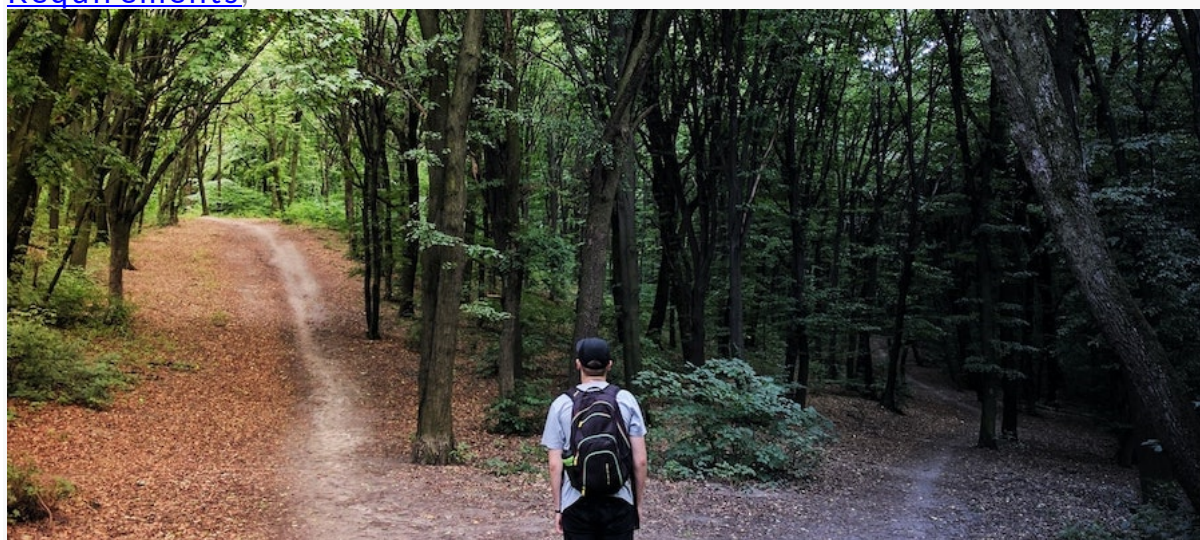


Colleges Are Now Test Optional. Is It That Simple?

By [Bruce Reed](#) November 6, 2020 [ACT](#), [Admissions](#), [College Admission Requirements](#).



In October 2019, nearly 4 million high school students took the PSAT/NMSQT, the College Board's onramp to the college admissions testing highway that extends to the fall of senior year for most. As soon as scores were returned in December, students began mapping out their testing plans for the spring and beyond. It felt like any other school year.

Then everything changed. The March 2020 SAT should've been the first official landmark reached along the testing path for many of last year's juniors. But the country began rapidly shutting down that week, introducing new obstacles for students in the form of test site closures. In the days that followed, ACT, Inc. and the College Board canceled their April and May test dates, respectively. It became clear that this was no longer going to be like any other school year.

The College Reaction

In response to what students were facing, colleges had to adjust accordingly to keep the admissions marketplace functioning. The most notable turn was the almost immediate and dramatic increase in [colleges going test optional](#), at least temporarily.

The first wave of policy updates was announced in March and April. Currently, over 95% of selective 4-year colleges do not require test scores. In some cases, the move is permanent; such colleges had already been contemplating the change to reflect their evolving philosophy around mandating test scores. For others, it is a temporary — even ambivalent — concession in response to extraordinary circumstances. The motives behind test optional policies are not universal.

Some temporary policies are structured as two- or three-year trials. This is partly in anticipation of an extended period of disruption and partly to allow time to observe how students — who will have arrived either with or without standardized test scores — perform at the collegiate level over time. Many other colleges have committed so far to only one year of relief. Colleges that have similar traits may not have matching admission policies, and vice versa. It is therefore important for families to note individual policies as they craft a strategic testing plan spanning the next year or two. We track and update the testing policies of several hundred popular colleges [here](#).

It is too early to know what different colleges will do when testing conditions improve and/or when a temporary measure is about to expire. We will likely see a range of outcomes, and individual policy updates will be informed by the results of these experiments. The multi-year trials are the ones best structured to allow for proper validity studies to occur.

The Importance of Testing? It Depends

There is a common, mistaken tendency to treat all colleges the same. It's easy to inadvertently imply or assume that broad statements about how "colleges act" hold true everywhere. Of course they do not. It may be helpful, therefore, to fine tune this question by thinking of any given 4-year college as falling into one of three admission-test groupings:

- **Still Important**

The smallest collection of colleges (accounting for about 1% of 4-year enrollment) receives outsized attention and inspires some of the cynicism and anxiety around the college admissions process. These colleges are exceedingly popular and therefore have admit rates at or below 10%. Nearly every applicant is qualified; nearly every applicant is denied. It has long been presumed that very high test scores are both essential and insufficient at such colleges. Strong scores haven't stood out, they've only blended in. Aside from suspending or eliminating testing requirements, not much will change at these few colleges this year, next year, or any year. Test optional or even test free policies will not make them any less competitive overall (and some pundits suggest the opposite).

- **Plus Factor**

A much larger set of colleges (accounting for about 19% of 4-year enrollment) has an average admission rate that is still competitive but far more reasonable. Supply and demand imbalances still necessitate a difficult and careful selection process but applications are read

supportively. Test scores have traditionally mattered but not more than a sustained track record of academic achievement. Strong test scores can be a plus factor but not a singular difference maker.

- **Lower Priority**

In terms of total enrollment numbers (the remaining ~ 80%), the third pool is by far the largest and consists of colleges that accept the majority of their applicants and evaluate applications based largely on a binary assessment of whether a student has shown the capability to succeed at their institution, or not. Admission decisions don't hinge on small differences in test scores and it appears that testing will only further diminish in importance at these schools moving forward.

However, these schools have established baseline standards and some will even maintain cut-scores as criteria for certain monetary awards or placement decisions.

Parsing Test Optional Policies

As public health conditions improve — and specifically, as safe testing facilities become widely and reliably available — test scores are likely to remain a relevant piece of the holistic review process at many colleges, especially where highly competitive forces are in play. When considering a more selective school, it is important to understand that while you may now have the option **not** to submit test scores, you also (in most cases) have the option **to** submit them.

Although test-optional is often couched as an *admissions* policy, the allowance is really more of a change to a college's *application* policy. The absence of a test score no longer prevents a student from applying, but how that omission affects any given student's chance of admission is the subject of intense, ongoing debate.

This apparent paradox explains why we have been fielding understandably skeptical questions from parents, students, and college counselors all year: how can both be true?

How can good scores help but the lack of scores not hurt?

While they can sound like double-speak, what these policies are saying precisely is that the mere presence or absence of test scores doesn't automatically advantage or disadvantage an applicant. It is much like how including or excluding another optional piece of information, like a summer job once held, doesn't automatically move the needle. It depends on the strength or nature of that additional piece of information.

What suspending test requirements will help do, though, is avoid a [steep decline](#) in the volume of applications that a college receives. Very few colleges could afford to cling to rigid or out-of-touch policies during a pandemic and watch the top of their applicant funnel shrink.

And yet, admissions officers grasp for anything that helps them better understand what a student can do, and a strong test score is a familiar piece of information to them. Solid test scores can make a good candidate better. If a safe and convenient opportunity to take an SAT or an ACT presents itself, it

will keep the option to submit scores in play for you. But if testing remains unreasonably difficult to complete, colleges will understand.

The Reaction From Test Takers? It Depends

Testing patterns from the class of 2021 have largely reflected three factors, unsurprisingly: 1) local testing restrictions, 2) a student's expected score, and 3) a student's list of target colleges. Test takers can't control the first variable but where testing has been possible, the other two considerations appear to have driven decisions.

While the overall number of test takers is expected to be down this year (current forecasts project as much as a 30% drop), the rates of decline differ by region and then by scoring band; the decreased rates inversely correlate to scores. In other words, the lowest absentee rates have been from the highest scorers: the count of students scoring over 1500 on the SAT has waned the least, followed by the number of those scoring over 1400 and so on. The most selective colleges are therefore expecting relatively high rates of score submissions even this year. And with the option to withhold scores carrying little or no stigma, published averages could be driven higher than ever by those who voluntarily share.

Mindful of these trends when advising current juniors, we encourage students and their parents to fully recognize the value of having options in a test optional environment. When colleges allow an applicant to choose to submit scores, they are ceding more control to the applicant – but only if the student has the ability to exercise that option. All things being equal, applicants who have scores to report retain an advantage over those who opt out of testing right from the start. And these planning discussions are happening now.

In states and regions where many test sites have been closed, it is natural to want to postpone planning until things are more certain. The wisdom that can be drawn from the class of 2021, however, is that planning becomes even more important during times of uncertainty.

The Road Ahead

The upheaval to the college admission testing process this year has caused widespread whiplash for test takers, testing agencies, and colleges. For high school seniors, as one horizon (application deadlines) inexorably approaches, another one (test dates) keeps inching elusively away. At some point the application process must move on, with or without scores.

For current juniors and sophomores, time is more on their side. Even in a pre-pandemic world, official testing for most college-bound students never needed to begin until the spring of 11th grade. Patience has always been a key ingredient to optimal long term testing outcomes (an estimated 50% of college applicants don't attain their highest score until the fall of 12th grade) and we think that patience will be an important – if not a necessary – cornerstone of a student's testing mindset this year more than ever. As you chart a testing path forward, assume you'll confront some frustrating roadblocks ahead that you'll need to overcome.

As for the two testing agencies (the College Board and ACT, Inc), stay tuned for important updates to their spring plans to address demand. Based on recent signals, we expect to see new testing dates added to the calendar, an increase in school-day testing opportunities, and the debut of an at-home online ACT.

We Are Here To Guide You

If you were unable to take the PSAT last month due to school closures, [contact us](#) to schedule a [diagnostic test](#) soon. We proctor full length practice exams every weekend and deliver score reports within 1-2 days. Our reporting platform is the industry's gold standard and provides depth and insights not available elsewhere. These assessments and corresponding analyses are critical pieces of informed planning.

And while some high schools have postponed the PSAT with the hope of hosting it in January, be aware that the results of that test won't be received until March. Whether you plan to take an official test in February, March, April, May, or June, it will help to have detailed results from baseline testing in hand before winter break to help select a test and properly address any identified areas of concern.

Once armed with our diagnostic reports, you can then schedule a personal consultation to help interpret results, set goals, and discuss preparation strategies. Our 1-on-1 program directors are renowned by college counselors nationwide for their honesty, experience, professionalism, and warmth in the guidance they offer. Please feel free to contact us to see how we can help.



About Bruce Reed

Bruce graduated from Colby College and has served in leadership roles in education for more than 25 years. Bruce founded our Northern California office in 2004 where he continues to serve as its hands-on leader while also guiding our national team in his broader role as Compass' Executive Director. Bruce is recognized throughout the Bay Area and beyond as a visionary and passionate voice in the realm of teaching, testing, and educational development. His extensive experience in one-on-one test preparation, college admissions, and professional development makes him a trusted resource for parents and counselors.