

Longitudinal Trends in U.S. Undergraduate Admissions Policies: 2001–2020

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Growing attention to promoting equity in the United States has fostered two major developments in admissions practices in higher education. The first is making the submission of standardized test scores optional. The second is emphasizing the use of holistic practices aimed at assessing the “whole applicant” rather than focusing solely on test scores and grades when making admissions decisions.

To address concerns that standardized test scores vary by applicants’ demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., gender, ethnicity/race, privilege), undergraduate institutions have increasingly adopted test-optional policies (TOPs). Although a small number of institutions established TOPs in the 1970s and 1980s (Barshay, 2021; Furuta, 2017; Syverson et al., 2018), attention to the practice greatly increased in 2001 when then-president of the University of California Schools, Richard Atkinson, called for moving away from using the SAT®, partially on the basis of concerns about its implications for fairness (Atkinson, 2001).¹ This trend became more pronounced in 2020 due to

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the dual impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has limited students’ access to standardized testing (Anderson, 2020; Freeman et al., 2021) and heightened attention to pervasive inequities and social injustice in U.S. society (Pleyers, 2020). Universities have instituted a variety of approaches to deal with test scores (e.g., not required but recommended, neither required nor recommended).

Holistic admissions practices are closely aligned with TOPs, and their rise has been linked to the 2003 Supreme Court case *Grutter v. Bollinger* (Espinosa et al., 2015), which endorsed the University of Michigan Law School’s practice of engaging “in a highly individualized, holistic review of each applicant’s file, giving serious consideration to all the ways an applicant might contribute to a diverse educational environment” (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003, p. 4). A major theme of holistic admissions is engendering understanding of the “whole person,” leading to admissions models that incorporate materials such as personal statements and letters of recommendation in addition to more traditional academic metrics, such as test scores and grade point average (GPA; Bastedo et al., 2018; College Board, n.d.). Like TOPs, holistic review practices represent an acknowledgment of the criticism that standardized test scores tend to be higher among individuals from privileged backgrounds due to the time, monetary costs, and educational support often needed to perform well on them.

Despite the rising focus on both TOPs and holistic admissions practices since the early 2000s, little research has examined how TOPs and consideration of non-test-based admissions components have evolved over time (e.g., ACT, 2021) either individually or jointly. This research note aims to narrow this gap by providing a more extensive picture of historical trends in how standardized test scores have been considered and the concomitant

evolution of consideration of other materials (e.g., secondary school GPA, letters of recommendation) in U.S. undergraduate admissions.

About this study

Using national-level data from U.S. undergraduate institutions across 20 years (2001–2020), this research note reports on the historical trends in the requirement and consideration of application materials used in the admissions decision-making process. As concern about diversity has been a major driver of changes in admissions practices over the years, we also explored changes in the racial/ethnic composition of the institutions across the same time period during which we examined changes in admissions practices.

Data were drawn from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS; <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data>), a national data collection system for higher education in the United States. Since 2001, IPEDS has collected data regarding admissions and test scores confined to undergraduate institutions that did not adopt an open admissions policy for entering first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students. Our final sample consists of 4,555 non-open policy institutions from 2001 to 2020, with the number of institutions ranging from 1,989 to 3,047 for each given year.

Our focal measure was based on answers to survey questions regarding institutional considerations of six application components: admissions test scores, secondary school record, secondary school GPA, secondary school rank, completion of college-preparatory program, and recommendations. Regarding how these components were considered, respondents were asked to select among one of four

categories (required, recommended, considered but not required, neither required nor recommended) for each application component. The enrollee racial/ethnic composition data came from the institutional characteristics data from IPEDS, which was merged with information about our focal measures using the institution identification codes.

Key findings

- There has been an ebb and flow of institutions requiring standardized tests in the admissions process, with a sudden drop in test requirements across institutions occurring in 2020.
- Decline in test scores being required in the early 2000s coincided with an increase in institutions not even recommending submission of test scores. However, there has been an increase in institutions that consider test scores but do not require them in the late 2010s.
- Secondary school record (e.g., transcript) was the most consistently required application component in the time period we studied, rising from 80% of institutions in the early 2000s to approximately 90% of institutions in 2020.
- The requirement of secondary school GPA steadily and consistently increased, coinciding with the decline in institutions requiring test scores over the past decade.
- Diversity has grown at approximately the same rate across institutions regardless of test requirement policies.

Study results

What is the historical trend in test-optional policies at the undergraduate level?

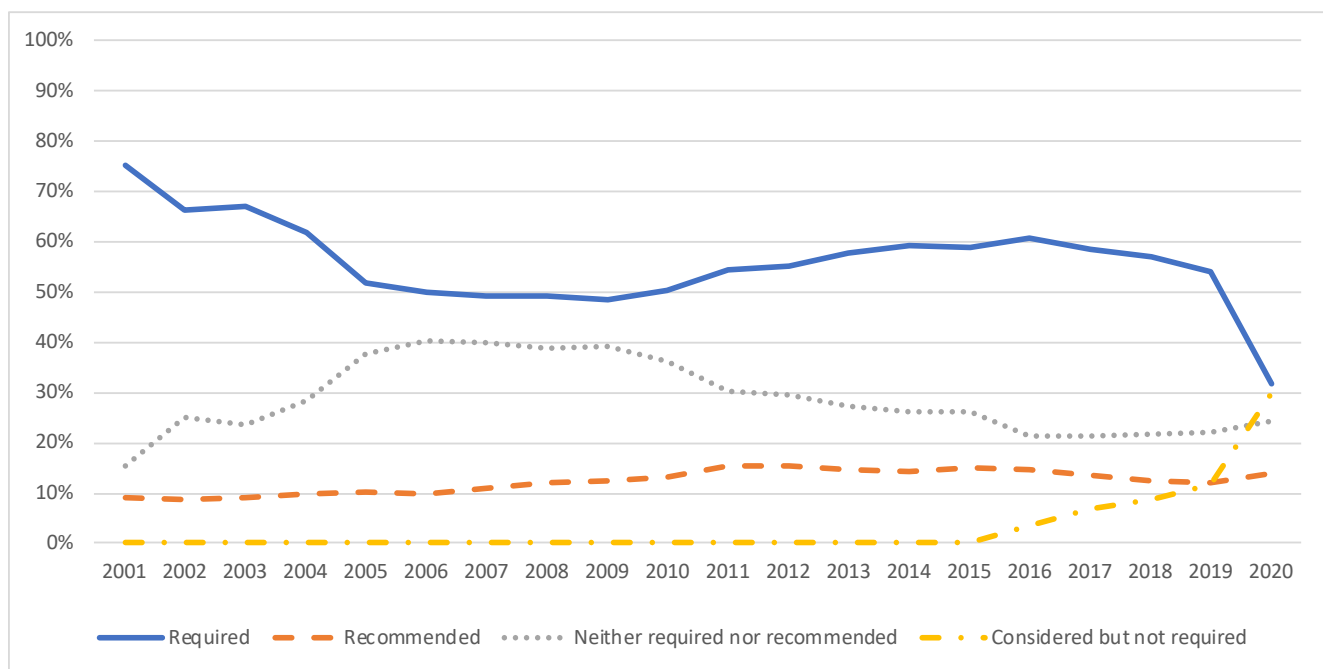
Figure 1 depicts the historical trend in the distribution of institutions classified by how admissions test scores were considered. For a more detailed description of the percentages across selected years, see Table 1. The percentage of institutions that required admissions test scores fluctuated over the years, with a sharp decline during the early 2000s and again in 2020. For example, the percentage of test score–requiring institutions decreased during the early 2000s and remained at about 50% until 2010. Then, it steadily picked up until 2016, when it began to decline, followed by a sharp decline in 2020.

Decreases in tests being required generally coincided with increases in tests being neither required nor recommended. Recommendation and consideration of test scores (but not requiring them) has risen since the mid-2010s, also partly in place of the test-required admissions policies that have been declining in recent years.

What is the historical trend in undergraduate admissions practices more generally?

To understand admissions practices more comprehensively, we examined institutions' consideration of six distinct application materials. A secondary school record was required the most compared to other materials, with around 80–90% of schools requiring it (see Figure 2). The requirement

FIGURE 1: Consideration of standardized admissions test scores from 2001 to 2020



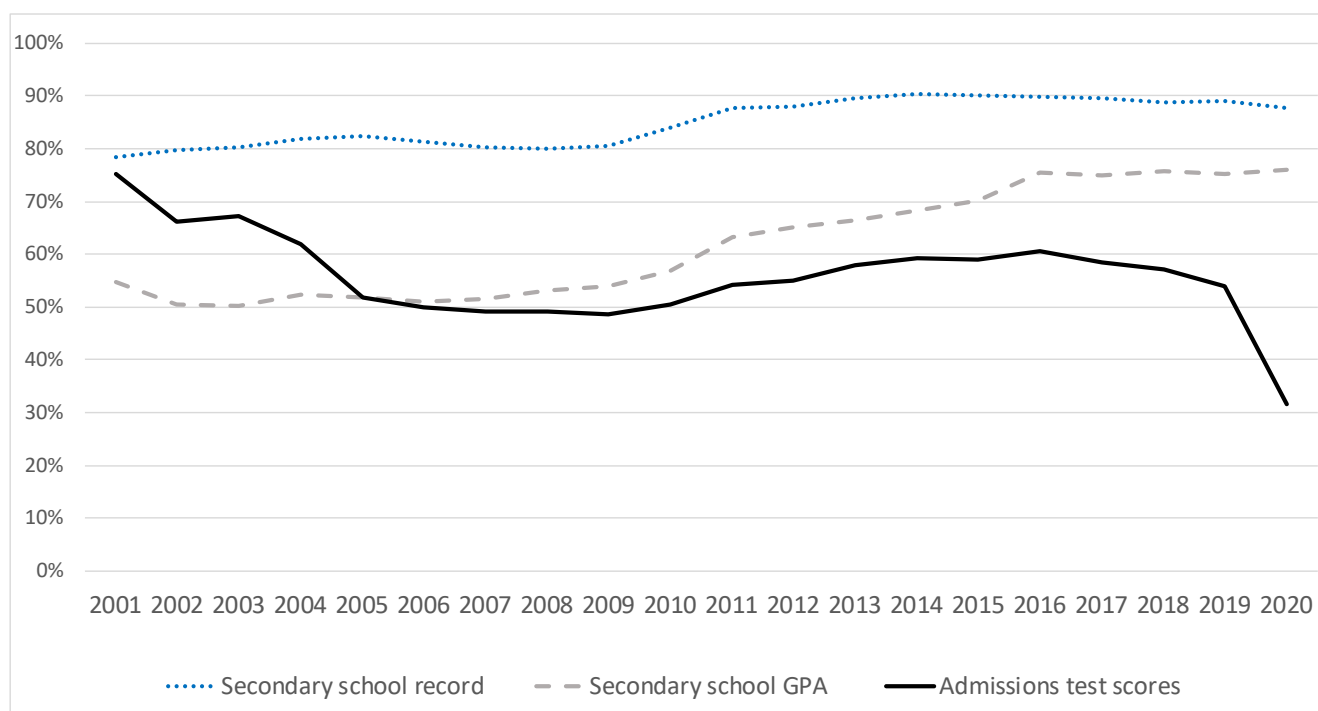
Note: The “considered but not required” category was introduced in 2016.

TABLE 1: Consideration of standardized admissions test scores in selected years

CATEGORY	2001	2005	2010	2015	2019	2020
REQUIRED	75.28%	51.91%	50.51%	58.86%	53.90%	31.62%
RECOMMENDED	9.19%	10.26%	13.13%	15.00%	12.18%	13.98%
NEITHER REQUIRED NOR RECOMMENDED	15.53%	37.83%	36.36%	26.14%	22.08%	24.33%
CONSIDERED BUT NOT REQUIRED	-	-	-	-	11.83%	30.07%

Note: The “considered but not required” category was introduced in 2016.

FIGURE 2: Requirement of secondary school record, secondary school grade point average (GPA), and admissions test scores from 2001 to 2020



of secondary school GPA steadily and consistently increased from about 50% to around 75% over the last two decades. This increase corresponded closely with the general fall in admissions test score requirements, with the requirement for secondary school GPA surpassing the requirement for test scores since 2006.² Of the remaining application components (see

Figure 3), recommendations (30–40%) were required the most, followed by completion of a college preparatory program (20–30%) and secondary school rank (10–20%). Consideration of college preparatory program completion showed a steady rise over the last decade. For a more detailed description of the percentages across selected years, see Table 2.

FIGURE 3: Requirement of college-prep program completion, recommendations, secondary school rank, and admissions test scores from 2001 to 2020

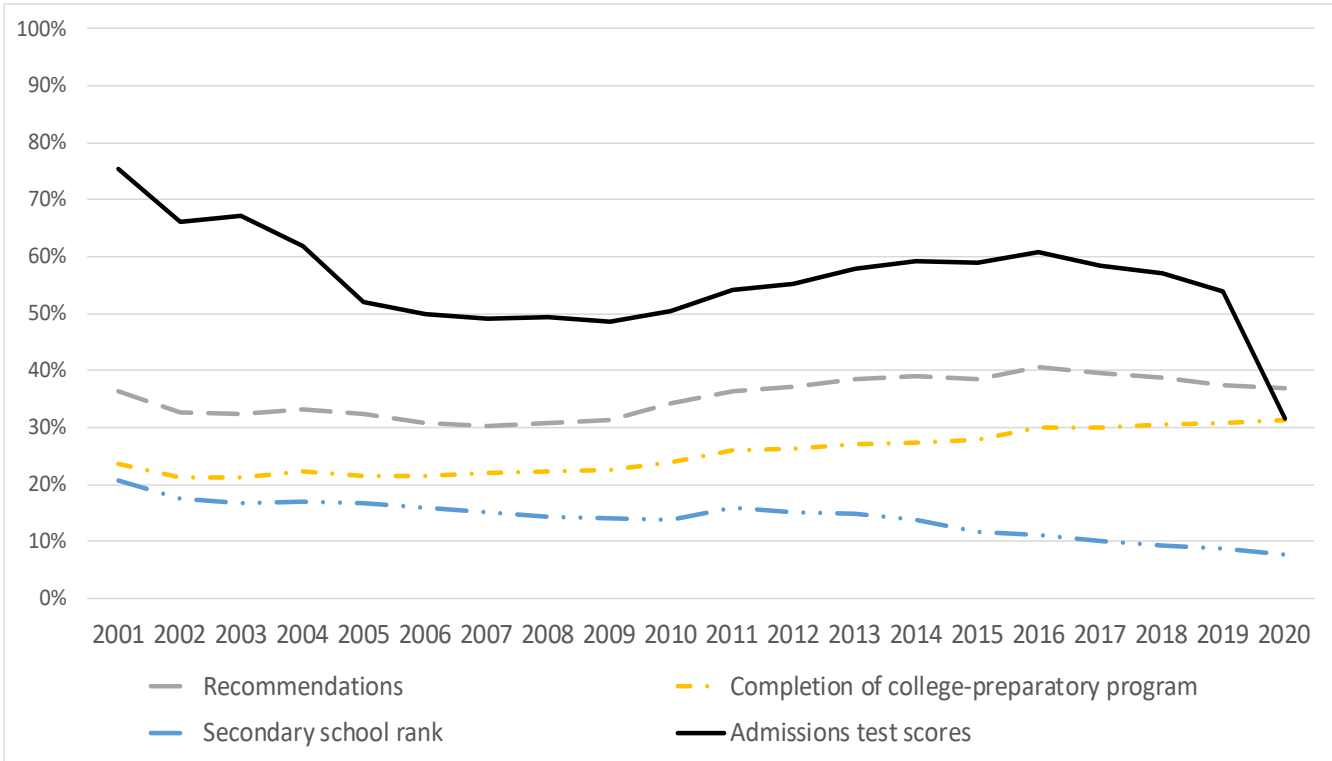
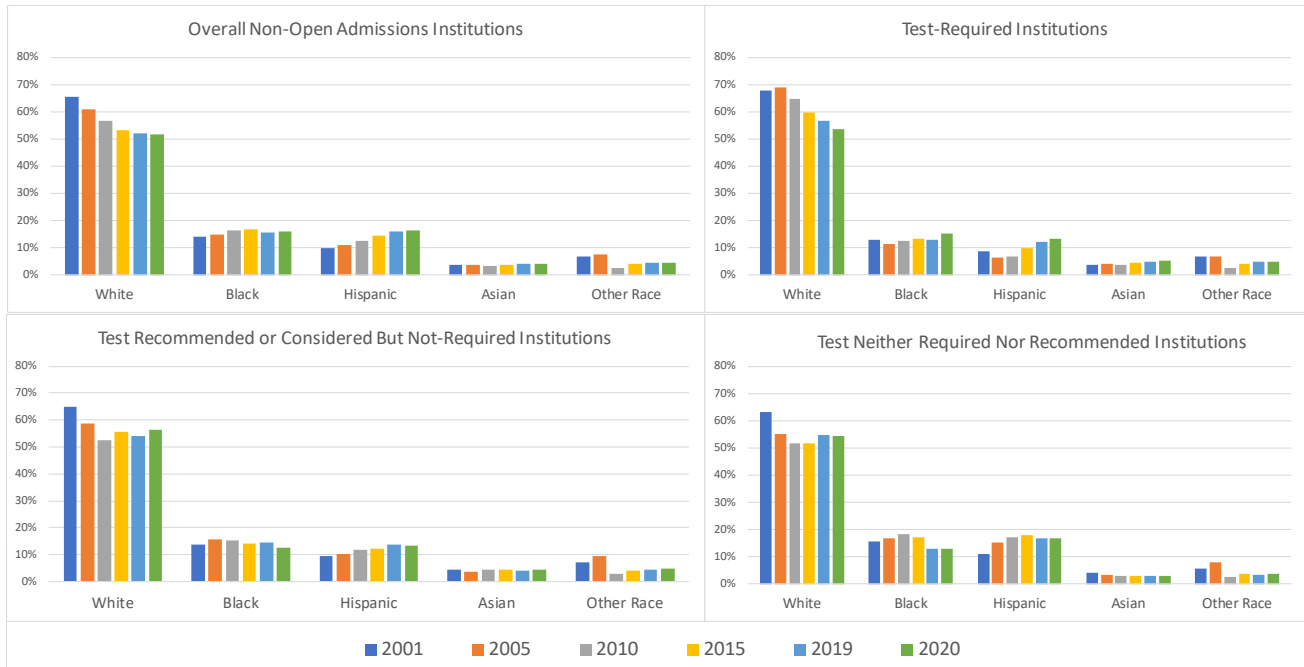


TABLE 2: Percentage of institutions requiring application components in selected years from 2001 to 2020

APPLICATION COMPONENT	2001	2005	2010	2015	2019	2020
ADMISSIONS TEST SCORES	75.28%	51.91%	50.51%	58.86%	53.90%	31.62%
SECONDARY SCHOOL RECORD	78.52%	82.39%	84.09%	90.18%	88.96%	87.63%
SECONDARY SCHOOL GPA	54.62%	51.70%	56.82%	70.20%	75.34%	76.02%
RECOMMENDATIONS	36.40%	32.43%	34.16%	38.50%	37.44%	36.75%
COMPLETION OF COLLEGE-PREP PROGRAM	23.59%	21.40%	23.98%	27.93%	30.78%	31.17%
SECONDARY SCHOOL RANK	20.66%	16.56%	13.81%	11.55%	8.65%	7.74%

Note: GPA = grade point average.

FIGURE 4: Racial/ethnic composition of institutions by admissions testing policy in selected years



Note: Bars in each column represent the following 6 years from left to right: 2001, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2019, and 2020. We did not include institutions that did not require but considered tests, given that category was introduced in 2016.

What is the historical relationship between admissions policies regarding tests and the presence of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds?

Given the attention afforded holistic admissions as a tool for potentially expanding diversity in higher education, we also explored the racial/ethnic composition of the enrollee pools across institutions in our samples by the type of policies they adopted toward tests (see Figure 4). In general, institutions that adopted TOPs tended to have a higher proportion of African American and Hispanic enrollees compared to test-required institutions. However, over time the racial diversity in test-required institutions has steadily grown

to be similar to that of the test-optional institutions. In fact, in the institutions that did not require or recommend tests, the proportion of racially/ethnically underrepresented minority students decreased during the mid to late 2010s.

Conclusion and recommendations

Undergraduate admissions practices can be critical for enhancing access, equity, and diversity in higher education. Our findings suggest that there are varying application components that institutions value at varying degrees and that there are nuanced associations between the implementation of admissions practices and student diversity.

Although our results begin to fill the gap in our knowledge of TOPs, holistic admissions, and their implications for student diversity, much additional work remains to be done in this area. For example, we still lack understanding of exactly how admissions practices are carried out at different institutions, the rationales that guide different practices, and the mechanisms linking these policies to diversity outcomes. In order to better understand various admissions policies and their implications, we recommend deeper investigation into the interplay of multiple admissions components (e.g., Are test-optional institutions more likely to require letters of recommendations or school records?). We also urge researchers to expand this line of work by exploring potential differences in admissions practices across different types of institutions (e.g., 2 year vs. 4 year, public vs. private, selective vs. unselective). Lastly, it would be fruitful to explore how admissions practices translate into diversity across student pools at different stages of the admissions process (e.g., applicants vs. accepted students) as well as postenrollment student success outcomes.

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Notes

- Atkinson (2001) mainly proposed abandoning the usage of math and reading sections (SAT I at the time) and instead utilizing *SAT Subject Tests*® (SAT II), including the writing section. This recommendation nudged the College Board to modify the SAT I to include a writing section in 2005 (La, 2002), and given this change, University of California Schools used SAT scores in admissions until 2021 (Burke, 2021).
- Secondary school records and secondary school GPA are difficult to disentangle, as presumably GPA is typically included in school records and school records are typically the primary source for information about GPA. To address this issue, we conducted supplemental analyses probing trends in institutions requiring school record, GPA, or both. Across the time period we examined, we found that about 2–4% of institutions consistently required GPA but not school record. About 23–33% required school record but not GPA between

2001 and 2015, with a decreasing trend in general; that number dropped to about 15–18% in the latter half of the 2010s. About 50% required both in the 2000s, which steadily increased to be 67% in 2015 and around 72% in the latter 2010s.

Acknowledgments

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