EAB

Enrollment Strategy for a Test-Optional Era

Practical Guidance on Applicant Evaluation, Aid Awarding, and Market Approach

enroll360

Marketing and Enrollment Solutions | Enroll360

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Introduction

A Time for Decisive Action

Many Colleges Uncertain on Test-Optional

A historic transformation

With many students unable to take standardized tests due to the pandemic, the nation's colleges have had little choice but to find alternate means of evaluating applicants. Practically overnight, the proportion of schools offering test-optional admissions increased to upwards of 70%.

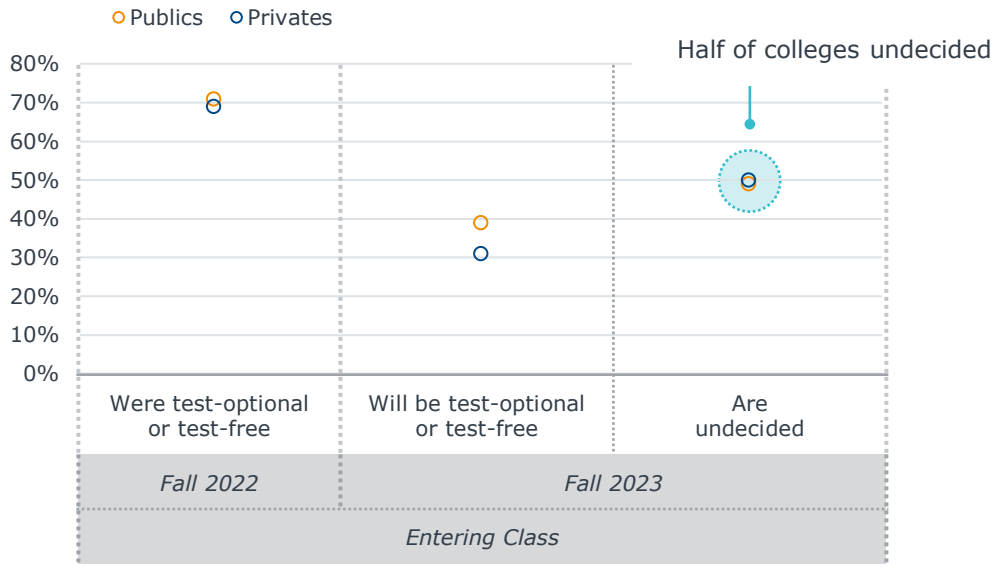
First movers

But that's not to say that many or most saw the shift as permanent. As illustrated at right, survey results from the summer of 2021 showed that around half of colleges were undecided on whether they would be test-optional for their fall 2023 entering class.

Many schools have since announced their policies for the next two or three years. Still, there is a larger lesson to be learned here, which is that uncommitted institutions risk falling behind schools that have more decisively embraced test-optional. Many in this latter group are taking advantage of the unique window of opportunity the pandemic has created to push through advances in admissions practice—changes of a kind that may find a less receptive audience once the pressures of the pandemic have passed.

Current and Future Test-Optional Plans

Percentage of Surveyed Four-Year Colleges, by Segment, Based on Survey Results from 2021



Source: McGuire Associates, "The Future of Test-Optional: Survey Results."

Test-Optional Is Probably Here to Stay

Understandable hesitancy

The reluctance on the part of some schools to commit fully to test-optional is understandable. Apart from it being difficult to execute to a high standard, there is an open question as to whether colleges will revert, en masse, to test-mandatory admissions once the pandemic ends, removing much of the impetus for any given school to stick with the policy.

No going back

It's true that there are many factors impelling colleges to return to test-mandatory admissions. But weighing the wider set of forces at play suggests that test-optional is probably here to stay.

Foremost among the factors likely to ensure lasting relevance for test-optional is the ongoing contraction in the number of college-bound students nationally and the added competitive pressure this is placing on schools. Few enrollment teams are in a position to absorb whatever declines in applications and enrollment might result from a return to requiring test scores from applicants.

Some Factors Influencing Test-Optional Prevalence

Factors pushing schools to **revert to test-mandatory admissions**	Factors pushing schools to **go/remain test-optional**
Test scores are widely believed to be uniquely predictive of key student-success outcomes	Reliance on test scores is widely believed to unfairly disadvantage underrepresented students
Evaluation of applicants under a test-optional approach can be resource-intensive	Requiring test scores from applicants suppresses application volume and enrollment
Some colleges are not set up to effectively serve "new" demographics attracted by test-optionality	The number of students testing will likely continue to drop after the pandemic
Some colleges face pro-testing pressure from powerful stakeholders (e.g., state governments)	Well-executed test-optional approaches expand prospect pools and improve predictive power
Standardized testing is structurally embedded in some disciplines (e.g., business, nursing)	Successfully serving more underrepresented students boosts a school's value proposition

These factors are likely to prevail

A further complication

Oftentimes the decision about whether or not to be test-optional on a permanent basis is ultimately out of enrollment teams' hands.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Positive Early Signs on the Net Impact of Test-Optional

A test-optional dividend

Because higher education's large-scale shift to test-optional was recent, it's a little early to reach definite conclusions about its impact. (The context of the pandemic also makes interpreting the data challenging.)

That said, the early signs are positive: institutions that made the switch to test-optional saw a substantial bump in deposits and total net tuition revenue relative to the market generally.

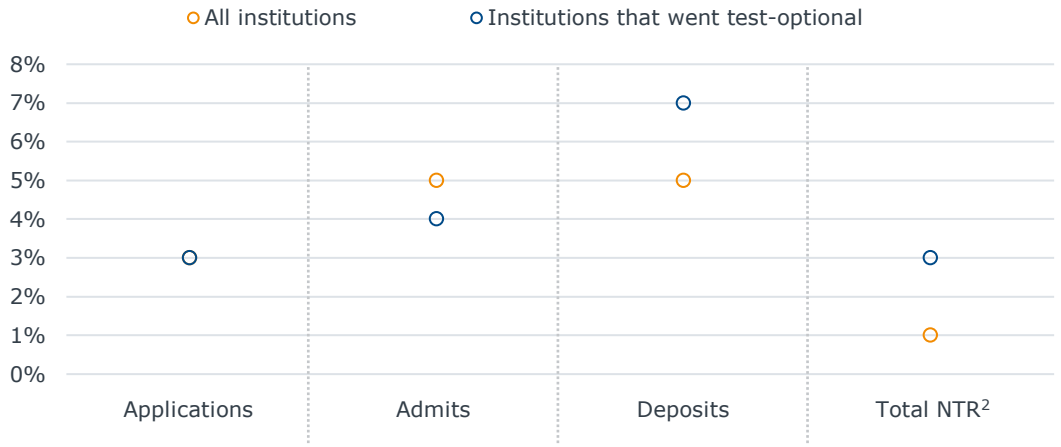
Some implications

The results shown at right underscore the point made on the preceding page about colleges' likely reluctance to return to a test-mandatory status quo, insofar as schools going that route might expect to see the reverse of the trend shown here.

Another important lesson about test-optionality illustrated by the data at right is that enrolling more underrepresented students, including lower-income students—a common result of going test-optional—does not necessarily have a negative impact on net revenue.

Change in Key Recruitment Outcomes

Entering Class 2020 Versus Entering Class 2021, EAB Partner Institutions by Test-Optional Adoption[1]



1. N=209 institutions. 63% of these institutions went test-optional for the 2021 entering-class year.
2. Net tuition revenue.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Test-Optional Headaches for Enrollment Teams

Broad benefit

As suggested on the preceding pages, test-optional appears to be here to stay, and there's plenty of reason to feel good about that. Evidence from schools with a long history of test-optionality proves that it can greatly benefit all involved, both students and colleges.

But it's also not quite so simple.

Far from easy

The effectiveness of test-optional policies depends on them being thoughtfully designed and executed to a high standard. As many enrollment teams are learning, that's easier said than done. Some of the more common and pressing challenges facing teams that have recently made the transition are shown at right.

The aim of this report is to put challenges such as these within a framework of related solutions, as outlined on the next two pages.

Common Concerns Expressed by Enrollment Leaders

- Difficulty communicating test-optional policy to students
- Difficulty gauging applicants' academic ability
- Increased admissions-team workload
- Reduced ability to predict yield
- Reduced efficiency of institutional aid
- Difficulty securing responsive data/analytics support
- Difficulty executing required information-systems revisions

A special concern: finding students to recruit

Even before the drop in standardized testing that occurred during the pandemic, a larger social and cultural shift away from testing was occurring—a shift that the growing adoption of test-optionality by colleges has reinforced. One important consequence is a likely future reduction in the number of names available for purchase from ACT and College Board—sources on which enrollment teams' recruitment-marketing lead-generation efforts have historically depended.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

A Four-Part Framework for Test-Optional Admissions

1 Test-optional **recruiting**

Look beyond test-based list sources

The number of student names available from ACT and College Board is likely to continue its decline, even after the pandemic ends and testing rebounds; enrollment leaders should learn to make optimal use of the many additional lead sources available to them.

Align audience selection with admit criteria

If you are no longer requiring students to submit test scores to be considered for admission, remove that constraint from the name buys you are doing for recruitment of future classes, as this will increase the size of your prospect pool and boost application volume.

Overinvest in communicating your policy

How you describe your test-optional policy can make the difference between a student applying or not; ensure that you're being totally clear in your related communications and avoid encumbering your policy with conditions that may needlessly suppress application volume.

2 Test-optional **admitting**

Commit to closer applicant review

High school GPA can be an equivocal measure of student ability, and you're unlikely to see optimal enrollment outcomes if it is the primary driver of your admit and aid decisions. Take a broader perspective on students' academic potential, incorporating detailed transcript review.

Scope the effort to your recruitment aims

How you review applicants should match the importance your institution places on enrolling students with high academic ability; close review of most or all applicants is resource intensive and may not be necessary or realistic for budget-constrained institutions with high admit rates.

Initiate rapid-cycle outcomes assessment

Evaluate first–year outcomes for students admitted under your test-optional approach, to ensure that it is producing results consistent with your intentions—e.g., that it is not resulting in unacceptably high rates of attrition. Promptly revise your admit criteria as necessary.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

3 Test-optional **awarding**

Take a "do no harm" approach

Structure your merit aid awards so that students submitting test scores will always receive the highest amount they are entitled to (i.e., between the award factoring in test score and the award calculated without it). Foreground this policy in your communication with students.

Refine your merit-aid awarding criteria

Unavailability of test scores can reduce the accuracy of aid modeling and the efficiency of your aid spend; expand your merit-aid awarding criteria to include new measures of student academic ability that approach or match the predictive power and granularity of test scores.

Continuously monitor aid impact through yield season

Enrollment outcomes can be unpredictable for schools new to test-optional; close monitoring of progress toward enrollment goals throughout yield season and making corresponding course corrections via fine-tuned adjustment of awards become especially important in this context.

4 Test-optional **infrastructure**

Campaign for capacity

Even schools that opt not to do closer review of all applicants will find test-optional admissions to be more labor intensive than test-based approaches; be prepared to lobby for the additional resources required to do test-optional well.

Increase your analytics bandwidth

Success under test-optional depends on continuous assessment of outcomes and corresponding policy adjustments; this is difficult to do without robust "in-team" data/analytics capabilities (or unconstrained access to an institutional research team or similarly skilled third party).

Sync with your school's student success capabilities

Test-optionality will likely lead to you enrolling types of students your institution may not be as familiar with. It will definitely lead to you having less information on students. Both considerations call for closer coordination with your student-success teams.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

“

Test-optional is a draw for students. For sure. But they won’t hesitate to pass on you if your policy is confusing or if you’re making them jump through hoops. Students are overwhelmed by options—they’re actively looking to cross schools off their list, to make their search more manageable. You don’t want to give them reasons to do that.

”

Vice President, Enrollment Management
Medium-size regional private university in the West

Source: EAB research interviews.

Test-Optional Recruiting

SECTION 1

Look Beyond Test-Based List Sources

An audience-generation problem

Many enrollment leaders worry about a future in which, test-optionality having become the norm, students stop testing and their names can no longer be obtained in bulk from ACT and College Board.

Given how profoundly most schools' recruitment-marketing efforts have relied on these sources in the past, the concern is understandable.

A dedicated EAB report

That said, the problem is not a direct consequence of any given school's adoption of test-optional policies and therefore falls outside the scope of this document.

Readers interested in learning more about how to find students to recruit in the face of declining test-taking can refer to another recently released EAB publication, "Recruiting in an Era of Channel Overload", available for download from eab.com. This report puts key test-based sources in the context of the larger set of audience-generation tools available to enrollment leaders, including survey-based sources and ones tied to online platforms such as college-search aggregators.

An Overview of Major Audience-Source Types

Standardized testing	Lists from standardized tests such as the PSAT, SAT, and ACT form the core of most colleges' recruitment marketing lead-generation efforts, due to the number of names available, the detail and accuracy of information provided, availability relatively early in students' college search, and the standardized measure of academic ability they provide.
Survey-based sources	These sources are built on survey data collected by organizations such as CBSS and NRCCUA. Because they are not tied to testing, they can sometimes provide broader and earlier coverage than test-based sources.
Online platforms	*College-owned:* This category includes the .edu and other college-owned digital channels, such as virtual campus tours. *Third-party:* This category includes college-search aggregator portals such as Cappex, and a large number of other sites that seek to attract and engage students through a variety of other means.

These audience sources will take on new importance as fewer students test.

A related EAB white paper available for download

"Recruiting in an Era of Channel Overload"

Explains how to find students to recruit in the face of declining test-taking

https://eab.com/services/whitepaper/enrollment/recruit-college-bound-students-channel-overload/

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Align Audience Selection with Admit Criteria

An enlarged prospect pool

From a lead-generation perspective, the important thing about test-optionality is that it expands a school's prospect pool to include students who previously would have been ineligible for admission based on their test scores.

Note that this is not true for all forms of test-optionality, but it does hold for policies that are test-optional for all applicants (see next page) and that rule out rejecting applicants based on test score.

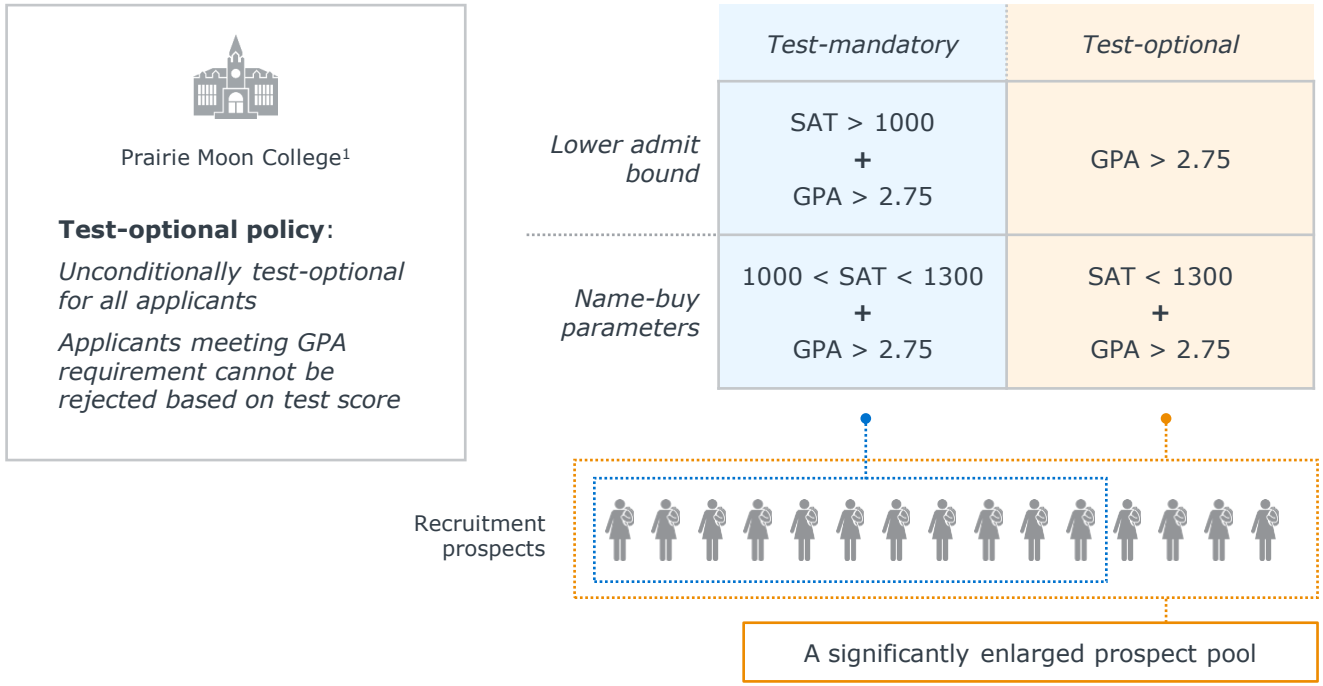
Note also that some schools raise their GPA floor when they go test-optional, believing that lack of test scores makes them less able to judge the academic ability of students at the lower end of the GPA range. At such institutions, the prospect pool will be enlarged to a lesser degree.

Syncing name-buy parameters

Schools making the transition to test-optional should be sure to revise the parameters they're using in name buys, bringing them in line with their new admit criteria, to take advantage of this enlarged prospect pool.

Prospective Students Meeting Minimum Admit Criteria

Before and After Revision of Admit Criteria/Transition to Test-Optional, Hypothetical Example



[1] A hypothetical institution.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

A Complicated Landscape of Test-Optional Policies

Conditional versus unconditional

Test-optional policies fall into two broad categories—conditional and unconditional. Conditional approaches limit test-optionality to a subset of applicants, place additional requirements on students who do not provide scores, or make certain opportunities contingent on submission of a score. Unconditional approaches have no such restrictions.

Minimizing friction for applicants

For institutions that can accurately assess student ability based on information other than test scores—something that all colleges should, in theory, be capable of—the "optional for all" approach is best. It is easy to explain to students, which is crucial. It also reduces the suppression of application volume that can happen with conditional approaches.

Note that the "optional for all" category may also be thought of as including admissions policies that do, in fact, have test score requirements, as long as those requirements impact only small numbers of students (e.g., those applying to highly specialized programs or for especially prestigious and exclusive scholarships).

Examples Seen in the Field

Conditional approaches	
GPA-threshold approach	Students whose high school GPA is above a set threshold need not submit a test score to be considered for admission/merit-based aid.
Supplementation approach	Students lacking a test score must submit supplementary information or fulfil other requirements to be considered for admission/merit-based aid.
Program-based approach	Students applying to certain majors or programs must submit a test score to be considered for admission.
Merit-aid-exception approach	Students need not submit a test score to be considered for admission but must do so to qualify for merit-based aid.
Unconditional approaches	
Test-blind Approach	Test scores are not considered when evaluating students for admission or merit aid.
Optional for All	No student need submit a test score to be considered for admission or merit aid; nonsubmitters do not face additional application requirements.

Best option for many schools

Source: EAB research and analysis; Steven Syverson, Valerie Franks, and William Hiss, "Defining Access: How Test-Optional Works," 2018.

A Minority of Schools Attach Conditions to Their Test-Optionality

Unconditional policies prevail

The material at right shows how widespread the different forms of test-optionality are.

The first thing to note is that the vast majority of test-optional institutions are in the "optional for all" category described on the preceding page; no student need submit a score to be considered for admission and merit aid, and students who do not submit scores do not face additional application or admission requirements.

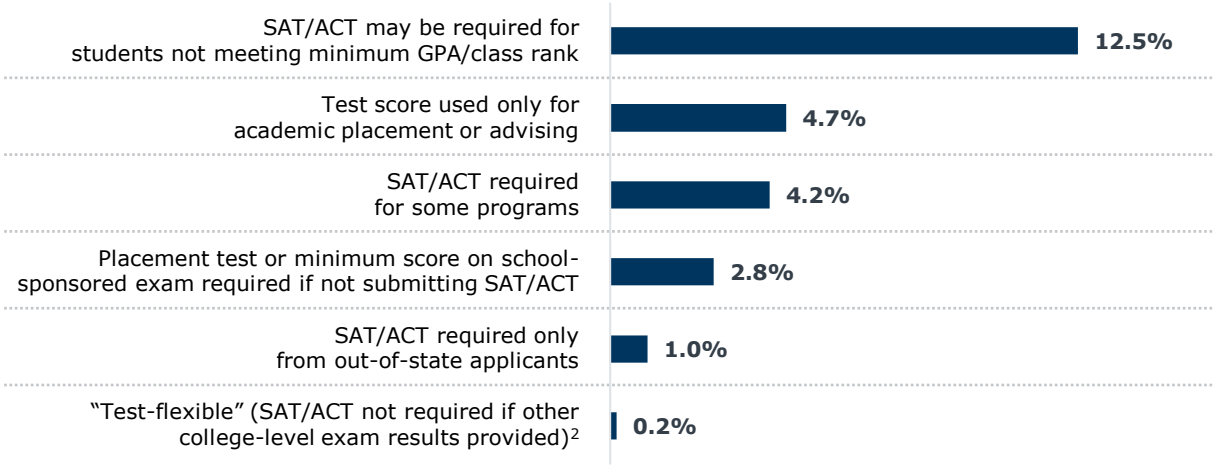
Varied motivations

For schools that do place conditions on their test-optionality, motivations vary. Most commonly, scores are required for students below a certain GPA or class-rank threshold; this makes sense given these students' elevated risk of attrition and the added insight that test scores bring to assessments of that risk.

Other schools require test scores for purposes besides making an admit decision—e.g., to help with academic placement or advising.

Percentage of Test-Optional Institutions Using Specific Conditional Approaches

Four-Year Colleges and Universities, Fall 2022 Entering Class[1]



<25%

of test-optional schools attach conditions to their test-optionality

1 Current as of February 2, 2022.

2 Includes tests such as SAT Subject Test, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate.

Source: fairtest.org; EAB research and analysis.

Added Complexity Beneath the Surface

Potential for confusion

Many people find test-optional policies difficult to understand.

One reason is the different combinations of conditions schools attach to their policies, as explained on the preceding page.

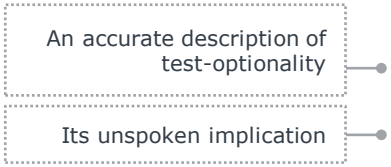
Another is that test-optionality generally (irrespective of the different flavors it comes in) has implications that are not immediately apparent and that seem, to some people, counterintuitive.

What weight for test scores?

One underappreciated implication of test-optionality is that it does not necessarily put students who don't submit scores on an equal footing with those who do. Nothing about test-optionality necessarily prevents admissions rubrics and aid-awarding formulas from selectively boosting odds of admission or merit aid awards for students submitting scores.

In this sense, test-optional policies may be thought of as existing on a spectrum, according to the weight that they give test scores. At one extreme they resemble test-blind policies; at the other, test-mandatory approaches.

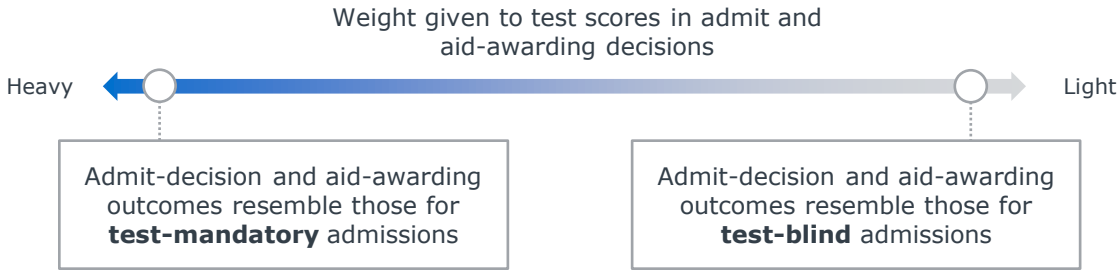
A Seldom-Stated Corollary



Students need not submit a test score to be considered for admission or scholarships

(but not submitting a score may disadvantage you relative to applicants who do)

A Test-Optional Spectrum



Where you fall on this spectrum will depend on the degree to which you believe that test scores are fair and accurate predictors of student success. This determination should be based on the objectives of your admissions policy and evidence you've gathered regarding the predictive power of test scores (and other admit criteria) relative to the outcomes that matter most to you—evidence specific to your institution and the students you serve.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

How Your Policy Is Presented Impacts Recruitment Outcomes

Policy versus policy articulation

Beyond setting the particulars of your test-optional policy, you'll want to pay close attention to how it is presented to prospective students.

The two pages that follow this one offer detailed guidance on that point. But it's also important to appreciate just how big an impact more or less thoughtful articulation of your policy can have—a point illustrated on this page.

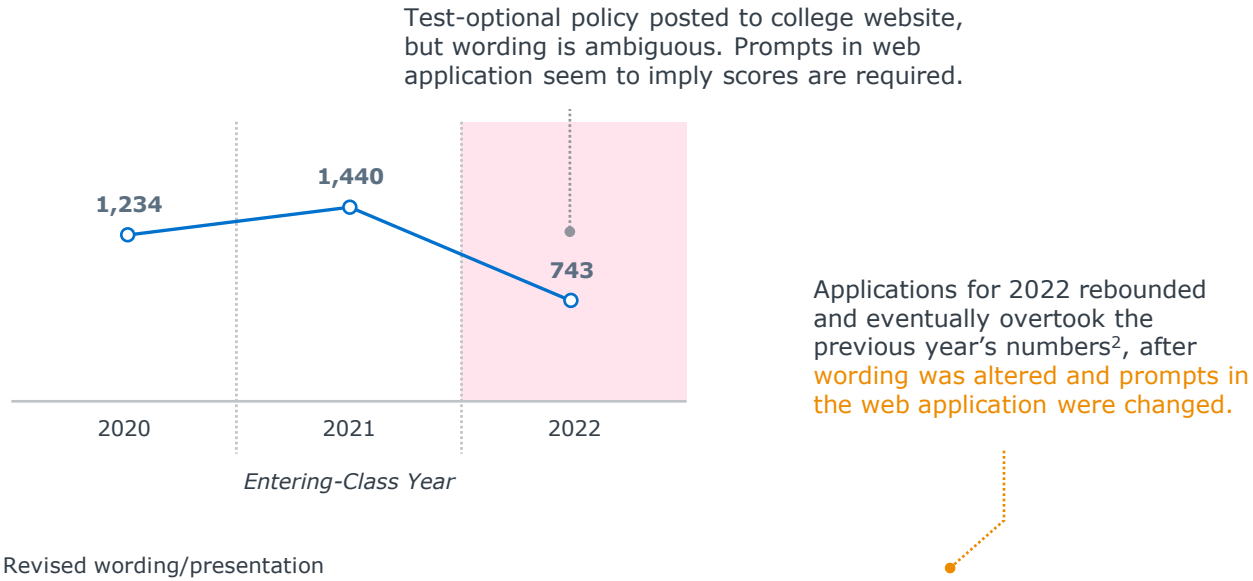
Clear communication matters

As illustrated by the chart at right, an unclear or otherwise misleading presentation of your policy can impact students' inclination to apply, with serious consequences for application volume.

Questions of clarity of presentation aside, the case study shown here also illustrates, incidentally, how powerful a draw test-optionality can be for students—i.e., insofar as doubts about it were enough to temporarily cut this institution's applicant volume in half.

Applications Submitted, Sycamore State University[1]

Point-in-Time Comparison (September 1), By Entering-Class Year



1 A pseudonym.

2 Based on point-in-time comparisons from January 27.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Overinvest in Communicating Your Policy

There's no question that communicating test-optional policies is difficult. This is due in part to tension between the conflicting aims of being as simple as possible and being totally transparent—you don't want to put off or confuse students, but you also don't want to mislead them. That said, following a few simple rules of thumb, as outlined below, will take you a long way toward student-facing explanations of your policy that are easy to understand, compelling, and transparent.

8 Steps to Improved Test-Optional Policy Communications

1	**Start with a market-friendly policy** Placing conditions on your test-optionality (e.g., requiring an essay from students not submitting scores) suppresses application volume and should be avoided as far as possible.
2	**Foreground a simple-as-possible statement of your policy** Include a simple statement of your policy in a prominent location on your website. Sample wording: "applicants do not need to submit a test score to be considered for admission or scholarships."
3	**Keep details in the background** Make sure the presentation of your policy maintains a clear hierarchy between the main statement of it, which should be most prominent, and important "fine print"-type details (e.g., test scores being required for certain scholarships or programs).
4	**Emphasize your "do no harm" approach** If your school's policy ensures that submitting test scores can only increase (and never decrease) students' chances of admission and their merit aid award, be sure to highlight that fact.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

5	**Help students decide** Help students decide whether to submit their test scores—e.g., by sharing rules of thumb, giving prescriptive advice (with examples), and encouraging them to seek guidance directly from your admissions team when in doubt.
6	**Share stats** Let students know the percentage of applicants who typically submit scores. This clears up ambiguity and can help lower students' anxiety about the decision to submit.
7	**Ensure consistency across communications** Your policy will invariably appear in different settings—your website and online application, for example. Make sure the way your policy is described across those settings is consistent (and optimized in each instance).
8	**Explain why your school is test-optional** Sample wording: "Like many other schools, we've found that the high school transcript is a better predictor of success for most students than are test scores."

See Hofstra University's website for an example of a well-executed test-optional explainer page.

https://www.hofstra.edu/admission/standardized-testing-policy.html

Source: EAB research and analysis.

“What a student thinks of our school has everything to do with who they’re studying alongside. A capable and motivated and diverse student body is the ultimate guarantee of our value proposition. In spite of what some people think, you can, in fact, maintain that foundation without using test scores in admissions. But it does require new ways of working.”

Senior Vice President for Enrollment and Marketing
Medium-size regional public university in the South

Source: EAB research interviews.

Test-Optional Admitting

SECTION 2

Mixed Messages on Testing

Do test scores matter?

At the heart of test-optionality is the specific basis for your assessment of students' academic ability and likelihood to succeed. The more you believe test scores to be a powerful independent predictor of student success, the more important it will be for your revised approach to compensate for their absence.

See for yourself

Unhelpfully, research on the predictive power of test scores is equivocal, with different studies reaching opposite conclusions. Reasons for this are complicated, though contributing factors seem to include high school grade inflation over time and variations in predictive power of test score by context (student demographics, high school and college attended, etc.)

In any case, lack of consensus on test scores is one of several reasons admissions teams should validate their admit criteria locally, relative to their college's unique aims and capabilities and the characteristics of the student populations they serve (work that most if not all schools already do to some degree).

Are Test Scores an Important Predictor of Student Success?

Findings from Two Representative Studies

No	Yes
"High school grades are a far better incremental predictor of graduation rates than are standard SAT/ACT test scores….The strong predictive power of high school GPA holds even when we know little or nothing about the quality of the high school attended."	"Test scores are predictive for all demographic groups and disciplines, even after controlling for HSGPA. In fact, test scores are better predictors of success for students who are Underrepresented Minority students (URMs), who are first-generation, or whose families are low-income; that is, test scores explain more of the variance in UGPA and completion rates for students in these groups."
W. Bowen, M. Chingos, and M. McPherson *Crossing the Finish Line* 2009	*Report of the UC Academic Council Standardized Testing Task Force* 2020

Note: the University of California (UC) system eventually decided to go test-blind, in spite of the findings of its task force—a fact that illustrates just how complex the factors governing test-optionality can be.

Source: W. Bowen, M. Chingos, and M. McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line,* 2009; "Report of the UC Academic Council Standardized Testing Task Force", 2020; EAB research and analysis.

The Problem with Retrospective Analysis of HS GPA

Learning from the past

Most or all schools base their admit criteria on analyses of post-matriculation outcomes for previously admitted students. So, for example, lower limits for eligibility typically correspond to high school GPAs below which rates of attrition have proven to be unacceptably high.

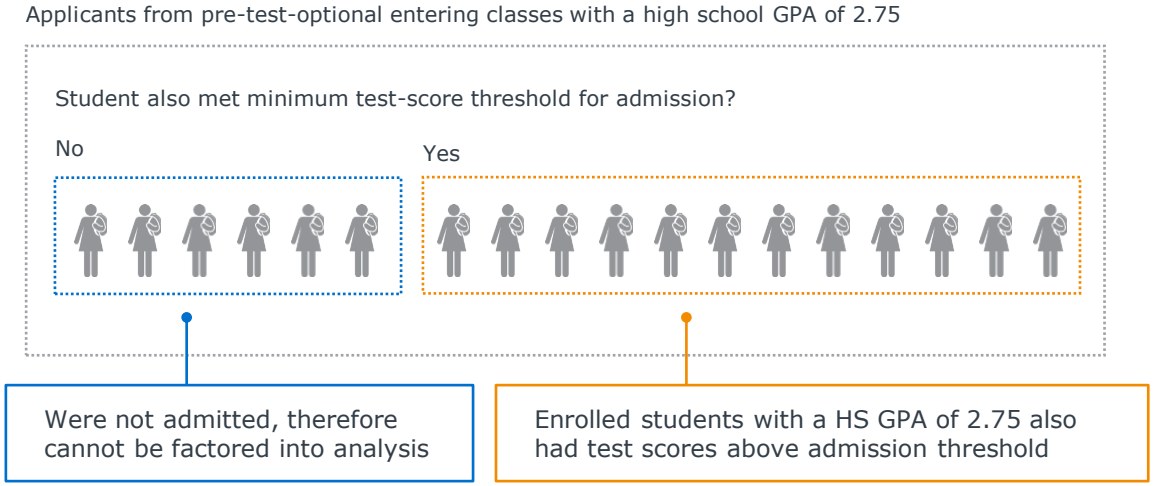
A missing baseline

The approach described above is a problem for schools new to test-optionality, which have no history of admitting students without test scores. As illustrated at right, enrolled students with a high school GPA of, say, 2.75, would also have had test scores above the lower test-score limit for eligibility. How students with that same GPA but lower test scores might have performed is unknown, since these students were not admitted and did not enroll.

This does not mean that schools should not be basing their initial test-optional policies on historical analysis—there is really no alternative. But they should do so factoring in the limitations just described. (Such considerations have led some schools to raise the GPA cutoff for eligibility when transitioning to test-optional).

Test Score Often Cannot Be Controlled For in Historical Analysis of Correlations between High School GPA and Post-Matriculation Outcomes

Hypothetical Example from a School That Has Not Historically Been Test-Optional



Source: EAB research and analysis.

Implications of Test-Score Unavailability for Admit Decisions

Variation by school segment

How much lack of test scores matters depends in part on a school's intent in evaluating students for admission.

As explained at right, for less-selective colleges, test-score unavailability primarily impacts admit decisions for the subset of applicants whose GPA puts them near the lower limit of eligibility.

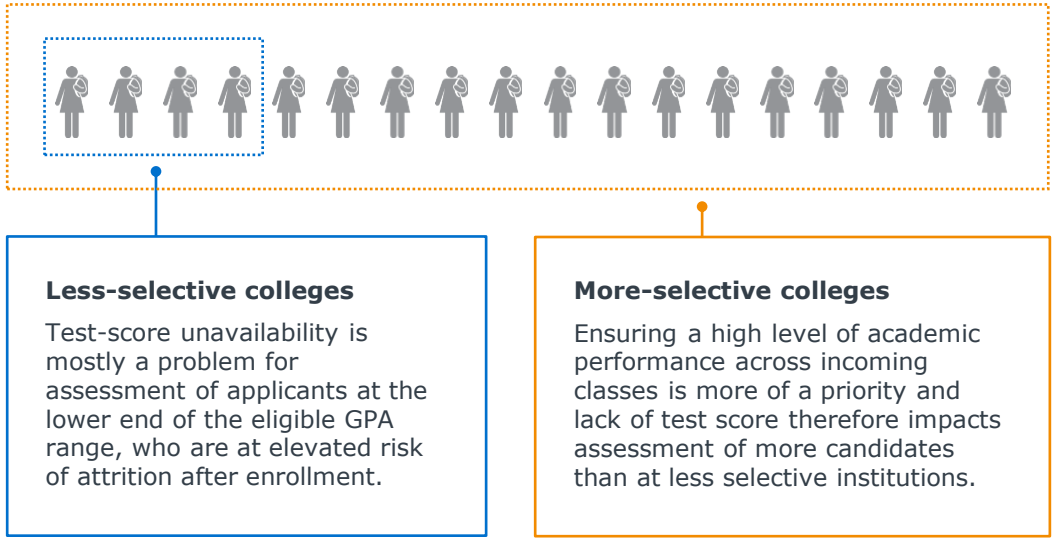
By contrast, more-selective colleges, for whom ensuring a high average level of academic ability in their admit pool is a priority and who often face the additional challenge of sorting through a surplus of qualified candidates, test-score unavailability impacts a larger portion of the applicant pool.

An aid-awarding tie-in

An important additional consideration for less-selective colleges is that, even if test scores do not impact admit decisions for the bulk of their applicants, they do enable more effective aid awarding—a process that touches every admitted student. For this reason, even less-selective schools may see broad negative impact from test score unavailability.

Scale of Problem Varies with Selectivity

Prospective Students



Source: EAB research and analysis.

Commit to Closer Applicant Review

Looking beyond high school GPA

Schools that have done well with test-optionality typically do not depend solely or mainly on high school GPA when making admit decisions; rather, they bring to bear a broader set of considerations when evaluating applicants, with a particular focus on detailed review of a student's high school transcript.

Tailored approaches

While there's no standard formula for which student characteristics to consider, some typical ones are shown at right.

Which characteristics make most sense for your school will depend on which prove to be most predictive for the outcomes that matter most to your institution. You will additionally need to factor in logistical considerations, such as which data points you are able to realistically gather for most students—a key consideration given that many enrollment teams' existing staffing levels are not a match for the extra work associated with close applicant review of this sort.

Aspects of a Student's Academic Profile Commonly Considered in Test-Optional Admissions

HS GPA

\+

"Challenge index"

High school rigor[1]

Performance in core courses

Dual enrollment

\+

Class rank (as available)

SAT/ACT score (as available)

AP/IB test scores (as available)

A measure of the difficulty of a student's chosen curriculum relative to what was offered at their high school.

Particular courses/course sequences known to be strong predictors of post-matriculation outcomes.

Since indicators like those listed above are highly predictive of student success and may be obtained for all students, schools that use them typically give the factors at left less weight in admit decisions.

[1] See next page.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Adjusting for Differences in Grade Calibration Across High Schools

Inconsistent standards

Many in the enrollment community believe (with some justification) that grading is inconsistent across high schools—that a 3.00 GPA from one school may indicate a very different level of academic preparedness than a 3.00 from another.

In search of a methodology

There are a few common ways in which enrollment teams account for this in their assessment of applicants.

For feeder high schools that application readers are familiar with, the school's quality is often factored into applicant assessment informally, in "gestalt" fashion.

More scalable and rigorous approaches to adjusting for high school quality have proven elusive. Some fairly reliable proxy indicators, like zip code (itself a proxy for average household income), are generally avoided due to their socioeconomic bias. Less-loaded alternatives include the one shown at right, in which a college calibrates any given high school's grading by looking at how students from that school have historically performed after enrolling.

Basing Assessment of High School Quality on Post-Matriculation Outcomes

A Hypothetical Analysis Performed by a Recruiting College on Previously Enrolled Students

Previously enrolled students with HS GPA of 3.50

	Average across students from all feeder schools	Average for students from High School A	Difference for High School A (percentage points)
First-year persistence rate	80%	86%	+6%
Four-year graduation rate	46%	55%	+9%

Students from High School A have historically performed better than students from other schools with equivalent GPA.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

New Assessment Inputs for "New" Student Populations

Unfamiliar demographics

Many schools see an increase in applications from underrepresented students after going test-optional.

Assessing such applicants, whose talents and abilities sometimes present differently than those of other students, can pose challenges for schools that have limited experience with this population.

CBOs can help

One valuable resource in this regard is community-based organizations, or CBOs—groups that serve as liaisons between underrepresented students and colleges looking to recruit and serve them better.

One of many ways in which CBOs can help is by identifying underrepresented students with high likelihood to succeed; generally speaking, CBO-affiliated students have higher levels of post-matriculation success than their non-CBO peers.

Tools that enrollment leaders can use to find and connect with CBO-affiliated students, at scale, include EAB's College Greenlight and Cappex services.

Test-Optional Attracts Underrepresented Students

Percentage of Schools Reporting Increases in Applications After Going Test-Optional, By School Type and Student Segment, Fall 2021 Entering Class

	Public Colleges	Private Colleges
First-gen students	**49%**	**34%**
Underrepresented students	**56%**	**45%**
Students with financial need	**48%**	**37%**

CBO-Affiliated Students Succeed at Higher Rates

Harman-Calisto Network[1] (HCN) CBO a Case in Point

First-year retention rate *Percentage of students continuously enrolled at the same college through freshman year*	All students, all US colleges	HCN-affiliated students attending HCN-affiliated colleges
	66%	84%

[1] A pseudonym.

Source: McGuire Associates, "The Future of Test-Optional: Survey Results;" EAB research, interviews, and analysis.

Scope the Effort to Your Recruitment Priorities

A capacity challenge

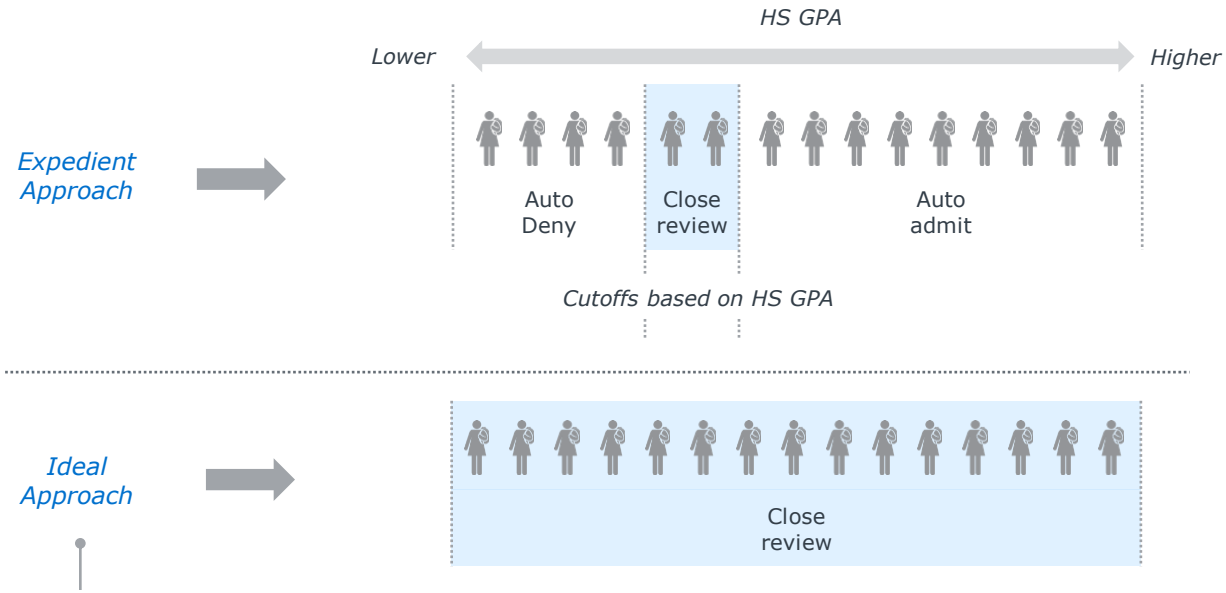
One major hurdle associated with test-optionality is the increase in admissions-team workload it entails. Obtaining, organizing, and interpreting additional data on students—for example, entering course-level information from transcripts into your systems—can double the number of hours required for applicant review.

Which approach is right for you?

Accordingly, many test-optional schools—particularly those with high admit rates and those for whom ensuring a high level of academic ability across admitted students is not a first priority—choose to limit close review to applicants with elevated risk of poor post-matriculation outcomes.

Potential pitfalls of this expedient approach include reduced efficiency of aid awarding and an inability to ensure that enrolled classes, as a whole, are reliably meeting minimum levels of academic ability consistent with your college's aims and capabilities. Schools experiencing these pitfalls should consider investing in the additional capacity needed to perform closer review of more applicants.

Applicants, by Intensiveness of Review



Supports more efficient aid awarding and helps ensure that the composition of your incoming classes (with respect to academic ability) supports your institution's aims

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Initiate Rapid-Cycle Outcomes Assessment

Increased call for analysis

As noted on the preceding page, transition to test-optional can boost the workload associated with applicant review.

Another demand it places on admissions teams is that of closer assessment of the relationship between admit criteria and students' post-matriculation outcomes.

Catch problems early

The admit policies schools use in the first few enrollment cycles after going test-optional are, unavoidably, unproven, insofar as they are based on analysis of historical data—i.e., data from a time when admit decisions were made with knowledge of students' test scores. (See page 25.)

One associated concern is that colleges may be unwittingly admitting students with unacceptably high risk of attrition.

Addressing concerns such as these is one reason enrollment teams should have plans in place to promptly assess post-enrollment outcomes of students admitted on a test-optional basis and to feed the findings of those analyses back into their admit criteria.

Prioritize Analyses Required to Effect Prompt Course Corrections

First priority

Focus on serious signs of trouble that can be spotted early—e.g., students not completing the fall or spring semester of their freshman year.

Second priority

Initiate data collection required to study the relationship between a broader set of pre-matriculation student characteristics and post-matriculation outcomes, across student segments and across the full course of their degree studies. This work will enable you to further refine your admit criteria.

Analytics tip

For students that have them, collect SAT/ACT scores from nonsubmitters after they enroll. Including this data in your analyses will give you a clearer read on the extent to which test scores do or do not add to your ability to predict student success.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

“

I do worry about merit awarding that’s based mostly on GPA, because we get applicants from high schools that have really different academic standards. There’s this feeling that it’s unmooring our aid awards from reality.

”

Dean of Admission
Medium-size regional private university in the Midwest

Source: EAB research interviews.

Test-Optional Awarding

SECTION 3

Implications of Test-Score Unavailability for Aid Awarding

The bigger challenge

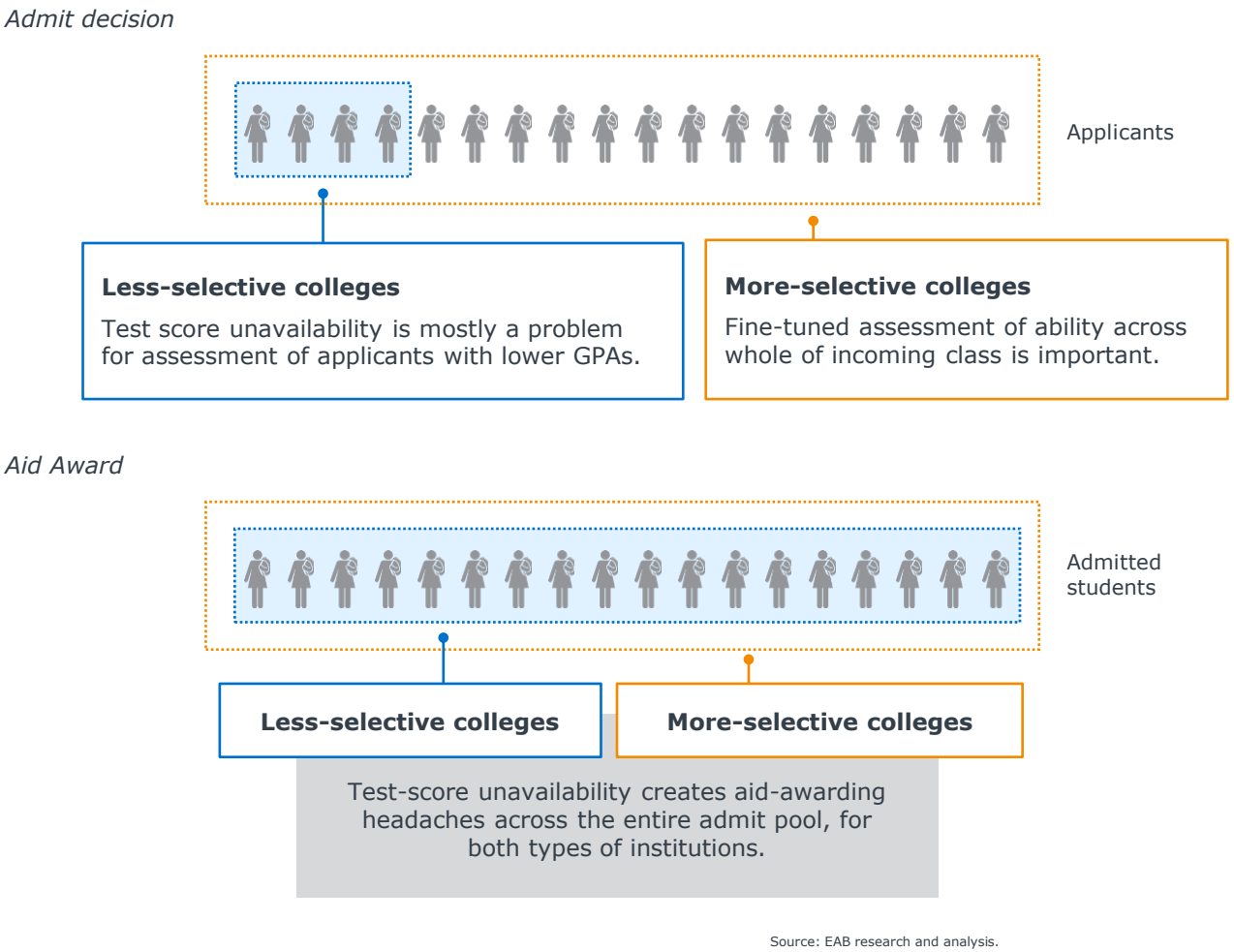
While lack of test scores may make admit decisions trickier, it arguably poses an even bigger problem for aid awarding.

Prediction problems

High school GPA can reasonably substitute for test score as a measure of academic ability in admit decisions, especially for less selective schools; for such institutions, lack of scores mostly becomes a problem for assessing students at the lower end of the GPA range, where attrition risk is higher.

This is not true for aid awarding. GPA on its own (minus test score) is typically not as good at predicting students' likelihood to enroll given any particular level of aid award—an assessment that, not incidentally, must be made across the whole of a school's admit pool, regardless of its selectivity.

A Bigger Challenge for More Institutions Relative to Admit Decision



Source: EAB research and analysis.

Take a "Do No Harm" Approach

High-stakes communication

As noted elsewhere in this report, the specifics of how test-optional policies are communicated to students can have a profound impact on enrollment outcomes. This is especially true when it comes to explaining how providing a test score (or not providing one) impacts a student's aid award.

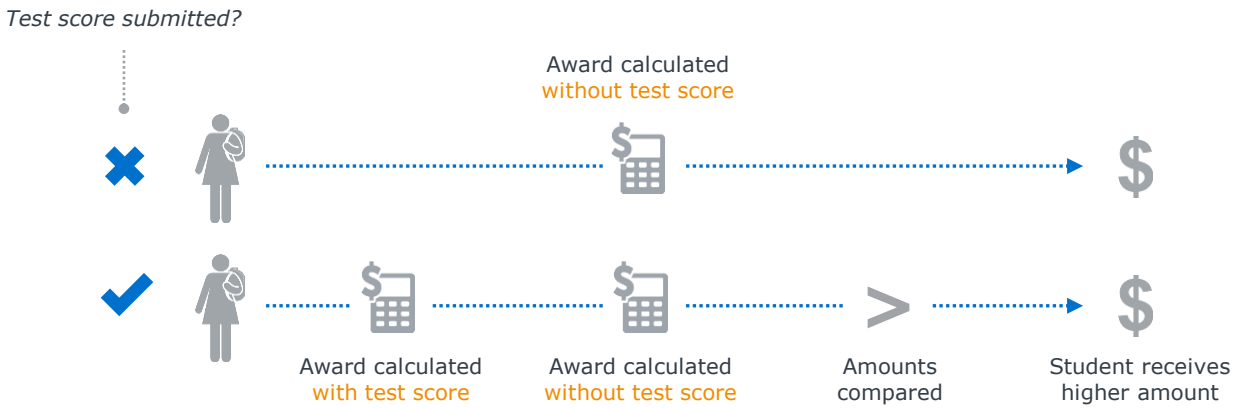
A question of perception

The framing of test-optional aid-awarding that is easiest for students to understand and otherwise plays best is a "do no harm" (DNH) approach—one in which providing a test score can only increase, and not decrease, the amount of aid a student receives.

An important and counterintuitive aspect of DNH awarding is that it can still end up favoring students who submit scores, depending on how it is structured—there is nothing about DNH that necessarily limits the weight that test scores (or other factors) are given. It is score submitters, rather than nonsubmitters, that this approach protects from "harm."

This last point is best understood by way of examples, several of which are shown on the next few pages.

"Do No Harm" Approach in Brief



An Encouraging Message that Is Easy for Applicants to Understand

"Submitting a test score can only increase, and never decrease, your scholarship award."

Source: EAB research and analysis.

A Hypothetical DNH Example that Weights GPA Heavily

A structure favoring GPA

This page shows an example of do-no-harm (DNH) awarding that favors high school GPA.

In this example, the merit-aid award is based entirely on test score and/or high school GPA, with the calculation for students who don't submit scores being based on GPA alone.

Note that, using the approach shown, the points assigned to any given GPA range for nonsubmitters might have been set at any level whatsoever, independently of the scale for submitters, thereby giving GPA more or less weight.

The specific example at right favors GPA, doubling its weight for nonsubmitters. As illustrated in the sample calculation, this means that students with a relatively low test score and a relatively high GPA can receive a higher aid award than they would if their test score were used. Note as well that no level of test score can get a student an award higher than what is available to students at the top of the GPA range.

Weight of HS GPA Doubled for Students Who Don't Submit Test Scores

A Points System Used for Merit-Aid Calculations

Test score submitters				Nonsubmitters		Award Calculation	
HS GPA	*Aid Points*	*SAT Score*	*Aid Points*	*HS GPA*	*Aid Points*	*Total Aid Points*	*Aid Award*
<3.00	0.5	<1000	0.5	<3.00	1	1	$10K
3.00–3.49	1.0	1000-1099	1.0	3.00–3.49	2	2	$20K
3.50–3.74	1.5	1100-1199	1.5	3.50–3.74	3	3	$30K
3.75–4.00	2.0	1200-1300	2.0	3.75–4.00	4	4	$40K
>4.00	2.5	>1300	2.5	>4.00	5	5	$50K

Sample Calculation

HS GPA: 3.78

SAT Score: 1090

	Calculation using submitter scoring		Calculation using nonsubmitter scoring	
HS GPA points	2.0	HS GPA points	4
Test score points	1.0	Test score points	NA
Total points	3.0	Total points	4
Aid Award:	$30K	Aid Award:	$40K

Under "do no harm" approach, student receives the higher of the two awards

Source: EAB research and analysis.

A Hypothetical DNH Example that Weights Test Score Heavily

A structure favoring test score

The preceding page showed an example of do-no-harm (DNH) awarding that weights GPA more heavily than test score.

This page shows a contrasting example, in which the highest aid award levels are reserved for students who submit test scores. In keeping with the DNH philosophy, submitting a test score cannot, in this example, result in a lower award for a student. But high test scores do unlock a substantial aid "bonus" unavailable to nonsubmitters.

Weighting is format-agnostic

Note that the "formats" that the examples on this and the preceding page use for arriving at specific award amounts (matrix versus points system) are not tied in any way to the aims in each example (favoring test score versus favoring GPA). Any number of formats might be used to achieve a similar type of weighting. Weighting of this sort is, in fact, an inescapable feature of test-optional aid awarding, regardless of format used.

Highest Aid Awards Reserved for Students with High Scores

A GPA-Test Score Matrix Used for Merit-Aid Calculation

HS GPA	Nonsubmitters	Submitters — SAT Score <1150	Submitters — SAT Score 1150-1300	Submitters — SAT Score >1300
3.00-3.24	$15,000	$15,000	$20,000	$25,000
3.25-3.49	$20,000	$20,000	$25,000	$30,000
3.50-3.74	$25,000	$25,000	$30,000	$35,000
3.75-3.99	$30,000	$30,000	$35,000	$40,000
4.00-4.24	$35,000	$35,000	$40,000	$45,000
4.25-5.00	$40,000	$40,000	$45,000	$50,000

Low SAT score does not reduce aid award

High SAT score increases aid award

Source: EAB research and analysis.

A Hypothetical DNH Example with Balanced Weighting of Multiple Inputs

Looking beyond GPA and test score

Schools with long and successful histories of test-optionality tend to base their approaches on close review of applicants, incorporating indicators of academic ability beyond GPA and test score (see page 27).

This approach typically reduces the weight that GPA and test score carry in admit and aid-awarding decisions. It also naturally translates into awards that are less skewed by either factor.

Weighted inputs

In the example at right, each of the inputs for the calculation must be assigned a specific weight (based, ideally, on data from analysis of past enrollment outcomes, showing how powerful a predictor of student success each is).

Note that analysis and weighting of the sort just described is also implied in the examples shown on the preceding two pages.

Consideration of Metrics Beyond GPA and Test Score Helps Prevent Aid Calculation from Being Skewed Too Much by Either

Points-Based Awarding Keyed to a Composite Measure of Academic Ability

Academic-Index Inputs
Student's average grade in core courses
Difficulty of student's chosen curriculum
Rigor of high school student attended
Student's GPA
Student's standardized test score

Each input is assigned a total maximum possible number of points, reflecting the intended weight of each. The maximum total score possible, summed across all inputs, in this example is 25.

Award Calculation

Total Index Score	*Merit Aid Award*
1-5	$10K
6-10	$20K
11-15	$30K
16-20	$40K
21-25	$50K

Points in this category may be reserved for students who submit scores indicative of unusually high ability—an approach that minimizes the degree to which nonsubmitters are penalized relative to submitters.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Refine Your Merit-Aid Awarding Criteria

Modeling inputs

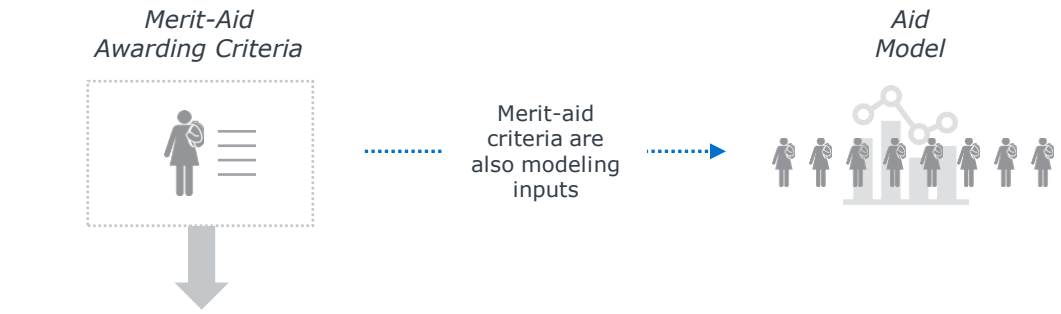
The merit-aid awarding process has two key components. One is the criteria on which awards are based (GPA, test score, etc.) The other is the aid model, which projects aggregate enrollment outcomes based on a specified awarding policy and characteristics of students in a school's admit pool.

Because the criteria used to determine merit-aid award amounts also serve as aid-modeling inputs, they can impact modelling accuracy and, therefore, aid-awarding efficiency.

Predictive and granular

Ideally, merit-aid criteria should be both predictive of student yield behavior and granular (able to reveal small differences in likelihood to enroll). Among readily available measures of student ability, test scores have historically been among the most predictive and granular in this sense. Their unavailability can therefore create problems for aid modeling—a fact that has prompted some admissions teams to seek new criteria for merit-aid awarding that match test scores' predictive power. Academic indexes based on close transcript review are a good example (see page 27).

Two Key Components of Merit-Aid Awarding



Three characteristics of effective aid-awarding criteria

Transparent	Clear relationship to student ability and potential award amounts	Helps with recruitment communications
Predictive	Positive correlation with students' likelihood to enroll	Boosts aid efficiency
Granular	Able to reveal small differences in students' likelihood to enroll	

A "black box" alternative

In contrast to the approach described above, some schools base a student's aid award directly on the output of statistical models. While this approach can, in theory, more precisely peg aid awards to the level required to convert a student, its "black box" character—the fact that it does not make the relationship between specific measures of academic ability and aid award amounts clear—can be confusing and otherwise off-putting for students.

Continuously Monitor Aid Impact through Yield Season

Increased uncertainty

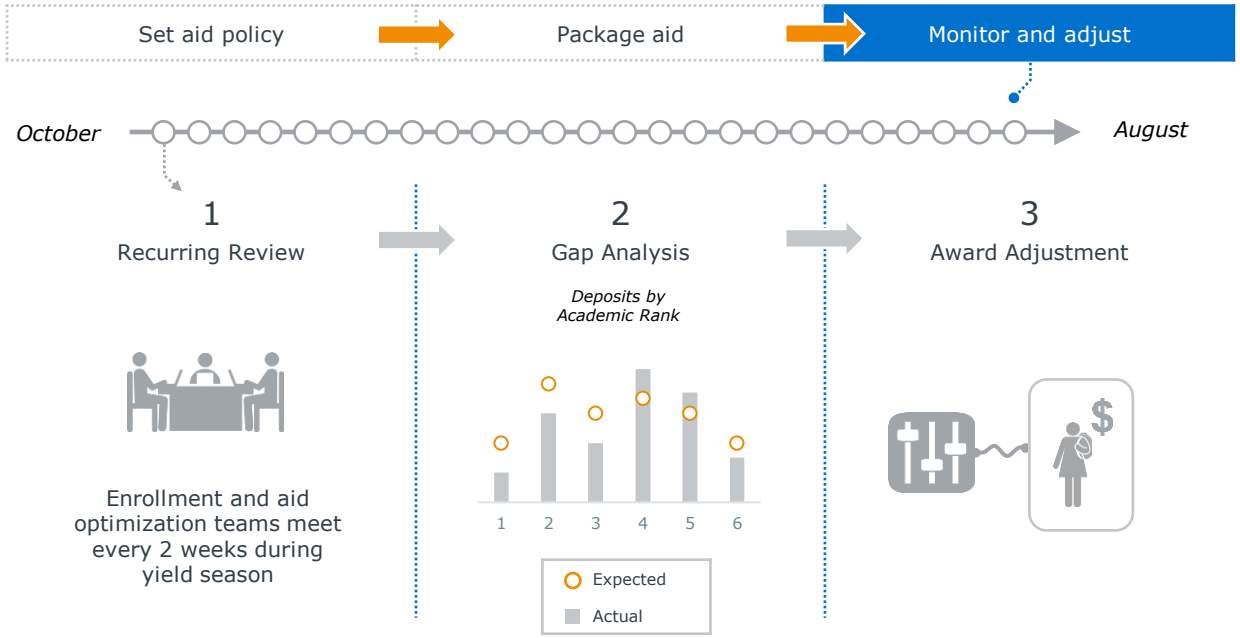
Aid modeling typically relies on analysis of data from an institution's past enrollment cycles. For schools new to test-optional, that data will have reduced utility, reflecting, as it does, the influence of test scores. This, and the fact that the demographic composition of applicant pools can shift after the transition to test-optional, means that aid-awarding outcomes can be unpredictable in the first few enrollment cycles after making the switch.

Keeping a close watch

The adoption of more powerful statistical modeling approaches and the consideration of new modeling inputs can help. But arguably the most important component of an effective response is the close monitoring of progress toward enrollment goals through yield season.

Always a feature of advanced aid-optimization approaches, this practice becomes all the more important at a time of increased uncertainty.

Promptly Identifying and Correcting Performance Gaps



Source: EAB research and analysis.

“We’re evaluating applicants pretty much how we did before. We still auto-admit a lot of students. The difference is that now we’re often basing it just on GPA versus GPA plus test score. For merit aid we’re just doubling the weight of GPA if students don’t submit scores. Hopefully that will work OK. If it doesn’t, we’re facing a hard slog to get the additional resources we’ll need to give more of our applicants a closer look.”

Vice President, Enrollment Management
Large regional public university in the Mid-Atlantic region

Source: EAB research interviews.

Test-Optional Infrastructure

SECTION 4

Test-Optional Comes with an Associated Price Tag

A long transition

One astonishing fact of the pandemic is how many schools were able to switch to test-optional practically overnight.

But that's not to say that the approaches they have implemented are necessarily producing their desired results or that they are sustainable. As colleges reflect on their initial experiences with test-optionality, many will conclude that doing it well requires new investments in related infrastructure.

A battle on several fronts

Much of the related work stems from the need to perform more comprehensive assessment of more applicants—an undertaking that has implications for staffing, information systems, and data/analytics. Also important are capabilities required to promptly assess the impact of new admit criteria on critical student success outcomes. No less crucial is the infrastructure required to effectively serve the distinctive needs of underrepresented students (many schools see a disproportionate increase in applicants from these populations after going test-optional).

What Does it Take to Do Test-Optional Well?

Selected Infrastructure and Other Requirements

Extra staffing capacity

Additional capacity may be required to cope with the higher application volume and closer reading that test-optional often entails (this being especially true for more selective schools).

Staff training

Staff must be trained to assess students based on new and sometimes unfamiliar criteria introduced as part of closer application review; this includes cross-calibration to ensure consistent rating across readers.

Information-systems support

Systems used to track and organize assessment of applicants must be revised to accommodate new data points considered as part of test-optional review.

Extended data/analytics capabilities

Transition to test-optional requires the impact of admit and aid-awarding criteria on enrollment outcomes to be tracked more closely; this calls for expanded access to analytical tools and staff with requisite expertise.

Expanded student-success infrastructure

Test-optional often boosts the number of underrepresented students applying and enrolling; colleges need to ensure they are set up to effectively serve the distinctive needs of these "new" demographics.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Campaign for Capacity

Double trouble

The test-optional pain point most frequently cited by enrollment leaders is the extra work it creates for admissions staff. Key underlying factors include the "double whammy" of increased application volume and the need for closer reading of applications, the latter problem being worse for institutions that give all or most applicants such detailed review (typically more selective institutions).

Elusive answers

There are, unfortunately, few ready answers for how to reduce the labor-intensiveness of applicant review; such solutions as do exist tend to be small, so that many must be implemented to see appreciable impact (this process itself becoming a drain on staff bandwidth). Unavoidably, some increase in staffing, seasonal or permanent, is typically called for and the best that many enrollment leaders can do is to lobby for additional resources.

That said, the search for solutions continues—for example, having students self-report transcript detail, which removes the associated data-entry burden from your staff.

New Demands on Enrollment Teams' Time

Cases in Point

Purcell State University[1]

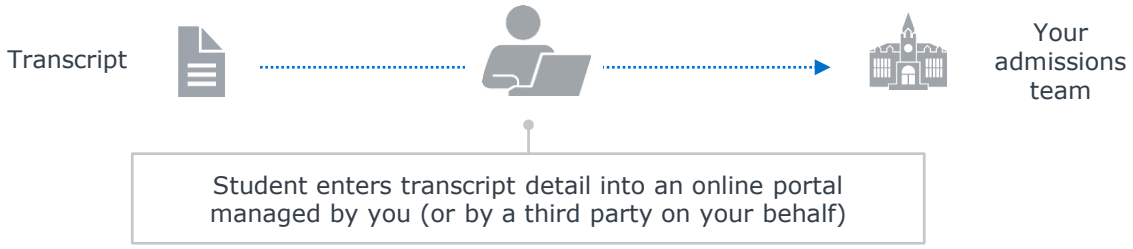
Transition to test-optional doubled the number of staff required for application review.

Casalette College[1]

Spends $20,000 annually on temp staff required to recalculate HS GPA for its ~25,000 applicants

An Ongoing Search for Solutions

Example: Student Self-Reporting of Transcript Detail



While some enrollment teams have seen good results with self reporting, others have been reluctant to embrace it, due to concerns that the work it requires of students might be enough to cause them to not apply. More viable versions of this approach include ones that make the process easier for students—by, for example, enabling data they enter once to be used by multiple schools to which they are applying.

[1] A pseudonym.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Pandemic-Era Challenges for Enrollment Analytics

Proceeding in advance of certainty

The degree to which test-optionality is a good thing depends on how effectively the new criteria colleges are using to evaluate students produce the desired outcomes. Present circumstances have made assessing that difficult.

Barriers to understanding

The related problem colleges face is twofold.

First, because many schools had no history with test-optionality, they also had a limited basis for understanding how any given set of student characteristics predicts outcomes absent test scores (specifically for their institutions and the types of students they serve).

Second, the impact of newly adopted test-optional policies is hard to assess against the background of the pandemic, due to the many disruptions in student learning, financial circumstances, etc. it caused and the confounding effect these disruptions have on interpretation of data.

Analytical "Noise" Making it Hard to Assess the Impact of Test-Optional Policies

Learning deficits from disruption of in-person instruction

Lower level of preparedness among students graduating during the pandemic impacts their post-matriculation performance

Changes in high school grading

More widespread use of pass-fail grading and reluctance of high school teachers to assign low grades to already-stressed students changes the meaning of GPA

Unequal impact of pandemic on different demographics

Lower-income students, more likely to suffer severe effects from the pandemic, are at correspondingly higher risk of poor academic outcomes, pre- and post-matriculation

Artificial suppression of standardized testing

Many students who would gladly have tested were unable to; similar students will return to testing after the pandemic

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Do What You Can

Difficult but essential

As explained on the preceding page, the pandemic has made it harder to analyze the impact of test-optional policies on enrollment and student-success outcomes. But that does not mean you should not try. In fact, robust data and analytics capabilities are especially critical during extended periods of change and unpredictability.

Tracking vital signs

The transition to test-optional is a time of experimentation, with enrollment teams being given permission to try things they've never done before. Now is the time to gather the data you'll need to assess those new approaches.

Consider also that missteps will be unavoidable as you're refining your test-optional approach, especially if you're among those institutions who are being especially ambitious with their policies—e.g., pushing the envelope on recruiting new and unfamiliar demographics or taking especially decisive steps away from dependence on test scores. You'll want to catch problems and course-correct early, and that depends on your data and analytics capabilities.

Admissions Analytics in a Time of Uncertainty

Guidance for Enrollment Leaders

Increase your analytics bandwidth

Effective analysis is hard when you're reliant on external resources; technological innovations are making it possible to develop the requisite capabilities within your own team

Consider context

Correct interpretation of data depends on understanding how contextual factors (e.g., financial strain on families due to the pandemic) may be contributing to observed results

Control for what you can

Insofar as you can, study variables of interest across otherwise similar groups of students—e.g., students from comparable high schools and income bands—when comparing outcomes

See next page

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Increase Your Analytics Bandwidth

Analytics velocity is essential

A key distinguishing feature of effective enrollment analytics is what might be called its "velocity"—the speed and ease with which analyses can be conceived of, initiated, and iterated on.

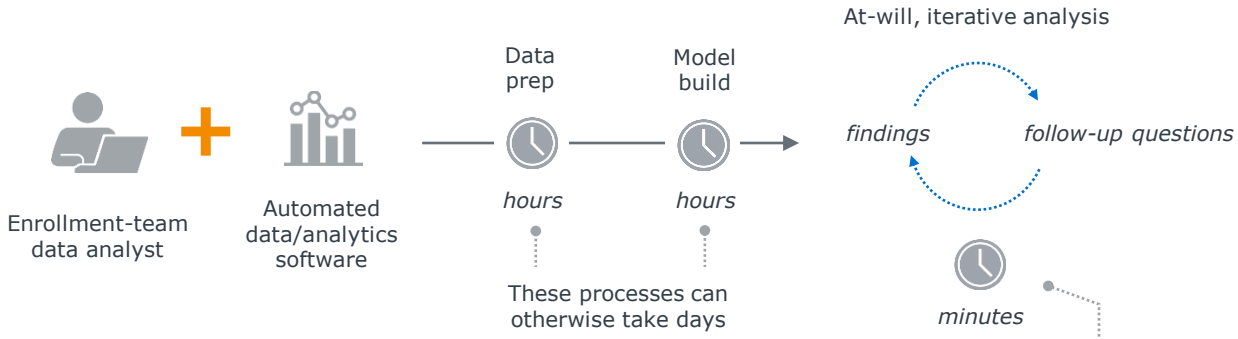
Insights emerge most readily when you are able to freely, flexibly, and rapidly explore your data, at will, with the findings from one analysis immediately prompting the next. Relying on outside resources, like your institutional research analysts, doesn't just slow things down; it more often prevents the most valuable analyses from happening at all.

New potential for local analytics

One important development in this context is the emergence of advanced software that automates the most labor-intensive and expertise-dependent aspects of data analyses, thereby putting them well within reach of curious and motivated users with a modicum of statistical understanding.

Such tools make it possible for enrollment teams to build out sophisticated "in-team" capabilities.

Technological Advances Introduce a New Era of Self-Serve Analytics



The process shown above can flexibly engage collaborators from across your institution, including subject matter experts with limited programming, modeling, or statistical literacy

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Sync with Your School's Student-Success Capabilities

Different demographics

Adopting a test-optional policy can, for a number of reasons, lead colleges to enroll more students with higher risk of attrition or other unfavorable post-matriculation outcomes.

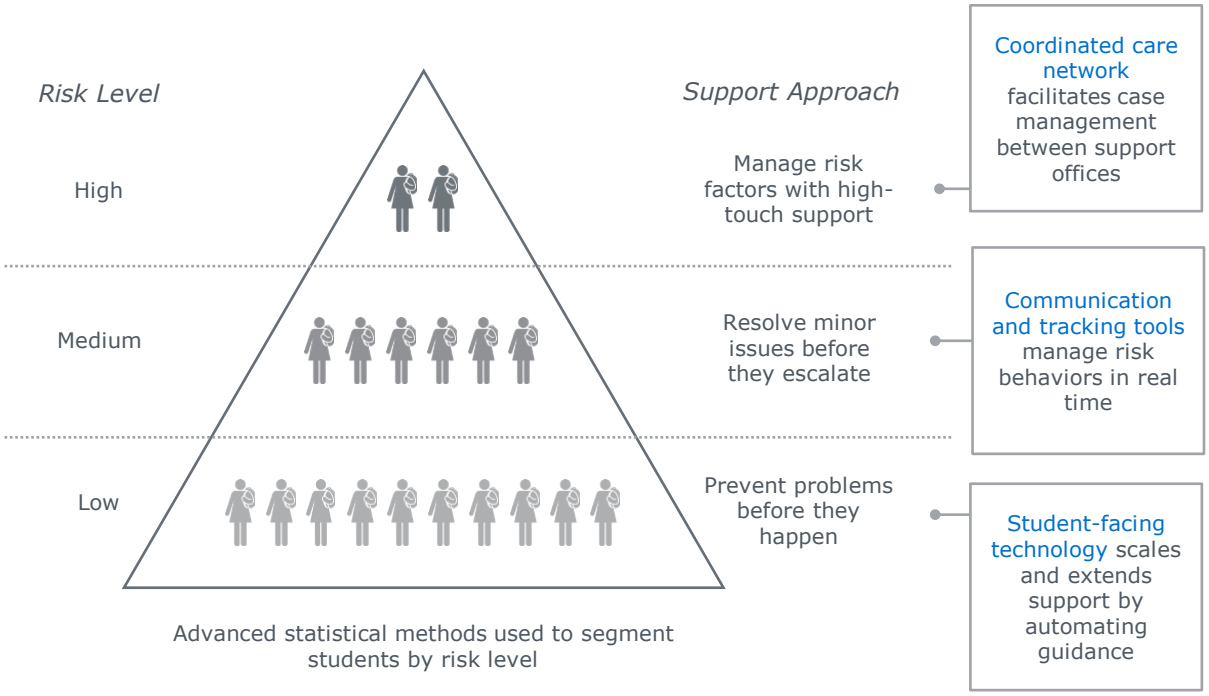
Considering your readiness

One productive lens to put on this phenomenon is that of your school's readiness to accommodate these students—their likelihood of success has everything to do with your ability to proactively identify and actively support them (including via institutional financial aid, financial hardship being a common driver of attrition).

A clear understanding of your institution's capabilities in this regard should play a part in setting and evaluating your test-optional policy. It may, for example, cause you to be more or less conservative in where you are setting your high-school GPA cutoff for admission (if that happens to be the primary driver of your decision). It may also lead you to reconsider how much of your aid awards you are basing on academic ability versus need.

Key Components of an Optimized Student Success Management System

Students by Risk Level and Corresponding Support Approach



Source: EAB research and analysis.

Support Tailored to the Needs of Underrepresented Students

Disproportionate increase

Schools adopting a test-optional admissions approach often see a demographic shift within their applicant pool. For many institutions, that includes an increase in underrepresented students.

Distinctive needs

Student-success infrastructure of the sort described on the preceding page, which is designed to serve the general student population, also typically benefits first-generation, BIPOC, and low-income students as well. But these latter groups have additional needs that are unique to them. Understanding those needs is an important part of attracting underrepresented students, retaining them, and ensuring that they are well served by your admission and aid-awarding policies.

One important way that colleges can deepen their understanding of the needs of these populations and how to best serve them is via partnerships with community-based organizations—for example, Trio, Emerge, College Advising Corps, and College Possible.

CBO-College Partnerships a Case in Point

Generic Example of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Between a CBO and a College Partner, Showing Key Commitments of Each

CBO commitments	College commitments
Make students available to colleges for early recruitment communications	Provide travel assistance to students wanting to visit campus
Find college candidates within a specified range of academic ability	Admit a pre-agreed number of students from the CBO per year
Ensure that students file a FAFSA by a specified date	Guarantee CBO students a minimum agreed-upon amount of institutional financial aid
Offer continued support to CBO students after enrollment	Provide CBO students with guaranteed housing for a predetermined number of years
Help students identify as many scholarships as possible that they might be eligible for	Provide students with travel assistance for visits to their home

MOU terms reflect factors that CBOs have found to be most impactful in attracting and retaining underserved students.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

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ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at **eab.com**.