The Role of Testing in College Admissions

John Barnhill, Florida State University

Randall C. Deike, Drexel University

Bill Hiss, Ph.D. Principal Investigator, Defining Promise (study of optional standardized testing)
Two Sources of Testing Requirements/Pressures:

• External – legislative mandates and rankings/reputation

• Internal – admissions; honors program; merit scholarships; student success
CONSTITUTIONAL DUTIES OF THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS OF THE STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM.—In accordance with s. 7, Art. IX of the State Constitution, the Board of Governors of the State University System has the duty to operate, regulate, control, and be fully responsible for the management of the whole publicly funded State University System and the board, or the board’s designee, has responsibility for: (i) Governing admissions to the state universities.

- **BOG Regulation 6.002 Admission of Undergraduate First-Time-in-College, Degree-Seeking Freshmen**

(e) FTIC students applying for admission must submit SAT Reasoning Test or redesigned SAT (rSAT) scores from the College Board or ACT with Writing scores from ACT, Inc. Universities may reserve the right to require a student to take an updated version of a test. Students applying for Spring 2017 or later are not required to submit an essay score.
Legislated Testing Mandates: Remediation Standards

6.008 Postsecondary College-Level Preparatory Testing, Placement, and Instruction for State Universities.

SAT: Mathematics 440 Reading 440

ACT: Reading 19  English 17  Mathematics 19
Legislated Testing Mandates: Budget/Performance Metrics

1001.7065 Preeminent state research universities program.—

(1) STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM SHARED GOVERNANCE COLLABORATION.—A collaborative partnership is established between the Board of Governors and the Legislature to elevate the academic and research preeminence of Florida’s highest-performing state research universities in accordance with this section. The partnership stems from the State University System Governance Agreement executed on March 24, 2010, wherein the Board of Governors and leaders of the Legislature agreed to a framework for the collaborative exercise of their joint authority and shared responsibility for the State University System. The governance agreement confirmed the commitment of the Board of Governors and the Legislature to continue collaboration on accountability measures, the use of data, and recommendations derived from such data.

(2) ACADEMIC AND RESEARCH EXCELLENCE STANDARDS.—The following academic and research excellence standards are established for the preeminent state research universities program: (a) An average weighted grade point average of 4.0 or higher on a 4.0 scale and an average SAT score of 1800 or higher on a 2400-point scale or 1200 or higher on a 1600-point scale for fall semester incoming freshmen, as reported annually.
Legislated Testing Mandates: Teacher salaries

1012.731 The Florida Best and Brightest Teacher Scholarship Program.—(1) The Legislature recognizes that, second only to parents, teachers play the most critical role within schools in preparing students to achieve a high level of academic performance. The Legislature further recognizes that research has linked student outcomes to a teacher’s own academic achievement. Therefore, it is the intent of the Legislature to designate teachers who have achieved high academic standards during their own education as Florida’s best and brightest teacher scholars.

(3)(a) To be eligible for a scholarship in the amount of $6,000, a classroom teacher must: 1. Have achieved a composite score at or above the 80th percentile on either the SAT or the ACT based on the National Percentile Ranks in effect when the classroom teacher took the assessment …
U.S. NEWS Best College Ranking Methodology

**Student selectivity (12.5 percent):** A school's academic atmosphere is determined in part by students' abilities and ambitions. This measure has three components:

- Admissions test scores for all enrollees who took the critical reading and math portions of the SAT and the composite ACT score (65% of the selectivity score).
- Enrolled first-year students at National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges who graduated in the top 10 percent of their high school classes (25%).
- The acceptance rate, or the ratio of students admitted to applicants (10%).
Top 25 is our institutional goal

• “We have set a goal to be a Top 25 public university, and we have charted a course to get there,” President Thrasher said. “I believe we can do it because I believe in Florida State.”

• Florida State University leapt 5 places in the U.S. News and World Report Public University rankings – more than any other top 50 university in the United States. We are ranked at 38, and well on our way to the top 25.
Description of the Study Design for Florida State University

- 5406 students who entered Florida State University in the fall of 2015 are included in this study.
- Each student's record included a criterion score, a high school measure of academic achievement, and SAT® scores.
- The criterion, First-Year GPA, was the standard of success in college for this study.
- High school GPA was taken from the institution's database.
- ACES provides opportunities for institutions to customize their validity studies in order to more closely match the admission process. You chose to use the highest SAT Critical Reading, SAT Math, and SAT Writing scores in your study.
Admissions: Admitted Class Evaluation Service of the College Board

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strong Predictors</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Predictive Strength (correlation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS GPA</td>
<td>5406</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT Subj: High-NonLang</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT Writing</td>
<td>5406</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT Math</td>
<td>5406</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT CriticalReading</td>
<td>5406</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT Subj: Math Level 1</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moderate Predictors</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Predictive Strength (correlation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SAT Subj: High-All</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># AP Exams</td>
<td>5406</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Honors/AP courses</td>
<td>5406</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak Predictors</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Predictive Strength (correlation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yrs Language</td>
<td>4434</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yrs Math</td>
<td>4489</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yrs Science</td>
<td>4404</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Admissions: FSU Research
HOW OPTIONAL TESTING WORKS: THREE STUDIES

• “Defining Promise: Twenty-five Years of Optional Testing at Bates College, 1984-2009”
  
  William C. Hiss, Kate M. Doria
  
  http://www.bates.edu/admission/optional-testing/ 2010

• “Defining Promise: Optional Standardized Testing Policies in American College and University Admissions”
  
  William C. Hiss, Valerie W. Franks
  

• “Defining Access: Does Optional Testing Change College Bound Populations?”
  
  Steven Syverson, Valerie W. Franks, William C. Hiss
  
  Planned publication, early 2018
“Take Back the Conversation…” *

**Ethical questions…**
Can optional testing lower access barriers and expand college bound populations?
Who is exploring the breadth of human intellect and promise in imaginative ways?
Who is doing the heavy lifting, serving broad constituencies?

**Practical questions…**
What happens when institutions admit students without considering their standardized test scores?
Who are the non-submitters?
How are these “non-submitter” students doing, compared to submitters?
Are college admissions decisions still reliable without testing?
Does a non-submitter policy come with any advantages or disadvantages to the institution? (e.g., geographic reach, diversity, academic achievement, tuition income and financial aid)

*The NACAC Commission on Standardized Tests included a recommendation to “take back the conversation” about testing from the various groups for whom testing was either a profession or a cause. These studies are a contribution to that conversation.*
“Defining Promise”: Principal Findings

There are no significant differences in either Cumulative GPA or graduation rates between submitters and non-submitters. Across the study, non-submitters (not including the public university non-submitters with above-average testing, to focus on the students with below-average testing who are beneficiaries of an optional testing policy) earned Cumulative GPAs that were only .05 lower than submitters, 2.83 versus 2.88. The difference in their graduation rates was .6%. By any standard, these are trivial differences.

College and university Cumulative GPAs closely track high school GPAs, despite wide variations in testing. Students with strong HSGPAs generally perform well in college, despite modest or low testing. In contrast, students with weak HSGPAs earn lower college Cum GPAs and graduate at lower rates, even with markedly stronger testing. A clear message: hard work and good grades in high school matter, and they matter a lot.

Non-submitters are more likely to be first-generation-to-college enrollees, all categories of minority students, Pell Grant recipients, and women. But across institutional types, white students also use optional testing policies at rates within low single digits of the averages, so the policies have broad appeal across ethnic groups.

In a surprise finding, non-submitters display a distinct two-tail or bimodal curve of family financial capacity. First-generation, minority and Pell-recipient students will often need financial aid support, but large pools of students not qualifying for or not requesting financial aid help balance institutional budgets.

LD students, from a modest sample of 1050 students at 8 institutions, are much more likely to apply as non-submitters, and much more likely to apply ED. They perform at levels close to the rest of their classmates. The evidence from a long-term study at Bates found that given the modest accommodations to which these students are legally entitled, their GPAs and graduation rates come up to class averages, helping to increase the institution’s overall graduation rates.

Non-submitters may commonly be missed in consideration for no-need merit financial awards, despite better Cum GPAs and markedly higher graduation rates than the submitters who receive merit awards. Institutions may want to examine their criteria for merit awards, especially the use of standardized testing to qualify students for no-need merit funding.

Testing may serve to artificially truncate the applicant pools of students who would succeed if they could be convinced to apply. Non-submitters often expand applicant pools, apply Early Decision at higher rates, increase minority enrollments, and allow for success by Learning Difference students.
Publicly Announced Institutions in the “Defining Promise” Study

Bates

F&M

Smith College

ST. LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY

College of the Atlantic

Wheaton College

Dickinson

Providence College

Denison University

Pitzer College
Student Perspectives
Institutions Recently Adopting Test-Optional Policies

- Wesleyan University
- Temple University
- Bryn Mawr College
- Beloit
- VCU
- Hofstra University
- Old Dominion University
- Duquesne University
- Montclair State University
- Rowan University
- Plymouth State University
- Kalamazoo College
- University of Puget Sound
- Allegheny College
- The George Washington University
- Trinity College
- The Catholic University of America
Defining Access: Does Test-Optional Admission Change College Bound Populations?
Defining Access: Principal Research Questions

Do colleges and universities experience a significant rise in number and diversity of applications after adopting test-optional admission? (Early signs: yes.)

Do they admit, enroll and retain significantly more diverse (first-generation, low-income, international, LD, and URM) students after adopting test-optional admission? (Mixed, but generally yes. And often a bar-bell curve of family financial capacity.)

How do non-submitters convert through the funnel from inquiry source through matriculation? (Complicated, and hard to summarize, due to different record systems.)

Who are the non-submitters? How does their college performance (first year GPA, Cum GPA, graduation) compare to submitters? (Performance seems sound.)

Are there institutional practices that can enhance the ability of a test-optional policy to succeed? (We are seeing both “best practices” and what seem to be “shoot-yourself-in-foot” practices.)
## Sample Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subhead</th>
<th>Column 1</th>
<th>Column 2</th>
<th>Column 3</th>
<th>Column 4</th>
<th>Column 5</th>
<th>Column 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Row 1</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row 2</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row 3</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row 4</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row 5</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample Bar Chart

- Series 1
- Series 2
- Series 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Series 1</th>
<th>Series 2</th>
<th>Series 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample Pit Chart

- 1st Qtr: 8.2
- 2nd Qtr: 3.2
- 3rd Qtr: 1.4
- 4th Qtr: 1.2
Sample Bar Chart

- Series 1
- Series 2
- Series 3

Category 1  |  Category 2  |  Category 3  |  Category 4
---|---|---|---
0 | 1 | 2 | 3
4 | 5 | 6 | 7