

## DePaul University Announces Test-optional Alternative for Freshman Admission

Against a backdrop of national discussions concerning appropriate use of standardized tests in college admission, DePaul University will adopt a “test-optional” policy for freshman admission starting with applicants to the 2012 entering class. It is believed that DePaul will become the largest private, not-for-profit university to implement a process that does not require the submission of any standardized test for admission. This change was unanimously approved by the DePaul University Faculty Council at its February 9, 2011, meeting.

This decision, which will be implemented through a four-year, pilot program, is not unprecedented. Many extraordinary colleges and universities have done so over the last 25 years, and with few exceptions, the results have validated the research that led to the policy implementation in the first place. Time and time again, studies (including our own) have shown that the best predictor of a student’s performance in college is his or her performance in a rigorous, college preparatory program in high school. While both the ACT and SAT show propensity to predict freshman-level grades, the extent to which they co-vary with high school GPA diminishes the *incremental value* of the tests in the evaluation of candidates for admission.

In light of these findings, DePaul is thus heeding the challenge put forth in the *Report of the Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission* published by the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) that encourages universities to “*consider dropping the [standardized] admission test requirements if it is determined that the predictive utility of the test...support that decision and if the institution believes that standardized test results would not be necessary for other reasons such as course placement, advising, or research.*” NACAC is the largest body of professionals dedicated to assisting students in the transition from high school to college.

In adopting this approach, DePaul seeks to further enhance our student-centered approach to admission, supporting the conviction that four years of performance and learning in high school are far more important than performance on a four-hour test. We view student capabilities as more complex than those measured by standardized tests, and we view student success as more than first-year grades. For many students, indicators other than test scores allow us better insight (and along different dimensions) into student capabilities and likelihood of success not only in the first year but over the entirety of their collegiate career.

Moreover, standardized test scores are strongly correlated with income, and scores vary dramatically across ethnic groups, raising questions about their fairness to all members of our society. The prevalence of the “test preparation industry” and the ability of wealthier students to take the test repeated times contribute to the debate about equity. To be sure, the answers about fairness are nebulous, and both sides of the argument cite findings either confirming or dismissing the perception of bias. The debate rages on while students and parents find themselves caught in the middle of a national obsession and anxiety over testing and college admission that serves no one well.

This is not a blanket dismissal of the value of standardized testing; in fact, we anticipate the vast majority of students who apply to DePaul will continue to submit an ACT or SAT score as a part of the application. We believe standardized tests can be helpful for institutions that deny far more applications for admission than they accept, adding an additional criterion to draw distinctions between large numbers of students whose academic performance is compressed at the top of the curve. However, we also believe an obsessive reliance on standardized test scores causes many colleges to overlook applications from motivated, high-achieving students who may have a great deal to offer colleges, but who—for whatever reason—don't perform well on standardized tests, which are fairly narrow measures of a very specific academic ability.

This decision at DePaul comes at a time of unprecedented growth in applications to the freshman class. It comes after DePaul has enrolled freshmen classes in recent years that have the best academic profile in its history, and with record levels of retention and academic performance in the first year of college. It also comes as DePaul continues its position as a trailblazer in economic and racial/ethnic diversity in its freshman class, with one-third of the freshman class identifying as a student of color, and a similar number qualifying for Pell Grants. Unlike other institutions that have moved to a test-optional policy because of concerns about diversity and enrollment success, DePaul takes this step from a position of strength with increasing demand, improving quality and an already diverse student profile.

DePaul is one of the nation's 10 largest private, not-for-profit universities, and thus brings this innovation to a significant scale; this decision will require considerable adjustments to systems and processes that are yet to be finalized. Although it may seem daunting to think about DePaul's commitment to a more holistic admission review without the benefit of a single standardized measure, the groundwork for doing so was put in place several years ago when DePaul introduced the use of "noncognitive variables" in the admission process. For three years, DePaul has piloted the use of its DIAMOND essays based on the scholarship of Dr. William Sedlacek at the University of Maryland. These open-ended essays on the admission application are designed to elicit evidence of students' background and characteristics that have been demonstrated to be better predictors of student success in college than standardized test scores. These essays will now be required for students electing to not submit ACT or SAT scores for admission review.

We plan to conduct extensive studies about the efficacy and impact of not requiring standardized test scores for admission, and our faculty have been invited to participate in research design going forward. We expect that DePaul will see the same positive results as other top-caliber colleges and universities that have adopted test-optional approaches to admission. However, we recognize that every university is unique, and are therefore dedicated to a rigorous examination of outcomes in terms of student success. Ultimately, we seek to admit the most capable students who can benefit from the educational experience at a vibrant, urban university in the Vincentian tradition.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**1. *Why is DePaul University choosing to make standardized test scores optional in the admission process?***

First, we want to make every effort to ensure that our admission process is student-centered and this approach reinforces our consistent message that a student's high school record is the most important academic component in the review for admission. In focusing on a holistic view of the high school record, DePaul is emphasizing that four years of perseverance, motivation and effort by successful high school students bear a direct relationship to college-level work.

Second, students often believe that low test scores rule out their chances for admission at a four-year institution. This is especially true of first-generation and low-income students, populations that DePaul has always served well.

**2. *What is the message DePaul Admission is sending to prospective students and families?***

We share in promoting many of the ideas expressed by our colleagues at other test-optional institutions: that student capabilities and motivations are more complex and nuanced than a single number; that some admission practices may be calcifying inherent inequalities related to wealth, ethnicity and gender; and that the frenzied focus on testing in high school detracts from learning core subjects in high school.

Our colleagues at places like Bates College, Lawrence University, Providence College, College of the Holy Cross, Fairfield University and Wake Forest University have found that test scores are not the ultimate arbiter of success for their students. We are buoyed by their example and encouraged by their experiences. To our potential students we say: Focus on learning all that you can in high school and don't let a number earned on a Saturday morning dissuade you from pursuing a four-year college education at a high-quality university.

**3. *How will DePaul Admission evaluate students who do not submit standardized test scores?***

The review process for students who submit SAT/ACT scores and students who do not submit scores will be very similar; we will continue to put primary emphasis on the student's high school record in college-preparatory courses as well as teacher recommendations, community and co-curricular involvement, the personal statement and the student's interests and academic goals. Students who choose not to submit scores will be asked to submit responses to short essay questions. These questions are being revised for the 2012 admission cycle, and will be on the application for admission when it becomes available this summer.

**4. *What research backs up DePaul's decision?***

There are countless studies showing the overwhelming value of high school grade point average as the best predictor of college success. There is also considerable research by William Sedlacek, professor emeritus at the University of Maryland, in the use of the noncognitive variables that strongly predict propensity to graduate from college. Noncognitive variables indicate strengths that students might have in leadership, long-term goals, positive self-concept and a supportive family; we know that these factors matter for student success. DePaul has assessed these variables over the past three years and studied the value of using both noncognitive and standardized measures, and we owe a great deal to the advice and guidance that Dr. Sedlacek has shared freely with us.

**5. *Are noncognitive variables really important?***

We believe so. For years, admission officers have expressed interest in learning more about students than is contained in the academic record, and this led us to begin using noncognitive variables in admission in fall 2008. An analysis of two years of data (the entering classes of 2009 and 2010) using these noncognitive variables in admission at DePaul leads us to believe that the essays tell us about important student attributes that are different from information we might gain from a standardized test score. These noncognitive indicators are also better predictors of student success, which we define as both satisfactory

grades and completion of sufficient credit hours to progress to sophomore status after the first year of college. At DePaul, we know from internal analysis that successful first-year academic performance and progress puts students on a path to retention and timely graduation.

**6. *Who is affected by the test-optional policy?***

Foremost, this policy may be applicable to students whose high school record is strong in terms of grades and completion of college-preparatory courses, but who may not have high standardized test scores.

Students who apply to enter DePaul as freshmen for the fall 2012 quarter may choose a test-optional route for admission. We plan to continue the policy through a four-year pilot program during which time we will assess the success of the program and determine whether it will become a permanent admission policy at DePaul.

**7. *Will any students be required to submit an ACT or SAT score for admission?***

The NCAA mandates the submission of standardized test scores for athletic eligibility. Therefore, DePaul will require that prospective student athletes submit SAT/ACT scores with their application. International students will be required to submit TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) results. Homeschooled students will be required to submit a standardized test score.

**8. *Does test-optional admission mean that students of lower academic quality will gain admission?***

No. DePaul is more selective than most private universities and our admission selectivity has been rising consistently in the last decade. The current student academic profile of freshmen is stronger than ever before in the institution's history. The test-optional decision comes after DePaul has just recorded our all-time highest rates of retention and graduation with the 2010 class. Our applications for this year's class are up significantly—a trend that began before this decision was announced. If the patterns seen at other test-optional colleges hold true, DePaul will receive more applications for next year, which would actually lower the admission rate. If that happens, it will be more difficult to get into DePaul, not easier.

Again, we want to emphasize that the student's high school record is the most important factor in our decisions; and we will closely evaluate the totality of this record for all students, but particularly for those students not submitting test scores.

**9. *Is this simply a marketing ploy to generate additional applications ?***

No. In fact, DePaul has historically and explicitly avoided artificial means of inflating applications by using tactics like "Fast Applications," "Priority Applications," "Snap Applications," or massive application fee waivers. If the intent were to increase applications, there are far easier ways to do so. We are undertaking this pilot at a time when applications are at record levels, when our student profile is stronger than ever, and our measures of student attainment are rising.

**10. *Is this primarily an effort to increase diversity at DePaul?***

Not primarily. There are currently very few institutions in the nation as selective as DePaul that are as diverse in their racial and socioeconomic student profile. However, students who are typically disadvantaged by standardized tests include low-income students, students whose first language is not English, and students with learning disabilities; yet we know that many of these students are highly capable and will succeed at DePaul. So, not requiring standardized tests could bring additional kinds of diversity to the DePaul student population.

**11. *Is this simply a strategy to raise test scores?***

No. DePaul's decision comes at a time when the university's admission is the most selective in its history; whether measured by high school GPA, admission rate, or ACT, the admitted pool of incoming freshmen will be the highest quality class on record.

DePaul is among the nation's 10 largest private universities, and our institutional quality is far more complex than a single measure of freshman testing; in fact, the freshman class of about 2,400 is less than one-tenth of DePaul's total enrollment each year. With nationally recognized graduate and law programs, and more than 100,000 living alumni in the Chicago area alone, we do not build reputation on narrow definitions of academic quality.

Even if we did want to raise test scores, the sheer size of DePaul's freshman class makes that difficult. Over the past four years, the freshman class has averaged 2,450 students, with an average ACT score of 24.72. If we were to eliminate the bottom 500 ACT scores in each class, the mean would only rise to 25.4. Since we anticipate far fewer than 500 freshmen will enroll under the test-optional policy, this change will likely have no effect on test score profile.

**12. How will DePaul report test scores to rankings entities?**

DePaul will report the scores that are used in admission decisions; unreported scores will not be part of the data set. In point of fact, the NACAC *Report of the Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission* (2008) expressly stated that SAT and ACT were never designed as measures of institutional quality and has called on U.S. News & World Report to eliminate test scores as a measure of institutional quality in their rankings.

While the U.S. News rankings portend to be a measure of institutional quality, DePaul rejects the notion that a single metric of average freshman ACT scores reflects the totality of our complex institution. Furthermore, our data tell us that our mean ACT scores are unlikely to move much at all.

**13. What outcomes will be measured during the four-year pilot of test-optional admission policy?**

DePaul's institutional research staff will primarily look at first-year performance and progress of score submitters versus non-submitters; these criteria are the strongest determinants of long-term student success at DePaul. Our institutional researchers will also track differences in chosen majors, academic placement and student satisfaction measures. Finally, we will study the impact of the policy on our overall mix of applicants.