Considering Test-Optional Admissions Policies

Bert W. McBrayer, III

The Pennsylvania State University
In recent years, a growing number of institutions of higher education are joining the ranks of schools with “test-optional” admission policies (Simon, 2015), i.e. application procedures that do not require the submission of a standardized test score. The motive prompting colleges and universities go test-optional is essentially the same reason that students don’t want to take the entrance exams; there is a lot of anxiety over whether the results of the SAT and the ACT are, in fact, accurate forecasters of academic performance in college-level coursework (Wilner, 2013). Additionally, there are many voices in the higher education realm that worry that standardized tests are responsible for providing a barrier to access for students from under-represented populations (Hiss & Franks, 2014; Rosner, 2012).

This topic directly impacts my work in the field of college admissions. In my current role, I have influence on the predictive formula used in the admissions evaluation of first-year applicants. Throughout my years working in higher education, I have long suspected that the reliance on standardized tests for the evaluation of applicants was a process that was dubious at best, and unfair at worst. This paper aims to examine whether students who apply to test-optional institutions and do not provide exam scores as part of the application process have the same predictors of academic success as students who do provide standardized test scores, and if institutions would benefit from a more diverse applicant pool if exam results are not required of applicants.

**Origins of Standardized College Entrance Examinations**

Prior to the twentieth century, a low percentage of the American population attended higher education and of those that did, the vast majority of college-bound students attended independent college preparatory secondary schools (Syverson, 2007). At that time, the majority of colleges and universities in the United States each had their own qualifying entrance exam for
applicants to complete prior to being offered admission (Syverson, 2007). These entrance examinations were comprised of institution-specific questions to determine if the applicant was prepared for enrollment at the institution.

**The SAT Exam**

Late in the nineteenth century, a growing concern over the many and varied individual college entrance exams led to a dozen institutions of higher education in the northeastern United States to form the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) in 1900 (Syverson, 2007). By 1926, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was created based on World War I military IQ tests (Zwick, 2002). According to Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, “Advocates promoted the test as a measure of intellect and a mechanism of educational and social opportunity” (2014, p. 1). In addition to creating a standard exam that applicants could submit at any college or university, the developers of the SAT were also looking to “identify talented students who had not been privileged to attend Northeastern prep schools” (Syverson, 2007, p. 56).

The SAT exam was not taken by large numbers of college applicants until the end of World War II, when the United States government enacted the Montgomery G.I. Bill. This afforded so many veterans returning from war the opportunity to enroll in higher education, and prompted dramatic growth in the number of people taking the SAT exam (Zwick, 2002).

**The ACT Exam**

The American College Testing Program (ACT) was created by people in the Midwest who felt that the SAT exam was biased toward students applying to selective institutions in the eastern United States (Zwick, 2002). The ACT was developed based on the Iowa Testing Programs, a high school assessment platform utilized in the state of Iowa (Zwick, 2002).
While there were demonstrable differences in the delivery of each exam, and what the tests each measure, the intent of both the SAT and the ACT were the same; a standard test for college-bound applicants to submit to any/all institutions to which they would like to apply for admission (Svyerson, 2007).

Use of Standardized Test Results

Students enrolling in these standardized college entrance exams has grown exponentially over the years. Between 1979 and 2000, the number of four-year institutions of higher education requiring standardized test results (either the SAT or the ACT exam) hovered around 90 percent (Zwick, 2007). In 2016, approximately 6.7 million students took the SAT or PSAT exam (College Board, 2016), and about 2.1 million students sat for the ACT exam (ACT, 2016). The overwhelming majority of selective colleges and universities, both public and private, continue to maintain the requirement that applicants provide standardized test scores from either the ACT or SAT exam as part of the application evaluation process (Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, 2014).

From an institutional perspective, there are two main uses for standardized tests: predictive academic data for application evaluation, and a marketing tool for gathering information about prospective applicants. Here we will focus primarily on the use of standardized tests in modeling to predict an applicant’s potential academic performance in institutions of higher education.

According to Zwick (2007), there is an extensive body of research that shows that standardized entrance exams have a strong correlation, approximately 0.4, with a first-year predicted collegiate grade point average. This means that colleges and universities can develop predictions on how an applicant will perform at their institution, and use that data point in the
evaluation of that student’s application for admission. Additionally, research has shown that standardized test scores, when combined with high school grade point average, provide a better prediction model for collegiate GPA than a high school GPA alone (Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, 2014).

The other primary institutional function in the use of standardized test is through the purchase of test-takers’ names. Both the College Board and ACT collect data about students who register and sit for their respective exams. For many years, the testing companies have “sold names” to colleges and universities for about 37 cents for each student’s name (Rivard, 2013). Institutions of higher education in turn use highly complex methods of sifting through data and selecting certain groups of students on which they can focus their marketing and recruiting resources and efforts (Rivard, 2013). This practice allows colleges and universities to segment their recruitment energies to target students who are in-state, or students within a certain academic profile, or many other distributions of data.

**Test-Optional Consideration**

Despite the overwhelming majority of American institutions of higher education continuing to require standardized test scores in the application process, since 2014 more than 50 liberal arts colleges have adopted test-optional admissions policies (Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, 2014). A recent press release by The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, an organization that promotes education and equality through advocacy of fair testing policies and practices, says that the list of institutions of higher education that do not require standardized tests as part of the admission process has now surpassed 900 (FairTest, 2016). According to Robert Schaeffer at The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, “Admissions offices increasingly recognize that they do not need ACT or SAT scores to make good decisions” (FairTest, 2016, para 6). Given all
of the benefits that colleges and universities get from the predictive analytics and marketing and recruitment tools of standardized tests, why would an institution want to allow students to apply without the SAT or ACT exam?

**Increased Access**

By removing standardized tests like the SAT from the checklist of admission application requirements, institutions can work to eliminate obstacles in the admissions process (Hiss & Franks, 2015). Those critical of the SAT routinely point to the inherent cultural bias that the test holds as a barrier to the success of diverse populations of students (Rosner, 2012). In his examination, Rosner (2012) says, “Latinos score about 2/3 of a standard deviation lower than whites, and African Americans score about 1 standard deviation lower than whites on both the Math and the Critical Reading tests” (p. 104). Additionally, male students score higher than females by about one-third of a standard deviation (Rosner, 2012).

According to their analysis, Hiss and Franks (2015) found that there is data to suggest that institutions that adopt test-optional application policies help to encourage more diversity in their applicant pool. In the study, the investigation centered around comparing students who submitted test scores as part of the application process, and those who did not submit. Results showed that students admitted to an institution without having to provide test scores as part of the admission decision “are performing as well as students admitted with much stronger test scores” (Hiss & Franks, 2015, p. 33). In addition, in comparing the demographic profiles between students who did not submit test scores in the application process and those who did, Hiss and Franks (2015) found that students who did not submit test scores were more likely to be first-generation college students, minorities, women, and Pell Grant recipients.
Belasco, Rosinger, and Hearn’s (2014) research also supports the notion that test-optional application processes also increases diversity, both economic and ethnicity, at institutions of higher education. This enhancement occurs without making concession in regard to the academic quality of the student body (Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, 2014). However, noted in their study was the recognition that there have not been many assessments that analyze the relationship between the enrollment of diverse populations of students, and test-optional policies (Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, 2014). While on the surface there appears to be a correlation, the impact of test-optional policies on campus diversity is an area that needs to have continued research and analysis. The impact is clear; for nearly all colleges and universities that have employed a test-optional admissions policy for a substantial amount of time, those institutions have seen marked growth in applications and enrollees from under-represented groups of students (Syverson, 2007).

**Academic Prediction**

One of the primary reasons that institutions of higher education continue to use standardized tests in the admissions process is the ability to predict an applicant’s academic performance at the college level (Zwick, 2007). Indeed there is a large body of evidence that shows that there is a positive correlation between high school grade-point-average and SAT scores. (Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, 2014; Hiss & Franks, 2014; Zwick, 2007). Most commonly, when used in conjunction with performance in high school, standardized test scores enhance the prognostic value to the method being used to predict the odds of academic success in college (Syverson, 2007).

However, there is a wealth of data that demonstrates that scores from standardized tests such as the SAT or the ACT are not necessarily strong predictors of academic success when
viewed individually (Hiss & Franks, 2014; Murray, 2012; Rosner, 2012; Syverson, 2007). A study by Rask and Tiefenthaler (2012) found that the SAT exam increases the power of prediction for the academic success of applicants, “only marginally – by 3 percentage points” (p. 125). The study showed that it takes more substantial differences – greater than 10 points – to show a meaningful difference in the predicted collegiate grade point average (Rask & Tiefenthaler, 2012).

Additionally, their research found that, while the SAT does have predictive power with regard to first-year college GPA, that power is more significant with certain groups of students. The data showed, for example, that the SAT is more valuable in a prediction of success at the college-level for students who do not receive need-based financial aid (Rask & Tiefenthaler, 2012). This suggests that students from higher-income families benefit from more test-preparedness (e.g. private tutoring, test-prep modules, etc.), which in turn increases their scores “independent of other academic considerations” (Rask & Tiefenthaler, 2012, p. 126).

Similarly, Murray (2012), citing a 2001 study by the University of California, explains that SAT and ACT scores and high school GPA have approximately the same role independently in predicting a student’s academic success at the college level. Murray (2012) contends that the SAT score’s role in prediction is so miniscule that it adds, “next to nothing to an admissions officer’s ability to forecast how an applicant will do in college” (p. 71). In other words, standardized test scores do not enhance the prediction power any more than the high school record, and Murray argues this is reason to eliminate the usage of test scores in the review of applications for admission.

In their study of over 120,000 students, Hiss and Franks (2014) found that there are no substantial variances in collegiate grade point average or graduation rates between students who
submit test scores during the application process, and those that do not. The study also found that high school grade point average closely parallels collegiate grade point average, even with widespread variability in standardized test scores (Hiss & Franks, 2014). Indeed, students who did not submit an ACT or SAT exam score in the admissions process on average received a cumulative college GPA that was only 0.05 points lower than those who did submit a score (Hiss & Franks, 2015). The difference in overall collegiate graduation rates was 0.6 percent; 64.5 percent for those students who did submit standardized test scores in the admission process, and 63.9 percent for those who did not (Hiss & Franks, 2015).

Conclusion

Continued research into the viability of use of standardized tests in the college admissions process is important. Across the landscape of higher education in the United States, colleges and universities are under increasing pressure to generate larger and more diverse applicant pools, and to enroll cohorts with more competitive admission statistics, and thus garner even more robust performance in rankings in publications such as Princeton Review and U.S. News & World Report (Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, 2014). Institutions are charged to meet these goals while simultaneously maintaining the ability to calculate an applicant’s possibility of success with as much accuracy as possible.

There is undeniable evidence that predicting an applicant’s academic potential at the college level can be accomplished without the inclusion of a standardized test score as a factor in the formula. Indeed the research has shown that students who are evaluated for admission to institutions of higher education without the use of a standardized exam score are as successful as those who do submit a score (Hiss & Franks, 2014).
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It is no surprise then, given all of the evidence that SAT and ACT scores do not add much to the predictive power of the high school record, every year sees more colleges and universities decide to make standardized test scores an optional component of the application process (Simon, 2015). In turn, this loosening of application requirements eliminates barriers for students from under-represented populations (Zwick, 2002), and has the potential to increase the number of applications from groups of students who would not have necessarily considered submitting an application to the institution (Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, 2014).

Despite all of the evidence, the vast majority of American institutions of higher education require SAT or ACT exam scores in the application process. Smaller institutions (e.g. small, private liberal arts colleges) are more readily prepared to make the leap to test-optional admissions, as the application review at these colleges and universities is more holistic in nature (Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, 2014, Zwick, 2002). However, the standardized test requirement will likely remain for large research institutions that receive thousands of applications annually, as predictive modeling is more complex (Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, 2014). Additionally, there are whole business models built around the use of standardized testing (e.g. test-prep programs), so it is highly unlikely that Americans will completely rid themselves of the pressure of testing in the college admissions process (Murray, 2012).

In Zwick’s 2007 essay, she posits that Americans cannot seem to decide what they want with regard to selective college admissions. Zwick (2007) says that Americans will never stop arguing about college admissions policies:

By definition, selectivity means keeping some people out, and that is not consistent with our national self-image. We like to think of our country as an inclusive big tent with equal opportunities for high-quality education. So, why not a lottery? Because it is also
“American” to reward academic excellence, perseverance, and hard work. The lottery seems unfair precisely because it does not take these virtues into account. As much as we would like to, we cannot both accept all comers and reward the few. That is why we will never stop arguing about the college admissions policy, with or without the SAT (p. 427).

The cumulative effect of all of the literature on this topic is clear; institutions of higher education could eliminate the requirement of a standardized test as part of the application for admission, and as a result there would be no diminished ability to predict the success of an applicant. Additionally, there would be the strong potential for a more diverse pool of applicants – particularly from those that would have previously viewed the test score requirement as putting their application at a disadvantage.

However, while there are many institutions that have taken the plunge into the test-optional pool, it is a very small fraction of the more-than 5,000 colleges and universities in the United States (Selingo, 2015). The debate surrounding the use of standardized college entrance exams is not new, and will most certainly not go quietly into the night with a few institutions adding to the test-optional list each year.
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References


