

Beyond the Admission Decision: New Trends in Test Score Use

At the onset of the pandemic, colleges and universities quickly pivoted to a test-optional admissions model. Now, several years later, higher education is thinking differently about standardized tests and becoming more intentional in deciding how and when they incorporate test scores and how they convey their policies to students and families.

Though many institutions are classified as test-optional, there is considerable variation in how test scores are valued, considered, and used across institutions. Additionally, colleges vary in how they communicate the value and use of test scores, impacting how many students end up sharing scores in admission and post-admission (once they enroll).

The following case studies illustrate how colleges are navigating the test-optional environment. Each case study offers insights into how these institutions are communicating their testing policies and how they use test scores in different and innovative ways. We selected institutions for the case studies based on prior survey responses about their use of test scores in admission and enrollment.

Participating Institutions

Bryn Mawr College
Colorado College
Creighton University
Samford University
Southern Connecticut State
University of Arizona

**Additional Institutions to come*

Key Takeaways:

Providing clear and detailed information about testing policies builds trust and reduces confusion for students and families, especially when institutions collect scores post-admission, and plan to use them to support the student later. Institutions highlighted this transparency and the use of multiple communication methods as key to reaching students and counselors, building trust, and ultimately, they described an increase in the likelihood of students submitting scores.

Increased emphasis is being placed on SAT[®] and ACT scores after the admissions decision-making process. SAT scores can be invaluable for placing students into appropriate courses, particularly in math. Additionally, colleges described how having scores for all or most of the incoming student body, regardless of their use in admissions, helps in understanding the academic profile of the incoming class, and aids in developing retention models and allocating support resources effectively.

Understanding students' SAT/ACT scores alongside college outcome data can help inform testing policies that align with institutional priorities. Colleges described how collecting test scores from enrolling students' post-admission decision making increases their ability to predict students' on-campus performance, including their first-year GPA, second-year GPA, credit accumulation, retention rates, graduation rates, and student engagement.

Supporting Research

- These findings support ongoing research on testing and the widespread move to test optional. Research shows that the SAT remains a valid predictor of first-year outcomes in college and that among fall 2021 first-year enrollees, students with higher SAT scores—regardless of their decision to disclose or withhold scores—achieved higher average first-year grades, accumulated more credits, and exhibited higher retention rates. Additionally, while students with higher test scores relative to the college to which they were applying usually disclosed scores and students with lower relative scores usually withheld scores regardless of demographics, campus test policy language also influenced student behavior. Institutions that explicitly express a desire to see test scores saw higher test score disclosure rates.
- As expected, many schools are using test scores post-admissions for placement purposes, specifically in math. Research shows that the SAT is strongly associated with academic performance, particularly in STEM majors. At every point along the HSGPA scale, students with higher SAT math scores have a higher chance of earning a math GPA of 3.0 or higher. Additionally, for STEM majors, SAT scores used in conjunction with HSGPA, showed an improvement of 38% in predictive validity over using HSGPA alone. Knowing the SAT scores for incoming STEM students can help institutions place students in appropriate courses and provide targeted academic support where necessary.

Recommendations and Things to Consider

- ✓ **Review current test score submission policy for clarity and transparency.** Providing clear language that explains why and how scores are being used helps students and counselors understand the process and increases the likelihood of score submission.
- ✓ **Explain to students how scores are used post-enrollment to increase submission.** For example, highlighting how scores can be used to place out of certain courses can be an incentive. It might also be worth considering nonplacement incentives to increase the number of submissions from lower scoring students.
- ✓ **Work closely with your academic advising and student success offices.** Coordinate to ensure that all team members understand how test scores should and shouldn't be used, and continue to communicate regularly about best practices and findings related to test scores and student outcomes and support.
- ✓ **Develop a clear process for the collection and use of scores post-admissions.** Communicate this process to institutional stakeholders, students, families, and counselors. Clearly define your policy, the intended use of scores, and why it is important to students' success.



BRYN MAWR COLLEGE

Using Scores to Place Students in First-Year Courses

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Bryn Mawr developed a **clear communication plan** to ensure students and counselors were aware that scores were going to be collected post-admission and explained how scores would be used.
- ✓ Test scores collected post-admission are used primarily for **math and science course placement**.
- ✓ Bryn Mawr is carefully **evaluating their testing policies** to ensure students admitted without test scores can be successful.

Institutional Profile

Overview	Admissions	Enrollment & Success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small, private women's college • Located in Bryn Mawr, Pa., near Philadelphia. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undergraduate enrollment: 1,400 • 88% out-of-state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of applicants: 3,594 • % admitted: 31% • % admitted who enrolled: 36%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Fall 2022

Policy and Practice: Admission

At outset of 2020, the year the pandemic started, Bryn Mawr College was already piloting a test-optional admissions policy as a way to encourage interest and applications from underrepresented and first-generation college students. Thus, the decision to adopt a test-optional policy prior to the pandemic led them to feel more prepared to make the transition in admissions. At Bryn Mawr, test scores are not required for domestic students to apply. Bryn Mawr wants every student to be able to put their best foot forward when applying, and therefore decide for themselves if that means including test scores.

For domestic students who do not submit scores, Bryn Mawr follows a holistic approach to evaluation, using other factors in the admissions decision. However, until recently, international students were required to submit test scores. In 2023, Bryn Mawr launched a test-optional pilot for international students. Similar to their approach for domestic students applying without scores, Bryn Mawr is gathering student success data prior to making a permanent decision on a test-optional policy for international students.

Still, Bryn Mawr has nearly half of all students submitting scores for consideration in admissions. Students who are proud of their scores are encouraged to send them when applying. With such encouragement, **they have seen an approximate 10%–12% increase in students submitting test scores for admissions post-pandemic.**

Policy and Practice: Post-Admission

Once admitted to Bryn Mawr, test-optional admits are required to submit official scores by June 1 so they can be used to place students in first-year science and math courses. Bryn Mawr remains clear about their desire to receive test scores regardless of how a student applies. Students and counselors receive routine communication about scores being required after a decision is rendered. Information is posted clearly on the institution's website and the rationale for the requirement is included in conversations with students, families, and counselors.

Despite widespread popularity of test-optional policies at colleges nationwide, the admissions team at Bryn Mawr fielded concerns, mostly from faculty, about students enrolling with less preparation in science and math. Similarly, faculty have expressed worries about high school grade inflation, an issue they hope to glean more insight into with scores required post-admission.

Not all institutions require scores of students applying test optional, but given Bryn Mawr's policy, enrollment officials knew a clear and compelling communication plan was needed to spur students to action. Notification of this requirement is included in the student's acceptance letter, ensuring there are no surprises or delays later. Early and Regular Decision admits are required to send official scores by March 1 and June 1, respectively. Failure to submit scores by stated deadlines or at all following repeated reminders sent to the student and parent(s) will route the student to a required placement exam prior to start of the semester.

Upon receipt, the Operations Team loads all official scores into the institution's Student Information System, a process that facilitates the Registrar's efforts to assist departments with course placement.



COLORADO COLLEGE

Using Test Scores for Aggregate Reporting and Building Retention Models

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Colorado College used data from the **Admissions Research Consortium** to develop and refine their testing policy and how they communicate about testing to students and counselors.
- ✓ Test scores collected post-admission are used to do aggregate **data analysis, build retention models**, and to be able to **accurately report the average test scores of enrolling students**.
- ✓ Colorado College prioritizes **extensive staff training** to ensure test scores are used and interpreted appropriately. College Board's **Landscape**[®] tool has helped their team better understand test scores in context.

Institutional Profile

Overview	Admissions	Enrollment & Success
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Small, private liberal arts• Located in Colorado Springs, Colo.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Undergraduate enrollment: 2,200• 78% out-of-state	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of applicants: 7,846• % admitted: 16%• % admitted who enrolled: 42%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Fall 2022

Policy and Practice: Admission

Colorado College has always seen testing as informative, but never as a sole determining factor in an admissions decision. Prior to the pandemic, Colorado College had a “test flexible” policy, where applicants could submit scores from a range of exams for consideration, not just SAT or ACT. The institution decided to move to test optional a year prior to the pandemic, and thus was already carefully considering how tests were used in their process and how they were communicating the value of test scores.

With the pandemic and widespread move to test optional, and with increased questions coming from students and parents, Colorado College looked at data from the Admissions Research Consortium* and further clarified their policies and procedures.

“The Admissions Research Consortium has really helped us in better analyzing and categorizing our policies and how that fits into the larger picture of test optional. We are articulating and clarifying our policy the best we can.”
–Matt Bonser, Director of Admission, Colorado College

* The Admissions Research Consortium (ARC) aims to help colleges understand how the impacts of the pandemic are shaping their incoming classes, and how these impacts might continue to affect college performance outcomes in the future. ARC is a multiyear, collaborative research initiative with 80 participating colleges and associations. Read ARC research findings here: <https://research.collegeboard.org/reports/college-access/evidence-admissions-research-consortium>

As a result, Colorado College has adopted what they call a “do no harm” testing policy: If a student submits test scores that are not to their advantage, they train admission readers to focus on other aspects of the application and do their best to ignore the score.

Colorado College uses Landscape, a free comprehensive tool that provides consistent high school and neighborhood information, which allows them to see test scores in context. This tool enables admission reviewers to evaluate test scores within the context of a student’s high school record and to better identify applicants from more underrepresented environments who would be successful at their college.

Colorado College admission staff are trained on whether and how to utilize test scores, if submitted. Additionally, they work to build trust among students and counselors by explaining the application reader process and what information is visible for applicants who apply without test scores.

Video Highlights



Colorado College posted a short video on their website aimed at helping students better understand their testing policy and how to decide if they should submit test scores as part of their application.

The video includes a detailed explanation of their philosophy on test scores:

- How they view test scores in the admissions process.
- Advice on deciding whether to submit scores for admission.
- Explanation on why they collect scores at the time of enrollment and how scores are used.

International Students

Colorado College does not require the TOEFL or the SAT/ACT for admission, a practice that gives the admission team the flexibility to review international students and make admissions decisions within context for a given student. It can be incredibly helpful for some students to submit scores or other validators to demonstrate that they will be able to do well as a student on campus. This is particularly true for students from schools or areas where the admission team may be less familiar.

Policy and Practice: Post-Admission

When students confirm their intent to enroll, their enrollment portal checklist requests they submit test scores or a form attesting that they don’t have scores. There is no incentive or penalty for students who don’t submit scores.

Colorado College primarily utilizes test scores collected from students, post-admission, for aggregate reporting and models for retention. Notably, all received scores are included in the reported middle 50%, whether or not they were submitted for admission. Because of this, the mid-50% of test scores has remained relatively stable since adopting a test-optional admissions policy.



CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY

Using Test Scores for Pre-health Student Support

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Because “test optional” means something different at every school, Creighton has focused on explaining what it means **within the context of their institution.**
- ✓ As a school with many students interested in pre-health professions, Creighton uses test scores and **placement exams for math and science course placement** and academic support.
- ✓ Creighton relies on scores to **understand which students need support** and notes that test optional hinders those efforts, particularly for pre-health students. The admissions office works closely with academic departments to craft language encouraging pre-health students to submit test scores at enrollment.

Institutional Profile

Overview	Admissions	Enrollment & Success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private Jesuit institution • Main campus located in Omaha, Neb. • New healthcare-focused campus in Phoenix, Ariz. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undergraduate enrollment: 4,300 • 70% out-of-state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of applicants: 7,977 • % admitted: 76% • % admitted who enrolled: 17%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Fall 2022

Policy and Practice: Admission

Creighton adopted a test-optional policy prior to the pandemic in 2019. With the universal shift to test optional, they worked to clarify their test policy language to help students and families understand what test optional means at Creighton. Their language assures students, families, and counselors that students really do have a choice in this process.

“We’ve heard from counselors and students that test optional doesn’t mean the same thing from school to school, so saying “test optional” isn’t enough. You have to explain what test optional means in the context of your institution.” – Sarah Richardson, Assistant Vice Provost for Enrollment Management

For Creighton, the move to test optional has opened the door for students who may feel confident about their high school record but less confident in their test scores. However, there are some challenges they continue to navigate. They acknowledge that when a student has a

borderline high school record and doesn't submit test scores, it can be challenging to determine if the student will be successful on campus and, if admitted, they might benefit from additional academic onboarding or supports. With widespread test-optional policies, the university says it is unclear if this new normal is really easier for students.

Test scores are still required for some programs and scholarships, including some endowed scholarships and applicants to the medical school's pre-professional programs.

Creighton also relies heavily on student assessments to identify and recruit prospective students. To help high achieving students see themselves at Creighton, they explained how they need to tell a compelling narrative that having test data helps them to do that effectively. Test scores remain a succinct way for institutions to communicate one aspect of their academic profile.

Policy and Practice: Post-Admission

Score submission compliance is not uniform across the university, yet over half of test-optional admits submit scores at the point of enrollment as the institutions makes their policy regarding score use clear: Test scores are used in conjunction with the math placement exam to determine first-year math courses. This is noteworthy since roughly 55% of Creighton's incoming class has an interest in health-related occupations. In the past, the Department of Chemistry used ACT/SAT math scores to predict student readiness for, and placement in, freshman chemistry courses, which most pre-health students must take. While a large proportion of incoming freshmen submit test scores post-admission, the department benefits from higher submission rates because it helps them place students in the chemistry class or math class that they are most likely to be successful in. As such, Creighton's enrollment leaders work closely with the department to develop language to encourage their test-optional students to submit test scores before they enroll.



SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

Encouraging Test-Taking Prepares Students for Their Future

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Samford encourages students to take a standardized test, regardless of whether they submit it for admission, because it is believed the experience of taking the test will **serve students well in the future if/when they apply to graduate school and/or enter certain careers.**
- ✓ Students who apply without test scores receive a regular cadence of reminders until they submit scores. They are also encouraged to sit for an exam even after they have been admitted if they have yet to take one. As a result, **90% of students have a score on file at the point of enrollment.**
- ✓ Admissions advisors and the Academic Success Center staff use test scores as one way to **monitor students' academic progress in their first and second years.** Students can also use scores to test out of certain classes.

Institutional Profile

Overview	Admissions	Enrollment & Success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religiously affiliated private university • Located in Birmingham, Ala. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undergraduate enrollment: 5,700 • 25% in-state • 74% out-of-state • 1% international 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of applicants: 4,337 • % admitted: 83% • % admitted who enrolled: 27%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Fall 2022

Policy and Practice: Admission

Samford adopted a test-optional policy during the pandemic when access to testing was limited. While Samford enrollment leaders believe that going test optional has grown and diversified their applicant pool, they strongly encourage students to submit test scores for general admission and require them for programs such as nursing. As a result, Samford has approximately 25% of students applying without test scores, and only 10% of students have no score on file at the point of enrollment.

Samford does not believe that removing test requirements is necessary to create access. Even so, their overarching philosophy is that test scores should “do no harm.” The admission committee evaluates each applicant in a holistic manner. The first and greatest priority is to take the information provided (including test scores) and make decisions that put students in the best position to be successful. If a student submits a test-optional application the test score is not considered in their review. Instead, they train admissions readers to put more emphasis on other parts of the application, like the strength of their curriculum and their high school grades.

Samford encourages students to take the SAT or ACT, even if they later decide not to provide scores for admission because they believe the act of taking the assessment will prepare students for their future. Many graduate programs and careers require students to take and pass standardized exams; taking an exam now gives them the opportunity to practice test taking under lower-stakes conditions. Samford has heard from parents that their younger children are now planning to take the SAT or ACT because they've watched their older siblings, many of whom have never taken a standardized entrance exam, struggle with their applications to graduate programs.

Samford's messaging around their test-optional policy has morphed since its inception. Initially they began with messaging designed to deter students from withholding test scores, especially in areas where they knew students had access to the test. More recently, their messaging encourages students to test and submit their scores. Within the school counselor community Samford is equally clear about their stance on testing: **It's a disservice to the student if they're told not to test. The score, or just the experience of taking the test can have a meaningful impact on their lives.**

Policy and Practice: Post-Admission

Long before applying to Samford, students are told that they will be required to submit a score before enrollment, even if they are admitted without test scores. Follow-up with test-optional admits is persistent, yet polite, with students receiving biweekly reminders via email and reassuring calls that submitting scores after admission will not result in one's decision being rescinded. In cases where students are genuinely unable to test prior to applying, they are informed about upcoming test dates if they have not yet taken an exam.

The emphasis on score submission is tied to positive outcomes for the student, such as being able to place out of certain classes and, in some cases, have their scores considered for some graduate programs.

Once a student enrolls, admission advisors and the Academic Success Center can review test scores, knowing which students applied with and without scores so they can keep up with first-year students and monitor student progress. These efforts have now been extended into the second year, as Samford has seen that support throughout a student's second year is just as critical. In addition to academic metrics, Samford is also monitoring student engagement on campus, as they have noticed a correlation between testing and campus engagement.



SOUTHERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

Using Multiple Assessment Measures to Inform
Course Placement and to Improve Retention

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Southern Connecticut State University encourages students to use **multiple measures of readiness** to ensure accuracy of placement in math and English.
- ✓ The university recognizes the **important relationship between accurate placements and retention**; devoting resources to appropriate placement upfront offsets costs endured later by student attrition.
- ✓ The university has worked closely with **faculty and student advising teams** to develop policies most likely to support student success, which they continuously examine and refine.

Institutional Profile

Overview	Admissions	Enrollment & Success
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regional public university• Part of the 6-member Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) system• Located in New Haven, Conn.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Undergraduate enrollment: 8,900• 90% in-state	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of applicants: 8,316• % admitted: 83%• % admitted who enrolled: 16%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Fall 2022

Policy and Practice: Admission

As a regional public university with the capacity to serve more students, Southern Connecticut State University has simplified their application process to lessen barriers to admission. In 2019, letters of recommendation were eliminated. In 2020, test scores became optional for admissions and scholarship consideration, but the institution continued to use them for course placement.

Although they cannot directly attribute changes in the composition of their student body and enrollment to policy change alone, enrollment leaders observed a 10% increase in first-year enrollment for fall 2023, and the student body continues to diversify. Over half of the entering class is first in their families to attend a four-year college, and slightly more than half are Pell Grant eligible.

Policy and Practice: Post-Admission

Before adopting a test-optional policy, Southern Connecticut University used SAT and ACT scores for math and English placement, aligning their standards with the other three public universities in the CSCU system. While ACT and SAT scores can still be used for math and English placement, their test-optional policy along with the limited availability of testing during the first year of the pandemic, provided an opportunity to expand course placement options.

At present, Southern Connecticut State University gives students three ways to determine placement:

- An SAT or ACT score;
- Completion of the ALEKS (Assessment and Learning in Knowledge Spaces) Placement, Preparation, and Learning exam (PPL) for math placement and/or an in-house writing assessment for English placement; or
- High school grade point average (HSGPA) on a standardized 4.0 scale, and for math placement only, an evaluation of prior high school math courses taken.

SCSU's new placement policy was rolled out over two years, allowing for observation and adjustment based on student behaviors and academic performance. In year one, students selected one of the three placement options prior to registration. In year two, the advising office used initial high school transcript GPA for placement. However, this approach yielded an unintended outcome: Fewer students submitted scores or attempted the institution's in-house placement exam (ALEKS) for English and math. Subsequently, students were placed in lower math classes which, in turn, resulted in more students complaining about their placement and seeking course changes during the first week of school.

Recognizing that incorrect placement can contribute to a student's decision to leave the university and that using multiple measures of readiness often leads to more accurate course placements, SCSU now encourages students to send an SAT or ACT score and/or take the ALEKS or in-house writing assessment to validate or challenge the initial placement based on their HSGPA alone. Students placed in the lowest level classes also receive targeted communications describing the content of those classes so they can self-assess whether they are appropriately placed; they are then reminded how they can re-place prior to the start of classes by using one of the other assessments.

While Southern Connecticut State aims to place students in the courses aligned with their current skill level, they acknowledge that the pandemic resulted in significant learning loss, especially in math and STEM, and that many students need remedial instruction. As they continue to examine the relationship between placement exams, placement, student performance, and retention, and continue to enroll cohorts of students whose learning was impacted by the pandemic in different ways, they'll continue to re-evaluate their testing and placement policies, as well as their available support services to help students reach their educational goals.



UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Test Scores Support Correct Placement in Math Courses

Key Takeaways

- ✓ The University of Arizona uses **clear communication with students and counselors** to highlight how test scores are used and why students should submit them.
- ✓ While test scores are used primarily to place students in math courses, fewer students have submitted scores or sat for the institution's math placement exams. **This has led to an increase in student placements into introductory math courses.**
- ✓ **Partnerships with the math department** ensure that students receive clear institutional test policy guidance.

Institutional Profile

Overview	Admissions	Enrollment & Success
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public flagship• Located in Tucson, Ariz.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Undergraduate enrollment: 39,000• 47% in-state• 48% out-of-state• 5% international	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of applicants: 52,091• % admitted: 87%• % admitted who enrolled: 20%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Fall 2022

Policy and Practice: Admission

Test-optional policies are not new at the University of Arizona, given the state's long-standing mandate to require such a policy for admission to the state's public universities. However, during the pandemic fewer students submitted scores. Pre-pandemic, about 60% of students submitted test scores. During the first years of the pandemic, that rate dropped to between 30% and 40%. This shift in score reporting behavior prompted the institution to clarify their score-use policies for admission placement.

To clearly communicate the changes in policies and support students in deciding if they should submit scores, University of Arizona updated the language on their website. The University of Arizona is intentional about clearly communicating to students and counselors that test scores submitted can only help. They are never held against students.

Additionally, there has been an increased focus on communicating with counselors through a variety of channels, including newsletters, workshops, and campus fly-ins. They use these platforms to inform counselors about how test scores are being used and why students are encouraged to submit them.

“Test scores are never used in a negative way for an admission decision. We use scores, if provided, in our holistic review process to help us learn more about the student. A score may help if the student’s GPA has fluctuated over the years or if they have a course deficiency.”

–Arezu Corella, Senior Associate Vice President, Enrollment Management & Associate Dean, Undergraduate Admissions

Policy and Practice: Post-Admission

The University of Arizona notifies all students about the score submission process and importance of submitting scores for course placement. In addition to this information being publicly available online, students receive similar information about the scores for placement process within their enrollment portal. Despite being encouraged to send official scores for math placement, some students do not submit official scores or any score at all. In such cases the student is offered the opportunity to take a separate placement exam.

While the placement exams help students get placed in an appropriate course, it is constructive to use SAT or ACT math scores as an alternative way to be placed into a math course. If there is no score on record and the student does not take the placement exam, they are placed in a review math course, and that has caused some challenges.

The University of Arizona has discovered that the unintended consequence of fewer score-based decisions is an increase in intro-level math placements. While institutional leaders attribute some of this to pandemic learning loss, they also acknowledge that absence of scores or failure to sit for a placement exam results in lower course placement for students and, potentially, a longer time to degree completion. **As a result, enrollment leaders work closely with the math department to develop clear communication to help encourage more students to submit scores for math placement. This includes an explanation of how the scores will be used.** Should a student register for orientation without having submitted a test score, they receive a series of communications explaining their course placement options, among which is that the placement exam or standardized test scores can be used to satisfy the requirement.