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Test-Optional Admissions: Pre and Post Enrollment

By

Mackenzie M. Turner

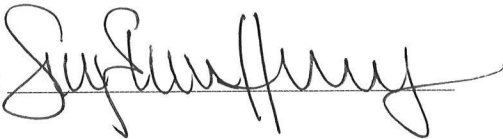
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Abstract

This phenomenological qualitative study explores students' experiences navigating test-optional admissions when applying to post-secondary education. This thesis examines how test-optional admissions influence students' admissions decisions. The recent policy changes in college admissions practices raise questions about student experiences when making decisions when regarding test-optional admissions. First, this study explores the factors that go into a student's decision on whether to submit test scores in their college application. Second, this thesis investigates college admission administrators' perspectives on test-optional policies at their respective universities. Third, this study analyzes where the views of college admissions and student applicants are dissimilar. One important insight of the test-optional movement is to understand how students make the decision to apply either using or not using high-stakes standardized test scores as a part of their admissions profile. This study examines the experiences of first- and second-year students at Bucknell University.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Students who wish to attend higher education must go through an extensive and stressful process of college admissions. At the beginning of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated a large shift in this process that affected everyone and everything in the world. One process that was completely altered was the college admissions process. The rise of test-optional policies stemmed from a lack of access to testing spaces in the United States, due to social distancing and quarantining. In response to this lack of access, many universities decided to accelerate their use of test-optional policies in their admissions practices. Student applicants now had the choice of whether to include their SAT or ACT scores on their application to the university. If they submit their scores test-optional, they understand that other students may be submitting scores that could possibly give them an advantage (Bannister, 2021).

Many colleges like Wake Forest have been test-optional since before the pandemic. The importance of seeing someone's character and personality showed more importance to Wake Forest than one or two numerical scores. Bowdoin College was the first to implement test-optional admissions in 1969 (Epstein, 2009). Today, only 4% of colleges require test scores (Visé, 2022). Some believe the test-optional shift “destroyed the academic reputation” of prestigious universities (Allman, 2012). Universities are choosing to require more personable application questions and interviews instead of mandating the submission of SAT or ACT scores. Bucknell University is piloting a five-year program to follow at least one class through graduation to help them analyze how those students who chose to be test-optional fared in college. By investigating students at a school that has stated a goal of prioritizing student

experience, this study will be able to evaluate how this program has impacted student experiences when deciding to be test-optional.

This study examines how test-optional admissions influence students' admissions decisions. The recent policy changes in college admissions practices raise questions: what features persuade a student to apply without submitting their SAT scores? What is the rationale behind students' decisions? This study investigates both the lived experiences of students who applied to college test-optional and admissions administrators' views on test-optional admissions. This research will uncover how admissions administrators and students are overlooking one another. Little is known about the qualitative impact of test-optional admissions on incoming college students, since many schools, like Bucknell, are currently administering pilot programs to see how admitted test-optional students fare.

It is also important to look at this topic from the perspective of admission administrators from universities. Understanding this shift in admissions coming from deans of admissions and admission officers from universities will be beneficial to the research. Gaining insight on the admissions process and their experiences through test-optional policies will help gauge where students and admissions are seeing eye to eye, or where they are disagreeing with one another. This study will uncover the difference in calculus behind making test-optional decisions. These decisions may include deciding who is fit and admirable to a university, and what university admissions are now looking for since their change to test-optional admissions.

Meritocracy Myths

American education has a long history of promoting the myth of meritocracy in policies, programs, and admissions. Although many believe college is accessible to all students, the pool

of qualified youth is much larger than the sum of applicants (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). Using standardized testing in collegiate admissions decisions is rooted in the myth of meritocracy and can possibly impede social mobility among students (Lemann, 1999). Positions of power and status are earned through demonstrated talent and effort, rather than being allocated based on factors such as wealth, social status, or family background. The concept of meritocracy was created to make application processes fair for all. Critics of meritocracy argue that it can perpetuate inequality and social exclusion, as individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds may have fewer opportunities to develop and demonstrate their talents and skills (Soares, 2020). In terms of meritocracy in education, the use of high stakes standardized testing, like the SAT, is used to eliminate class discrimination in the application process (Milburn, 2012).

College and university attendance is an opportunity for students to receive higher education and expand their own knowledge. College admissions are attempting to measure merit and academic potential. It is argued that college admission processes maintain the myth of meritocracy, and do not prevent students from directly inheriting their parents' social class (Milburn, 2012). This system is supposed to support a fair selection process among candidates with schools using familiar criteria (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). However, it is also an opportunity for social mobility (Kotzee & Martin, 2013). A common assumption is that an exceptional higher education can lead to job opportunities and a successful career. Obtaining social mobility through post-secondary education comes with challenges. Not every student has the same opportunities to get the grades and extracurriculars needed for secondary education. University efforts to raise enrollment of racial minority students more so than high academic achieving students is a controversial topic in post-secondary education (Hirschman et al., 2016).

Beverly Tatum's book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (2017) examines affirmative action policies in conjunction with the understanding of White privilege. Affirmative action is frequently and incorrectly associated with the phrases “reverse racism” and “reverse discrimination”. Instead, these policies are used to create entryways and opportunities for minoritized, underrepresented populations and people of color to create space for achievement that through systemic racism has been historically denied. These practices remain hectic because society today maintains barriers and inequalities against social groups (Tatum, 2017). Because of these barriers, institutions have administered affirmative action plans to increase the number of minority representation in their schools (Orlans, 1992).

History of Standardized Testing in College Admissions

Criticism regarding the SAT has stayed the same throughout its existence. High-stakes tests like the SAT continue the systematizing of opportunities through standardized testing and education (Perkins, 2001). The SAT has been accused of cultural and racial bias, lack of predictive power, and inability to measure a student’s intelligence (Furuta, 2017). It is recognized that a student’s record and performance in high school are a more reliable indicator of potential success in college (Syverson, 2007). The test optional initiative aims to expand access to those who perform poorly on standardized tests, especially minorities and the socioeconomically disadvantaged. Test-optional policies are targeting a decentralized and unequal secondary education system. The goal of introducing test-optional admissions was to make schools more reachable to a wider demographic (Buckley et al., 2018). Examining the history of selective schools, minority representation in the student population is significantly low (Reardon, et al., 2012,). The switch to test-optional admissions provides a chance for all

prospective students to have a chance of gaining entrance into selective colleges without the additive stress of test scores.

Being a relatively new admissions practice, the long-term effects of test-optional policies are not available since there is not enough data to gauge student success in their college education as well as post-collegiate life (Shultz & Backstrom, 2021). Many schools with pilot test-optional programs will evaluate the impact on student populations over the coming years. Since this is an ongoing journey, it is crucial to understand the effects of these policies on students' admission experiences. It is crucial to understand the effects of these policies on students' admission experiences. Statistics are used to make schools seem more desirable and prestigious, but what the statistics do not account for is the thought process students go through when choosing a college. One important insight of the test-optional movement is to understand how students make the decision to apply either using or not using high-stakes standardized test scores as a part of their admissions profile. Admission test use "has raised the stakes for students, families, and colleges in many ways" (Soares, 2011, para 1).

For those wanting to pursue higher education, it was a standard step to either take the ACT or SAT, or both, as part of the application. Up until now you had to take this test to gain admittance to universities and colleges. This is essentially one or two numbers that represent a student's twelve years of learning prior to their secondary education. Although many colleges also look at high school grades and extracurriculars, standardized tests are still heavily factored into the admittance process. Students can still show positive and high achieving academic success without having test scores or showing poor test scores. This shift to test-optional is currently reshaping the entire college admissions process.

Test-optional admission policies have been around since the late 1960s (Schaffner, 1985). The first test-optional admissions appeared at Bowdoin College, whose policy granted the idea that test scores were not as important to admissions as the public thought. It would not be until over twenty years later that a second school, Bates College, would do away with the testing requirement of admissions. Schools began to follow out of response to “falling applications, reduced selectivity rates, and dropping indicators of student preparation” (Buckley, et al., 2018). Schools like the University of California and its branch campuses have been test-optional since before Covid-19. The impact of test-optional admissions on incoming college students is relatively unknown since many schools, like Bucknell, are administering a pilot program to see how admitted test-optional students fare over four years.

Since the early 1920s, taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) for college admissions has been an expected rite of passage for high school graduates hoping to pursue higher education. This major part of high school academics and college applications has been in the process of being completely altered. According to the College Board, a test-optional admissions policy means applicants have the choice of whether to include their SAT/ACT scores on their applications. For many individuals, the term “test-optional” was not heard until 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the United States. Many high school juniors and seniors did not have access to take the SAT or ACT, so universities ultimately chose to initiate a test-optional approach to admissions. The SAT, in relationship with high school records, is used to predict the success of students in college (Syverson, 2007, p. 60). Colleges use statistics to make their schools seem more desirable and prestigious, but what the statistics do not account for is the rationale behind students' decisions.

Bucknell University

According to Bucknell's Dean of Admission Kevin Mathes, Bucknell chose to run a five-year pilot program because they did not want eligible students to cross Bucknell off their list because of low test scores. Bucknell wanted to be test optional over test blind because they wanted to allow students with great scores to still be able to use them, in hopes of making them look favorable to the university. They hope to cause less stress for families that cannot afford the test or do not have access to it. Bucknell went test-optional in 2018 before the Coronavirus pandemic started. Bucknell chose to go test-optional because of the accessibility problem for standardized testing in high schools. Not all students have availability for these tests due to income or the location where they reside. High school counselors were excited about this change in the application process and saw it as a way for students to still want to apply to great schools. Many schools provide pamphlets and online resources that show the average scores that students submit to the school. This study will uncover how students place test-optional admissions in their college decision process, and if this type of admission is used as a criterion for a school of interest.

It is crucial to understand the effects of these policies on students' admission experiences. Statistics are used to make schools seem more desirable and prestigious, but what the statistics do not account for is the thought process students go through when choosing a college. One important insight of the test-optional movement is to understand how students make the decision to apply either using or not using high-stakes standardized test scores as a part of their admissions profile. This study examines the experiences of first- and second-year students at Bucknell University. Interviews will also be carried out with three comparison schools of Bucknell and those schools' admission counselors. Admission counselors at universities are the

decision makers that build policies and practices that can alter student's learning experiences as well as the social and cultural climate of a campus (Soares 2011).

Overview of Study

This study will be broken down into five chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Data Collection, Analyzation, and Implications. Chapter One has created an overview of the project and a prelude to the history of this topic. The literature review will cover the history of the SAT/ACT as a college admissions practice, critiques, and problems of this practice in terms of race, socioeconomic status, and covid, the recent history of test-optional practices, system profiles of specific universities, and lastly, how test-optional responds to the critiques of the SAT/ACT. The data collection will include interviews, surveys, and document collection of test-optional policies (what is posted on school websites). Chapter 4 will be the analysis of all gathered data and Chapter Five will be the conclusions and implications of the study.

The literature review will discuss the history of both SAT/ACT standardized tests as well as the history of test-optional policies. It will also empirically look at how test-optional policies look at and respond to critics of standardized tests like the SAT and ACT. As mentioned before, these criticisms bring in conversations about race and socioeconomic status. Covid was a key factor in the growth of test-optional policies due to the lack of test availability. A general history about how test-optional policies aim to make secondary education more accessible to students from different demographic backgrounds will also be discussed.

Positionality

Reflecting on myself, I am a 2019 high school graduate. Before Covid-19, I had not heard of test-optional or test-free admissions at universities and colleges. I did not apply to any schools

that offered a test-optional admission or had an option to due to NCAA guidelines. Because I was being recruited to schools for athletics, I had to show my test scores to coaches to gain admittance. The NCAA requires all incoming athletes to submit their test scores to them, but not directly to the school. Therefore, either way (whether submitting a test score or not) I would have had to take the exam for the purpose of recruitment and athletic rules.

Another large part of my college admissions process was getting “slotted” for a sports team. “Slotted” essentially means you bypass admissions and do not have to have the typical Bucknell grades or scores to gain admission since you are athletically contributing to the school. By going through this process, I did not have to fully consider how my test scores were faring in my acceptance. Although I was looking at multiple schools throughout the country, I ended up only applying to one: Bucknell. After many visits and conversations, I verbally committed to the Bucknell track before even applying here or anywhere else.

Essentially, I never had to go through the process of deciding whether to submit test scores because I did not apply or look at any schools that offered that chance. Not only this, but I did not have to consider the decision of taking the SAT or ACT exam because of the requirements of the NCAA. The stress of SAT scores was lifted because of my bypass of admissions at Bucknell. The only standardized test I have taken was the SAT. I never took the ACT and came from an area where the SAT was more prioritized and favored.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Significant literature abounds on the barriers standardized testing presents and the discriminatory college admissions process. However, there is limited literature on the policies and general background of test-optional admissions since this recent rise in test-optional policies. Test-optional admissions policies have been around for decades but have been accelerated by the rise of Covid-19 in past years. Examining the role standardized testing plays in the college admissions process is crucial when investigating student admission experience. Current research focuses largely on policy briefs and effects on institution enrollment and success rather than understanding the logic students use when applying test-optional admissions practices (Shultz & Backstrom, 2021).

Most university admissions policy changes, regarding test-optional admissions, can be broken down by evaluating the history and critiques of the SAT, along with the history and critiques of the test-optional movement and how it is being executed. This literature review is organized chronologically based on these topics, including each history of standardized testing, the use of the SAT as a college admissions tool, and test-optional policies. Criticism of the SAT and the response that test-optional admissions carry out will be discussed at the end of this section.

History of the SAT as an Industry Standard

The SAT has been used as a tool to measure students' academic performance and knowledge. For a long time, selective institutions around the nation required test scores in an application, about 59% of post-secondary schools (Visé, 2022). Developed in 1926, the

Scholastic Assessment Test (previously named the Scholastic Aptitude Test) was used as a sorting device, for measuring academic ability. The change of the Scholastic Aptitude Test to the Scholastic Assessment Test came in 1990, hoping to part from the idea that the test measured “innate ability” (Epstein, 2009) and move to a measure of potential success and academic capability in post-secondary schools. Richard Atkinson, former president of the University of California system from 1980 through 1995, believed that admissions priorities were distorted by the Scholastic Aptitude Test, which also fueled the change to the Scholastic Achievement Test (Epstein, 2009). Since the early 1900s, the popularity of the SAT has risen. At the time, there was not a high attendance pursuing secondary education (Furuta, 2017). From 1930 to 1970, there was about a 70% increase in the pursuit of post-secondary education, however, this statistic was due to a higher high school attendance and graduation rate at the time (Golden, 1994). Today, the SAT is still used as a sorting device for universities to predict the future success of students (Buckley et al., 2018).

The SAT is set up on an unreliable foundation for determining student success. Khan (2019) discusses three men who were major influences in the development of standardized testing: Alfred Binet from France, Sir Francis Galton from England, and James McKeen Cattell from the United States. These men believed that intelligence was genetic and not a set of capacities that could be taught or learned (Khan, 2019). Sir Francis Galton was known as the creator of mass testing, where he applied the same tests to a large group of people and analyzed the results (Himelfarb, 2019). These men invented the IQ test with the aim “to measure the mental capabilities of potential students because those students who are “slow” or deficient in any way are not going to benefit from mainstream schooling” (Khan, 2019, Pg. 851). The scores on these tests allowed administrators to judge what students should be put in higher academic

classes, and which should shift towards job skills and vocational training. The creation of the IQ test perpetuated the idea of testing for academic intelligence, where it was used to compare mental capabilities with the abilities of other people (Braaten & Norman, 2006). Universities began administering their own versions of standardized tests (like the SAT and ACT to select the most intelligent from the class (Hirschman et al., 2016).

Intelligence testing was viewed as a tool that could be used to improve society which led to the SAT being founded by eugenicist Carl Brigham. His goal was to do away with the “less intelligent” which then became the standard admission requirement for colleges and universities (Khan, 2019). Race and economic status have the largest influence on standardized test scores (Geiser, 2015). The underperformance of marginalized, underrepresented, and people of color as well as lower socioeconomic students is not just seen in standardized testing, but also in the student’s high school GPA (Bowen et. al, 2009). Students of color and bilingual students are less likely to attend schools with adequate access to resources that are needed to succeed in schools, making it difficult to succeed on standardized tests (Himelfarb, 2019). In 1970, test developers began working to ensure all bias based on different cultural and educational backgrounds was removed from the tests (Lawrence, 2003).

Standardized testing is a common theme within K-12 educational policies. Educational policies are used to improve the quality and rules of educational institutions. Since the implementation of educational reform acts like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, standardized testing has been prevalent in youth education. There is eagerness within K-12 educational policies to improve test scores and practice standardized test-taking primarily for marginalized groups (Bowen et al., 2009). Standardized tests are crucial for policymakers, in that they use scores to evaluate not just students, but teachers, and school systems (Gneezy et al.,

2019). Standardized testing is commonly started as early as kindergarten and is used to evaluate students' academic ability. In our society, SAT scores hold power in the minds of high school students (McDermott, 2008). These scores are used to evaluate students' preparedness for college (Buckley, et al, 2018), success in one's career, likelihood of college completion, and future potential earnings (Klasik, 2012). Each student takes the same test and is given the same amount of time, so it is argued as fair. However, these processes of standardized testing are argued to be inequitable across different groups of students, especially those from lower socio-economic statuses and students of color.

Critiques of the SAT

In today's literature and research, there is more critique of the SAT than there is support. Most believe the test is a barrier to higher education for students (Epstein, 2009). Receiving a college degree can be influential and promote social mobility for the student (Kotzee & Martin, 2013). Students get the chance to move up in society by attending universities, where they are given the space and opportunity to learn and grow (Kotzee & Martin, 2013). Universities have made efforts to raise enrollment of racial minority students and high academic achievement students is a controversial topic in secondary education (Hirschman et al., 2016). Race and merit are both considerations when it comes to admission offices viewing applicants (Hirschman, et al., 2016).

Students can often feel more valued by universities when their SAT score is not attached to themselves or their application (Hiss & Franks, 2013). Admissions who look at the students' entire portfolio, like personality, extracurriculars, work ethic, and other characteristics allow the prospective student to be seen as a person rather than a statistic. Along with these factors, a holistic admissions approach looks at high school grade point averages as well. High school

grade point averages (GPA) are a powerful tool to determine success in college. (Hiss & Franks, 2013). Many researchers argue that humans are too complex to be held to one score that defines their academic success and intelligence (Hiss et al., 2015), which should leave standardized testing to be invalid or at least reduce relevance. High-stakes tests like the SAT continue the suppression of opportunities through standardized testing and education (Perkins, 2001). The SAT has been accused of cultural and racial bias, lack of predictive power, and inability to measure a student's intelligence (Furuta, 2017).

Racial Discrimination

The SAT was not originally developed to benefit all students—it was specifically created to reinforce racism and prejudice to reject African American students from enrolling in college (Hirschman et al. 2016). Today, there is substantial research demonstrating that Black and Latino students perform worse on college entrance tests, as well as low-income and lower socioeconomic class students (Soares, 2020). The large variance in students' SAT scores between background demographics like race and ethnicity shows how the SAT is not equitable among different groups of students (Geiser, 2015).

Fair Test: The National Center for Fair and Open Testing one of the largest SAT-optional advocacy programs has claimed the SAT is particularly biased against women and students of color, and that it is not an indicator of collegiate success (Epstein, 2009). To combat the disparities in standardized testing, race-based affirmative action plans were created to increase the amount of racial diversity in colleges and universities (Geiser, 2015). Race-based affirmative action plans were halted in the 1990s and universities looked for a way to increase diversity among accepted students (Zwick, 2018). Universities that carry out affirmative action programs

must account for the selectiveness of the school and how practical their plans are (Kotzee & Martin, 2013).

Cunningham (2018) argues that students of color make up most students at low-performing schools in the U.S. and are therefore the most affected by high-stakes testing (Cunningham, 2018). Caucasian students are more likely to attend schools with access to educational resources than African American and Latino students (Himelfarb, 2019). No Child Left Behind used standardized testing to make decisions on where the funding should go and choose between those who were deserving and those who were not. When “whiteness is perceived as the norm, and therefore justified as the only acceptable source of knowledge” (Cunningham, 2018, Pg. 114), minority students' education is greatly affected.

Bilingual students experience a direct disadvantage on standardized tests. Many tests are given in the language of the country in which the test is given. These tests are used to eliminate bilingual students from being in high academic classes or gain admittance into colleges. Students who may have a first language other than English may perform highly in school and community but may lack an adequate test score. All students must disclose their race on the first page of the test, so one of the first things the grader will see is their race. Standardized tests “have a cultural bias in them so that they can favor white middle-class youth over minority youth” (Khan, 2019, Pg. 861). Although there are many issues surrounding standardized testing, Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, spoke about how expensive creating standardized tests that are unbiased and have proper exam security is (Epstein, 2009).

Students identifying as African American, Latino, or Native American are at higher risk for experiencing inequality in schooling because they are more likely to attend under-resourced and lower-quality schools. Cunningham (2018) argues that standardized testing does not just aim

to evaluate students on their perceived abilities, but it diminishes identities that are not part of the dominant society. By evaluating and analyzing the history of standardized testing, Cunningham (2018) views these tests as a proponent of inequality in youth education. “Epistemological erasure” occurs when marginalized groups attempt to perform like the dominant group. Standardized tests enforce this erasure, seeing that they are used as evaluation tools for schools to view how their students are performing. Cunningham (2018) mentions the effort to close the “achievement gap”, which encourages students of color to want to succeed like their white classmates. The curriculum taught in schools does not incorporate the knowledge of outside cultural communities from the dominant group (whites) by “preserving achievement for those who can master liberal-capitalist knowledge formations” (Cunningham, 2018, Pg. 112).

The Progressive Era, the civil rights era, and the No Child Left Behind Act are each historical examples used to describe the timeline of the “epistemological erasure” standardized testing causes. The Progressive Era’s school reform plans focused on European working-class immigrants' lack of achievement in schools (Cunningham, 2018). One of the first forms of standardized testing was the intelligence quotient (IQ) test. The panic that accompanied immigrant dropout rates and low performance motivated the creation of the IQ test, which was first argued to be an unbiased tool used for “efficiently assigning children to a curriculum appropriate for their intellectual ability” (Cunningham, 2018, Pg. 113). Current-day research has proven the test to be culturally biased and like many standardized tests today, there is a correlation between scores and family life/immigration status.

The ACT, which stands for American College Testing, is another standardized test used in the college admissions process. There is a scoring gap between black and white test takers that has been expanding since the release of the test (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education,

2001). The journal also reported that “88 percent of all white test takers scored at or above the average score of black” (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2001, Pg. 53). The SAT and ACT have been proven to not be correct indicators of college academic success as well as a professional success by researchers (Himelfarb, 2019).

Class Discrimination

Standardized tests like the SAT and ACT put families who can afford test preparation at an advantage (O’Shaughnessy, 2009) whereas minority students are more likely to fare poorly on the tests. Colin Diver, who has been a president, dean, and professor at many high-achieving universities, stated how the standardized tests required by universities favor the rich (Epstein, 2009). Some students even get closer attention from universities if they can afford the full tuition of the institution (Selingo, 2020).

Students from privileged backgrounds have a higher chance than low-income students to complete the steps necessary to apply for college (Klasik, 2012). Families of students who have access to FAFSA support systems, like counselors and other school personnel, show an increase in college attendance and completion (Bettinger et al, 2012). Students from rural areas and high schools have different perceptions of the factors that influence college attainment (Morton et al., 2018). Morton (2018) found that students from rural areas explained how they did not have access to educational opportunities due to the geographic location and affordances of their high school. Highly selective colleges focus on not just the students applying, but the high schools where they were enrolled at. Selingo (2020) identified that 79% of all admitted students to “top universities” only accounted for 18% of U.S. high schools (Selingo, 2020, Pg. 1). Students from areas without access to quality educational support fear that they will fail in college (Morton et al., 2018).

Students from low economic backgrounds likely have jobs to help them financially support their families. These students may not have access to free standardized tests or free test preparation courses. Even if they were to have access, they have minimal time in their schedule due to working (Scott, 2021). Like the SAT, the ACT requires payment from either the student or school to sit for the test. A study showed that those who retake the ACT multiple times have a more likely chance of receiving a high score than students who take the test once (Mattern et al, 2018). According to the Dean of Admissions at Vassar College, Sonya K. Smith, prioritizing diversity in universities is essential to see growth in this country (Bannister, 2021).

High School Education / Discriminatory Patterns in College Admissions

Institutions value students who can pay, ones who bring up their diversity in the economic background (mainly higher socioeconomic) and ethnicities (Hossler et al., 2019). Admission groups may choose to look for students' contextual factors that include anything within their demographic background. Institutions aim to have the most intelligent admissions class they can, rather than an admissions class made up of students from elite backgrounds (Hirschman et al., 2016). Prospective students may apply to universities and be turned down because of low test scores (Hiss & Franks, 2015) or may shy away from applying because of low test scores that do not meet the statistics of the school. Applicants should be admitted based on if they will be contributing members of their specific field of study as well as the university (Kotzee & Martin, 2013).

In comparison to other countries, the United States has been behind in performance on these exams. These tests are meant to account for disparities in academic performance, but students may not be motivated to perform well on them because they believe they are not important to their educational experience (Gneezy et al, 2019). When it comes to interest in what

universities have to offer, different groups (racial or socioeconomic categories) share separate interests in what schools have to offer (Kotzee & Martin, 2013).

High school teachers often partake in the process that is known as “teaching to the test”. This is when teachers skip over lessons and materials to only focus on what will be presented on the exam to produce higher test scores (Himelfarb, 2019). Many studies show that the academic performance of students (grades, extracurriculars, GPA) accounts for post-high school success (Hiss et al., 2015).

Since the 1990s, the college admissions process has become more intricate and unexplainable (Epstein, 2009). Prior to applying to higher education, students must complete multiple tasks like writing admissions essays, seeing guidance counselors, and applying for financial aid if needed (Klasik, 2012). Students tend to choose their higher education based on factors like location, availability of academic majors, and external influences such as family expectations (Meyer & Cranmore, 2020). These factors must be considered when evaluating students' participation in test-optional applications.

Test Anxiety

Applying to colleges can be an anxious activity for high school students. Pursuing secondary education can help create a future for individuals who wish to join the workforce. There are many types of institutions and universities, each having a different size, accessibility, and price. While trying to finish high school, students are expected to keep track of SAT test schedules and college application deadlines. Secondary education can provide a ladder for social mobility (Kotzee & Martin, 2013) and can be a time of high anxiety and confusion for students (Hecklau, 2017).

Test anxiety is a form of anxiety that is heightened when taking an exam. Most students with test anxiety have fears of failure in school or failure on the specific test that is being taken (Klug, 2021). Students who succeed in the classroom may fare poorly on exams and tests because of their test anxiety. Test anxiety is also more common in women than men, which can ultimately create a gap in test scores between the genders (Zeidner, 1990). Classroom and school conditions may also affect test anxiety, where students who are in a competitive or highly evaluative environment are more likely to be impacted by test anxiety. In competitive schools, students are more likely to have test anxiety due to the stress the school puts on testing and evaluations (Hancock, 2001). Students should be evaluated based on their classroom performance and in-school grades, creating a mix of data points to evaluate the student's success rather than having one score define a student (Klug, 2021). Test anxiety may be more popular in the SAT/ACT because of the pressure that one score can determine a student's future (Hannon, 2012).

COVID-19

Secondary education has changed since the pandemic of Covid-19. The pandemic caused a shift in the college admissions process and changed how students perceive applying for school (Dennis, 2020). Due to the pandemic, many universities and high schools chose to carry out a pass/fail grading system. This left many prospective students to be missing several grades that would usually be an indicator of merit on their college applications. Some schools were even entirely shut down. The cancellation of the SAT and ACT left many students unable to submit test scores, forcing universities to reevaluate their testing requirements for admission.

Not only did Covid-19 affect submitting test scores, but it also altered the entire admissions process entirely for students. Prospective students were not able to visit campuses

during the pandemic, so Zoom visit sessions were implemented (Bannister, 2021). Many usual recruitment techniques and programs were forced to be moved online, including Q&A's, accepted students' day, and informational sessions. Although there were several schools already executing test-optional policies, Covid-19 accelerated the spread across the entire country (Cai, 2020).

It is well known that Covid-19 caused a worldwide shutdown of businesses, schools, and normal life itself. People were forced to isolate themselves and not partake in any group activities. Because of this, students were not able to participate in athletics, clubs, or any other extracurriculars. Selingo (2020) argues that the widespread use of test-optional policies due to Covid-19 will further the inequality of admissions practices in secondary education. As mentioned earlier, selective colleges look at the top high schools in the country, all with great access to educational resources and funding. With the elimination of test scores, these universities will focus even more on the high schools they are familiar with (Selingo, 2020).

Test Optional Practices and Policies

Brief History

The test-optional movement was put into effect not long after admissions began requiring standardized testing requirements. Test-optional admission policies have been around since the late 1960s (Schaffner, 1985). An aim of test-optional admissions policies is to allow access to higher education to underrepresented populations in the United States. Unfairness in admissions and standardized testing is shown where students without a high-achieving test score may fall short of scholarships (Scott 2021). Due to the wide use restrictions regarding race in the admissions process, there has been a rise in test-optional policies from universities (Zwick 2018).

Test-optional admissions began in small, selective liberal arts colleges before the pandemic and have continued to diversify into regional private schools and public schools (Shultz & Backstrom, 2021). Selective colleges can be identified by those who admit less than half of the applicants (Selingo, 2020), totaling around 200 universities. In small liberal arts schools, it is apparent that there has been a leisurely increase in the push to do away with testing requirements in admissions (Zwick, 2018). The first selective college to implement a test-optional admissions policy was Bates College in 1984 (Pellegrino, 2022). Over the past twenty years, there have been few selective universities to go test-optional in their admissions. In the year 2021, approximately 150 colleges have implemented a test-optional policy for said school year (Camara, 2020).

The first test-optional admissions appeared at Bowdoin College, whose policy granted the idea that test scores were not as important to admissions as the public thought. It would not be until over twenty years later that a second school, Bates College, would do away with the testing requirement of admissions (Epstein, 2009). Schools began to follow out of response to “falling applications, reduced selectivity rates, and dropping indicators of student preparation” (Buckley et al., 2018, Pg. 147). The movement’s popularity grew in the 1990s when multiple distinguished universities adopted test-optional admission policies, each basing their decision on their own reasons (Furuta, 2017). The impact of test-optional admissions on incoming college students is relatively unknown since many schools, like Bucknell, are administering a pilot program to see how admitted test-optional students fare over four years.

As mentioned earlier, Covid-19 is changing higher education norms and practices. The pandemic caused universities to change their admission requirements to fit the needs of students. Since students could not sit for the test, universities decided to not require it in their applications.

Some schools, like the University of California and its branch campuses, have been test-optional since before Covid-19 (Epstein, 2009). However, many universities did not anticipate going test optional until the pandemic impacted SAT and ACT testing.

Effects on Students

Those who decide to take the SAT or ACT have higher aspirations to attend a college or university than those who do not (Klasik, 2012). Applying test-optional would eliminate the critique that many students shy away from applying to selective schools they would succeed in if they were to be granted admission (Hiss et al, 2015). Students with lower test scores shy away from applying to highly selective colleges and universities and are still discouraged even if they have high-achieving grades in the classroom (Lucido, 2018). Student applicants with low scores are less likely to include them on an application (O'Shaughnessy, 2008), which can be required for merit aid. Some institutions are seen as hypocritical when it comes to switching to test-optional since they devalue the significance of the test, yet have it be required for merit scholarships.

Students who chose not to submit their test scores are more likely to be first-generation students, minority students, and Pell Grant recipients, as well as women (Hiss et al., 2015). In 2009, FairTest accounted for 800 test-optional universities that were mainly technical, religious, or small liberal arts schools (O'Shaughnessy, 2009). Some admissions programs are focusing on other characteristics of potential students. They vouch for creativity, self-efficacy, teamwork, leadership, and learning skills (Hossler et al., 2019). Instead of looking at scores that represent a student, institutions that adopted test-optional policies chose to look at the individual as well as their personality. Other institutions are relying on essays and interviews (Perkins, 2001) to gauge whether a student is fit for their school.

Critiques of Test-Optional

While the critique of the SAT is rather well known (despite its widespread use), critique of test-optional programs is also evident. When switching to the test-optional plan, universities face problems that range from updating printed materials to dealing with the disapproval from alumni and other universities about how Holy Cross was lowering the quality and selectiveness of the school (Mcdermott, 2008). Students analyze these statistics regarding the selectivity of an institution that they are looking at or applying to (O'Shaughnessy, 2009).

According to Hiss, W., & Franks (2015), students that are applying test-optional are faring just as well as students who chose to submit scores. There was a .05 lower difference in GPA and a .06 lower difference in graduation rate than students who submitted test scores (Hiss et al., 2015). Influence on test scores can come from a variety of factors, like students living and economic background (Mattern et al., 2011), so the removal of the test score from the application would cause no harm to applicants and create a process that is more inclusive and welcoming to students from underrepresented backgrounds. However, removing the SAT from the application requirements creates a difficult situation for college admission offices. The SAT is a tool used to essentially put everyone on the same scale which can make the admission process easier for universities. This change causes admission representatives to look over students' high school grades and academics more so than when the university required scores. A difficulty with this is how "one can assuredly anticipate variations in grading standards, point systems, and rigor of each class" (Pellegrino, 2022, Pg. 6). Not every high school uses the same scale in terms of grades and class rigor, therefore making it harder to judge an applicant's academic success. This strategy can cause measurement error, subjectivity, and ambiguity in the admissions process (Laird, 2005).

Regarding the point that test-optional admissions policies boost socio-economic and racial diversity, there are arguments that test-optional policies are used to further boost universities' rankings and admissions attractiveness (Belasco, 2015). In the quantitative study done by Belasco (2015), diversity gaps in admissions were not relieved by test-optional admissions. Some schools, like Holy Cross, have seen positive results since switching to test-optional where there is more diversity among admitted students (Mcdermott, 2008). Test-optional schools show a higher SAT score average in recent Covid years than schools that had these policies before the pandemic (Belasco 2015).

Being a relatively new admissions practice, the long-term effects of test-optional policies are not available since there is not enough data to gauge student success in their college education as well as post-collegiate life (Shultz & Backstrom, 2021). Many schools with pilot test-optional programs will evaluate the impact on student populations over the coming years. The test-optional initiative aims to expand access to those who perform poorly on standardized tests, especially minorities and the socioeconomically disadvantaged. Test-optional policies are targeting a decentralized and unequal secondary education system. The goal of introducing test-optional admissions was to make schools more reachable to a wider demographic (Buckley et al., 2018). Examining the history of selective schools, minority representation in the student population is significantly low (Reardon et al., 2012). The switch to test-optional admissions provides a chance for all prospective students to have a chance of gaining entrance into selective colleges without the additive stress of test scores.

Benefits to the Institution

Admission processes are highly important for selective universities (Hirschman et al. 2016). Admitting students with high academic standings brings up a college's rank, which in

return makes the college look more appealing to potential applicants. Since the beginning of standardized testing used in college admissions, there has been a significance of academic merit and racial minority representation in the admissions class (Hirschman et al., 2016). In the study done by Syverson, Franks, and Hiss (2018), the research proved that the adoption of a test-optional policy resulted in an increase in applicants to the university (Syverson et al., 2018).

The switch to test-optional allowed schools to seem more reachable to prospective students, meaning there were more applicants (Belasco, 2015). This allowed schools to reject more students, making their institution appear more selective, and therefore more desirable (Furuta, 2017). The term “selectivity” became a metric for measuring institutions' appeal and excellence. In the past, there have been specialized and less selective schools that have not required submission of SAT scores to gain entry (Syverson, 2007). These institutions are also able to boost their average SAT since those with poor or below-average scores chose not to submit (Epstein, 2009).

As mentioned above, the push for test-optional admissions began in small, liberal arts schools. It took a pandemic and limited access nationwide for large universities to implement these policies in their admission offices. One reason for this is that not every school has a large admissions office. Large schools may not have the time or resources to individually go through each applicant (Perkins, 2001) or conduct interviews with every applicant. They rely on numbers like SAT score and GPA to evaluate students efficiently.

According to Epstein (2009), universities must be communicating with the applicants about what is important to the school. When the school allows for students to choose what is significant (e.g., submitting test scores), the admissions process becomes limited and restricted.

Schools should shy away from using a filter when going through applicants to find those with high test scores to raise their average (Mcdermott, 2018). If a university wishes to show themselves as universal, then they must either view the entirety of the applicant or make the submission requirements the same across all applicants (Epstein, 2009). Epstein (2009) also describes how Colin Diver poses the idea that the test should be eradicated, not made optional.

Conclusions

The standardized testing process entangles multiple issues within admissions processes. There is a long history of the SAT/ACT, where they each relate to racial and social class disparities and do not correctly measure the aptitude of students (Perkins, 2001). Students who are systematically disadvantaged do not have the resources to perform well on educational tests like the SAT and ACT. University's admission offices and programs hold an immense amount of power over students and families (Bannister, 2021). These offices are continuously going through a time of uncertainty and transition due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, there is limited research on the experience of the students making the decision of whether to submit SAT scores to a test-optional school. These experiences are important when analyzing the benefits of a test-optional admission policy.

There are both benefits to students as well as to universities through test-optional admissions. Students from diverse backgrounds have more opportunities to receive higher education at selective colleges (Hiss et al., 2015). Students who suffer from test anxiety can put more weight on their high school grades and extracurriculars in their applications, rather than submitting an SAT score. Universities see an increase in applicants, which in turn can make their schools become more selective as they are denying more students. It can also increase the

diversity of the applicant pool and accepted applicants, making their school more desirable to underrepresented youth (Belasco 2015).

After looking over previous research on test-optional admissions, it can be concluded that although these policies existed before the pandemic, Covid-19 accelerated the process by forcing many schools to implement test-optional admissions (Marcus, 2021). Before the pandemic, schools seemed to be test-optional due to the lack of equality in standardized tests. Test-optional admissions were a response to the inequity of standardized tests provided to students, especially those who are minority students as well as those from underrepresented areas. The increase in test-optional admissions policies was a response to the Covid-19 pandemic where some institutions were forced to not require scores due to accessibility of the test but made hints that their university would see benefits in these policies (Bannister 2021).

Chapter 3: Methodology

When examining the influence of test-optional policies on college admissions, it is common to rely on statistics and university specific policies to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of making test scores optional in the admissions process. Higher education has relied heavily on test scores in the admissions process to scout potential candidates for their institutions. The purpose of this study is to understand student decisions and logic regarding submitting their SAT/ACT test scores for university admission. This study takes a different tactic in seeking to uncover how test optional admissions influences students' admissions decisions. The recent policy changes in selective college admissions practices raise the questions: what features persuade a student to apply without submitting their SAT scores? What is the rationale behind students' decision?

Type of Study and Rationale

To examine student decisions and logic in admissions decisions and their lived experiences, I adopted a purposive sampling approach. A phenomenological qualitative study fits this research question because it allows the researcher to explore a participant's experience and the lived aspects of a particular time or situation. In this method, the researcher determines the demographic that will be studied and purposely chooses people who are suited for the study. Participants were selected based on their decision to not submit test scores to Bucknell. The criteria for selection were first-, second-, or third-year students at Bucknell University who did not use test scores in their application. Additionally, I employed the snowball technique to draw other participants from the initial group and help to find representatives of a specific population. Everyone in the first group will be asked to name other students who also applied for test-optional.

My study was designed to collect qualitative data to locate commonalities within the admissions process when navigating test-optional policies. The qualitative methodology I chose to pursue in my research was phenomenology heuristic inquiry, which can be described as “exploring the subjective meaning and essences of another’s experience of a phenomenon (Glesne, 2016, Pg. 20). When analyzing the data, I utilized interpretivism, which aims to understand social reality while covering assumptions and beliefs of society (Alharahsheh, 2020). Each of these complements one another in qualitative research and when looking at the experiences of a group after a shift in a societal practice. In the case of my research, the shift was seen in the college admissions process. Little is known about the qualitative impact of test-optional admissions on incoming college students. As previous research has shown, the college admissions process can be a stressful and enduring experience for high school students (Hecklau, 2017). This research topic is considered low risk, where there was no threat of discomfort or serious conversations involved.

Sampling

Admissions Sampling

This study collected qualitative interview data from Bucknell students (9) and admissions administrators from a range of colleges and universities considered peer institutions (4). Additionally, documents were analyzed with items such as university websites, podcasts, newspapers, and policies. The populations I wanted to investigate for my project were admission counselors from Bucknell and Bucknell’s comparison schools. The schools were Lafayette, Lehigh, Pennsylvania State University, Villanova, Colgate, Northeastern, UVA, Cornell, Pitt, and the University of Maryland. The schools included in my study are either universities similar to Bucknell’s student population, and academic achievement, or in the same conference as

Bucknell. Other schools interviewed were universities that Bucknell commonly loses student applicants to. All these institutions were suggested by Bucknell's office of admissions.

I reached out via email and received responses from three out of ten representatives. The lack of responses may have been due to the time of year since late winter is a busy time in college admissions. In addition to invitations, I called admission offices to set up meetings with deans either through their secretaries or assistants. Even after these efforts, I was only able to schedule three interviews with comparison schools. These schools were Penn State University, Colgate University, and the University of Maryland. Interviews were conducted with the Deans of Admissions, Vice Presidents of Admissions, and Associate Deans of Admissions. Each of these interviews was conducted over Zoom throughout the month of February. Participants were given the opportunity to look over both the informed consent form as well as the interview protocol before the meeting to help them prepare for the conversation (See Appendix A).

Student Sampling

I planned to interview current first-, second-, and third-year students at Bucknell University, hoping to get five students from each year. I used a purposive sampling technique and sent invitations through the Message Center and reached out to professors for course announcements. At the end of the interviews, I initiated a snowball sampling technique, asking for contacts of students who chose to not submit their test scores when applying to Bucknell. In all, I recruited 9 students, comprised mostly of first-year students, and used a prepared interview protocol (See Appendix B).

Each individual student interview lasted from thirty to sixty minutes. Participants had to be within the first three years of college since the senior class did not experience the large

increase in test-optional schools due to Covid-19. Although there were schools that had test-optional admissions before the COVID-19 pandemic, I chose to look at student experiences through the new wave of test-optional schools. Overall, I found it difficult to recruit students from the third-year class. This may be because many students took the SAT or ACT prior to the pandemic, since they would have been seniors in high school, or because they do not remember much from their admissions process since it was over three years ago.

As this is already a specific topic to investigate, I focused my inclusion on a wide group of students that could be from any race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic class. This decision allowed me to have a simple and straightforward recruitment process. Since it was difficult to find test-optional participants, I felt this was the best approach to the research. Bucknell has not released specific data on their pilot program and there is no way to tell publicly what percent of Bucknell's student population was admitted as test-optional students.

When investigating the reasons for not submitting test scores, the type of university considered is important. Bucknell is a rather expensive institution, where the student population is predominantly white and affluent. A goal of test-optional admissions was to make higher education more accessible to all students and remove the focus of admissions from test scores to a holistic approach. For purposive sampling, the researcher has an idea of the demographic that will be studied and purposely chooses people who are suited for the study. Participants were selected based on their decision to not submit test scores to Bucknell. My judgment will be relied on when selecting individuals to participate in the study. The snowball technique will draw other participants from the initial group and help to find representatives of a specific population. Everyone in the first group will be asked to name other students who also applied for test-optional.

Over the past few months, I have conducted semi-structured individual interviews with nine students from Bucknell University. I recruited one participant from the message center, three from the education classes, and the other five from the snowball technique. Seven of the students did not submit their scores to Bucknell, and the other two students submitted scores to Bucknell but did not use scores in their applications to other schools. There was a mix of students who did not take either test, the SAT and ACT, along with students who took the tests, but chose not to submit their scores to Bucknell. All students were 18 years old or older, as well as American born. Each participant had grown up and attended school in the United States.

Before conducting interviews, a brief demographic background survey was sent out to each participant that will provide more information about their background gathering: household income, race/ethnicity, type of high school attended (public or private), and other distinguishing demographics that would allow for more specific interview questions to be collected. This survey included a ranking of their social integration at Bucknell thus far in their university experience, other schools they applied to, and their social class relative to Bucknell. This survey was considered when evaluating student responses in the interview stage (See Appendix C).

Populations

Admission Population

As previously mentioned, I interviewed three comparison schools to Bucknell. These schools were the Pennsylvania State University, Colgate, and the University of Maryland. From the University of Maryland, I interviewed Nicholas Paul Orban, the Special Assistant to the Associate VP for Enrollment Management. At Colgate University, I talked with Jamiere Abney, Associate Dean of Admission and Coordinator of Outreach for Opportunity and Inclusion. Lastly, at the Pennsylvania State University, I interviewed Rob Springall, the Assistant Vice

President for Enrollment Management and Executive Director of Undergraduate Admissions. At Bucknell University I interviewed our Dean of Admissions, Kevin Mathes. See the table below for a compilation of institutional data.

Table 1: School Demographics

<i>School</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Type of Institution</i>	<i>Student Population</i>	<i>Location</i>
Bucknell University	Kevin Mathes	Dean of Admissions	Private	~3,500	Lewisburg, PA
Pennsylvania State University	Rob Springall	Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management and Executive Director of Undergraduate Admissions	Public	~76,000 (University Wide)	State College, PA
Colgate University	Jamiere Abney	Associate Dean of Admission and Coordinator of Outreach for Opportunity and Inclusion	Private	~3,000	Hamilton, NY
University of Maryland	Nicolas Paul Orban	Special Assistant to the Associate VP for Enrollment Management	Public	~30,000	College Park, Maryland

Student Population

All student participants identified as female, where seven were first-year students and two are second-year students. Eight of nine students identified as white, and one student identified as Asian. Eight students classified themselves as middle class, where five are upper middle class and, two are middle class, and one is lower middle class/working class. One student

classified themselves as working class. All student participants categorized their high school GPA in the 3.5 to 4.0 range. Only one student who was working/lower middle class was a first-generation college student. Majors of students varied from all three of Bucknell University's colleges, including engineering, English, education, psychology, animal behavior, biology and chemistry, political science, and management.

The demographic survey was used to identify any patterns or commonalities between specific groups like social class, race, or grade point average in high school. For a measure of social class, I included a picture of the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status for them to rank themselves, a common technique used in sociology (Adler et al., 2000). This scale was used to measure how participants are succeeding in their social integration at Bucknell. Please see Table 2 below which summarizes the student participants, using pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Table 2: Student Demographics

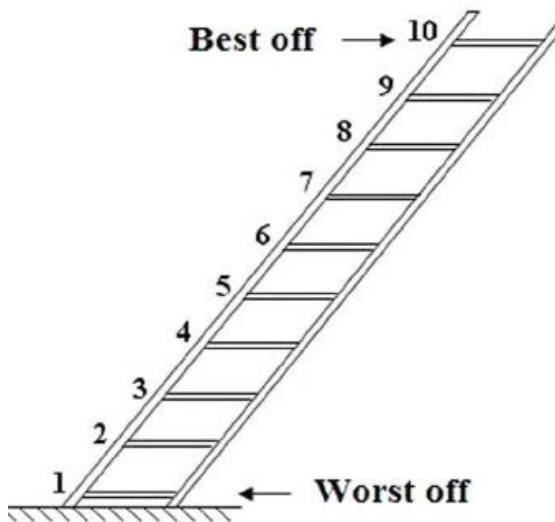
<i>Name</i>	Class Year	Major	Social Class	Race	Gender	High School GPA	First Generation
<i>Julia</i>	1	Mechanical engineering	Middle Class	White	Female	3.5-4	No
<i>Madison</i>	1	English	Upper Middle Class	White	Female	3.5-4	No
<i>Angie</i>	1	Education/Psych	Upper Middle Class	White	Female	3.5-4	No
<i>Lizzy</i>	1	Animal behavior	Working Class	White	Female	3.5-4	No
<i>Katie</i>	2	Bio Chem	Middle Class	Asian	Female	3.5-4	No
<i>Phoebe</i>	1	Undecided (Pre-health): psychology, biology	Upper Middle Class	White	Female	3.5-4	No

<i>Tracy</i>	1	Political Science	Upper Middle Class	White	Female	3.5-4	No
<i>Ella</i>	2	Global Management and Spanish	Upper Class	White	Female	3.5-4	No
<i>Hannah</i>	2	Psychology	Lower middle-class/working class	White	Female	3.5-4	Yes

Table 3: MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status Rankings

<i>Name</i>	Social Class Rank	Social Integration Rank
<i>Julia</i>	5	8
<i>Madison</i>	8	7
<i>Angie</i>	7	6
<i>Lizzy</i>	7	8
<i>Katie</i>	3	5
<i>Phoebe</i>	7	6
<i>Tracy</i>	9	7
<i>Ella</i>	8	8
<i>Hannah</i>	4	8

Figure 1: MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status



Interviews

Admissions Interviews

I conducted interviews with admissions representatives from Bucknell's comparison schools via Zoom. These participants were either Deans of Admissions, Associate Deans of Admissions, or Vice Presidents of enrollment management. During these interviews, I asked participants to explain their test-optional policies, the admissions process, and their student and admissions relationship through the application process. Before the interview, I sent the participants the interview protocol to ensure they were prepared for the types of questions being asked. Participants were asked to read the informed consent form and verbally consent at the start of their interview.

In these interviews, I wanted to understand the rationale for going test-optional. While most schools switched to test-optional due to accessibility reasons from covid, I wanted to investigate if schools were open to continuing their test-optional programs. I also wanted to

understand, from an admissions process, how test-optional policies are working. Their goals, successes, and failures were all covered through these interviews. Even though this study centers around student experience, I wanted to see how admissions representatives viewed their own policies and their interactions with students navigating this new realm of admissions. Lastly, I wanted to explore the repercussions of test-optional admissions and if there were any unknown benefits to the institution after switching their process.

Student Interviews

All student interview participants had confidentiality in this project. Each participant was given an informed consent form to read over and sign before their participation in the study. Student interviews were conducted in a private study room on Bucknell's campus. My goal for these interviews was to investigate the experiences of test-optional students before and after enrollment. Questions about pre-enrollment discussed their experience with the SAT/ACT, their high school profile and academics, and their values while going through the admissions process. These values included what they were looking for in a university, like location, price, size, etc. Questions surrounding post-enrollment largely included their academic and social experience since being admitted to Bucknell. A component of this study is looking at how well these policies are working, which can be evaluated by student experiences regarding both academic success and social repercussions from being a test-optional student.

The themes that were used in this part of my research were centered largely around my literature review. These themes included student preparation for the SAT, high school experience surrounding the SAT, values in the college decision-making process, experience around other schools of interest, deciding whether to submit test-scores and experiences after enrollment. These themes were used to generate conversation around specific topics that I wanted to include

in my research and that were included in the literature review. After each interview, I gathered more information about student experiences and used this information to create new questions or get rid of questions.

Document Collection

Along with admission and student interviews, I focused on document collection for another source of data. I focused on the three schools I interviewed, as well as Bucknell, to look for news articles or policy announcements about test-optional admission at their university. I found news articles from Penn State University's newspaper called the Daily Collegian, as well as two admission posts about their pilot program for test-optional admissions. I also looked at both Colgate's and the University of Maryland's admission announcements about their policies lengthening their pilot programs for test-optional admissions. In addition to these sources, I was sent a survey from Nicolas Paul Orban which was from the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). This organization administers the State of College Admission, which surveys a wide variety of topics. For my research, I used Chapter 3: Factors in Admission Decisions. To investigate the social repercussions of being a test-optional student, I looked at social media to find any posts surrounding test-optional admissions. The only application I was successful in finding information about was Yik Yak. Yik Yak is a phone app where users can chat with others within a five-mile radius anonymously. Users can make posts, like posts, and reply to posts. I assume students felt comfortable posting on this app since it is anonymous, especially about sensitive, or rather controversial topics.

Analysis of Data

Data were analyzed using the transcription of interviews, assigning pseudonyms, and creating a thematic coding scheme. The transcribing of interviews was done using an external online service. After initial transcription, the interview documents were checked for small transcription errors to ensure correctness and accuracy. Pseudonyms were assigned to each student participant randomly. These pseudonyms were used throughout the entirety of the analysis process. The coding of data was used under an open thematic approach, where I first began with nine overarching themes found in the student interview data. I collapsed these themes under four main categories of analysis: personal influences on the test-optional decision, pre-enrollment factors, post-enrollment factors, and the normalization of test-optional. Admissions interviews had initially six thematic categories and were then collapsed under three overall themes: policy overview, impact on applicants, and admissions outcomes. After the initial coding of themes, I met with a peer debriefer to confirm that my data aligned with the thematic findings.

Chapter 4: Analysis

Introduction

Interviews were conducted with both students at Bucknell University and admissions administrators at Bucknell and Bucknell's comparison schools. Student interviews were centered around the admissions process experience as well as the decision-making process when thinking about whether to submit scores. The data I collected through student and admissions interviews, as well as document collection, suggests that the decision-making process around test-optional admissions is multifaceted. There are many factors that go into the application process on both the student's side as well as the admissions side.

The data will be laid out and organized in two parts: student results and admissions results. Each part has been broken down into themes and subthemes. For student data, the themes I found were personal influences on the test-optional decision, pre-enrollment factors, post-enrollment factors, and the normalization of test-optional. For admission data, the themes I found were policy overviews, impact on applicants, and admissions outcomes.

Part 1: Student Results

The data in this study, collected through student interviews and university documents, has been organized through a thematic approach for this chapter. The themes I coded from my data were test anxiety, pre-enrollment factors, post-enrollment factors, and the future state of test-optional policies. Pre- and post-enrollment factors each are broken down into sub-themes. The data was coded by analyzing previous literature as well as examining interview transcripts for common threads throughout the data.

Personal Influences on the Test-Optional Decision

Test Anxiety

When looking at the data, specifically the question I posed around the reasoning for deciding to not submit scores, a common answer was around the idea of test anxiety. Test anxiety can be defined as a type of anxiety that is triggered by any type of testing or exams, specifically those given in school (Klug, 2021). Since the SAT and ACT are two high-stakes tests in students' lives, they can trigger substantial anxiety. Most participants with test anxiety explained that they receive good grades in school and took part in plenty of extracurriculars. Overall, the participants with testing anxiety were all-around good and successful students in high school who were very stressed and anxious when it came time to take the SAT or ACT.

One participant, Katie, explained that for every SAT she took she was very well prepared. She used her test scores in her application to Bucknell University since they were within the range of the school's average test scores but did not submit them to other schools, she considered her "reach" schools. This means that for schools she viewed as more difficult to gain admission to, Katie withheld her scores since they were outside the range of average test scores for that school. Katie received private tutoring for the SATs and took multiple classes both in school and out of school to help her prepare for the SAT. However, Katie suffers from testing anxiety, where she states:

"I have terrible test anxiety [Laughs]. And I would say that I know the material well, and I just get really nervous when I'm taking tests. Yeah. I think that's the biggest thing. I'd literally sit down, and it just wipes out of my [Laughs] brain." (Katie, 2023)

Katie suggests that although she knows she is prepared for the test and has done everything in her power to prepare for it, her anxiety takes over as soon as she sits down for it.

Test anxiety can interfere with academic performance while causing a significant amount of stress to the student (Hecklau, 2017). This type of anxiety can cause long-term effects on a student's academic success, as it is seen as interfering with one of the most important tests for a student's future at a college or university.

Another participant, Angie, had a similar experience with taking the SAT. Different from Katie, Angie knew going into her SAT test that she was going to be test-optional. Participants suggested the reason for taking the SAT even though they knew it would not be used in their admissions process was because of their school culture. Students felt pressure to still take the test even though they knew they were poor test takers and did not plan on using the scores. Taking the SAT or ACT also guaranteed them a score that may have been adorable at a safety school or lower choice school for the participant.

Angie had experienced prior forms of test anxiety in high school and for her, the SAT was going to be no different. Angie explained that a giant test like the SAT was sure to trigger her anxiety by sharing that

“I think with my experience, I have ADHD and anxiety and it really stems from school and it just got worse as I got older, and test-taking was like a huge anxiety trigger. Yeah. So, I think test taking is stupid and I think that colleges should just consider the person.”
(Angie, 2023)

In her interview, she expressed that school was always stressful for her. Angie ended up switching high schools halfway through her time at a public school, to a private school that had more resources and opportunities for her to learn and grow. However, even with these new

resources and opportunities, Angie was not able to overcome her testing anxiety. Angie knew before, during, and after the SAT, she was going to be test-optional because of her test anxiety.

Hannah, a second-year psychology major, talked about research studies she read about how test anxiety can influence students' futures. Although she did not directly point at this as a specific factor in her decision to be test optional, she pointed to test anxiety when asked about the significance of the SAT in the application process. Hannah would argue that anxiety is heightened during the SAT, explaining how

“Especially a test that's kind of created to determine where you're going to spend the next four years of your life. And psychologically with testing anxiety, stuff like that, that's automatically added pressure to it. And for students who already have test anxiety to a certain level, to put them in the situation of being like, "You need to pass this or you're not going to get into a school," that despite what your grades are saying, you can't get into.” (Hannah, 2023)

Hannah demonstrates her knowledge of test anxiety and how she has seen the effect it can have on the future success of students. She also explains how nerve-wracking the SAT is for students, as some students view it as a test that is the determining factor for where they are going to spend four years of their lives. Hannah also points out that even students with excellent grades in schools can still feel the pressure of the SAT and its significance in their college applications.

Pre-Enrollment Factors

One of the main questions of this research study is why students are deciding to be test-optional, and what factors are influencing their decision to not submit scores. Most of the time, they reached this decision because their test score was not up to their own expectations or the

school of interest's standards. Looking at how students are navigating this new test-optional world in admissions, I examined the factors that occurred before enrollment to college to understand more about the decision-making process and being test optional.

High School Culture

Students are largely shaped by the institutions they attend. Angie, for example, was able to turn her school life and grades around by switching her schooling environment. She switched from a very unsupportive and under-resourced school that did not care for her success, to a school that prioritized both her well-being and academic success. She credits her admittance to her top school, Bucknell, due to this rise in academic standing, which resulted from greater personal attention to her learning. She believes that schools should be looking at students' overall standing within a school, not just their grades or test scores. High school culture can be a large factor in both the SAT/ACT scores as well as college admissions.

For many participants, like Lizzie, their high schools were very competitive. Throughout all classes and grade years, there was a push to get excellent grades and perfect test scores. When asked about how competitive the SAT was at her school, Lizzie explained how crucial getting acceptable scores was for everyone. "Then just even the culture where I live, some of my friends started preparing in the eighth grade. Yeah, it's taken very seriously to get into these elite procedure schools." The school which Lizzie attended from kindergarten to twelfth grade prioritized the importance of the SAT beginning in middle school. Students were not only preparing for this test four years before they would even take it, but the school instilled the notion that it was important for their future. It was important that students studied hard and received excellent scores on the test that would decide whether they had a future at a good-standing academic institution.

Julia, a first-year mechanical engineering major, went to a boarding school that was very competitive and academically rigorous. To stay in the school, students had to participate in a certain number of extracurricular activities as well as maintain a certain grade point average. Julia categorized her college admissions process as negative and stressful, largely due to the competitive environment she experienced in high school. The importance of the SAT was heavily emphasized; fellow students were creating systems and competitions based on where students were applying to college. When discussing her process of applying to schools she explained that

...I think it was just mostly just because the school I was in was very negative and very stressful. It was just very cutthroat I would say. There were people making spreadsheets of where everyone was EDing to and trying to sabotage it.

This idea of everyone at her school knowing where she was applying made her experience with the SAT and college admissions process that much more difficult and nerve-racking.

Julia felt that by being test-optional, she was disengaging from the “cutthroat” activity of her classmates. She also explained that she tried as much as possible to distance herself from these groups, she already felt that she was “different” from her classmates because of her lower score. Julia also recognized that her list of application universities was much different from those of her classmates since they applied to ivy league schools and other top schools in the country.

Another First-year participant further explained that the “group” you’re in high school makes a difference in how you view the SAT. Madison explains how at her Quaker high school, the SAT was prioritized based on how competitive your group of friends was. She explained that, for the most part, her school took the SAT seriously, but only offered students a chance to

take the PSAT. There were no classes offered or tutors offered directly by the school, yet many students would hire private tutors or take classes outside their school.

It definitely was like, depending on what group of people you were in, there were certain schools that are really competitive. Then that, in turn, obviously leads to your ACT/SAT score. So, people would share too. I got my tutor from a family friend who lives really close. (Madison, 2023)

Madison shared that she was not involved in an extremely competitive friend group, but she still prioritized her preparation for the test by hiring a private tutor for herself.

Madison took the SAT approximately four or five times before settling on her decision to be test-optional. She explained that although her school was supportive, she still felt a need to perform well on the exam because she had always believed that the SAT was important in the application process. Her private tutor gave her the advice that if she “wasn't in the 90th percentile, to not submit her scores” (Madison, 2023). This advice made her feel more competitive in the sense of wanting to do her best on the test, but she did not feel a sense of competitiveness against her friends or classmates.

A podcast from Bucknell University in 2022 features Ben Kavanaugh, associate director of admissions. Kavanaugh and the hosts explore the significance of the SAT. Kavanaugh describes it as “something that you can give quickly, cheaply, efficiently to a wide range of students in a wide range of places all over the world” (A Guide to Standardized Testing, 2022). The SAT is essentially the easy way out in determining who should and should not be admitted into universities. He also made the point to mention how students find where they land on the university's test score scale. Many of these desired test scores appear on the university's website

or in printed admission materials. Madison would agree with Kavanaugh's quote on how to go about the test-optional decision, and whether to submit a score. Her need to continue taking the test even after not being confident in her score proves Kavanaugh's point that the SAT can be important when weeding out applicants.

Ideas about Standardized Tests

A common thread throughout the interviewing process was the value students placed in SAT/ACT results. Many participants viewed the SAT as a feature of college admissions and this time in their lives that was important to their future, yet also maintained that it was not the most important thing to do well on because of test-optional admissions policies. Students explained that because of test-optional admissions, they did not fear that a less-than-adequate test score would ruin their chances of future success, because schools did not require the submission of test scores. Many students also have strong opinions about the SAT/ACT and its history of required submission to attend higher education institutions. Participants shared their disdain for standardized testing, stating that the SAT does not account for the entire intelligence of a person.

Phoebe, a first-year pre-health student, shares her insight on how the SAT does not effectively account for a "well-rounded student" in the admissions process by stating that "It's kind of unfair to place all that weight and all that pressure on one multiple choice test when a lot of information won't apply to future success I would say. And also, just the conditions. You're putting so much pressure on yourself for one test, one time. I feel like if we look into what you've done over the past four years in high school, I feel like that would be more important and more revealing. And then also taking into

consideration everything you don't learn in the classroom which can prepare you for the future and success.” (Phoebe, 2023)

Phoebe argued that while going through the college admissions process, there should be an emphasis on looking at all elements of a student, rather than just their test score. She believes that test-optional is not only beneficial to students, but admissions officers as well. When looking at an applicant holistically, schools can judge not only their intelligence, but their character as well.

A 2019 Editorial from *The Bucknellian*, “University Admissions: Is test-optional optimal?”, discusses the advantages of test-optional policies in college admissions. The article examines the disadvantages of standardized testing, specifically the SAT/ACT, discussing how they “often reduce students to a number; a student’s drive, interpersonal skills, and other relevant qualities are devalued” (University Admissions: Is test-optional optimal? 2019, Pg. 1). The disadvantages of standardized testing, like reducing a student to a number, can cause universities to reject students who may have excelled in environments other than a testing room. Being test-optional encourages students to create the best presentation of themselves in their application. Whether this includes test scores or not, learning how to present oneself helps transition students to adulthood where people must represent themselves in the best way possible.

When asked her opinion on if schools should remain test-optional, Hannah mentioned her background on psychology to aid in her explanation of why schools should continue being test-optional. Hannah argued for implementation of test-optional admissions at all universities because of her lack of trust in the SAT for predicting future success. Tests like the SAT can be more of a barrier to people than a way of mobility where Hannah believes

“...the whole process is, A, kind of disadvantages some, and B, why are you making it such a big deal when you know and there's research that it is not going to benefit some people? And some people don't have access to be able to prep for this thing that, unfortunately, where we were two years kind of determined the trajectory of the rest of your life. Like where you go to undergrad, which determines if you're going to grad school, if you're not, [or] if you're going to go to law school. Yeah, overall, I think it should be test-optional everywhere.” (Hannah, 2023)

Interestingly, Hannah’s statement raises the possible repercussions of what a low SAT score means. Whether Hannah’s opinion is factual or not, it is important to understand how students view the SAT in their application to college. In general, students believe that a low-test score will impact their academic lives beyond undergraduate admissions.

Students from competitive high schools strongly perceive the importance of the SAT in their college application process. However, students also described how they feel their entire life is being impacted by one score they get on a test that they take when they are sixteen or seventeen years old. Because of this pressure, many participants believed that test-optional was a positive approach to college admissions. Students argued that the SAT only measures how good a student is at taking a test: “If you're a good test taker, you're going to be fine. If you're not, you're kind of limited” (Hannah, 2023).

University Values

One way I used to gauge where test-optional fell in the list of values students had while looking at colleges was to ask, “When thinking of your values in your search for colleges, where did test-optional fall into this list?”. When determining where to apply, students often rank

universities based on several factors and values. These factors could be specific values they have and want to see in a school, like majors or programs, size, and location, private or public, and other characteristics of what makes a university desirable to that specific student. Since the rise of test-optional policies, the exploration of test-optional as a value or characteristic of an institution is relatively new. The ubiquitous spread of test-optional policies across colleges and universities has given students the decision on whether to use their score in their application.

Test-optional as a value in universities for college applications has relatively no literature currently. However, many of my participants stated that almost all, if not every university they considered was test-optional, even if they were not specifically looking for test-optional schools. For others, having test-optional admissions was a central factor in their college search. Angie highlighted that almost every school she was looking at was test-optional. She also pointed out that if more schools in the country had required scores, she would have limited her search to only test-optional schools. “I think I only applied to schools that were test-optional. It was kind of like a no-brainer for me.” (Angie, 2023). The mindset that Angie was in showcased other students who used test-optional as a new criterion for deciding between colleges and where to apply to.

For some participants, the rise of test-optional policies was a way of reaching a new demographic of schools that were once unattainable in nature. Ella, a second-year Global Management student, explained the shift in her college search after schools continued to be test-optional even after the class of 2020. Although she was fully prepared to take the SAT, she felt relief when schools began extending their test-optional admission policies into the class of 2021. Ella felt that “almost every school she looked at was test-optional,” meaning that she did not have to consider test-optional as a value in the admissions process, since almost every school she was looking at gave applicants the chance to not submit their test scores.

According to Ella, the movement to test-optional was a chance to aim higher in the university search process. Since many prestigious universities, like the Ivy League, no longer required scores, she and others saw it as an opportunity to showcase their other talents on their application.

“But a lot of my friends were like, "Oh, this is my chance. I have a high GPA. I’m really involved. My test scores were going to bring me down. I’m going to apply to Ivy League schools. I’m going to try to get into schools that I never would have been able to before." I think it just changed the way that we look at applications for the class of 2021 that was so different from even the class of 2022 following the next year.” (Ella, 2023)

One response to this new environment was that students valued their extracurriculars and personal essays more. Students with good high school GPAs and plenty of extracurriculars had higher confidence about themselves and their applications, even when applying to more selective schools. This shift in attitude shows how test scores were highly weighted in the admissions process, from the perspective of students. After switching to test-optional, students began asking themselves if they could get into schools like Harvard or Yale because a test score was no longer impacting their value as a candidate.

An Opinion piece from *The Bucknellian*, “Should standardized testing be optional?”, from 2016 profiled a report sponsored by Harvard University about minimizing standardized testing’s significance in applications. In the article, author Kiera McGee states that the report argues that there should be more focus on the quality of the extracurriculars (holding leadership positions, starting new clubs) rather than the quantity of the extracurriculars. Harvard hoped to factor in family and community involvement/responsibility to aid in assessing low-income applicants (McGee, 2016). The SAT has received criticism because of the inequality it produces

among students. Wealthier families who can afford tutors and prep classes perform better on the SAT and ACT than students who may not have access to these resources. McGee (2016) raises a crucial point about determining the level of challenge of the high school curriculum. She argues that test-optional admissions will not be beneficial to students because of the difference in the scale of curriculums across the country. A 4.0 at one school may not be on the same difficulty level at another school. However, McGee quoted “SAT is the only practical method of equalizing such discrepancies and leveling the playing field amongst hundreds of thousands of high school students,” which seems to be feeding into the concept of meritocracy and that the SAT is equal for all students (McGee, 2016).

This data has suggested that students' decisions around test-optional admissions are multifaceted. Students have personal reasons for not submitting their scores, like test anxiety or being a poor test taker. Students also have a certain logic around test-optional admissions pre-enrollment. Many participants explained that through their experience looking for colleges, most universities were test-optional. Depending on the type of high school students went to, the influence of competition among classmates or the general school culture caused stress for students through the test-taking process as well as the college admissions process. These student perspectives and experiences regarding test-optional admissions question why students decided to withhold their scores from their applications, and if any of these previous perspectives influenced their decision.

Why Test optional?

Many factors go into determining whether a student submits their scores or not. As mentioned previously, students said they felt “more comfortable” applying to schools that saw them as whole individuals rather than primarily a test score. Such a view was important to Ella,

who credited her decision to not submit scores to the Covid-19 pandemic. As mentioned in chapter two, Covid-19 did not influence the creation of test-optional policies but did cause an accelerated movement of test-optional admissions, largely due to the lack of available testing. Admissions offices could not rely on all students would have access to taking the SAT which was university admission's main reason for not requiring the test during Covid-19. This shift has now turned into pilot programs to see how test-optional students are faring throughout their four years. A graduate of 2021, Ella explained her troubles with the College Board, explaining

“The time in which I was going to be taking the SAT, they were all being canceled by College Board because of COVID. Prior to that, I always planned on taking the SAT but because my scheduled SAT got canceled five times and then on the sixth time, they were like we'll just reimburse you. By that point, every college was test-optional” (Ella, 2023)

Because of the lack of accessibility, Ella relied on the fact that all schools were test-optional because of Covid-19. She had every intention of taking the SAT, but after her many cancellations, she ultimately decided to not take the SAT. Students who decide not to take the SAT, whether in situations like Ella's or other reasons, must narrow their college search to include only test-optional schools. In this case, students would consider test-optional admissions as a condition of their search. However, most participants pointed to the fact that almost all schools they came across in their search were test-optional.

When deciding whether to submit test scores, most participants considered the average scores submitted to the university by applicants of the previous years. Tracy, a first-year political science major, went to a competitive private school and said that “if their average was slightly higher than mine, I didn't want to” (Tracy). Tracy shied away from submitting scores to most schools, even though her score was in their average range. If test optional had not been an option,

she said that she most likely would have still applied to the school and be comfortable submitting her scores. If the participant's score fell on the lower side of that range, however, respondents indicated they were much more hesitant to submit their scores. Katie explained part of the thought process for submitting test scores as,

“Just depending on which schools, I applied to... I applied to the University of Pennsylvania. That was one of my reach schools. So, for that, I kind of just told her [a college counselor], I was like, ‘I'm thinking of not maybe submitting my test scores.’ My test scores were okay, but they weren't incredible. So, I was like, ‘If there's an option to not submit a test score, I might try that and see what happens.’” (Katie, 2023)

Again, this method of gauging where their score lies in the broader applicant pool or previous applicant pools is a primary way of determining whether to submit their test scores as a part of their application.

The Bucknell podcast, *A Guide to Standardized Testing*, offers insight into the admissions perspective of how test scores are weighed in the application process. In the past, Bucknell University required test scores but factored in everything about a student's experiences into their decision. The university's holistic approach to admissions was in place even before Covid-19 and their switch to test-optional admissions. Associate Director of Admissions Ben Kavanaugh explains that he has never looked deeply into the scores of students. Instead of analyzing the sub-scores of the SAT and ACT, he focuses on the overall score the student received. Kavanaugh quoted

“They took the test. Okay, that's how they're scored. And, oh, they didn't take the test, okay. Well, there's other things to look at. I mean, I don't recall thinking or spending a lot

of time on testing when looking at an applicant. It's one data point of many.”

(Kavanaugh, 2023)

The idea of “one data point of many” is the thought that Bucknell admission officers cited when examining applicants. Kavanaugh stated that he rarely looks at test scores more than other data points in an application, and he does not prioritize certain aspects of an application over others. The SAT and ACT are not the only numbers on an application. There are also AP and IB test scores, as well as high school grades that are looked over in an application.

Post Enrollment Factors

Most colleges and universities using test-optional admissions policies are gathering SAT scores and other data about the students who chose to not submit their test scores. This practice shows that the post-enrollment lives of test-optional students are just as important as the decision they made before enrollment to withhold their scores from their application. Students are being evaluated on their GPA, number of class withdrawals, and type of major they are considering (Penn State, 2023). Looking at students post enrollment experiences is also significant in determining how well test-optional students are succeeding over their four years at Bucknell.

Social Repercussions

A popular form of social media here at Bucknell is the phone app YikYak. YikYak is an app that allows users to anonymously post content within a certain mile radius and anyone with the app can view the posts. This app has generally been used to make funny comments about life on campus, but it has also been used in inappropriate ways, such as ridiculing certain groups of people on campus. Posts surrounding test-optional students are usually negative or imply that test-optional students are less intelligent than those who chose to submit their scores.

One post from November 9th, 2022, read “Some of y’all are test-optional and it really shows,” implying that there is a noticeable academic and intellectual distinction between those who were admitted to Bucknell test-optional and those who were not. The underlying meaning of posts like this is that test-optional students are not on the same academic level as other students. The distinction may be because students assume test-optional classmates tend to do more poorly on the SAT/ACT than those who do submit their scores. Another post on October 25th, 2022 read “The SAT-optional folks finally found yik yak”. This quote is not as direct a putdown as the one prior, but it still gives insight that there may be a divide between the groups. After finding this data, part of the interview protocol was created around the student's social experiences while being a test-optional student.

Interestingly, when asked about perceptions of those assumed to have been admitted as test-optional, interview participants explained their experiences with being test-optional admittees have been mostly positive. Students reported that there has not been mention of a divide between test-optional students and the rest of the student body. Phoebe quoted that

“No one has ever really questioned whether I should be here or not because I went test-optional. Just a nice thing I would say. I also feel like now a lot of people are more accepting towards that test option. So, maybe not in the past, but I think we’re kind of going towards that direction.” (Phoebe, 2023)

Her quote suggested that due to the rise of test-optional policies, it has become more common to be a test-optional student at a selective university. The recent rise in test-optional policies has been occurring for approximately three years now, so it seems that students are used to the idea of test-optional admissions.

Another participant also discussed the idea that test-optional admissions are now normalized among the student population. Her description of the social setting around test-optional admissions gave the idea that it is not talked about or discussed between friends or classmates. After being asked if she has seen any negative social repercussions about test-optional students, Madison stated

“I think, well, one, because test-optional is always available, so we're not the first class who experienced that. Two, once you get into college, I don't even remember what I was doing a year ago, let alone like, "Oh, were you test-optional?" That hasn't really come up.” But I also think that just once you get to school, no one cares how your academics were in high school because you're all going to the same college. You're expected to be on the same level to some degree.” (Madison, 2023)

This quote offers insight into the reasons why test-optional has not been mentioned much in small talk or between friends. Once students get to their university or college, they likely forget the time when they were applying to schools. The notion of meritocracy takes over following admission; the theory goes that anyone who was admitted got based on their own merit and accomplishment. Many student participants also assume that everyone got in due to their own academic excellence and are all on the same level now. When asked about the Yik Yak posts, students would usually laugh and admit to seeing them, but not really thinking anything of them. Some participants also explained that they hear jokes sometimes, like “Oh I was test-optional. I don't get this stuff” (Julia, 2023). These small comments are taken lightly by the test-optional community, and it seems that they have no discomfort with these statements.

The contrast between the Yik Yak posts and the direct student quotes may suggest an underlying issue around the opinions of test-optional students. Yik Yak is an anonymous

platform where students can share content without fear of identification. It is possible that there is a hidden opinion on test-optional students that they are not academically inclined as those who submitted their scores. Hannah pointed towards this perception when she commented, "...I think some students are afraid to be like, "Yeah, I applied test-optional because... ...there's always some sort of underlying judgment there from other people." (Hannah, 2023). During the interview, participants discussed the conversations around campus regarding test-optional admissions. Students seem to have no direct negative comments or views towards classmates who were test-optional, and those test-optional students feel like they have had no direct criticism for not submitting their scores. However, the Yik Yak posts suggest there is a line between the two groups and test-optional students do feel there may be an underlying judgment from classmates.

Academics

Another form of evaluation post-enrollment is the academic success of test-optional students. Universities with pilot programs are evaluating the success of test-optional students over the course of their four years. They are comparing this data to the data of students who chose to submit their test scores. Penn State reported on their test-optional data that students in "STEM colleges who provided a test, that mean first-year GPA at Penn State were a 3.18. In those same colleges, a student who was admitted without a test, their mean GPA in that group was a 2.86" (Penn State, 2023). College admissions officers are engaging with data to decide whether or not test-optional policies are essentially working and are still allowing the university to only admit students who meet the academic standards of the institution.

While this data is important to evaluate test-optional policies, the experiences of test-optional students are important as well. All students interviewed held 3.5-4.0 grade point

averages in high school and were each looking at selective, prestigious schools similar to Bucknell. Gaining the perspective of these students and understanding their perceptions of their academic success is also an important data point to consider. Lizzy credited test-optional for her admissions into Bucknell but expressed gratitude for it since she has been succeeding in school. She expressed her belief on her admission to Bucknell by saying

“Honestly, I'm not sure if I actually would be here if it wasn't for test-optional, but I think that just tells you standardized testing isn't really an adequate way of testing people's knowledge, considering I am doing well now in school here.” (Lizzy, 2023)

Lizzy pointed out her view that standardized testing, such as the SAT, does not accurately measure a student's intelligence. An inaccuracy like this in college admissions can lead to students not being admitted to schools they would perform well at if it was not for a low-test score. Lizzy also explained that her high school prepared her well for the college transition and that her classes have all been manageable.

Julia, on the other hand, described her workload as “intense” and “difficult” as a mechanical engineering student. She commented that she is doing well in school and is happy with her grades, but she has struggled to adapt to the new environment of college. “I think it’s definitely been very challenging I would say. Like, the workload is definitely very intense. Like pretty much spending all hours of the day just doing work. Yeah, I think that about sums it up” (Julia, 2023). Julia’s larger stress on her workload compared to other students is most likely due to her major and the academic rigor it requires. Even though her workload has been a struggle for her, Julia has remained optimistic and is continuously hitting the average or above average for her exam scores.

Like other student participants, Ella managed to graduate high school with a high GPA and plenty of extracurriculars. She credited her transition into college to her high school experience. She discussed her high school classes and culture, saying

“I took a lot of AP classes in high school, and I thought that they prepared me really well for being here. I think I’m used to the way that things are tested, and I’m used to the way that courses are structured. So, I didn’t really feel like wow, this is a huge adjustment moving into college. I think I was really lucky within that. Also, a lot of my classes are graded based on writing or discussion rather than taking tests” (Ella, 2023).

Her mention of both the grading scales of tests and written assignments shows that students acknowledge a difference between the structure of class assignments. Classes that are exam and midterm based are viewed as more difficult, whereas classes based on writing and discussion are seen as easier. This indicates the conversation around which majors are easiest to do well in, and which are more “academically valid”.

There is also the assumption that certain majors are smarter than others, which can be translated into the idea of test-optional admissions. Angie discussed her view on students whom she assumes submitted their scores because of how academically rigorous their major is. Angie said, “my old roommate was a mechanical engineer with a dance minor and so she obviously submitted her scores, and she was so smart” (Angie, 2023). However true this assumption is, there are engineering major students who tested optional, and are successful in their classes.

Is Test-optional the New Normal?

The rise of test-optional policies is going into year four, and students seem to be advocating for the extension of the policies. Every student interviewed agreed that test-optional

was beneficial to both student applicants and college admissions. *University Admissions: Is test-optional optimal?* an article from the Bucknellian, explains the importance of promoting fairness within university admissions, stating how students “evaluated within the context of their high school academic and extracurricular achievements, measures that can be seen as both more fair and relevant to the application process” (University Admissions: Is test-optional optimal? 2019, 1). There is also a trend among participants that the significance of the SAT is decreasing over time, as test-optional policies become more normalized. Tracy, a first-year political science major, expressed her opinion on the significance of test-optional policies and the SAT. She suggested that the significance has gone down “because I feel like a lot of people just wouldn’t want to study for it if they don’t have to submit it. Then if they have a good GPA, they don’t need a good score.” (Tracy, 2023).

Tracy also pointed out that “if like I had known from the beginning that [college admissions] were test-optional, I wouldn’t have studied as hard”. This quote came from a hypothetical situation given during the interview. Participants were asked if there would be a shift in attitude toward the SAT/ACT in upcoming years because the incoming high school class years have watched their siblings, family, and friends go through the admissions process. These populations are each watching and learning from their older role models about how to go through the application process. Tracy pointed out that if she knew a lot of schools were still test-optional, she would not have put as much effort into her test.

When discussing the validity of the SAT, Julia pointed out that she had “never been a good test taker” and that she gets “a lot of test anxiety”. She saw that the SAT is about learning how to take a test and learning the tips and tricks on how to succeed in it. “I think colleges definitely benefit from being test-optional because then it kind of allows students to show in

other ways how they can succeed” (Julia, 2023). Having access to test-optional schools allows students to showcase other talents and skills that show how they would be as a student. Students want admission officers to look at student candidates as whole people, rather than a test score.

Student post-enrollment attitudes towards test-optional admissions can be evaluated by looking over their academic and social experiences. Student participants discussed that although there has not been a great deal of direct criticism, they believe there may be a distinction between the two groups on campus (test-optional students and students who chose to submit their scores). The data collected from student interviews suggested that students feel test-optional admissions were a normal experience for students going through the application process.

Now that we have explored the pre and post enrollment attitudes towards test-optional admissions from a student perspective, I turn to the insights from administrators from the four institutions that participated in the study: the Pennsylvania State University, the University of Maryland, Colgate University, and Bucknell University. These data demonstrate the calculus of university admissions administrators on the changes in policy. Administrators offer their facts and opinions on how test-optional admissions are impacting both universities and students.

Part 2: Admissions Results

Policy Overview

Bucknell University went test-optional in 2019, where they began a five-year pilot program. After the Covid-19 pandemic, they were still test optional and opened the possibility to international students and homeschooled students; two populations had been required to submit scores during the four years of their pilot. After speaking with the Dean of Admissions, Kevin Mathes, it was apparent that Bucknell prioritized the opening of barriers for students through

their test-optional policies. The school had already been test-optional for one year prior, and although Covid-19 influenced the policy in some ways, it seems that Bucknell is very engaged with creating more access to possible applicants. Dean Mathes discussed this thought process and stated

“I think that in the lens of equity when we think about education across the United States and even the globe and the preparation, we know that there are barriers to success in terms of testing because of academic environments. And I think for us to be able to acknowledge to students that your academic profile, your transcript, how you've done, the rest of the application you've put together is enough for us to make a good decision.”
(Mathes, 2023).

Overall, Bucknell has aimed to increase applicant diversity as well as admissions diversity. In their admissions process, one-way Bucknell evaluates a student is by quantifying applicants' transcripts and test scores. The other part is evaluating their experiences and extracurriculars. When identifying individuals without a test score, Mathes stated that “So, when you're assessing a file, you're still looking at an academic profile the same way, it's just for some students you just don't have one piece versus others” (Mathes, 2023). Dean Mathes described this process as one that is not comparing two applicants to each other but rather looks at them separately with all data points that were given to them in the application.

In a 2019 editorial article from *The Bucknellian*, the author points out the changes that Bucknell will likely see from this shift in policy. Name questioned Bucknell's intentions of switching to test-optional admissions, stating that the university is attempting to “increase the size of the applicant pool to lower the acceptance rate, making the school look more prestigious” (University admissions: Is test-optional optimal? 2019, Pg. 1). Although this may be a benefit to

the university in switching to test-optional admissions, Dean Mathes assured that the main objective for making the switch was creating an increase in diversity in applicants. The editorial supports Dean Mathes' statement about how scores on the SAT and ACT better indicators of wealth and financial status are than intelligence. Admissions offices at universities should focus on creating a "class of deep and innovative thinkers and developing them to their fullest potential" by following a holistic admissions process (University admissions: Is test-optional optimal? 2019, Pg. 2).

Nicolas Paul Orban, from The University of Maryland, College Park, described their admissions process as "holistic," a term that many universities used when describing their methods of evaluating potential students. This approach essentially looks at the unique individual's experiences as well as their academic standings from high school. This method is used to ensure that students are being evaluated as complete individuals, rather than just as representations of grades and test scores. Universities use this method by conducting interviews, requiring essays, and examining extracurriculars the student has been involved in. Nicolas Paul Orban, the Special Assistant to The Associate VP for Enrollment Management, described the University of Maryland's process by saying

"Our admission process uses a holistic review of students' applications. We consider as many as 26 different factors when reading a student's application and making an admission decision. And so with all that information, there's not always going to be a typical kind of admitted student, just because we're really looking to see what each student brings to the table" (Maryland, 2023).

The description of this university process shows that admissions officials are shying away from looking at just scores or grades from potential applicants. Using twenty-six different factors

ensures that the student is not being overlooked in any way and ensures that the student feels seen as an applicant.

Access to Higher Education

In addition to increasing the diversity of the enrolled student body, Bucknell University began its test-optional pilot program to increase applicant access to higher education. Dean Mathes indicated that there was wide agreement on the benefit of a more accessible school for students who previously ruled Bucknell out of their college options because of their test scores. According to Dean Mathes, Bucknell has seen an increase in diversity among not only their applicant pool but also their admitted students over the past three years. Dean Mathes was quoted saying

“I know our first generation of college population has increased over the last few years. Our student of color population has gone up a bit slightly. I think the other piece too is we've had some stronger enrollments in things like the humanities. And that's something else we noticed with the difference is that students who go test-optional tend to be in more of like the arts and humanities fields than STEM” (Kevin Mathes, 2023).

This increase in diversity in admitted students shows the success Bucknell is having with their test-optional program. The data also proves that not only is the applicant pool diversifying, but the admitted student group as well. Test-optional policies make universities more admirable to students, therefore there is going to be a large increase in student applicants. However, the admitted students are not always more diverse than they had been in previous years.

Colgate's Jamiere Abney, Associate Dean of Admission and Coordinator of Outreach for Opportunity and Inclusion, discussed how their admissions team evaluates students on the same

level and actively acknowledges that there are outside factors that may be impacting their grades and test scores. These factors can depend on an applicant's school, home life, or socioeconomic status. His admission team places the applicant in the context of their own situation when looking over their application. Associate Dean Abney suggested that

“We really try to be conscious of the context of what it looks like to be involved and it's one of the things we've tried to flesh out over the last couple of years is how can we be more equitable in that conversation, recognizing that students' socioeconomic circumstances or just the context of where they're coming from, locationally and demographically, can really impact what they can do” (Colgate, 2023).

By engaging in the students' personal situations and backgrounds, Colgate can open their admissions up to “stellar students” who may have tested poorly or “don't feel comfortable to be able to find themselves in that environment in the test room when you're sitting there by yourself and very much focused on this singular thing” (Colgate, 2023). Here, Jamiere Abney refers to those students who may have testing anxiety or do not perform well on tests. Colgate's test-optional policy has allowed them to admit students based on their own experiences and merit, rather than getting turned away for a poor test score.

Importance of Data

As mentioned, schools are collecting data on their test-optional policies to see how well they are working in college admissions. This data is important in determining if students who were test-optional are succeeding at the same levels as their classmates who submitted scores. The University of Maryland is taking a different approach to its data. Although they are still

examining quantitative data around GPAs and retention rates, they are also evaluating the data more in-depth. Nicolas Paul Orban noted

“[GPAs and retention rates] are valid and I think, like I said, institutions who are doing that I think are doing good still, but we wanted to look more in depth, think about things like community impact, student representation, and sort of maybe get a little bit finer into sort of student success measures and student educational attainment measures”

(Maryland, 2023).

The desire to look at qualitative factors regarding test-optional admissions and their effects on students shows that the University of Maryland, like Bucknell, is prioritizing the student rather than the quantitative data. Evaluating a student's success on factors other than grades, test scores, and graduation rates helps to make students feel less like they are being scaled back to a number, and more like they are being valued by their school and admission officers.

In an article published by the Collegian in 2014, Penn State's Chelsea Friedman evaluated Temple's shift to test-optional admissions. This shift came before the mass rise of test-optional policies among U.S. institutions, where the Pennsylvania State University still required test scores. Friedman used this evaluation of Temple's policy as one that promotes diversity and equity in college admissions. Although the change at Penn State to test-optional admissions did not happen until after Covid-19, they tried to not only focus on test scores but on an application. They weighted high school performance higher than test scores in their admissions, as well as “other factors, like standardized test scores, class rank, personal statement, and activities” (Friedman, 2014).

Impact on Applicants

Effects on Application Volume and Selectivity

Colgate University is one of many universities that had an increase in applicant volume after switching to test-optional admissions. As seen in the literature, implementing test-optional policies in admissions will likely increase a university's number of applicants (Syverson et al., 2018). In return, this causes a university to turn away a larger number of applicants, especially if the university cannot accommodate admitting more students. Jamiere Abney discussed their thought process when evaluating students as well as how their university has become more selective. Associate Dean Abney stated

“And so we've actually become more selective by nature of the fact that our applicant pool has grown. And I think for us, as I mentioned earlier, it's not trying to look at students from a vantage point of what they don't have there but what is available to us and still being very, very strict in what we're looking for and who we want to admit.”
(Colgate, 2023)

Like other universities, Colgate's selectivity rate has gone down since implementing its test-optional policies. Although they are receiving more applications and having to turn more students away, they are still being critical in their application evaluations.

Penn State, a public university, has experienced an increase in the average test scores of admitted students. Rob Springall, the Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management and Executive Director of Undergraduate Admissions, explained that since switching to test-optional admissions, his university has seen a rise in average SAT scores in admitted students. He credits this rise to the fact that since test-optional admissions became more popular, only the students

with scores at the higher end of the university's scale are submitting them. He explains this change by quoting that

“Most of our admitted students cluster between 1200 and 1500 using the SAT rubric, and that's increased over the last couple of years as test-optional and as we've seen about half of our students apply not using a test. But research we've done shows that who's not using a test are the students who tend to score lower, so the test average has crept up.” (Penn State, 2023)

Rob Springall relied on his university's own research regarding test-optional policies to back his statement that those with lower scores on Penn State's scale tend to shy away from using them in their applications. These actions will naturally make a university's prestige and selectivity go up.

Effects on Student Characteristics in the Applicant Pool

In a quote from Bucknell's Dean of Admissions, Kevin Mathes, he argues that opening admissions to test-optional policies will widen the applicant pool. This would allow a wide range of students to apply that may have shied away before because they did not feel that Bucknell would admit them because of their test scores. Kevin Mathes was very knowledgeable about previous research on standardized testing in the admissions process, stating that

“There's a lot of research that shows that test scores are the best predictor of family wealth. We also knew that when we looked at some of the data that's out there, test-optional policies help you attract women in your applicant pool. I think Bucknell's always been a place that's been about 50/50 or a little bit more female than male in the applicant pool, but we know that if you're looking for talented women in things like STEM where

women are underrepresented in the field, this could be a pipeline for that” (Mathes, 2023).

As mentioned in Chapter Two, one of the purposes of test-optional admissions was to diversify the applicant pool and student body. Kevin Mathes expressed his interest in reaching all demographics of students, especially low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students.

Like Dean Mathes, Rob Springall suggests that universities should be aiming to find a way to provide more equitable treatment of their applicants. Assistant Vice President Springall suggests that all admissions officers should review and determine if a student is academically prepared to attend the university, using both the student’s transcripts as well as their SAT or ACT scores if available. Assistant Vice President Springall quoted how he thinks

“One thing admissions officers are looking hard at is talent is connected to one's opportunities, achievement is connected to one's opportunities, and how do we really balance that, depending on where a student comes from. And all these things combined make it more important than ever that we, even if we have an SAT or go back to requiring an SAT, how are we also considering equitable treatment of our applicants. Knowing that the SAT is the same SAT given to everybody, that doesn't mean it's equitable to everybody who takes it.” (Penn State, 2023)

While engaging in a student's academic records, admissions officers must also look at a student’s background and experience to determine if their test scores are valid. There are many underlying factors that go into a student's test scores. Penn State admissions have recognized that although

the SAT is the same for everybody, this does not mean that it is an equitable measure of intelligence.

Replacement for the SAT/ACT?

When the SAT and ACT are taken out of the admissions process, schools are forced to focus on other aspects of a student's application. These aspects involve their grades, extracurriculars, and personal essays. If schools continue being test-optional and the SAT and ACT become less significant, there is a possibility that something else may replace them. The University of Maryland and Penn State each had similar responses when asked if they believed a factor in the admissions process will become more significant in the upcoming years. Nicolas Paul Orban stated his belief

“I think some colleges may make minor adjustments to their process, but my prediction is that there's not going to be any sort of broad sweeping change across the world of college admission to replace the requirement of test scores.” (Maryland, 2023)

A change in admission processes does not seem likely in the eyes of Orban, although he does believe universities may have to make minor changes to their admissions policies to make up for the loss of the test score as a data point.

Similar to University of Maryland, Penn State argues that there will not be a direct substitute for the SAT and ACT in the admissions process. Assistant Vice President Springall described the shift in admissions process as a shift in weight of factors. He would not argue that there is going to be a new factor replacing the test scores, but rather the idea that high school grades may be weighed more heavily and looked at closer. Vice President Springall describes this process as

“When the SAT or ACT is removed out of the equation, then the weight of the decision really rests on the high school record – the grades, the courses, and what kind of rigor that high school record has. And really, there's not much else that goes into our process that replaces a lack of the SAT or ACT. It really, if the standardized test is removed, then the weight that the high school record got now is that same weight plus the high school record now has to substitute also for what the SAT or ACT would have been in our process.” (Penn State, 2023)

Although it may seem that high school grades are now replacing the SAT and ACT as a numerical score placed on an applicant, Penn State had also mentioned they look at a student’s overall high school and community experience when making a decision regarding their acceptance into the university.

Admissions Outcomes

As mentioned before, universities are relying on data collection, specifically around quantitative data, to analyze the results of their test-optional policies. Penn State began its test-optional admissions in a response to Covid-19. After the shutdown of schools in 2020, access to the SAT/ACT was halted. Like other schools, Penn State responded to this shift by switching to test-optional admissions, making the statement that

“Our response was informed almost entirely by meeting the students' frustration and anxiety about whether or not they would be able to even take any test at all, and that really was the single motivating factor. And certainly we're trying to look at it now as this is a situation we're in, before we make any decision whether we should go back to

requiring a test or do something else, let's really think deeply about where we are" (Penn State, 2023).

Penn State's response to the limitations around the SAT was to help ease student concerns about whether they needed to submit a test. Although there were many populations prior to Covid-19 that did not have access to the test (like populations from underrepresented areas and low-income families), Penn State believed that Covid-19 disrupted the system for everyone. After three years of this program, Penn State found that "students who provided a test had a slightly higher-grade point average by about two-tenths of a point than students who were admitted and enrolled at Penn State without a test" (Penn State 2023).

Similar to Penn State, Bucknell University has made efforts to comfort the anxiety of applicants in the admissions process. Dean Mathes pointed out the drop in significance of the SAT as a way of remedying students' anxiety about the tests. Students are beginning to believe the SAT and ACT are losing value in both intelligence as well as in the admissions process because of test-optional admissions. Dean Mathes would agree with the students on believing there was a drop in SAT/ACT significance, stating that

"Right now, yes. I'm curious to see how that might evolve over the next few years just because I do think because of COVID since so many institutions did it and the way the decisions were able to be made, I think it did relieve that pressure valve a little bit on students to say, "You don't have to always submit a score." (Mathes, 2023)

Dean Mathes also discussed how he is interested in seeing how this will evolve over the next few years. Like Bucknell, many pilot programs will be ending in the upcoming years and universities will start having to decide on whether or not to keep their test-optional policies. Looking at

which schools believe test scores have a “meaningful piece in the process” will determine how high school students will be impacted by future college admissions practices.

After looking over data from admissions interviews and documents about test-optional policies, there are many suggestions made by admissions about the experiences of students and universities when shifting to test-optional admissions. Admissions administrators feel that there are impacts on their university and admissions process. Switching to test-optional admissions creates natural changes to a school’s selectivity, whether this be a desirable outcome or an unwanted one. Students and university admissions each acknowledge the importance of a holistic admissions process and how students should not be minimized to a number. However, students and admissions administrators overlook one another when discussing what is taking the weight in a student's application when there is not a test score included. There is also disagreement on the significance of the SAT/ACT and whether these tests will remain important factors in college admissions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of universities throughout the country that have adopted test-optional policies. Student perspectives on test-optional admission policies are through a different lens than that of admissions officers at universities. As time goes on, test-optional policies are remaining in place in university admissions, even after the Covid-19 pandemic. Admission perspectives on test-optional admissions include arguments about accessibility and fairness. Admissions administrators also offer insight into the possibility of a new entity replacing the SAT/ACT in college admissions. As seen in prior literature, test-optional policies have aimed to reduce barriers to access and equity, as well as to acknowledge the limitations and biases of standardized testing (Pellegrino 2022). The impact of test-optional admissions on various outcomes, such as applicant pools, admission rates, and diversity, are all still being researched due to the recent rise in test-optional policies. However, the literature regarding student logic of test-optional admissions is thin.

This current research project sheds light on the complex and multifaceted nature of experiences with test-optional admissions from the student's point of view. One significant theme the data demonstrates is the importance of values: both individual student values as well as perceived institutional values. Test-optional policies give students the opportunity to showcase their strengths in other areas than test scores, such as their extracurricular activities, community service, essays, and personal experiences.

Implications of Test-Optional

There are many benefits to both students and university admissions when switching to a test-optional policy. Test-optional policies can increase access to higher education for groups of students from underrepresented backgrounds. These policies also allow more leeway for students who did not have the opportunity to prepare due to factors such as test anxiety, financial barriers, and a lack of access to resources. The findings in the previous chapter suggest two conclusions: in a test-optional admissions environment, students feel less pressure regarding the SAT because they have test-optional to “fall back on ” and universities garner more applicants, making their admissions applications and enrollment numbers more selective. However, the second conclusion is taken differently by public and private schools. Private schools tend to be more selective than public institutions and embrace this fact. Public schools, especially the University of Maryland and the Pennsylvania State University, were created to create accessibility for in-state students. Each school is the land grant school of their respective state and may not want their institution to seem more selective.

One overarching theme found throughout the student interviews was the idea that test-optional policies created a “cushion” for students. The switch to test-optional policies essentially made the application/test-taking process more humane in nature. “It was almost like a cushion kind of to fall back on because I knew that at the end of the day, this wasn’t going to be the deciding factor” (Phoebe, 2023). The humanity created by the test-optional approach is most easily seen in comments regarding test anxiety. As mentioned in both chapters two and four, test anxiety is a common struggle when it comes to taking the SAT and ACT for college admissions. Test anxiety is a form of anxiety that is heightened when taking an exam (Klug, 2021). Research shows that students should be evaluated based on GPA, extracurriculars, and overall classroom

performance (Hiss et al, 2015). These criteria are each projected over a span of time, and a culmination of all experiences over the course of the student's high school experience.

The switch to test-optional admissions provides a chance for all prospective students to gain entrance into selective colleges without the additive stress of test scores (Reardon et al., 2012). Student interviews for the current research project support this finding. Students argue that this method of admissions is better from a student perspective because it limits the impact of one metric in the admissions profile and thus lessens the stress that comes with college admissions and taking the SAT or ACT. For competitive admissions schools, students are more likely to have test anxiety due to the stress the school puts on testing and evaluations (Hancock, 2001). Test anxiety is significant and common while taking the SAT/ACT because of the pressure that one score can determine a student's future (Hannon, 2012).

From the university perspective, there is a hidden benefit given to test-optional admissions. When asked about a possible increase in test score average (when test scores were submitted with applications), university officials made sure to state that this rise was not intentional when creating their test-optional policy. Whether it was intentional or not, institutions reap the benefits of an increased applicant size and an increase in the university's average test score. Interestingly, however, this benefit is viewed more negatively at larger, public schools. The University of Maryland is a public institution that since switching to test-optional has had an increase in average test scores. Nicolas Paul Orban describes that although his university is becoming more prestigious, "we're the public land grant...we have a commitment to serving students across the state of Maryland and for commitment to college access initiatives' (UMD, 2023). Students may now look at a once accessible school and believe they are not fit for the University of Maryland because of its newly lowered acceptance rate.

Normalization of Test-Optional and Significance of the SAT

An overall theme across student participants was the idea that test-optional policies were relevant and normal today and in higher education. The literature on this topic suggests that the rise of test-optional policies is relatively new and has limited data surrounding it (Shultz & Backstrom, 2021). One facet of this new landscape the literature did not account for was the normalization of test-optional admissions among high school students. From the student's perspective, the significance of the SAT/ACT has decreased. This shift can also be due to the idea of test-optional creating a "cushion" for students. Due to the normalization of test-optional policies, the importance of the SAT/ACT has gone down.

One important pattern in the research was that what students seemed to not be aware of was that they were part of a pilot program. Most participants assumed that the test-optional admissions practice was a permanent change in admissions policies. This belief was likely supported by the fact that almost every school they applied to was test-optional. Eight out of nine students interviewed did not submit scores anywhere and stated that Bucknell was either their top choice school or reach school. With the help of test-optional admissions, students felt more confident in an application to a top school.

Students told different stories about how their younger siblings and friends are beginning to apply to schools. Several explained that the younger people who look up to them see them applying test-optional and see that many schools are test optional. Student participants expressed concern that universities might switch back to requiring tests, and that this younger generation may not be prepared. Students are already seeing this shift in admissions culture, one student quotes:

“My sister is a senior in high school right now and she did take the SAT because one of her top schools requires it again. I know that was really stressful for her especially because I didn't take it. So, she normally is used to having an older sibling who she can follow in her footsteps and whatever and now she doesn't. That was kind of a jolt” (Ella, 2023)

Ella explained her concern for her younger sibling and that the younger generation is going to experience a “jolt” if universities were to switch back to requiring test scores. This jolt is a direct result of the normalization of test-optional admissions and first- and second-year university students having the view that “almost every” college in the United States was test-optional when they applied. Julia states that “most schools...every school I was applying to was test-optional. So, if I didn't do well, it wasn't really a big deal. I could just not submit it (Julia, 2023). Student participants explained that they did not have to look specifically for test-optional schools during their admissions process, meaning that schools not requiring scores were very accessible to students.

These conclusions pose the question of whether universities will hear students' opinions and keep test-optional admissions, or if highly selective institutions will, at some point, move back to requiring the SAT/ACT. In my opinion, based on my own research, I speculate that colleges may begin requiring test scores again, but only for certain colleges, or majors within the institution. I also would argue that the top schools in the country, like the ivy league or heavy research institutions, will begin requiring scores again. Many prestigious universities have already made the shift back to requiring test-scores in admissions.

This change in admissions is creating a shift in attitude towards the SAT and ACT as entrance exams to higher education. Students are seeing the normalization of test-optional

policies, which is causing them to view the SAT/ACT in a different light. One student pointed out that taking the SAT is not necessary anymore, stating that “It's kind of stupid to take it if the schools that you're looking at aren't requiring it. I feel like that's probably more prominent even now with people who are in lower class grades than I was” (Hannah, 2023). Hannah expressed that with her class year and those younger than her sees no advantage to taking the SAT, especially if a student does not plan on using their scores. Hannah went on to say, “if you saw that your older sibling went to college and didn't have to apply for that, in their mindset they're not going to be prepping for it” (Hannah, 2023). The normalization of test-optional policies, whether they are temporary or permanent, is causing a shift in attitude toward the significance of the SAT/ACT. As the normalization of test-optional policies is increasing, the significance of the SAT, from student perspectives, is decreasing.

Comparison of Logics

By conducting both student and admissions interviews, each side of the admissions process was evaluated. The attitudes of college admissions towards test-optional policies vary widely. Some admissions officers believe that standardized tests are measures of academic ability and potential (to an extent), and they may continue to give weight to test scores in the admissions process even if the school is test-optional. Admissions officers still want students to have the option of presenting themselves in ways that benefit them, whether this involves submitting test scores or not submitting test scores. They also recognized that standardized tests are not always an accurate or fair measure of a student’s academic ability or potential. They view test-optional admissions to level the playing field for students who have been historically disadvantaged by standardized testing, such as low-income students, students of color, and students from other underrepresented backgrounds.

Student attitudes towards test-optional admissions also vary. After student interviews, it seemed that all student participants viewed the SAT/ACT as inequitable and unfair. When it came to submitting scores and test-optional policies, students expressed that they should have the option of whether to submit, determined by whether it makes a student look more desirable in the admissions profile. Some students felt relieved that they did not have to worry about preparing for and taking the SAT/ACT, especially if they struggle with test anxiety or have limited access to test preparation resources. They saw the test-optional policy to showcase other aspects of their academic and personal accomplishments, such as their grades, extracurricular activities, and personal essays.

An interesting conclusion from this research is seeing where admissions and students agree, disagree, or completely miss the mark with each other. Both groups agree on the process of holistic admissions. Test-optional policies give students the opportunity to submit an application that emphasizes them as a person rather than a single test score (Hiss et al., 2015). Students want to be valued as an individual instead of as test score that may weigh down their application (Hossler et al., 2019). Bucknell University was able to get this message across to students without any confusion. Dean Mathes wanted to make this application process as smooth and understanding as possible. One student described how “Bucknell was really clear about how they were going to be holistic with all of it. It's not just like, oh, now, your GPA counts twice as much. It's like everything now counts more” (Ella, 2023). However, some students were still left with confusion about test-optional admissions. Regarding Bucknell’s admission tours, “when someone brought up the question, they were like, "Oh, we consider students fairly."” (Hannah, 2023). Students need clear instruction on what test-optional admissions look like, as well as what the “holistic” approach is that many universities are now using.

An instance where admissions officers are not understanding student frustrations around test-optional admissions is how students understand their application looks without a test score. Admissions officers promote test-optional as a “stress relief” for students worried about their test scores (Pellegrino, 2022). However, although test optional admissions have been a “cushion” for students to fall back on, there is still anxiety among students about not submitting a score. Anxiety seems to be caused by a lack of communication from institutions about how, without the test score, the rest of the applicant’s file will be evaluated. Many participants were struck by the vagueness of how a missing test score was going to impact an admissions view of their application and academic success, even though Dean Mathes made a point to eliminate any confusion regarding Bucknell’s test-optional policy. Student participants made overarching statements about this confusion, so it is likely that it was directed toward other colleges of interest. Even students who were very aware of the holistic approach and had read over the school’s test-optional policies described the process as inchoate:

“Because I felt like if I don't submit it, they're just going to assume I did bad. Then I had a lot of... When reps would come or I'd go on tours, they really try and say that has no... doesn't negatively affect you, but I feel like there's no way... I don't know” (Madison, 2023)

Students are worried about how they look to admissions officers, even if they are confident in all other parts of their application. As Tracy explained, “Well, they're going to think I'm an idiot” after being asked how she thought not submitting scores was going to impact her application (Tracy, 2023). It seems that even if schools expose the inner workings of their test-optional policies, students are still mistrustful of the process. Another student explained her hesitation to not submit a score:

“What if I don’t get in because they’re going to be looking at someone who has a very similar application, similar GPA, similar extracurriculars, but they have a test score. They would look better” (Julia, 2023).

Julia expressed her comparison of herself to a student with test scores included in their application. She believed that missing scores were going to hurt her since it was a missing data point other students had. Many students discussed their confusion with how their application was going to be viewed, and if they had enough admirable pieces in their application to gain admittance into the school.

This answer of whether withholding scores hurt or helps a student’s chance of admittance was the same in most participants. It was common that most students were confused with the test-optional admission policy, but most of the participants said they believed not using their scores was going to help them. The belief that using scores was going to help the student seem more adorable can be concluded on the students' own confidence in their application. Katie described this belief by saying:

“I would say that it would probably definitely help me. [Laughter] Yeah. Again, I had pretty good grades in high school and, I talked a lot about extracurriculars and things. So, I feel like those together were pretty strong. So, submitting my test scores, I feel like it wouldn't have necessarily hurt me, but it wouldn't have done anything to help me.”

(Katie, 2023)

When a student feels confident with other parts of their application, they are less likely to believe not submitting their scores is going to hurt them. When a student has a strong knowledge of the holistic admissions process and the test-optional policy of the university, they put more effort

into showcasing their other talents, such as their extracurricular activities, community service, essays, and personal experiences.

The idea of confidence in one's application raises the question of whether test scores are being replaced with a different part of the application. Is there something rising to take the place of the SAT/ACT in college admissions? According to admissions officers, they each believe there is nothing, and will not be anything, that replaces the SAT/ACT in admissions. They argue that "the grades, the courses, and what kind of rigor that high school record has" is weighted more if the test scores are not included (Penn State, 2023). Admissions officers take a more in-depth look at the student's background to gauge how prepared they are for college. Like Penn State, Colgate argues that nothing will replace test scores in admissions, but there will be other factors that are weighed heavier:

"We see the potential of what they're doing, either by nature of the type of school that they're at, how the school is challenging them, how those that are a recommendation really can come in very valuable from teachers and counselors" (Colgate, 2023)

In the end, because of the need to craft a diverse student body through the admissions process, taking a stronger account of student backgrounds and experiences is more important to admissions counselors than having test scores included in their application. Admissions officers want to get a sense of who applicants are academically but also what experiences they have had throughout their lives.

Students argue that they are putting more weight on their extracurricular activities when they decide they are going to be test-optional. Every participant mentioned how important extracurriculars were to them in their application process. One participant, after deciding to be

test-optional, described that “the importance of that was definitely amplified during the process. But throughout it, I’d always say I wanted to get good grades. I was involved in clubs and different organizations” (Phoebe, 2023). Students are taking extracurricular activities more seriously so they can be more appealing to admissions officers. However, admissions officers are more so looking for rigor in high school class schedules and students’ involvement in the community. When the SAT is weighed less, there is miscommunication between students and admissions officers about what is weighed more in an application.

There are many implications of test-optional admissions. This study found that students view test-optional policies as a “cushion” for them when applying to colleges and universities. If they felt unprepared to take the test, students did not feel as pressured to do well. From a student perspective, the more test-optional policies are normalized, the less significant the SAT becomes. This conclusion is also due to the idea that test-optional alleviates the stress of standardized testing for students, which makes the test less serious for students. Admissions officers are working to promote holistic admissions, which students believe should be the core of all admissions policies. Admission officers and students miss each other when discussing what is being weighed more in an application when test scores are not included. Students believe they need to be involved in more extracurricular activities, whereas admission officers encourage students to take more rigorous courses in high school and become more involved in the community.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was not having a diverse participant pool. Most of my students were white, whereas one identified as Asian. Each participant went to schools with access to educational resources and was mostly a part of the middle class. Test-optional

admissions aim to help diversify student populations as well as create opportunities and access for students from low-income families and underrepresented areas (Buckley et al. 2018). The sample population from this study is predominantly first-year students, with only two participants being second-year students. As mentioned in chapter three, I aimed to have students from the high school class of 2020, gain insight into the first-class year of students who experienced the rise of test-optional admissions. Third-year students are less likely to remember their admissions experiences and therefore were less likely to commit to an interview about their experiences.

Direction for Further Inquiry

The results and conclusions from this study bring about more questions about the test-optional admissions debate. The student participants in this study describe their experiences with applying for and gaining admittance into college through test-optional admissions. Students brought up their concerns for future generations of college students and if this type of admission will be accessible to them as well. For admissions officers, it will be important to begin looking at test-optional data through a different lens. Data that is being collected by admission offices are primarily looking at the success rates of students based on GPA, graduation rate, and other quantitative data to evaluate their test-optional policies. I believe both students and universities would benefit more from looking at student experiences directly, and hearing what their students have to say about their admissions policies. The future of test-optional is very unknown to both university admissions and students. There should be more effort to connect student experiences to decisions that are being made by universities in terms of their test-optional policies to ensure that both groups' ideas are compatible and in agreement with one another.

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Appendix A: Admissions Interview Protocol

Overview of the Policy

1. What types of students do your admissions look to admit?
 - a. What's the profile of a successful student applicant?
 - b. How have the criteria shifted after implementing a test-optional approach?
2. At what point did your university switch to test-optional admissions and why?
 - a. How is the pilot program working?
 - i. What changes, if any, would you make to the program?
3. What were the goals of test-optional admissions at your university?
 - a. How have test-optional admissions changed the demographics at your university?
4. What feedback have you received from students?
 - a. Alumni?
 - b. Faculty?

SAT/ACT

5. As someone who works in admissions at a selective university, why do you believe the SAT and ACT have been widely used as an entrance piece for college admissions?
 - a. In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of high-stakes testing?
6. At what stage of application is the SAT/ACT used in the decision to admit a student?
 - a. How has this changed since your university went test-optional?
 - b. What other factors are important when applying for college?

Admission/Student Relationship

7. Do you encourage students to submit their scores?
 - a. Is there any difference between a student who should submit their test score versus someone who should not submit their score?
 - i. Is it solely based on their numerical score, or is there more to the decision?
 - ii. Explain your success rate of students that decided to not submit test scores.
 - b. What factors should students consider when deciding whether to submit test scores?
8. Some schools are requiring students to send in their scores even if they opt to be test-optional, because of statistics for their pilot programs. Is your school doing anything like this?

- a. Do you think this causes students to be distrustful of the admissions process because of the possibility that admissions may see their scores?
9. What happens to the universities' average test scores rising after switching to test-optional?
 - a. How did this impact your university's average test score?
 - b. What are your thoughts on test-blind admissions?

Student Activity

10. Are there any other factors that are correlated with test-optional applications?
 - a. Are those who are admitted as test optional earning similar GPAs as those who submitted? Do they need better GPAs than those who submitted?
11. Is there a correlation between a major and going test-optional?
 - a. What are some of these majors?
 - b. How often do students switch majors after gaining admittance through test-optional?
12. Have you heard of any social repercussions of being a test-optional student?
 - a. Have you seen any of these in person or on social media?
 - b. What criticisms or complaints have you received about the new pilot program?
13. Overall, do you see this program succeeding in the future?
 - a. Will you continue being test-optional?
 - b. Would you ever consider being test-blind or not requiring any scores?

Appendix B: Student Interview Protocol

Student Preparation for the SAT

1. How important were your GPA, high school grades, and extracurriculars in your application process?
2. What were the norms at your high school surrounding the SAT?
 - a. How did your high school influence your college admissions process?
3. What was SAT prep like at your high school and in your area?
 - a. Did you have access to tutors, prep courses, guidance counselors, etc.?

Values in the Decision Process

1. How did you approach the college admissions process?
 - a. Explain your values going into this process.
2. Rank these values from most important to least important.
 - a. (In general): Location, price, academic, size, test scores
3. How does Bucknell specifically fit into these values for you?

Other Schools of Interest

4. Other than Bucknell, what other schools did you apply to/consider?
 - a. What were their admissions processes like?
5. Did you apply anywhere that required test scores?
 - a. How was this experience different from that of applying to a test-optional school?
 - i. Was this experience less or more stressful?

Deciding Whether or Not to Submit Test Scores

1. How was your experience with the SAT?
 - a. How do you think not taking this test affects your admissions process?
2. When investigating colleges, how did other schools promote their test-optional policies?
 - a. How have you described the impact on your admission chances by applying test-optional?
3. How did you think applying test-optional was going to hurt or help your chances of gaining acceptance into college?

Experiences After Enrollment

1. What has your social experience been like in terms of getting admittance without submitting a test score?

- a. Have you experienced any criticism for applying test-optional?
2. What has your academic experience been like so far?
 - a. Did you feel academically prepared to attend a selective university?

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent

Bucknell University

Project Name: The Rise of Test-Optional Admissions: Pre and Post Enrollment

Purpose and Plan of the Research: This is a Bucknell University research project for the purpose of a social science honors thesis. You are invited to participate in a research study that will uncover how test optional admissions is working and the influence it has on students' application decisions. This study will investigate the lived experiences of students who had the decision of whether or not to submit SAT test scores to colleges and their reasoning for the choice.

Design: There are two parts of this process: a survey and interviews. The purpose of this brief survey is to gain background information in preparation for an individual interview. Following the interviews, the participants will be invited to a focus group session to explore themes that arise from the data. I will send out focus group prompts prior to the meeting to give participants an opportunity to prepare.

Estimated Duration: The survey will be completed before the first interview and should take no longer than ten minutes. Each student interview is expected to last from forty-five to sixty minutes. The focus group itself will last approximately sixty minutes, depending on the student's discussion.

Estimated Number of Participants: There will be approximately fifteen students participating in this study, five from each of the first three class years.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation is fully voluntary, and you may discontinue your participation at any time. There are no risks anticipated for this study.

Confidentiality: Your identity and responses will be kept entirely confidential. To ensure confidentiality, participants will be given pseudonyms in the write-up of the study. At the conclusion of this study, all audio recordings will be deleted from the recording device and computer. Each participant will receive a copy of the transcript of their interview and will have an opportunity to make any adjustments or deletions they wish.

Questions or concerns: If you have any questions, feel free to contact me. My information is:

570-228-0270

mmt014@bucknell.edu

For general questions regarding human subjects in research, you may contact the current IRB Chair Mathew Slater:

1 (570) 577-2767

matthew.slater@bucknell.edu

Participant Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Researcher Signature: _____ **Date:** _____