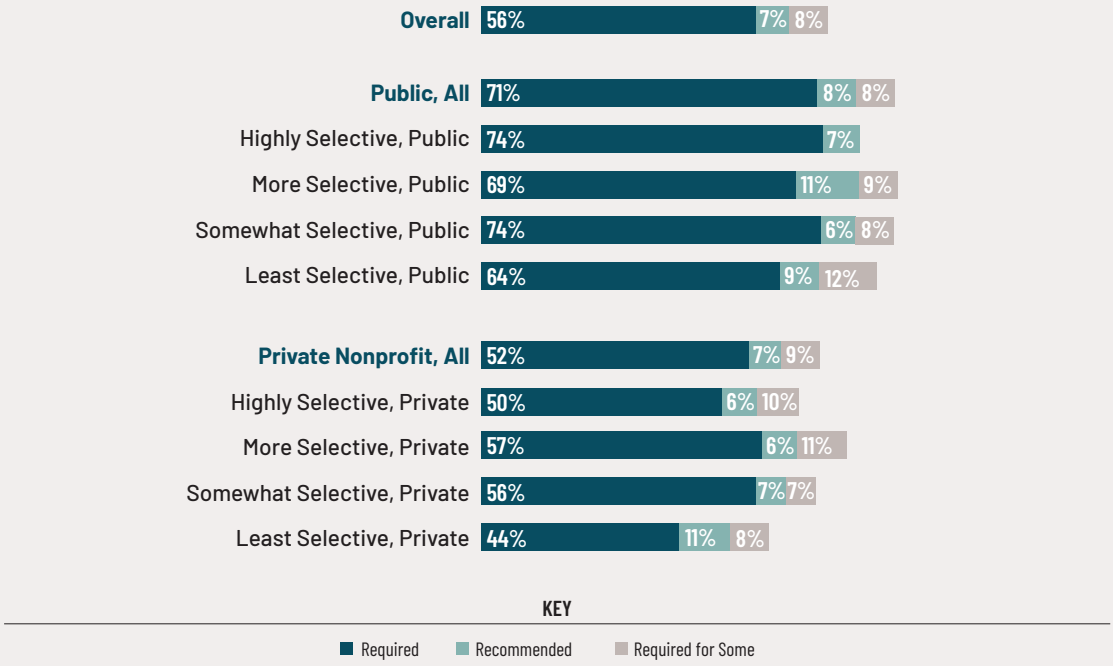
Over the last decade, selective institutions have started to recognize that requiring students to submit standardized test scores perpetuates racial and socioeconomic inequities in higher education. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the share of institutions requiring applicants to submit scores for the SAT and/or the ACT had declined by 23 percentage points.[43] Approximately two-thirds (68 percent) of selective private nonprofit institutions require student test scores, whereas the vast majority of selective public institutions (87 percent) require them for admissions decisions (Figure 5.1).

Some colleges and universities have changed how they use standardized tests by implementing the following policies:

- **Test-flexible:** Students are allowed to submit scores from other exams, such as the Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB), rather than the SAT or ACT.[44]
- **Test-optional:** Students are allowed, but not required, to submit test scores as part of their application for admission. If students choose to submit their scores, institutions may consider them in admissions decisions.
- **Test-free:** Students are not required to submit any standardized test scores and an institution will not consider submitted test scores when deciding whether or not to admit an applicant. Test-free institutions often take a more holistic approach to making admissions decisions, considering applicants' grades, extracurricular activities, essays, and other factors like the academic rigor of their courses.

FIGURE 5.1

Test Requirements Among Selective Four-Year Colleges



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, foreign institutions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. Selectivity categories generated from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

While test-flexible and test-optional policies represent incremental progress, they do not necessarily offer a guaranteed path to increasing campus diversity.[45] When given the option, first-generation college students, students of color, women, Pell Grant recipients, and students with learning differences are most likely to be "non-submitting applicants," meaning they opt out of including test scores in their application for admission.[46] However, just allowing students to forgo submitting scores does not necessarily change which students are accepted and ultimately enroll. A study of more than 100 liberal arts colleges between 1999 and 2014 found that going test-optional led to higher average SAT scores—since students with lower scores were less likely to submit those as part of their application—but enrollment among students of color did not increase.[47] Similarly, when researchers examined changes in diversity at 180 selective liberal arts colleges over nearly two decades, they found that the 32 institutions that adopted test-optional policies had lower proportions of Pell Grant recipients and students of color enrolled than the institutions that continued to require test scores for admission.[48]

Another analysis found no significant effect of test-optional policies on racial, socioeconomic, or gender diversity at private, nonprofit, and public institutions.[49] However, more recent studies of test-optional programs that include more institutions and consider outcomes over a longer time period find that when institutions with these policies are compared to similar institutions that require tests, evidence emerges that the policies do indeed increase diversity.[50] These new findings may indicate that test-optional polices implemented in a thoughtful, equity-minded way can advance access for historically underrepresented groups.

In sum, White and wealthy students stand to benefit the most when institutions consider standardized test scores in admissions decisions. And the idea that test scores may uncover a "diamond in the rough" is no justification for the continued use of an exclusionary tool. Beyond the substantial costs associated with taking and performing well on the test, research makes clear that standardized tests reinforce historical racial inequities in our higher education system.

OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: RETHINK THE ROLE OF STANDARDIZED TESTS

To truly cultivate diversity, address the inequities that standardized tests propagate, and dismantle racist and classist practices within higher education, institutions should go test-free. That is, they should stop considering standardized test scores in admissions decisions and take a more holistic approach.

AS COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES PREPARE FOR THEIR NEXT ADMISSIONS CYCLE, THEY SHOULD IMPLEMENT CHANGES TO THEIR ADMISSIONS POLICIES THAT IMPROVE EQUITY ON CAMPUS, LIKE THESE MEASURES:

NO LONGER REQUIRE TEST SCORES IN ADMISSIONS DECISIONS:

Privileged students who are better positioned to receive high scores will continue to benefit from their use in admissions and financial aid decisions, even when tests are optional. Therefore, institutions should remove test score requirements altogether (go test-free) and adopt more holistic admissions approaches that consider multiple measures, including a student's unique, nonacademic experiences alongside traditional metrics such as grades.[51] Holistic review allows institutions to view an applicant through a more nuanced lens to judge if a student will be successful at the institution.[52]

MAKE TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES PERMANENT:

If institutions are not willing to eliminate their use of standardized test scores in admissions and financial aid decisions, they should consider making permanent any temporary policies that deemphasize its role. Due to logistical challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions have temporarily waived test score requirements.[53] But underserved students face limited access to the tests and test prep services even when not facing a global health crisis.

ENSURE TEST FREE AND TEST-OPTIONAL ADMISSIONS POLICIES ALIGN WITH INSTITUTIONAL FINANCIAL AID POLICIES:

Even when test scores are not factored into admissions decisions, some institutions require students to submit scores to be eligible for some institutional grants and scholarships.[54] Admissions and financial aid policies must work together for colleges and universities to reach their access and diversity goals.

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