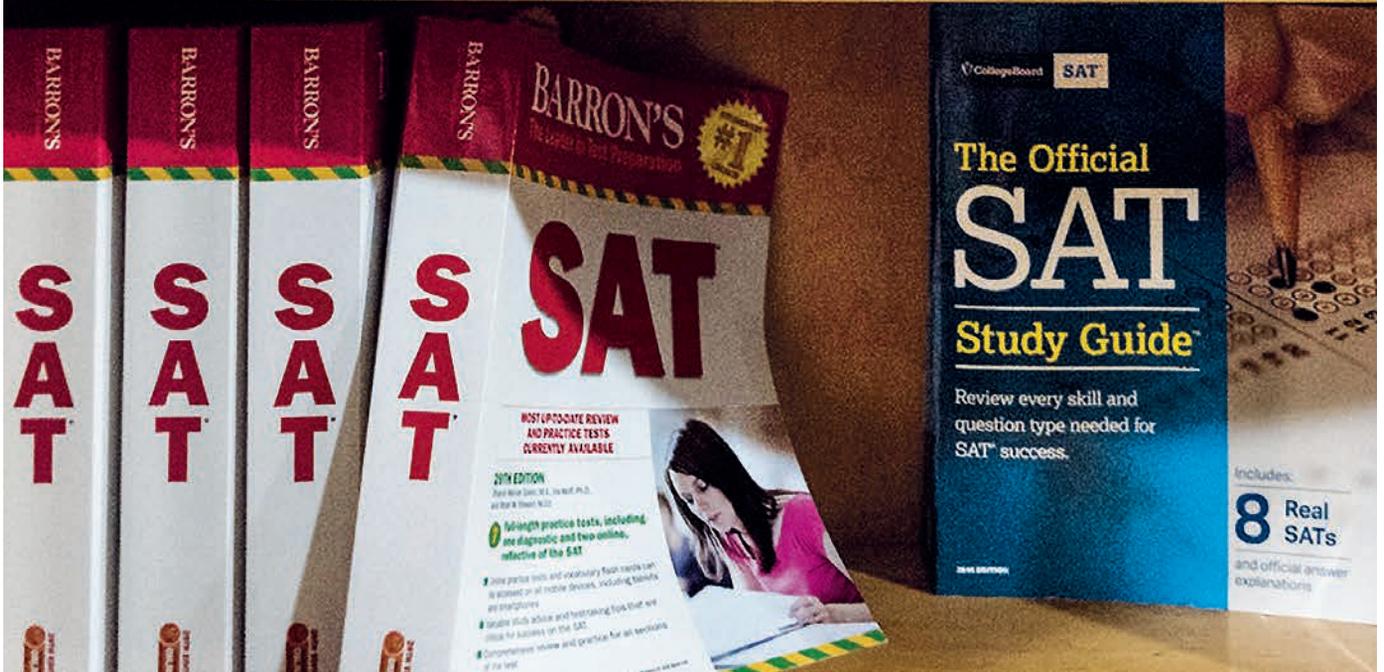
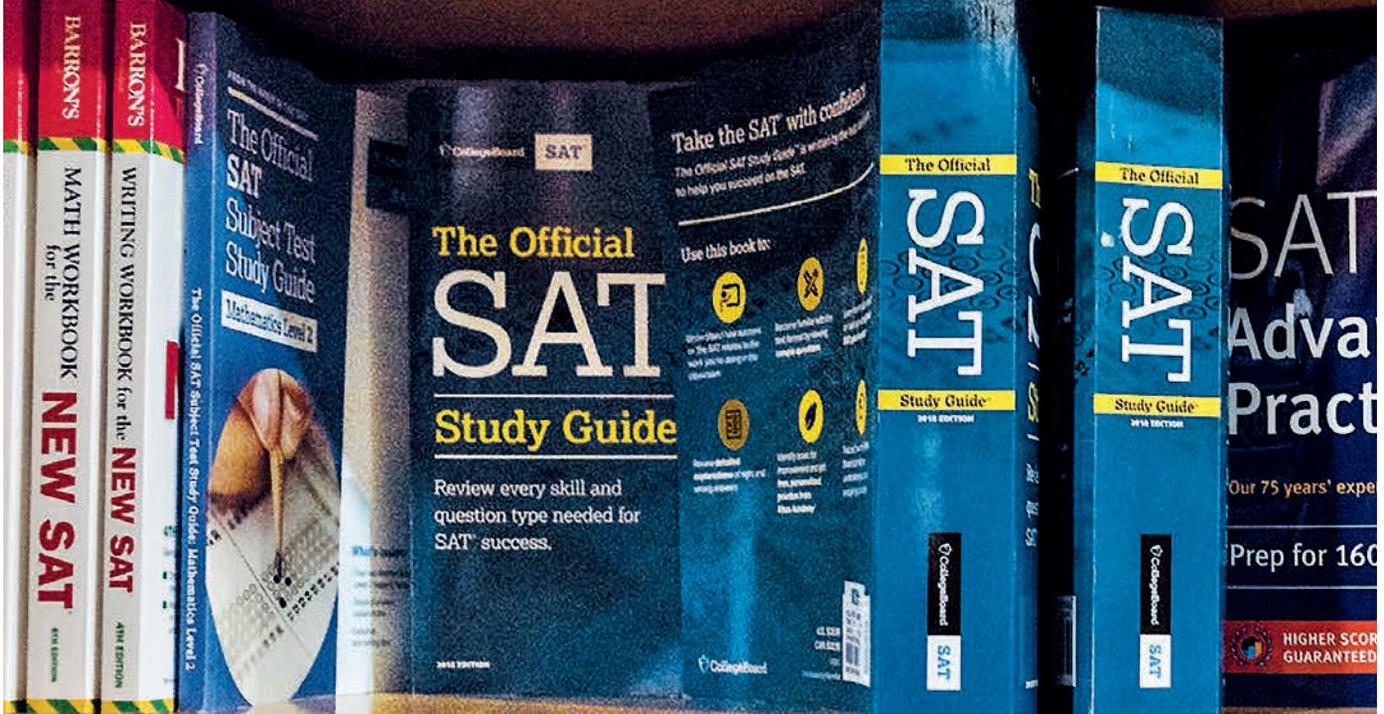




SAT



DAILY BRUIN

Should State Universities Downplay the SAT?

THE MERITS AND DRAWBACKS OF “TEST-OPTIONAL” ADMISSIONS

Many private colleges and some public institutions no longer require prospective students to submit their scores on standardized tests such as the SAT and the ACT. Now the coronavirus pandemic is hastening that trend, as additional institutions announced this spring that they would waive the testing requirement for students applying for fall 2021 admission. With testing dates canceled at least until June 2020, more colleges may consider going “test optional.” Downplaying standardized tests, some education leaders say, can help increase the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of a campus population. Is that claim true? And might this policy have any negative consequences? Increasingly, state university systems are facing these questions as they consider the use of standardized testing in the admissions process. Should these public institutions, which often serve thousands of students, go test optional? Jack Buckley, president of the testing company Imbellus, Inc., says no, that test scores have a legitimate place in a holistic admissions approach. Dominique Baker of Southern Methodist University and Kelly Rosinger of Penn State College of Education argue that test-optional policies can enhance equity in college admissions.

STANDARDIZED TESTS CAN SERVE AS A NEUTRAL YARDSTICK

by JACK BUCKLEY



ALTHOUGH MANY postsecondary students in the United States attend local or regional nonselective institutions, the selective-college admissions process nevertheless captures the imagination of the media and policymakers year in and year out. One frequently returning story has centered on the growing number of institutions changing their policies on the use of standardized testing in admissions. These reforms—typically grouped together under the label “test optional”—are touted as fostering an increase in campus racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity.

More than 1,000 institutions, mostly liberal-arts colleges, have jumped on the test-optional (*continued on page 68*)

TEST OPTIONAL OFFERS BENEFITS BUT IT'S NOT ENOUGH

by DOMINIQUE BAKER and KELLY ROSINGER



A GROWING NUMBER of colleges and universities—including state systems of higher education such as the University of California and Indiana University—are weighing the role of standardized-test scores in the admissions process, typically citing concerns that the tests disadvantage low-income students and students of color and that the scores add little beyond high-school grades to predict a student's ability to succeed in college.

Since 1969, when Bowdoin College announced that the SAT and ACT would be optional for applicants, dozens of selective liberal-arts colleges have followed suit. While the test-optional movement began in (*continued on page 69*)

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bandwagon over the past five decades. Recent years have seen an acceleration of the trend—and an expansion to a much broader group of colleges and universities, including a small handful of large public institutions (such as the University of Delaware) and the elite, private University of Chicago. The most closely watched case is the University of California system, whose board of regents is set to decide this year whether or not to make the submission of SAT or ACT scores optional for applicants.

With some 226,000 undergraduates statewide, the University of California could become the largest public university system to eliminate or de-emphasize standardized tests in admissions. That possibility prompts a closer look at test-optional reform and how it could affect the nation's state-university systems.

What Is “Test Optional”?

Admissions policies that downplay or do away with standardized test scores come in several flavors. The simplest and purest is a “test-blind” policy, under which admissions officers do not consider applicants’ test scores under any circumstances. Virtually

low-income students or they consider high-school GPA to be at least as predictive of college success, if not more so.

On the question of bias, test-optional proponents often cite several kinds of evidence, including the undeniably racist early history of standardized intelligence measurement; the gaps that persist between the average scores of students of different races, ethnicities, or socioeconomic backgrounds; and the ability of wealthy parents to secure advantages for their children, such as private “test-prep” courses.

While the worst examples of past, misguided efforts to measure human intelligence and aptitude are indefensible, today's standardized admissions tests are developed explicitly to measure the mastery of academic content that students are expected to learn in school—not IQ or general intelligence or some other notion of aptitude. Both the ACT and SAT are aligned with state content standards in mathematics and English language arts—which is one reason some states use college-entrance exams as their state accountability test in place of longer, state-specific assessments.

Citing the existence of score gaps as evidence of test bias is particularly puzzling. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress and many other standardized tests consistently show, as do countless research studies, that Asian and

Some evidence finds that high-school grades are “inflating” over time,
and rising at a faster rate for affluent, advantaged students.
Standardized tests might act as a partial check on grade inflation.

no U.S. institutions are test blind. (While Hampshire College in Massachusetts has a published test-blind policy, that institution will look at students’ submitted International Baccalaureate, AP, and SAT Subject Test scores, just not their ACT and SAT I scores.)

The most common form of test-optional policy encourages applicants to submit their college-entrance examination (usually ACT or SAT) scores only if they believe that so doing will help their chances of admission.

“Test-flexible” policies are another, less common variation, generally meaning that applicants are not required to submit ACT or SAT scores but that they *are* required to submit some sort of standardized-testing results—often AP, IB, or SAT Subject Test scores.

In the case of the University of California, media accounts have reported that the regents are considering either a truly test-optional policy or an approach that requires students to submit scores from the state's Smarter Balanced high-school accountability tests.

Why Avoid Standardized Tests?

Colleges and universities that drop the SAT and ACT from their admissions requirements generally say they do so because they view the exams as biased against disadvantaged minority and

white students, on average, outperform their black and Hispanic counterparts and that wealth and socioeconomic status confer a compounding advantage to academic performance and life outcomes. How, then, could one expect a standardized measurement at the end of high school *not* to reflect the unfortunate educational inequities inherent in American society?

If high-priced test prep or coaching is exacerbating these score gaps, that is a valid case against the SAT and ACT. As the Varsity Blues bribery scandal demonstrates, some parents will pay or do almost anything to secure an admissions advantage for their children. Yet evidence fails to show that the ecosystem of test-prep providers, consultants, and coaches does much more than profit from parental anxiety. Moreover, both major testing companies that oversee the ACT and SAT have introduced free test-preparation materials in an attempt to offset any advantage of test prep, although the efficacy of such offerings is unknown. Finally, given the amount of parental anxiety over the elite selective-admissions process, it's likely that the widespread adoption of test-flexible and -optional policies would simply cause a shift in emphasis to test prep for any new required tests (IB, AP, Smarter Balanced) and to pricey tutoring for boosting high-school GPA.

Perhaps the strongest argument against the use of the SAT and ACT in admissions is that high-school (*continued on page 70*)

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in that sector, over the past five to ten years it has expanded to highly selective private universities such as the University of Chicago and George Washington University, and to public universities such as Temple and the

University of Delaware (for in-state residents only). The test-optional movement has also extended to graduate education, with a growing number of programs eliminating the GRE requirement for applicants and nearly 40 law schools allowing applicants to submit GRE scores in place of the traditional LSAT.

The National Center for Fair and Open Testing reports that more than 1,000 institutions have made test scores optional for undergraduate applicants or have de-emphasized the use

also examined the effects of test-optional policies at selective liberal-arts colleges and reported similar results. More recently, a 2019 study by Matt Saboe and Sabrina Terrizzi failed to find effects of SAT-optional policies on measures of student quality, selectivity, or institutional diversity.

These studies, however, either focused on private, highly selective liberal-arts colleges; analyzed a short span of years, which restricted the outcomes that could be measured; or compared the test-optional institutions to all four-year institutions in the United States (a problematic comparison from which to draw conclusions). The body of prior research therefore makes it difficult to hypothesize about what would occur if large public-university systems such as the University of California system adopted test-optional policies. Private, highly selective

A 2019 study of private institutions found that implementing test-optional policies increased the enrollment of black, Latinx, Native American, and, to a lesser extent, Pell-grant students.

of standardized-test scores in the admissions process. Among them are 370 colleges and universities that receive top rankings from *U.S. News & World Report* in their respective categories. The question is, do test-optional policies do what they are intended to do—increase racial and income diversity on campus?

The Research

Generally speaking, selective admissions offices across the United States use college-entrance-exam scores as one factor among many in evaluating applicants. When an institution goes test optional, this usually means that applicants are welcome to send their test scores if they so choose, but they are not required to. When students elect not to send their scores, admissions professionals rely on other criteria, such as grades, personal essays, and extracurricular activities, to make their decisions. Some institutions offer “test-flexible” admissions, still requiring students to submit a standardized-test score but allowing them to choose an SAT subject test or another assessment in place of the SAT or ACT.

A 2015 study by Andrew Belasco, Kelly Rosinger, and James Hearn examined test-optional admissions among selective liberal-arts colleges and found that these initiatives did not expand enrollment among recipients of the federal Pell grant, which is directed toward low-income students, or among black, Latinx, or Native American students. The study did find that the policies helped the colleges themselves by increasing the number of applications and the average standardized-test scores of those who submitted them, both of which boost an institution’s perceived selectivity. A study by Kyle Sweitzer and colleagues, included in the 2018 volume *Measuring Success* (co-edited by Jack Buckley, our companion essayist in this forum)

liberal-arts colleges from which the test-optional movement emerged differ from more recent adopters that tend to be larger, more research-focused institutions and even some selective public universities.

A 2019 study by Christopher Bennett,* presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, looked at the effects of test-optional policies on campus diversity at private institutions, and his findings diverged from those of previous investigations. Bennett examined more recent adopters of test-optional policies, comparing them to several groups of peer institutions with similar characteristics. The study found that implementing these policies increased the enrollment of black, Latinx, Native American, and, to a lesser extent, Pell-grant students. Because this research focused on the most recent test-optional adopters—which include a wider range of institution types—we might expect similar effects to occur at public institutions.

But are there alternatives to test-optional admissions that could expand access? One strategy several states have employed is requiring high-school students to take one of the college-entrance exams, potentially increasing the likelihood that they will pursue college studies. As of 2017, 11 states had adopted policies requiring all high-school juniors to take the SAT or the ACT, and they also pay for the students’ testing fees. Recent studies by Joshua Hyman and by Michael Hurwitz and colleagues indicate that these policies boost college enrollment by 0.5 to 3 percentage points. While required testing appears to induce low-income students to *(continued on page 71)*

* Bennett is married to Dominique Baker, one of the authors of this essay.

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grades offer similar value in predicting college success. While both major testing programs have produced decades of research showing a small overall advantage when institutions use *both* a standardized test and GPA, the relative predictive power of tests varies across institutions. Indeed, both ACT and the College Board work confidentially with colleges and universities to conduct local validity studies meant to shed light on the utility of testing relative to GPA and how the different sources of data should be weighted in support of decision making. Larger institutions that conduct their own such studies often report that GPA alone is a sufficient predictor. Yet here a caveat is in order: a small but growing body of evidence finds that high-school grades are “inflating” over time, and that they are rising at a faster rate

system in 2018 reviewed files from over 180,000 applicants to fill about 46,000 seats. Conducting an in-depth, “holistic” review of every single application would not be feasible, so large institutions often prescreen students based on factors such as test scores and GPA to winnow down the pool. In this context, the scores can help admissions officers put students’ grades (and different high schools) in perspective. This is presumably one of the reasons the University of California system is considering the use of the state’s Smarter Balanced high-school test scores in place of the SAT and ACT rather than going test optional or test blind, especially since recent research suggests that the Smarter Balanced test exhibits similar levels of predictive validity and smaller differences between relatively advantaged and disadvantaged groups of students.

Adopting a test-flexible policy or requiring a single test other

There is little evidence that test-optional policies succeed in increasing campus diversity. When an institution goes test optional, applications go up, average test scores rise, but little else seems to change.

for affluent, advantaged students. It’s possible that standardized tests act as a partial check on grade inflation; if so, then reducing or eliminating their role in college admissions could worsen the problem. What’s more, the predictive value of the GPA could diminish if too many institutions stop using test scores.

Test Optional in State Universities

While most state systems comprise colleges and universities of varying levels of selectivity, all of their individual institutions must review a large number of applicant files compared to small, private colleges. For example, the University of California

than the ACT and SAT appears to be a viable strategy for a state system. The university gets to continue using standardized-test scores to screen applicants while also getting credit for ending the tyrannical reign of the despised college-entrance exams. There are several considerations, however, that state-university administrators and governing bodies should keep in mind.

First, although alternative tests may appear more equitable than the SAT or the ACT, this advantage may not necessarily arise from any specific properties of the assessments, but simply because they have never been subjected to the corrupting pressures that high-stakes admissions tests must withstand.

Smarter Balanced, for example, which California uses as part of its public-school accountability system, holds high stakes for educators and leaders but has little impact on individual high-school students. Affluent parents don’t pay thousands of dollars for “ringers” to take the Smarter Balanced test for their kids, and organized criminal rings do not supply those ringers, attempt to steal test forms, or sell questions online—at least not yet. State systems will need to constantly monitor the performance and security of the various tests they permit. Other possible assessments in a test-flexible menu, like AP or IB, might better resist these pressures than state-accountability tests, but that is unknown until the pressures become real.

Next, it’s important to note that there is little evidence that test-optional policies succeed in increasing campus diversity. Indeed, what little scientific research exists has produced mixed (*continued on page 72*)



Actress Lori Loughlin and husband, Massimo Giannulli, leave court in Boston, where they are fighting charges related to helping their child get into USC.

KATHERINE TAYLOR/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDFUX

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enroll at an increased rate, there is little evidence that the policy has a particular effect for black, Latinx, or Native American students. Therefore, while mandatory college-entrance exams might have some salutary effect, we are not confident this policy can close both economic and racial gaps in enrollment at selective institutions. Additionally, given the troubling and persistent racial and

to adopt such a policy. However, test scores are not the only source of bias in the selective admissions process. Race and class inequalities are baked into many of the metrics that selective colleges use to evaluate applicants. For instance, there are decades of research demonstrating that low-income students and students of color have less access to the advanced high-school coursework that selective colleges view as a measure of a rigorous curriculum. While selective colleges try to evaluate applicants in the context of their individual high schools and

Test scores are not the only source of bias in the selective admissions process. Race and class inequalities are baked into many of the metrics that selective colleges use to evaluate applicants.

economic gaps in standardized-test scores, we worry that these policies will not do enough to level the playing field and expand access among underserved students.

Recommendations

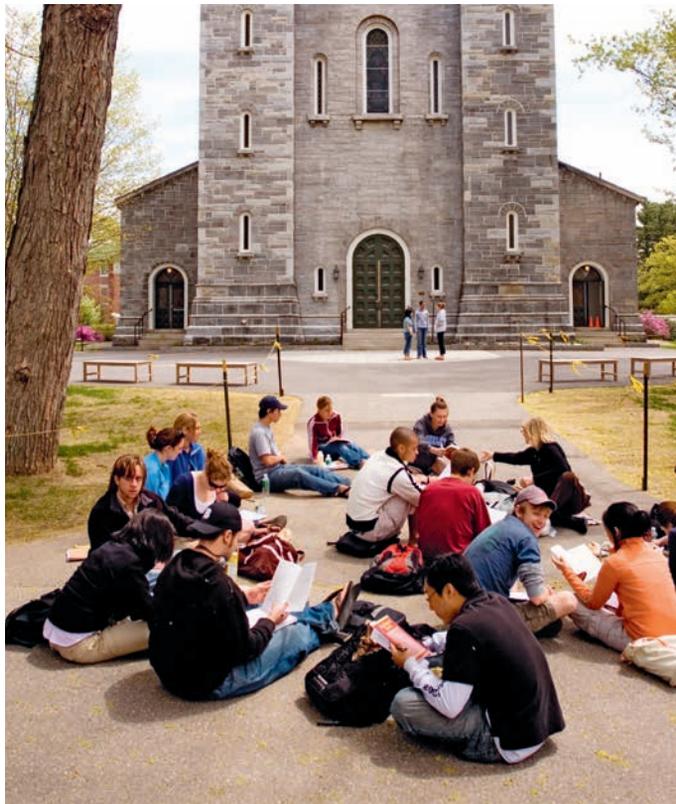
In light of recent evidence that test-optional policies at some institutions appear to have expanded campus diversity, we think there could be benefits for students if public institutions elected

communities—that is, taking into account whether students took advantage of the most difficult coursework available to them—other common metrics used to evaluate students may also reflect racial and class privilege.

Factors that vary by race and class can influence the perceived quality of a student's credentials. Affluent families can afford to hire admissions consultants to prep their children for the college interview or to critique their personal essays. Similarly, underserved students may not have the same opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities as more advantaged peers, potentially because certain pursuits are not available or because they have outside responsibilities, such as having to earn money to support their families. Perhaps this is why a study by Kelly Rosinger and colleagues found that consideration of extracurricular activities during the admissions process did not move the needle substantially when it came to expanding access to selective colleges.

Other barriers stand in the way of low-income students and students of color gaining access. For instance, studies show selective colleges tend to recruit from high schools whose students are largely white and well-to-do. Less-advantaged students also lack the means to pay for college, may not have help navigating the admissions process, and may wonder if they will develop a sense of belonging on an “elite” campus. Without a comprehensive approach to recruiting, admitting, enrolling, and supporting underserved students on the way to and through college, higher education will fail to serve not only these students, but also the entire country.

It is tempting to view test-optional policies as a silver bullet that can expand access to selective colleges for all qualified students, regardless of race or class, but large systemic issues rarely have simple solutions. To a limited extent, such policies may contribute to racial and socioeconomic diversity on college campuses, but until the higher-education sector addresses the many other hurdles that block the way, access to and success in college will continue to elude many of the country's qualified young people. ■



CARL D. WALSH / AURORA PHOTOS

Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, announced an SAT-and-ACT-optional admissions policy in 1969, setting a precedent.

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findings at best. When an institution goes test optional, applications go up, average test scores rise (since applicants with lower scores choose not to send them), but little else seems to change, at least among the

liberal-arts colleges that have implemented the policy for the longest amounts of time.

Finally, and as noted earlier, it stands to reason that standardized test scores will reflect the achievement gaps endemic to American education, but colleges and universities are free to consider this reality when developing their holistic application-review procedures. Indeed, within the University of California system there are examples of such adjustments. UC San Diego, for one, accepts disadvantaged minority and lower-income students with average SAT scores that are more than a standard deviation below those of their more-advantaged counterparts.

Indeed, the UC Academic Council's standardized-testing task force recently concluded, after a review of the evidence around admissions testing, that UC institutions on the whole are using testing responsibly and that the practice has contributed to campus diversity. Moreover, the task force recommended against switching to the state's Smarter Balanced

assessment, in part because such a shift would make it harder to compare in-state applicants to those from states using different testing systems. In its report, issued in February 2020, the task force recommended that the UC system continue to use the SAT and ACT while also working to develop a new standardized-admissions test, tailored to the UC system, that would measure a "broader array of student learning and capabilities" and possibly "enable UC to admit classes of students more representative of the diversity of the state."

Testing in Perspective

State systems are under enormous pressure to provide access to low-cost, high-quality postsecondary education in a way that is equitable and fair. It is understandable, given the controversy that besets college-entrance testing, that they should want to scrutinize the role of these tests in admissions. When used thoughtfully, as part of a holistic process, well-designed standardized assessments do not have to be a barrier for disadvantaged students—they can serve as a neutral yardstick that helps put students' academic performance in context. If state systems elect to shift their policies around the use of such tests, they should do so with a clear eye and an active program of research to avoid unintended consequences. ■



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