**Goodbye Standardizing Testing**

For so many years, getting a strong test score has been essential for admission to higher tier schools. However, as a result of disruptions from the COVID-19 Pandemic, with some not being able to take the test, colleges have made the SAT optional for the past two years.

For some schools, it is optional for the next couple years as well. Last week, Harvard University announced that they would be extending their test-optional policy for the next four years. In addition, The University of California schools have abolished the SAT as a component of their application. Other colleges are expected to follow suit with similar policies. While, initially the test-optional policy looked temporary, it now seems like it will not be going away that soon

The test-optional policy is very beneficial when it comes to alleviating socio-economic and racial disparities. Studying and doing well for the SAT/ACT can be costly. The average cost of tutoring is $70 per hour while SAT/ACT prep courses can cost up to $6995. For so long, this has been a major barrier for lower-income students. These high costs have prevented them from affording these avenues of preparation, and therefore have limited them in achieving highly on the exam. According to a study by HigherEd, on the SAT reading section, students with family incomes of below $20,000 scored an average of 433, while students with average family incomes of more than $200,000 scored an average of 570. Studies like this have demonstrated that success on the SAT clearly correlates with wealth.

There are also major racial disparities in test performance as well. According to Education Attainment, on the SAT math section, 34% of Asians, 20% of Whites, and 3% of African Americans scored over 600. In 2015, the mean score of white students on the SAT was 299 points higher than that of African American students. As a result, a below-average SAT score has prevented many African-American and other minority students from reaching colleges of their choice. Now with the SAT not being necessary, students of all backgrounds are able to apply to their dream schools, regardless of their scores or whether they were able to take the test.

As significant as the disparities caused by the SAT/ACT are, they will still continue to have some importance for colleges in evaluating applicants. With the numerous applications to colleges coming from applicants of all different contexts, the SAT is able to serve as a common metric that can be used to compare students.

There are even some who make the argument that the SAT can still be beneficial to minority or lower-income students. Paul Siemens, an advocate for standardized tests said the following.

“Research has shown that [testing] really plays a role in offering opportunities to underserved students,” he said. “If we do away with it, the privileged students and parents will have more opportunities to game the system and to push for higher grades... So I think standardized testing is playing an important role right now in society.”

Some claim that there are better ways for colleges to increase diversity, outside of their standardized testing policies. Shekila Melchior, Director of Geroge Mason University's Office for Diversity and Inclusion, believes that colleges should focus on their recruitment efforts.

“What high schools are you going into to recruit students and what are you saying to the students? Have you created a pipeline for your Black and Brown students from high school to college to graduate school?” said Melchior. “These are the questions to be asking.”

**Results of the Policy**

The results of the test-optional policy are already beginning to show. Last year, the applicant pool to many selective schools was the most diverse up to date, both from a socio-economic and racial perspective. Success with the policy also came from the finding that low-income and minority students are more likely to submit their applications without a test score.

More diverse applicant pools have translated to even more diverse classes of admitted students for many colleges. According to the American Talent Initiative, 60% of test-optional institutions experienced increases in enrollment of underrepresented students. Overall, colleges have also been able to attract more applicants with better academic qualifications, benefitting their institutions significantly.

This increasing diversity can be seen at Middlebury College for example, a liberal arts college located in Vermont. After going test-optional, their applications increased by 30% in 2021. Of those admitted to the college, 37% were students of color, an increase from 29% in 2020.

The test-optional policy also helped grow socio-economic diversity by contributing to an increase in the average amount of demonstrated need among students at colleges and universities in the US. Studies examining this showed that those who did not submit their test scores tended to have larger financial aid packages on average than those who did. However, one limitation here is that while the average amount of aid increased, the average proportion of enrolled students with financial aid remained relatively constant.

According to Akil Bello, the impact of a test-optional policy goes beyond just helping the chances of admission for lower-income and minority students.

"When a college announces a test-optional policy, it also conveys to students that the college is aware of and sensitive to issues that impact low-income and underrepresented students and this awareness can signal to applicants an aware and inviting institutional culture," Bello said.

Looking to the future, it is clear that test-optional admissions will continue in the near-term. However, it is difficult to predict with the landscape of the Pandemic, how the test-optional policy will continue into the longer-term future. What is clear however, is that even if standardized test scores continue to be considered, the way they are considered and the weight they are given, i is unlikely to ever be the same.