

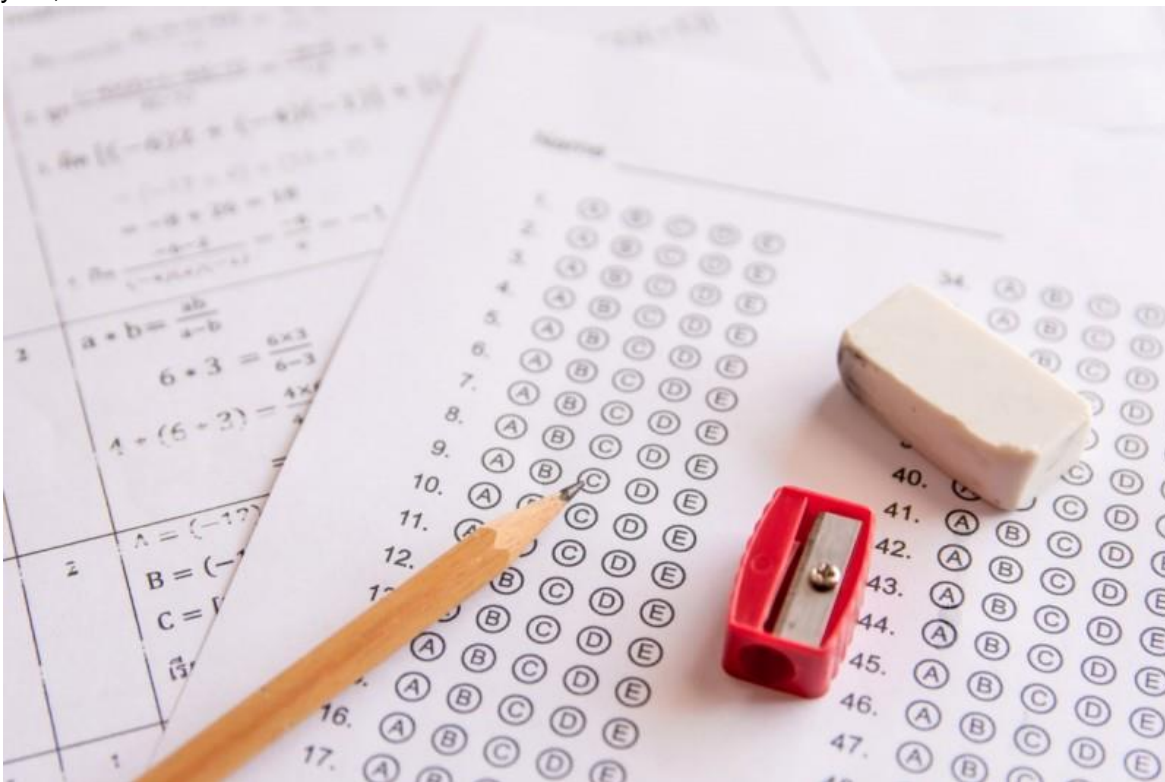
INSIDE HIGHER ED

To Be Test Optional or Not to Be, for International Students

As more colleges make submission of SAT or ACT scores optional, the decision on whether to require scores from international applicants can raise a different set of issues.

By [Elizabeth Redden](#)

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An increasing number of colleges have made submission of SAT or ACT scores optional. But just because a college is test optional doesn't mean it's optional for international students.

International students applying to U.S. universities will find a potentially confusing patchwork of standardized testing policies, with admission practices often differing for international versus domestic applicants.

Some colleges that require the SAT or ACT for domestic admission do not require it for international applicants. Other institutions that have proclaimed themselves test optional for SAT and ACT -- a movement that has been undergirded by the stated goal of increasing access to underrepresented minority students here in the U.S. -- have not included international students in their test-optional policies, while others have.

To be clear, test optional in this article refers to test optional for SAT or ACT only, not to standardized English proficiency tests such as the TOEFL or IELTS, which typically are treated as important factors in the international admission process.

Bucknell University, which announced **a new test-optional policy** in February, will continue to require SAT or ACT scores from international applicants for what Kevin Mathes, the dean of admissions, described as credential verification purposes. Mathes said the test-optional policy is being piloted for five years and one of the questions the institution will look at is whether to extend it to international applicants.

“When I think about the admissions landscape, we know that there are some areas where you have to be careful about the academic credentials that you’re receiving in terms of, ‘is what is being provided to you as an institution how a student is actually performing,’” Mathes said of the decision to keep the standardized testing requirement for international applicants. “As we create relationships with counselors at secondary schools, we just can’t cover the globe as well as we can cover our domestic territories. Definitely there are

places we have great relationships. But beyond that, as we get applications from lots of different areas and countries we can't visit, we feel testing can provide in a way some verification of credentials. We felt that this was a bit of a safety net for us to be able to make sure we're making good decisions with international students at the moment."

Other colleges that recently became test optional for domestic applicants already were for at least some of their international applicants. Todd Rinehart, the vice chancellor for enrollment at the [University of Denver](#), which [announced](#) its new test-optional policy in March, said the university previously required submission of SAT or ACT scores only for those international applicants who attended American-style schools. "It just didn't make sense to require a U.S.-centric exam for students studying under a completely different system. With that said, many of those students historically submitted test scores, and many have very strong scores," he said. [Marquette University](#), which [announced](#) its new test-optional policy in June, had already been test optional for international applicants for the past two years. Brian Troyer, the director of undergraduate admissions, said the policy is only possible because of the expertise Marquette's international office has developed in assessing international credentials.

"We have a great deal of confidence in the transcript evaluation for all students in all parts of the world," Troyer said. Size of institution also matters, he acknowledged: "This year we will enroll somewhere around 40 international students at Marquette, so we're able to look granularly at a student in context."

"No matter who the student is and where they're coming from, our feeling is we have to take the time and the effort to review students within the context,"

Troyer said. "To me it shouldn't make a difference if a student is coming from Greece or Georgia."

"We're increasingly pushing colleges to consider not having different policies for U.S. applicants versus international applicants," said Robert Schaeffer, the public education director of FairTest, the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, an organization that advocates for test-optional policies. "Historically, the rationale for excluding overseas applicants from the test-optional process is that their transcripts might not be as trustworthy, but there now appear to be systems in place to evaluate them more strictly, and schools still will have language requirements for nonnative English speakers who apply from overseas, TOEFL or IELTS."

Others argue that the SAT and ACT can be particularly valuable in assessing international applicants. "We're talking about a worldwide system of schools where at least some kind of measuring stick helps institutions to understand relative performance," said Jerome Lucido, a professor of practice and associate dean of strategic enrollment services for the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education. "It's sort of the SAT/ACT argument for the U.S. on steroids. First of all, can students handle English? Next, what is their aptitude, their academic aptitude?"

At the same time, Lucido said, "not everybody has ready access to testing centers, so test optional makes some sense at least to people in certain regions" (more on this below).

Jack Buckley, the co-editor of *Measuring Success: Testing, Grades and the Future of College Admissions* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), and a former senior vice president for research at the College Board, which owns the SAT, said his problem with test-optional policies is "you don't need a

stated policy of optional testing to decide how you want to weigh assessment data in your admission decision. I can have everybody take the SAT but not use those to drive the decision to admit: that's within the admissions officer's control."

"The reason to keep using standardized tests [for international students], you either want a better measure of English competency for academic work than just a TOEFL or Duolingo [another English test] or you want to be able to put their schools in context," Buckley said. "I think the reason for extending a test-flexible or test-optional policy to international students is probably being driven by the economic pressures institutions are facing ... This is what drives a lot of test-optional decisions in the first place."

Ed Colby, a spokesman for the ACT, said via email that ACT research shows that admissions tests administered in English, including the ACT, "generally have similar validity for international test takers who are proficient in English, but less so when test takers' English skills are limited ... Universities often have additional requirements for international test takers to complete TOEFL or a similar English proficiency test which helps contextualize the scores on the ACT or SAT."

"ACT respects every institution's right to determine the admission policies that best suit its mission and students," Colby said about the move toward test-optional policies. "That said, we strongly believe that test scores provide a valuable piece of information in the admission decision process. We believe that more information is always better than less information when making decisions that impact individuals' lives, and ACT scores offer a benefit that no other admission criterion can: a standardized measure of a student's academic achievement and college readiness that institutions can use to compare students from different schools, states, and countries on an equal,

apples-to-apples basis. When considered among multiple other factors, including courses taken, grades earned in those courses, involvement in activities, character, etc., ACT scores help give colleges a more complete view of a student's readiness to succeed on their campus, regardless of where the student lives."

The College Board just completed [a study](#) based on data from more than 223,000 students across 171 institutions that found, in summary, that "the SAT is essentially as effective as high school grades in predicting students' college performance and, when these two measures are combined, offers the most accurate understanding of student performance than either measure used alone." That study included international students, but a separate study focused just on the validity of the test for international students is in progress. Jaslee Carayol, a College Board spokeswoman, said results will be available this fall.

"More students than ever are taking the SAT (2.1 million in the Class of 2018)," said Carayol, who added that the vast majority of colleges require submission of SAT or ACT scores. "Even schools identified as test optional often require the SAT or ACT for subsets of applicants and use the SAT to make decisions about course placement, academic counseling, and scholarships."

Still, there are pressing access and equity concerns about standardized testing in an international environment. In 2018 the National Association for College Admission Counseling and its international affiliate, International ACAC, sent [a letter](#) to colleges drawing attention to how international student applications might have been adversely affected by test security problems. The letter discussed the decision by the College Board to reduce the number of international SAT testing dates from four per year -- compared to seven

testing dates here in the U.S. -- and the cancellation of ACT and SAT tests due to test security concerns.

“NACAC and International ACAC remain respectful of the complexities involved with administering a test internationally, particularly as the unprecedented rate of technological change presents additional challenges. However, the rise in large-scale, systematic cheating, among other factors, has resulted in changes to the testing environment causing significant disruptions for students who test outside of the United States. This has now become a major issue of equity and access for U.S. citizens abroad and international students,” the letter stated.

A report from an ad hoc committee of International ACAC on international admissions testing issued in May argued that international applicants have less access to standardized tests than U.S. students due to such factors as differences in the number of test centers, seats and test dates; the higher cost of testing and the unavailability of fee waivers for international test takers; and the cost of transportation. Among other issues, the committee report says, “The move to the [computer-based] ACT (which caused many school-based test centers to close and large centers to be located in major cities only) and the SAT security breaches (resulting in mass test cancellations) have made these tests less accessible.”

Dickinson College, which has been test optional for domestic students since 1995, continues to require SAT/ACT score submission from international students "so that we have additional information regarding a student’s English language skills," according to Catherine McDonald Davenport, the vice president for enrollment management and dean of admissions. But Dickinson has been flexible in response to disruptions caused by alleged test security violations: "as some international testing sites have canceled test

administrations or canceled scores if there is suspicion of cheating or test security being compromised, we have allowed students to request a waiver of this requirement," Davenport said. "We review these requests and make decisions on a case-by-case basis. If we waive the requirement, we may request an additional piece of information such as a Skype or Zoom interview."

Sarah Loring de Garcia, an independent counselor based in Mexico and a member of International ACAC's admission practices committee, helped develop a list of colleges that are test optional for international students. [The list](#), which dates to 2016, is out-of-date. But she said she continues to work with students to identify test-optional institutions. "I have some students who have been extraordinarily successful with universities in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere that are test optional and have allowed my students to show their talents in other ways," she said.

"I hope that more colleges and universities will look at the real predictive value of the test and think carefully about access issues, in terms of cost, access issues in terms of the number of times that the test is presented each year, the distance to testing centers, the closing of test centers in certain regions due to security issues, and look at the obstacle that this is placing for students around the world to be able to get this education that they're dreaming about, and consider how that aligns with their institutional goals," Loring de Garcia said. "If they want to bring international students in, particularly if they are not looking at international students as strictly a tuition revenue benefit, but rather as a community benefit, in terms of what international students bring to that college campus, then they need to think carefully about what this test is really offering them in terms of information about students."

Read more by [Elizabeth Redden](#)

https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/07/22/colleges-go-test-optional-domestic-applicants-they-take-different?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=bd92521199-WNU_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-bd92521199-199133009