

## **Removing Standardized Testing is Not the Fix-it-all Solution Colleges Were Hoping to Find**

By Adriana Peyton Lanza

Standardized testing has been seen throughout history; from its creation in Imperial China to when it was widely popularized by companies in the early 20th century, standardized testing has prospered through the ages. In recent years, standardized testing has been brought under scrutiny for the inequality it creates in an education system meant to be meritocratic. Now with the Covid-19 pandemic forcing students into online classrooms across the nation, standardized testing requirements have become a hot topic, and colleges nationwide have opted to go test-optional for the near future. However, going test-optional is not the solution that will fix a highly unequal system; meritocracy is complex, so improving one aspect of the education system will not erase all of the problems caused by inequality.

Meritocracy describes the idea where everyone starts at the same place and their hard work allows them to advance in their position. The main problems with this concept are that everyone starts at different places and those with advantages have no need to work as hard as those at a disadvantage. These advantages can include being born into a wealthy family, not having to work while studying in school, being able to participate in extracurricular activities, etc. Low-income students, first-generation students, students of color, and disabled students all start off at a disadvantage within our education system. These students are often given less attention within the education system, and thus, are less prepared for standardized tests, giving them lower scores on average than their peers. If disadvantaged students have lower scores, wouldn't removing the SAT benefit them? The answer to that question is complex and the rest of this article will discuss why removing standardized testing is only the first step at resolving the entire problem.

So why is standardized testing a significant part of our education system? The SAT and other standardized tests were created as a way to measure a student's ability without allowing their status and background to cloud that measurement. [Resilient Educator](#), a training program that works to improve educators, states that these tests were intended to allow students to set themselves apart from their high schools so that "even if their high school didn't offer... Advanced Placement courses or extracurricular activities," students could still be seen as "bright and motivated." And for students who are in competitive high schools, they would "get the chance to demonstrate that they are intelligent and qualified," despite not being the top of their class.

Standardized testing was also intended to give states a way to measure teachers on their ability to educate students. Resilient Educator also found that in the United States, around "a third of all states had adopted evaluation policies requiring teacher evaluations to include objective measures of student achievement." Standardized testing was meant to hold teachers accountable for teaching students the material needed each year because it would enable teachers who did not teach the required material to be identified within the system.

Unfortunately, standardized testing contributes to the limited meritocracy of the education system. Although the intent was to create equality, the system allows wealthy students and families to "buy" their higher scores on these tests by hiring tutors, enrolling in test-preparation courses, or taking the exam multiple times. Educators have known about this disparity between

students for years. In 2014, CollegeBoard, the creators of the SAT, released a profile report of all the students who had taken the SAT which found a strong positive correlation between income level and test score.

The disparity in test scores between income levels does not accurately predict success in higher education. DePaul University saw this disparity in Bates College, a small liberal arts school in Maine that has been test-optional since 1984. In 2004, Bates College released a study that found the “graduation rates between submitters and non-submitters varied by only 0.1%, and average Bates GPAs varied by only 0.05%” even though the SAT scores of the non-submitters were “160 points lower than scores of submitters.” Although the test scores differed between the groups, significant differences did not occur between these groups during college. These findings sparked national interest and numerous schools followed Bates in going test-optional, which brings us to today. With so many colleges across the nation opting to go test-optional, what effect does going test-optional have on students?

When colleges decide to go test-optional, they open their doors to a larger range of students. The American Research Association and SAGE, a publishing company, released a study in 2014 about test-optional liberal arts colleges which found that “liberal arts colleges receive[d] approximately 220 more applications” after going test-optional.

These new applications come from students who previously wouldn’t have applied to college due to their lower-than-average SAT scores. In an [NPR interview](#), Laurie Koehler, an enrollment officer at George Washington University, states that going test-optional “will broaden access for those high-achieving students who have historically been underrepresented...”

Although test-optional policies can increase applications from first-generation, low-income, disabled, and ethnic minority students, it is not the perfect solution colleges were hoping to find because it was found that actual admissions of minorities actually decreased. In the same study from the American Research Association, test-optional liberal arts colleges “enrolled a lower proportion of Pell recipients and underrepresented minorities, on average, than test-requiring institutions...” After seeing the decreased diversity on campus, Bill Hiss, the former head of admissions at Bates College, stated in an NPR interview that an increase in diversity “will take time and that many schools simply haven’t been test-optional long enough to see one.”

However, other studies have found different results in a short timespan. [Ithaca S+R](#), a group that focuses on higher education, released a study in 2019 that found that [60 percent](#) of the test-optional institutions experienced increases in enrollment of underrepresented students... while about [50 percent](#) saw an increase in enrollment of Pell recipients.”

So why are these two studies so conflicting? In the study from the American Research Association, liberal arts colleges that went test-optional “experience[d] a subsequent rise in their reported SAT scores, by approximately 26 points.” This was because, under the new policies, students who sent in scores had generally done well on the tests. When colleges later calculated their averages, they were able to inflate the scores they report to the magazines that give colleges rankings. [USNews](#), a magazine that ranks colleges, bases part of their ranking on incoming freshman’ test-scores. With this, these test-optional colleges would see their rankings increase. Ithaca S+R found that since the college’s ranking increased, historically undeserved students

may have been dissuaded from applying, thinking that their application may not have been good enough, decreasing the college's overall applications and subsequent admissions.

Although going test-optional is a good first step, it doesn't fix the overall system. For example, colleges need to recognize that further steps are needed for a fully meritocratic system due to the fact that historically underrepresented students need significant help with financial aid and colleges haven't yet stated how they intend to deal with that increased monetary need. As the American Research Association states, this creates a problem of a greater number of students who need aid that would be competing for the same number of seats. There are other steps colleges might take too. Some institutions are focusing on revamping their admissions process to be more holistic and look at the entirety of an individual. Instead of colleges looking at a number that a student achieved on a test, a college looks at the entirety of an individual. With a larger applicant pool, schools will find themselves looking at a more diverse range of students with differing passions. [Angela Farmer](#), a high school administrator in a rural area, states that a more holistic admissions process means that colleges can see a "more complete picture of [students] and their talents."

Although a holistic admissions process is the direction that colleges want to head towards, currently colleges have only shifted the weight of the application from standardized tests to other sections including GPA, extracurriculars, and essays.

Shifting the weight of the application has numerous effects, which can be detrimental to minorities seeking admission. Although research has shown that high school grades and GPA are the best predictors for college success, they still come with a bias towards wealthier students. In an opinion piece from the [New York Times](#), Saul Geiser, a sociologist from UC Berkeley, discussed his book that notes that the "correlation between family income and SAT scores among University of California applicants is three times as strong as the correlation between their family income and their high school G.P.A."

Even though GPA is a better indicator than SAT scores, GPA still inherently helps more affluent students. Wesley Whistle, an education writer at [Forbes](#), found that since many low- and middle-income students work or take care of their families after school, their schoolwork can be impacted, lowering their overall GPA.

Although this context can be discussed in an applicant's essay, many applicants feel uncomfortable sharing intimate details of their life with admissions officers. Many times, Whistle expresses, students don't even feel the need to share these details in their application as they know family and friends who are struggling in similar ways and feel that their story isn't unique.

There is also something to be said about the problems associated with the college essays required in applications. [Inside Higher Ed](#), a media company that focuses on education topics, found that wealthier students are able to afford counselors who can aid them in finding ideas that "reveal their unique attributes." An essay coach who wished to remain unidentified stated that "most low-income students could never find someone to do what he does" because of the high cost of essay coaches. In his words, "how does someone without money 'compete' on an equal footing?" And that's the problem in the education system, low- and middle-income students

aren't able to compete because they don't have the same resources that affluent students receive to help them write the perfect essay.

Low- and middle-income students are also at a time disadvantaged as some work part-time jobs after school or have family responsibilities that don't give them the time to participate in extracurriculars, that they can later discuss in their application essays. In an interview with [The Hechinger Report](#), a journalism website that reports on educational inequality, D'naysha Griggs, a high school senior in New York, discusses her daily routine with Steven Yoder. Griggs is one student who doesn't have the time after school to participate in clubs. Griggs' day starts at 5 a.m. so she can get to school at 7:30. When she works after school, she can get home as late as 11 at night, at which point she does homework for another hour or two before heading to bed around midnight. On days she doesn't have work, she is babysitting her younger siblings. Although the commitment Griggs has to her education is commendable, college applications don't have space for these types of experiences. When colleges increase the weight of the application, they are putting students who are unable to afford essay coaches and who don't have time for extracurriculars at a disadvantage over their peers. These students have experiences that have shaped their lives, but are left struggling as to what they can put on their applications.

By going test-optional, Ithaca S+R expresses, other aspects of the application carry more weight, which can have admissions officers rely “on supplementary materials and extracurricular activities, which may privilege wealthy students who have more access and ability to develop a compelling resume.” Going test-optional removes one portion of an application that sees inequality, but it doesn't fix the overall systemic inequality college applications foster.

Although removing standardized testing is a small step in the right direction, many large civil rights groups are against this new movement. Their argument stems from the fact that standardized testing provides consistent data about marginal groups that help these organizations, such as The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, fight for “more fair treatment for students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English learners.” In a [joint group statement](#) from multiple civil rights groups, they all stated that removing standardized testing “result[s] in statewide bills and local pressure on schools to discourage students from taking assessments.” Removing standardized testing can make it more difficult for these groups to fight for equality because the data that supports their cause no longer exists.

While civil rights groups believe that these tests should continue, the Institute for Democratic Education in America (IDEA) believes that standardized testing needs to be reduced. [IDEA](#) recognizes that some standardized testing is needed, but overall they feel that these tests “hurt low-income youth and youth of color” as these tests often hold these students back and force teachers to teach to a specific curriculum, making classrooms more rigid. Low-income schools where students are unable to buy their scores are the schools most affected by these tests, as teachers often have to teach directly to the test rather than have a more diverse curriculum. So in IDEAS' eyes, reducing standardized testing allows teachers to be more creative in the classroom and it allows students to learn instead of memorize.

Even though these groups have differing ideas, both of these perspectives agree on one point: standardized testing is unequal in modern America. Both groups have found that standardized testing hurts students who are first-generation, low-income, disabled, or an underrepresented

ethnic group, however, civil rights groups need the consistent data from these tests to fight for equality while education groups find that testing is just too strenuous on children and classrooms to continue as frequently as it is occurring now.

Going test-optional is just a band-aid to the overall problem of systemic inequality in the education system. Test-optional colleges can see more diverse students apply, but they also have to make sure they have the resources for these students and they need to recognize that the change in the application can also hurt these historic minorities, since the rest of the application favors more affluent students as well. One tiny step in the right direction will not fix the system, but that doesn't mean the step shouldn't be taken.