

The Use of Standardized Testing in Admissions: Summary of Key Findings

April 2024

Introduction

In April 2020, Cornell suspended the requirement for SAT/ACT exam scores for undergraduate applications for admission. This was largely a response to the logistical difficulties accessing testing locations with the onset of the COVID pandemic, but the decision also eased some concerns that the flaws that inhere in standardized tests undermine some of Cornell’s admissions goals.

As shown in Table 1, four of the undergraduate colleges adopted “score-free” policies (where test scores that have been provided to Cornell by the testing agencies are not uploaded into the admissions data reviewing system¹), and the remaining colleges have “test-optional” policies (where official test scores are easily available to the reader and may inform the admission decision).

In the spring semester of 2023—following two cycles of fall first year admissions—the Provost charged a Task Force on Testing in Admissions to look at the impact of removing the testing requirement by considering the following questions:

- Does the submission of test scores alter admission chances in the test-optional colleges?
- Do test-optional or score-free admissions policies impact the socioeconomic or racial/ethnic composition of admitted students?
- Is there evidence that the use of test scores enhances student outcomes at Cornell?

The Task Force delivered a confidential report in May 2023 that summarized findings relating to the matriculating cohorts of Fall 2021 and Fall 2022.

¹ If an applicant self-reports scores on the Common Application, those scores are viewable through a PDF of the application materials in both “score-free” and “test-optional” colleges. In the score-free colleges, reviewers are asked not to consider those scores.

At the request of the Provost, these analyses were updated in the spring of 2024 by the office of Institutional Research & Planning. The updated findings, described below, reinforce and extend the more tentative conclusions from the earlier report.

Notable findings from both rounds of analyses include:

- There is not a clear indication that the relaxation of the testing requirement has increased the diversity of matriculating first year students.
- In Cornell’s “test optional” colleges (where applicants test scores can be considered in the review process), the submission of test scores has a substantial and statistically significant impact on the chances of being admitted.
- Students admitted with known test scores had better academic outcomes than students who were admitted without test scores.

Opting to provide test scores

Official test scores are provided to Cornell by the testing provider at an applicant’s request.² As shown in Table 1, a minority of applicants had a test score sent to Cornell. In Fall 2023, just 24% of Cornell’s undergraduate applicants provided an official score.

Table 1. Percentage of Fall freshman applicants submitting an SAT or ACT score

Test policy	College	Applicants			Acceptances			Enrolls		
		Fall 2021	Fall 2022	Fall 2023	Fall 2021	Fall 2022	Fall 2023	Fall 2021	Fall 2022	Fall 2023
Test optional	A&S	31%	28%	24%	53%	52%	50%	67%	63%	62%
	Engineering	35%	34%	30%	57%	64%	61%	71%	77%	75%
	CHE	42%	33%	28%	52%	53%	45%	65%	63%	54%
	ILR	32%	28%	23%	69%	43%	43%	74%	47%	46%
	Brooks ³			23%			43%			53%
Score free	CALS	29%	24%	20%	38%	23%	21%	39%	24%	22%
	AAP	26%	22%	18%	39%	26%	17%	40%	26%	17%
	JCB-Dyson	27%	19%	12%	39%	18%	11%	40%	18%	11%
	JCB-Nolan	22%	18%	18%	30%	21%	20%	30%	21%	18%
Total	University	31%	28%	24%	50%	44%	42%	59%	50%	48%

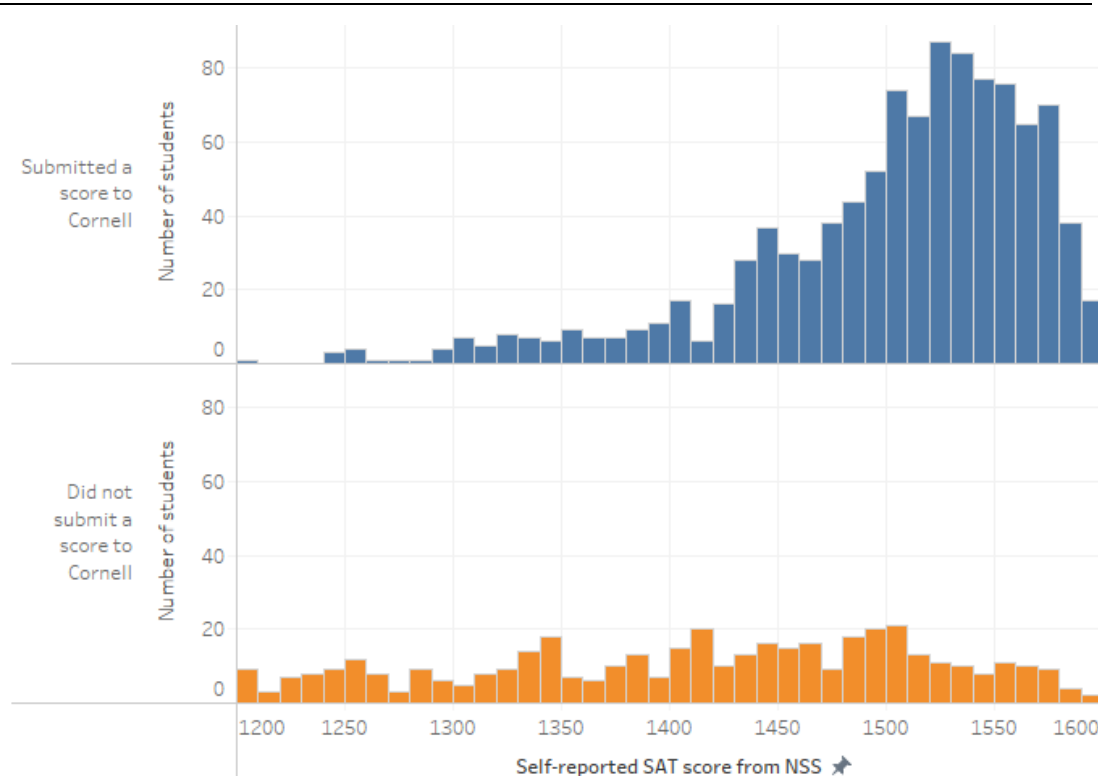
² The request to have test scores sent to an institution may occur well before submitting a college application, such at the time of taking the test. This may explain why some students had their scores sent even when they [later?] applied to one of the score-free colleges.

³ The Brooks School of Public Policy became an admitting unit during the period of interest.

While Cornell did not receive test scores from most applicants, data from the Fall 2022 administration of Cornell’s *New Student Survey*⁴ indicate that 91% of matriculating first-years took either or both the SAT and/or the ACT. Indeed, 70% had taken the SAT (or the ACT) test multiple times.

When test scores are an optional part of the admissions process, the decision to provide a test score is a question of strategy.⁵ Presumably, many applicants guessed that providing their scores would hurt their chances of admissions. Indeed, self-reports of test scores on the survey indicate that those who did *not* submit their SAT scores to Cornell tended to score lower than those who did (see Figure 1). Notably, it appears that some applicants with perfect and near perfect scores did not submit them.

Figure 1. Self-reported SAT scores of Fall 2022 *New Student Survey* respondents, by whether scores were submitted to Cornell by the test agencies



⁴ This survey of first-year students had a 79% response rate and ask students how many times, if any, they had taken the SAT and the ACT. It also asked students to self-report their scores. The comparison of self-reported test scores with official test scores when possible indicates that the score self-reports are accurate.

⁵ In test-optional colleges, there has not been a way for the applicant to have test information suppressed on the application if it has been provided to Cornell already. Thus, it is possible that some applicants provided test scores to Cornell somewhat unintentionally.

Whether it is “strategic” to submit a score with one’s application may not be immediately apparent to high school students: teenagers with differential access to the resources that may help them navigate the question to their best advantage.

Data from the 2022 *New Student Survey* suggest that students’ decisions to share test scores are shaped by social background factors such as the type of high schools they attended, their family incomes, and their access to and use of guidance counselors. Among students who scored above 1400 on the SAT, for example, Black students were less likely than White and Asian students to have submitted their test scores: 62% of Black students versus 74% of White students and 79% of Asian students with these high scores sent them to Cornell.

To the extent that students from different kinds of backgrounds are differentially deciding to withhold scores that are strong enough to help them gain admission to Cornell, test-optional policies may undermine equity in admissions.

Access

Because standardized test scores are systematically correlated with indicators of privilege, some have anticipated that removing the test requirement could facilitate access for applicants who are low income; Black, Hispanic, and/or Indigenous; and those who are the first in their family to attend college.

Others have argued that test scores read in context can buttress the case for admission among applicants who may not have the clear signals of strong application (such as coming from a known and well-regarded high school, informative letters of recommendation, and AP exams). Read with an appreciation for context, an applicant with a test score that may be below the average for Cornell students but that is well above average for their high school may be considered a desirable admit. Test scores enable those types of decisions.

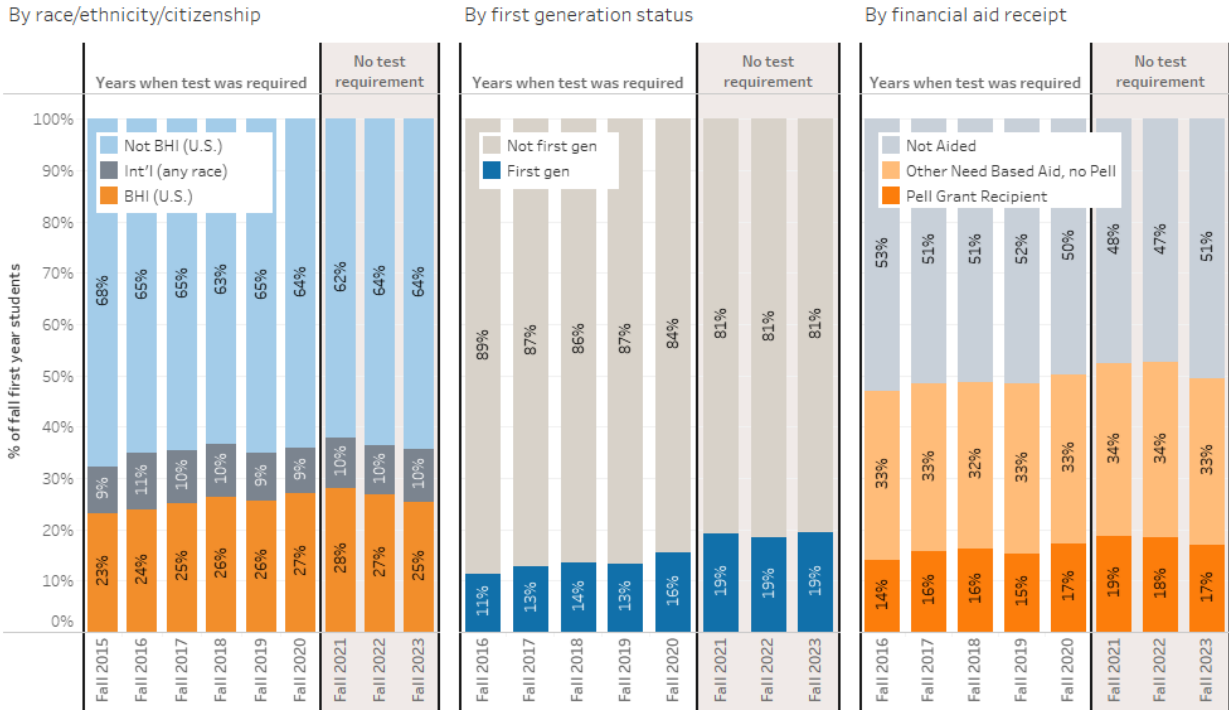
On the whole, it does not appear that the shift in Cornell’s testing policy has played a major role in diversifying first year students by race/ethnicity/citizenship, first generation status, or family income (see Figure 2). While there are some very modest shifts between the Fall 2020

cohort (that submitted required test scores) and the cohorts that followed (that did not), the movement towards increasing representation of less advantaged groups has been in process for several years. For example, the percentage of first year students who are Black, Hispanic and/or Indigenous (BHI) increased from 23% to 27% in the five years preceding the pandemic. In Fall 2021, that percentage increased further to 28%, but has declined very slightly to 25% in Fall 2023.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of a shift is with respect to first generation status (see middle panel of Figure 2) where the percentage of the class that is first generation increased from 16% to 19% between 2020 and 2021 and has remained at that level in the subsequent matriculating cohorts. However, the proportion of the class that is first generation had been increasing prior to the policy shift as well, so too this could be considered as a piece of a broader trend.

If the policy shift away from testing has substantially enhanced access to Cornell, it has done so in ways that elude simple measurements.

Figure 2. Composition of first-time first-year students by matriculation semester: race/ethnicity/citizenship,⁶ first generation college student, and financial aid status



⁶ Students who identify as Black, Hispanic, and/or Indigenous are grouped here as “BHI.”

Chance of admission

As shown in Table 1 above, less than a third of applicants submitted test scores since the test requirement was removed. However, more than 40% of our acceptances and about half of matriculating freshmen had provided scores.

This difference could reflect the fact that, on balance, students who submit test scores are stronger applicants on other dimensions. That is, they might have stronger academic records in high school, stronger letters of recommendation and so forth.

In test-optional colleges—where the difference between applicant and admit submission rates is much larger—it could also result from admissions officers being more likely to admit students when the officers could see the test scores.

Regression models that estimate the probability of admission holding constant several other factors—including high school GPA and additional student and high school characteristics—suggest that submitting test scores significantly increases the likelihood of admission in the test-optional colleges but has little or no effect in the score free colleges.

The differential impact under the two policy scenarios suggests that admissions officers are using the test scores to inform decisions when they are available. Given this finding, it seems prudent for those applying under the test-optional policy to send in their test scores.

Academic outcomes

Previous studies at Cornell and elsewhere have found that SAT scores are significant predictors of first-year GPAs.

The vast majority of students who have matriculated at Cornell—with or without known test scores—have performed well here. However, those who were admitted without test scores tended to have somewhat weaker semester GPAs, were more likely to fall out of “good academic standing,”⁷

⁷ To maintain good academic standing, a student must successfully complete at least 12 academic credits and have a GPA of at least 2.0 each semester.

and were less likely to re-enroll semester after semester. These patterns hold true holding constant students' high school GPAs as well as other personal and high school attributes.

There is no evidence that these differences have diminished across cohorts of matriculants; the gap in first semester GPA has remained consistent for all three years of new admits.

The association with GPA may be attenuating somewhat as students accumulate more semesters of experience at the university. That is, the gap is smaller in the third semester than it is after the first semester. This is encouraging for those students who have persisted, but the robust evidence of increased rates of academic struggle and attrition remains a concern.

The analyses of outcomes are consistent in suggesting that when admissions officers have test scores available to them as additional information in a holistic admissions process, they are able to use them in a way that supports positive outcomes for Cornell students.

2023 Task Force Members

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