

DePaul University *Enrollment Matters*, 2010/11 – Issue 6 – SPECIAL EDITION

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Enrollment Matters, produced by DePaul's Division of Enrollment Management and Marketing (EM&M), is intended to provide the university community with pertinent information about activities and initiatives that improve and enhance DePaul's competitive market position and prominence.

This special edition of *Enrollment Matters* highlights DePaul's recently announced test-optional alternative for freshman admission.

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WHY TEST OPTIONAL MATTERS – BY DAVID KALSBECK

While we've communicated the nature and intent of the test-optional pilot program for freshman admission through our online resource (www.depaul.edu/emm/testoptional), we present further information in this special edition of *Enrollment Matters*. We are eager to engage in further conversations with members of the university community about this pilot program and I invite you to contact me directly if you have questions.

Our purpose in offering a test-optional alternative is to elevate in the admission process the best and fairest criteria for evaluating student potential, namely students' academic performance in a rigorous, college-preparatory program in high school. That has always been DePaul's primary criterion for freshman admission. This new approach seeks to encourage a wider range of high-achieving students to consider a four-year degree at DePaul, including very talented and promising students who may be disadvantaged by admission criteria that emphasize standardized tests.

The kind of students that may benefit from this admission alternative include students whose first language is not English; students who are first in their families to attend college; and students who do not have unfettered financial access to test preparation, coaching and multiple test-takings. Our experience shows that many of these students do very well at DePaul when given the opportunity, if there is evidence of their ability to succeed academically in high school.

While DePaul is in good company in offering a test-optional alternative, we are still an early adopter. As noted elsewhere in this issue, the value of a test-optional admission approach has been demonstrated in the experiences of Wake Forest University, Providence College, Bates College and other exemplary pioneers. There is a growing sensibility nationwide about the inherent limitations and liabilities of an overreliance on standardized tests in college admissions and I believe DePaul will surely be on the right side of history, as they say, when we look back years from now at this innovation. By adopting this approach early, DePaul's move will have a greater impact and will also serve as a model for other institutions concerned about how to bring such innovation to scale. Early adoption, of course, also entails some risk; hence, we are approaching this as a pilot program. However, these are risks worth taking in light of the growing constraints on educational opportunity for many promising students.

This move is not just a new admission strategy. A test-optional policy matters in broader and deeper ways. It reflects core values about what's important in higher education and grounds these values not in rhetoric, but in actual policy and practice. Our test-optional program underscores that what matters at DePaul is students' academic achievement and educational outcomes at the end of their college career, not just their profile at the outset. Rather than focusing on metrics that have become measures of prestige for highly selective colleges and universities, our pilot will contribute to the national conversation about using fairer and broader indicators of students' strengths and capabilities in admission decisions and keeping our primary focus on educational outcomes and attainment.

VIEWING TEST OPTIONAL IN AN ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT CONTEXT – BY DAVID KALSBECK

DePaul's decision to offer a test-optional alternative for freshman admission marks a significant moment in the evolution of DePaul's undergraduate enrollment strategy. While it has garnered considerable public attention, the test-optional admission policy is really no different than any other enrollment management initiative that has been launched at DePaul in recent years in that it is distinguished by these defining qualities:

- It seeks to elevate and enhance DePaul's competitive position and prominence.
- It seeks to balance market-based realities and mission-based aspirations.
- It is guided by and grounded in research and analysis.
- It brings innovation to scale.

Although the announcement of the test-optional pilot brought sudden attention, there was nothing sudden about this decision; it represents the next, natural extension of enrollment management approaches and strategies successfully implemented in recent years. Three years ago, we conceived, designed and initiated the DIAMOND program using noncognitive factors in admission essays, grounded in William Sedlacek's theories and scholarship, as a means by which DePaul could better level the playing field for applicants as we became more selective in admission. It began as a division-wide effort led by Admission, Institutional Research & Market Analytics and the Center for Access and Attainment—but under the direction of Sacha Thieme, associate director for Undergraduate Admission, it quickly became a university-wide effort with extraordinary systems support from Information Services and a network of volunteer readers from across the university community. The research and value that we've experienced from the DIAMOND program has helped set the stage for introducing the test-optional alternative for the 2012 freshman class.

From an enrollment management perspective, the prime strategic value of test-optional admission is that it provides a means for more effectively balancing the goals of enhancing academic quality and student success, ensuring access and diversity and realizing necessary net tuition revenue. That balancing act is essentially what defines the art and science of enrollment management, insofar as these goals inevitably present competing and conflicting tensions and tradeoffs. One value of a test-optional policy in an enrollment management context is that it provides greater flexibility in admission decisions for freshman applicants—a flexibility that the years ahead will require in order for universities like DePaul to continue to thrive.

In terms of academic quality, DePaul's well-designed enrollment strategies, significant institutional investments and extraordinary effort over the past decade have combined to result in the university being more selective today than ever; we attract a higher caliber of applicants and recently posted the highest retention and graduation rates ever. Given the experiences of other institutions that have test-optional admission policies, this strategy will in fact help strengthen DePaul's academic position and selectivity in the face of the growing demand we anticipate in the near future.

However, there is no single outcome that this test-optional strategy seeks to achieve; its value is that it enables DePaul to balance many different goals and objectives simultaneously, even those in conflict with each other. Successfully and intentionally balancing multiple, competing goals is a nationally recognized hallmark of DePaul's approach to enrollment management. In fact, in the recent upgrade of DePaul's credit status by Fitch Rating agency, specific commendations were focused on DePaul's "carefully managed multi-pronged enrollment strategy;" this particular initiative is no different.

As noted at the outset, test-optional admission is a significant moment in the evolution of enrollment management at DePaul—and in many ways it is just that, another step in a long history of strategic innovations and initiatives designed and executed in ways that enable DePaul to successfully shape its enrollment profile and improve its overall competitive market position while remaining true to its core values and mission-based aspirations. A test-optional policy enables DePaul to be market-smart while remaining mission-centered.

HOW DEPAUL'S DIAMOND PROGRAM HELPED INFORM A TEST-OPTIONAL APPROACH

As one of the nation's 10 largest private, not-for-profit universities, it may seem daunting to think about DePaul's commitment to a more holistic admission review without the benefit of a single standardized measure. However, 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 the past three years, DePaul has piloted the use of its innovative DIAMOND essays based on the scholarship of William Sedlacek, a leading authority on the topic of noncognitive assessment and author of *Beyond the Big Test: Noncognitive Assessment in Higher Education*. 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 noncognitive characteristics include: positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, successfully working within a system, preference for long-term goals, availability of a strong support person, leadership experience, community involvement and knowledge acquired in a field. Similar essays will be required for students electing to not submit ACT or SAT scores for admission review.

While these noncognitive criteria are used by The Gates Foundation in selecting recipients of the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarships, DePaul is the only major private university in the United States to make explicit use of these noncognitive factors in a university-wide admission and retention strategy focused on access and attainment. Our team of more than 80 volunteer faculty and staff essay readers have made this level of holistic review possible for our applicants, making the process more student-centered.

DePaul's preliminary analyses show that, in particular, these noncognitive attributes help predict first-year grades and progress at DePaul. However, we will need more time and research on current cohorts of students to comment on multi-year retention and graduation outcomes as tied to noncognitive variables.

Our experience with noncognitive variables to help predict student performance and success at DePaul has provided us with confidence in offering a test-optional alternative for freshman applicants.

For more on DePaul's DIAMOND program, read http://depaul.edu/emm/downloads/NoncogExperience-DIAMOND_March2011.pdf.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TEST-OPTIONAL MOVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the history of higher education's test-optional movement, two examples from the University of California and Bates College stand out as watershed events.

The first occurred in 2001 when Richard Atkinson, president of the University of California, recommended that colleges stop using the SAT and switch to tests tied more closely to the high school curriculum. Between 2001 and 2005, studies conducted in California confirmed that high school grades are the best indicator of college performance, and this correlation becomes stronger as students progress toward graduation. Since the University of California system represents such a high number of students, testing companies have always paid attention to rhetoric and use of tests by this system.

The College Board responded in 2005 by redesigning and lengthening the SAT, and by eliminating the word analogies section. The "new" SAT (and ACT) also added writing sections to the tests. Despite these revisions, some colleges saw the testing companies as having failed to address the tests' "historic problems," including perceived biases. The College Board's own study in 2008 revealed that differences in predictive validity for subgroups of students persist even after the 2005 test redesign.

The second watershed event for test-optional admission occurred in 2004 when Bates College presented data on their test-optional experience. Bates College, a highly selective liberal arts college in Maine, has been test-optional since 1984, but has always required all students to submit their test scores upon matriculation to allow them to compare "submitters" to "non-submitters" for research purposes. Their twenty-year longitudinal data were

presented at the 2004 National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC) conference, at which thousands of college and high school counselors were in attendance. Among many findings reported by Bates, two pieces of data stood out: graduation rates between submitters and non-submitters varied by only 0.1%, and average Bates GPAs varied by only 0.05%. In addition, non-submitters had slightly *higher* graduation rates. Even though SAT-I scores of non-submitters were 160 points lower than scores of submitters at Bates, these test performance discrepancies did not correlate to significant differences in widely-used measures of college success.

The Bates data renewed national interest in test-optional policies, and a number of selective colleges went test-optional after the results of the Bates study were released. The move to test-optional admission was initially clustered in small liberal arts colleges. In recent years, the list has become more varied in institutional type and size: Worcester Polytechnic Institute, College of the Holy Cross, Pitzer College, George Mason University, Fairfield University, Texas A&M, American University and New York University. In addition, there are many public university systems that admit students by considering class rank or high school grades instead of standardized test scores, for example: California State system (14 campuses), University of Texas (8 campuses), Washington State, University of Oklahoma, University of Oregon, University of Nebraska, University of Maine and University of Arizona. The University of Texas' Top 10% program is a prominent example where large numbers of students have been admitted by class rank, without regard to test scores. Texas administrators verify that this admission policy has increased diversity at the flagship institution, uplifting students and families in a region that depends on expanding economic and social opportunities.

Another important moment in the history of the test-optional movement was the 2008 release of the *Report of the Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission* published by the NACAC. The report challenges universities to "consider dropping the [standardized] admission test requirements if it is determined that the predictive utility of the test...support[s] 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." Furthermore, the Commission encouraged colleges and universities to regularly question and evaluate the implications of standardized test requirements.

In an interview following the report's publication, William R. Fitzsimmons, the dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard University who led the Commission, said, "It would be much better for the country to have students focusing on high school courses that, based on evidence, will prepare them well for college and also prepare them well for the real world beyond college, instead of their spending enormous amounts of time trying to game the SAT."

Along with the lessons of early adopting test-optional institutions, several of the Commission's recommendations resonated strongly at DePaul and prompted an evaluation of our practices in light of the growing body of research surrounding standardized tests and admission practices.

INSTITUTIONS WITH TEST-OPTIONAL ADMISSION PROVIDE INSPIRATION AND INSIGHT

With its decision to introduce a test-optional admission alternative for freshmen, DePaul joined the growing list of selective four-year colleges and universities. In fact, there are more than 875 schools across the country that have some form of a test-optional admission policy in which applicants need not submit ACT or SAT scores. (Visit <http://fairtest.org/university/optional> for a list of these schools.)

Since the release of the Bates data, institutions of various types have also altered their admission policies to provide test-optional routes for admission. We highlight here Lawrence University, Providence College and Wake Forest University who have successfully implemented similar admission policies.

Lawrence University in Wisconsin announced in 2005 that it would no longer require students to submit standardized test scores for admission. "Ultimately, [a student's] choice of courses and record of achievement over four years of high school provides a much better indication of their ability to survive the academic rigors of Lawrence than do the results of a three-hour test taken on some Saturday morning," said Steve Syverson, then dean of admissions, who is now the university's vice president for Enrollment. Syverson also served on the

Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission, convened by the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC), that released an influential report in 2008. (For more information from Lawrence University, visit <http://lawrence.edu/admissions/about/testoptional.shtml>.)

In 2006, Providence College in Rhode Island introduced a four-year pilot program to stop requiring undergraduate applicants to submit SAT or ACT scores as part of the admission application. In the Winter 2007 issue of the Harvard Educational Review, the president of Providence College, Rev. Brian J. Shanley, O.P., discussed the school's decision. Within the essay, Father Shanley explains, "While the college has always emphasized a holistic review of students' credentials for admission, there is mounting evidence that students and their parents, more than ever before, have become overly focused on improving standardized test scores. Furthermore, economically disadvantaged students are less likely to have the resources necessary to participate in test-preparation programs. This reality has created an inequity that reveals itself in the correlation between family income and standardized test scores." (To read the full essay, visit <http://bit.ly/ShanleyEssay>.)

A few years ago, Wake Forest University in North Carolina became the first among the top thirty national universities in the country (as ranked by *U.S. News & World Report*) to make standardized test scores optional for undergraduate admission. According to Wake Forest's president Nathan O. Hatch, "We must conscientiously preserve and offer opportunity to talented students of all economic and cultural backgrounds. I see [the test-optional provision] as a portal to opportunity—an alternate track for young people who are talented and would otherwise be denied the opportunity for the best education simply because they don't do as well on standardized tests." (For more on Wake Forest's decision, read <http://www.wfu.edu/magazine/2008.09/sat/>.)

The examples offered here are just a sampling of selective four-year institutions that now offer a test-optional route to admission. Institutions with test-optional policies have seen no adverse effect on academic quality or rankings, for which freshman test scores are only one small factor, and many have succeeded in attracting more high-achieving students. Some other trends that adopters of test-optional admission policies have noticed include: a robust increase in applications in the first year, with about 20 to 30 percent of students applying as non-submitters; applicant pools that are more diverse in racial, ethnic and socioeconomic composition and in the range of expressed interests of study; and enrolled classes with significant increases in ethnic minority, low-income (Pell-eligible) and first-generation students.

Similar to these highlighted institutions, DePaul will engage in research during the test-optional pilot program to assess outcomes and evaluate the success of the program for students and the institution.

RESEARCH AND OPINION PIECES ON TEST-OPTIONAL ADMISSION

Just Google "test optional" and you'll get a flood of links to myriad sources that have something to say about the test-optional issue in higher education. To help you weed through the Web links, we've compiled a list of credible research reports, websites and news articles at <http://depaul.edu/emm/TestOptional/index.asp#TestOpExternal>.

If you have questions or feedback, contact David H. Kalsbeek, Ph.D., senior vice president for Enrollment Management and Marketing, at dkalsbee@depaul.edu.

The mission of DePaul's Division of Enrollment Management and Marketing (EM&M) is to improve and enhance DePaul's competitive market position and prominence in order to increase DePaul's capacity to achieve the goals of the VISION twenty12 plan in a manner consistent with DePaul's Catholic, urban and Vincentian character.

Past issues of this newsletter are posted on the Division of Enrollment Management and Marketing's website at www.depaul.edu/emm/about/division.asp.