

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

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Darrell Lovell and Daniel Mallinson
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Note: A previous version of this essay inadvertently classified institutions that adopted test-optional admissions prior to 2005 as non-adopters. This essay was revised on February 1X, 2022 to include pre-2005 adopters of test-optional admissions in the pre-COVID adopter group, clarify how institutional characteristics are measured, and adjust reported tuition and fees data using a higher education price index. As a result, the total number of pre-COVID adopters is significantly larger and the average tuition and fees of pre-COVID and COVID adopters is much more similar than previously reported.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted many colleges and universities to introduce test-optional admissions policies. Institutions that implemented these policies during the pandemic are more selective, less expensive, and more diverse than those that offered test-optional admissions before the pandemic.

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

Data show that the number of four-year universities and colleges with test-optional policies has nearly doubled (from 713 to 1,350) since spring 2020. Using data from FairTest and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), our analysis compares three groups—nonadopters (327 institutions), prepandemic adopters (713), and pandemic adopters (637)—to identify the profiles of institutions implementing the policies and the differences between these groups. Specifically, we

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

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

examine the characteristics of institutions in IPEDS during the year they went test optional (for nonadopters, we use the most recent year of IPEDS data).³

Table 1 provides the breakdown of public and private (nonprofit) institutions that adopted test-optional admissions before the pandemic, during the pandemic, or never.

TABLE 1
Institutions That Did or Did Not Adopt Test-Optional Admissions Policies

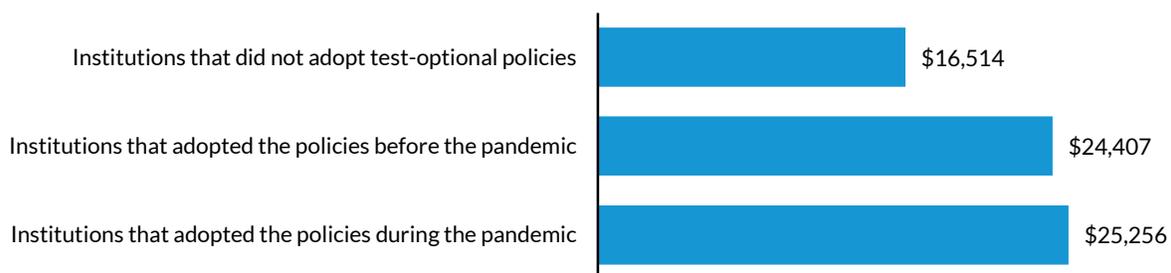
	Private nonprofit institutions	Public institutions
Prepandemic adopters	538 (48%)	175 (31%)
Pandemic adopters	338 (31%)	299 (52%)
Nonadopters	232 (21%)	95 (17%)
Total	1,108 (100%)	569 (100%)

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

Three key trends emerge:

1. Adopters, regardless of whether they adopted before or during the pandemic, had, on average, higher tuition and fees than all remaining nonadopters. This means the landscape for test-optional availability is not becoming more accessible to students looking for schools with lower tuition.

FIGURE 1
Average Tuition and Fees



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

³ The FairTest data do not indicate the year of adoption for the 420 institutions that adopted test-optional admissions before 2005. For these institutions, we use IPEDS data from 2004. For all institutions, we adjust reported tuition to 2020 dollars using the Commonwealth Foundation’s higher education price index.

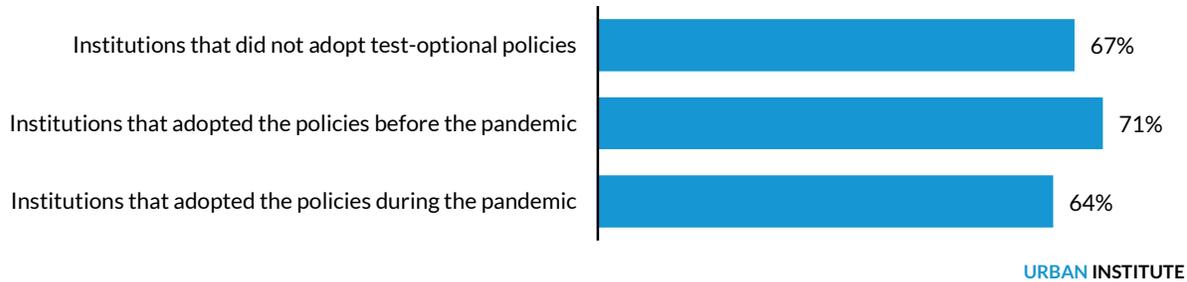
Note: Tuition levels are reported in 2020 dollars using the Commonwealth Foundation's higher education price index.

2. Pandemic adopters were more selective than prepandemic adopters and nonadopters. This reinforces the notion that access has not necessarily increased because of the pandemic. Many institutions that adopted test-optional policies during the pandemic did so out of necessity. After all, with the college boards shut down, there were no scores to evaluate.

FIGURE 2

Admissions Selectivity

Students who were accepted / students who applied



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

Pandemic adopters are more selective in terms of admissions rates, on average, than prepandemic adopters.

3. The pandemic greatly increased the number of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) with test-optional policies. Three percent of the pandemic adopters are HBCUs, matching their 3 percent share of all colleges and universities. Of the 62 HBCUs in our dataset, 32 had adopted a test-optional policy before the pandemic. During the pandemic, 19 more joined, representing 30 percent of all HBCUs. In total, 82 percent of HBCUs in our dataset now have a test-optional policy.

The pandemic did not prompt more institutions with lower tuition to implement the policy. More selective institutions are also dropping standardized test score requirements. Tuition differences between nonadopters and adopters are still quite large, though the pandemic has increased access to institutions that are more selective and have higher graduation rates. The expansion of test-optional policies during the pandemic will provide more opportunities for students who are seeking to enter college without standardized test scores.

Darrell Lovell is an assistant professor of political science at West Texas A&M University. Daniel Mallinson is an assistant professor of public policy and administration at Penn State Harrisburg.

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500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

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