

A JOINT INITIATIVE OF ETS AND NAGAP

What's Now and What's Next in Graduate Admissions Policies

Results From the
ETS/NAGAP 2022 Admissions Survey

Sara Haviland, Joseph Paris, Reginald Gooch, and Jose Sotelo



Graduate admissions processes have undergone historic and unprecedented shifts in the COVID-19 era with the rapid expansion of test-optional admissions policies and holistic review practices. Given the early testing center closures and general uncertainties, the COVID-19 crisis led many schools to adopt test-optional graduate admissions policies, where standardized admissions tests were not required for admission but would be considered if submitted by the applicants. Some programs shifted to test-free graduate admissions policies, where the test was not required and would not be considered at all if submitted.

In partnership with NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, ETS conducted research to better understand how these seismic shifts in admissions policies affect the graduate admissions process and its stakeholders. Our research explicates the goals of these policies, the admissions decision-making strategies implemented by institutions and graduate programs with test-optional and test-free policies, and the experiences of graduate admissions officers and academic department leaders working under these policies.

This work began in the summer of 2021 with a pulse survey regarding the extent and nature of test-optional and test-free policies first reported in Haviland et al. (2022). A follow-up survey in Fall 2022 further explored these themes as the pandemic was beginning to shift toward an endemic phase.

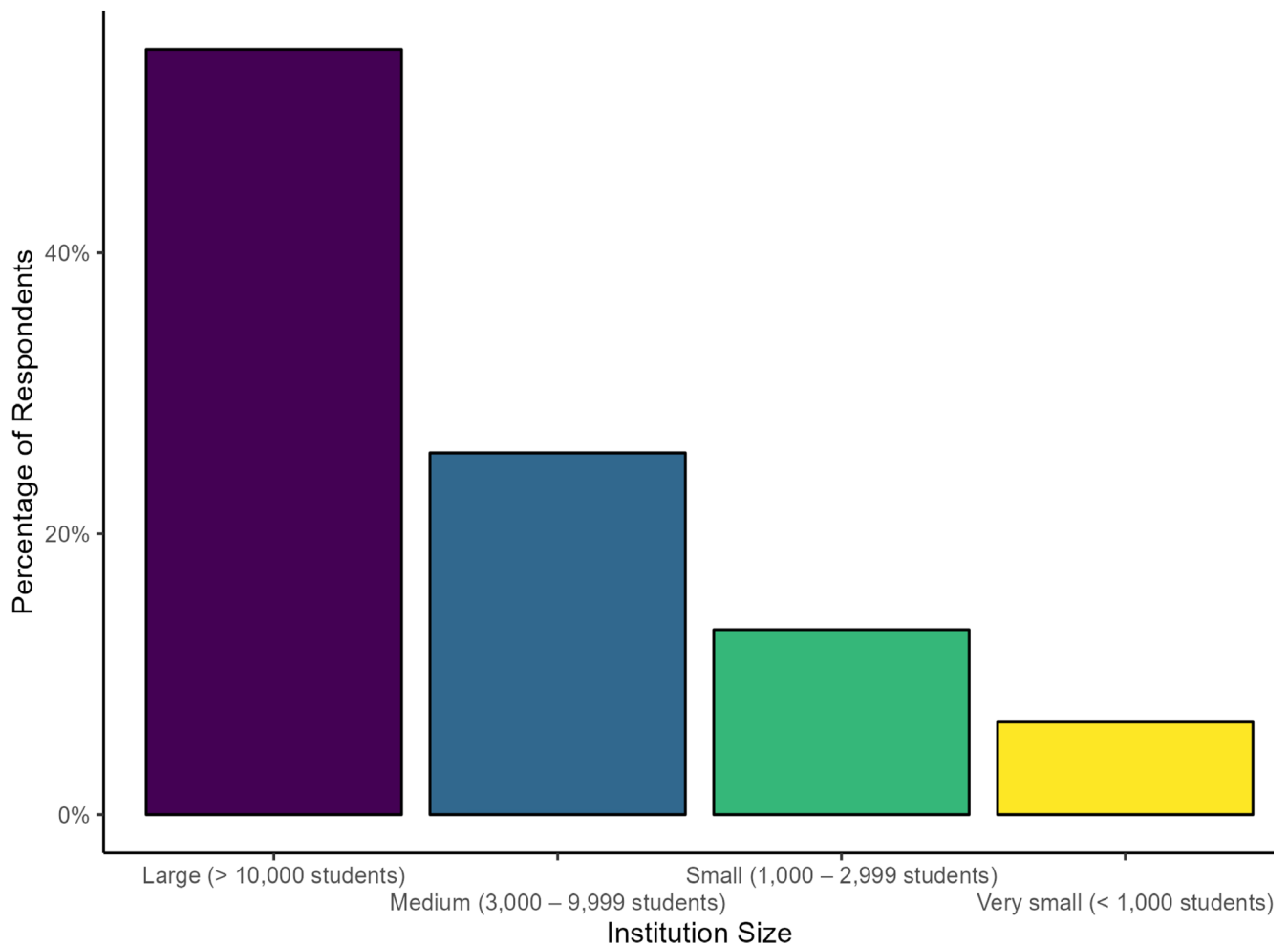
The ETS-NAGAP 2022 Graduate Admissions Survey

We extended direct email invitations to 1,387 NAGAP members in September 2022, inviting them to complete the ETS-NAGAP 2022 Graduate Admissions Survey. A total of 167 members completed at least 50% of the survey questions for a response rate of 12%;¹ participants were not forced to answer questions they were not comfortable answering. Responses to all answers were collected electronically. Respondents were presented with 15–23 questions tailored to their

role in graduate enrollment management (e.g., within an academic department or within an institution-wide admissions office) as well as an invitation to participate in future interviews.

Respondents' institutions represented a diversity of enrollment sizes (see Figure 1), though most worked in large or medium institutions. Of our sample, 45 participants did not provide the name of the

FIGURE 1: Enrollment size of NAGAP 2022 respondents' institutions ($N = 167$)



institution where they work. From the 122 participants who reported their institution, we collected data from 113 distinct institutions. Of the institutions that had multiple respondents, all were classified as a large institution with an enrollment of more than 10,000 students total. We limited our sample to a maximum of three participants reported from any one institution.

Respondents worked in a variety of positions within their institutions (see Table 1). Approximately 29% of respondents worked for an academic school or college within their institution, while 21% worked for an institution-wide graduate admissions office.

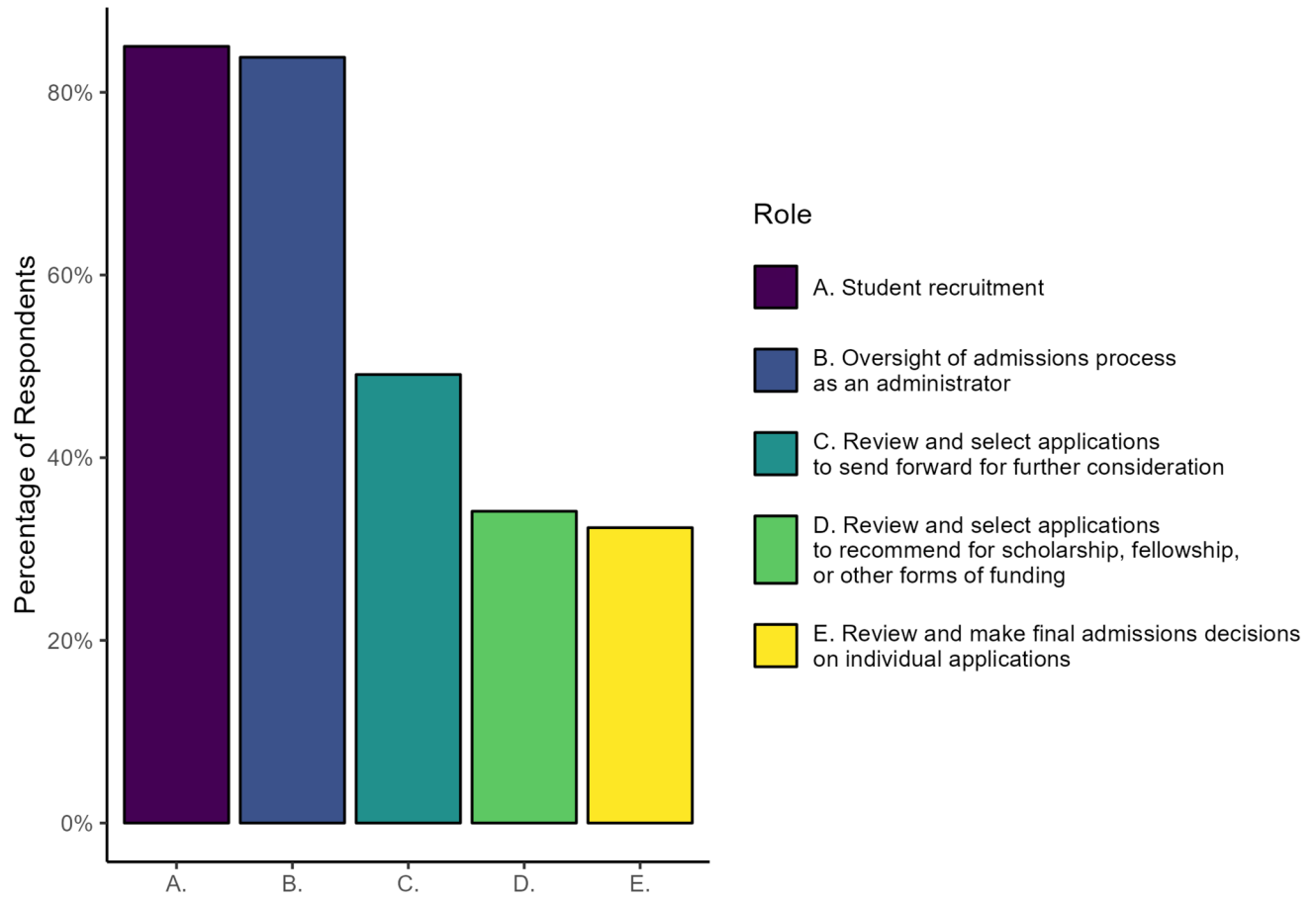
From these different positions across campus, respondents performed a range of roles within the graduate admissions process (see Figure 2). Participants could select all the roles that applied to their participation in the admissions process. Most participants were involved in student recruitment (84%) and in the oversight of the admissions process (83%); fewer participants were involved in making scholarship or fellowship recommendations (34%) or making final admissions decisions (33%), which typically are the responsibility of the academic departments in which graduate programs are housed.

TABLE 1: Frequency of work units listed by admissions officers

WORK UNIT	N	%
ACADEMIC SCHOOL OR COLLEGE WITHIN INSTITUTION	48	28.7
INSTITUTION-WIDE GRADUATE ADMISSIONS OFFICE (EXCLUDING UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS)	35	21.0
INSTITUTION-WIDE GRADUATE SCHOOL OR COLLEGE	28	16.8
ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT OR PROGRAM WITHIN THE INSTITUTION	25	15.0
INSTITUTION-WIDE ADMISSIONS OFFICE (UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE)	15	9.0
INSTITUTION-WIDE ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT OFFICE OR DIVISION (FOR EXAMPLE, ADMISSIONS, FINANCIAL AID, STUDENT SERVICES)	13	7.8
OTHER	3	1.8
TOTAL	167	100.0

Note. Total percentage does not equal 100 due to a rounding error.

FIGURE 2: Respondent role in graduate admissions ($N = 167$)

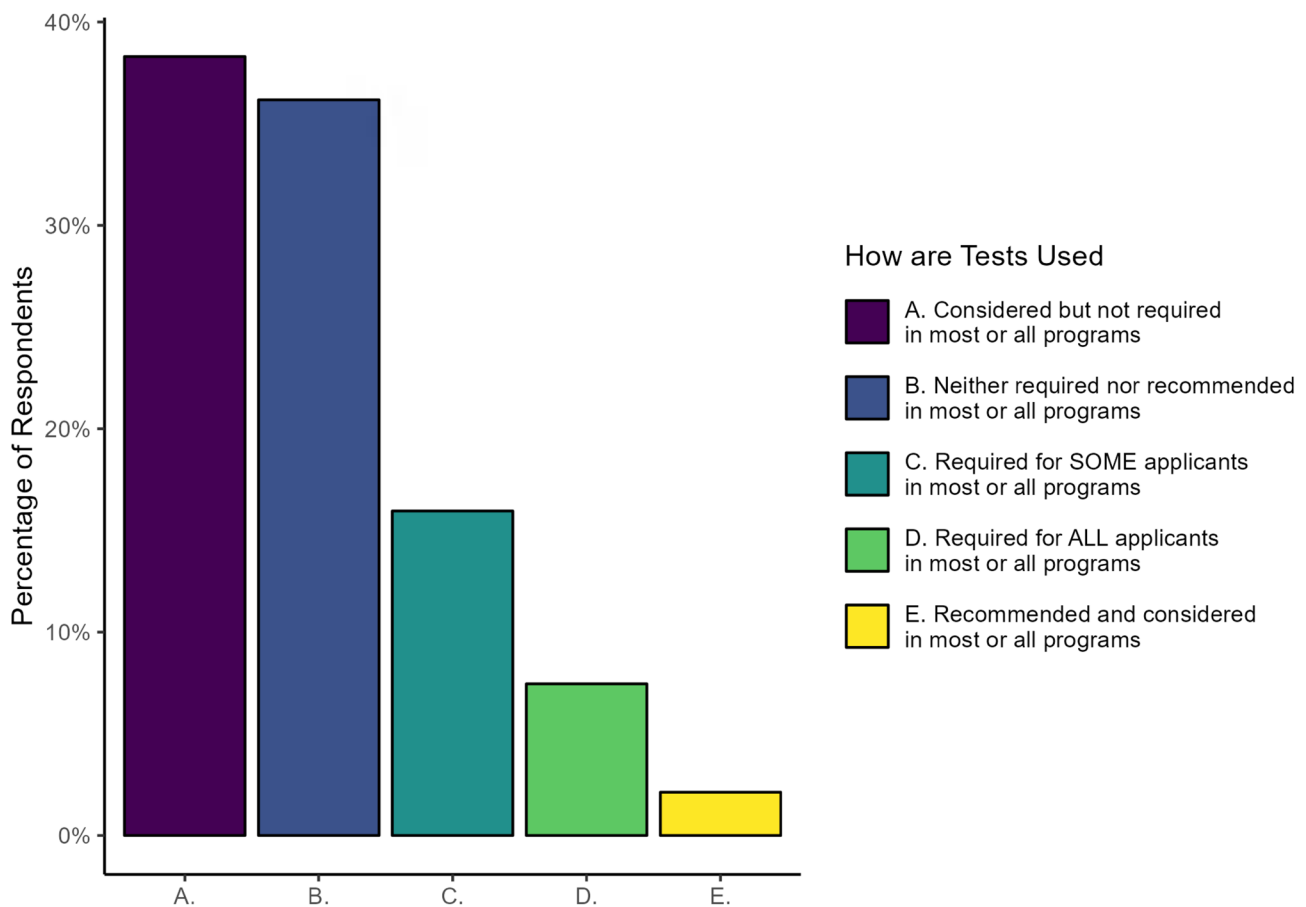


Though less compulsory, test scores remain part of graduate admissions

Only a small number of respondents' institutions required admissions tests for all applicants in most or all programs. Of the 94 respondents, most indicated that standardized tests are considered but not required for most programs (38%) or neither required nor recommended for most programs (36%; see Figure 3). With the respondents who noted that the tests were required for some applicants in most or all programs (16%), required for all applicants in most or all programs (16%), required for all applicants in most or all programs (7%), or recommended and considered in most or

all programs (2%), roughly 64% of all respondents' institutions utilized admissions tests in some way. These counts are a snapshot in time; however, we note that our findings are similar to the 2021 version of the survey as reported by Haviland et al. (2022). Yet, we did not conduct a panel study, and these are not the same respondents as those who participated in the study conducted by Haviland et al. Therefore, we can speak of trends generally, but interpretations about these trends are made with caution.

FIGURE 3: How tests are used in graduate admissions (N = 94)

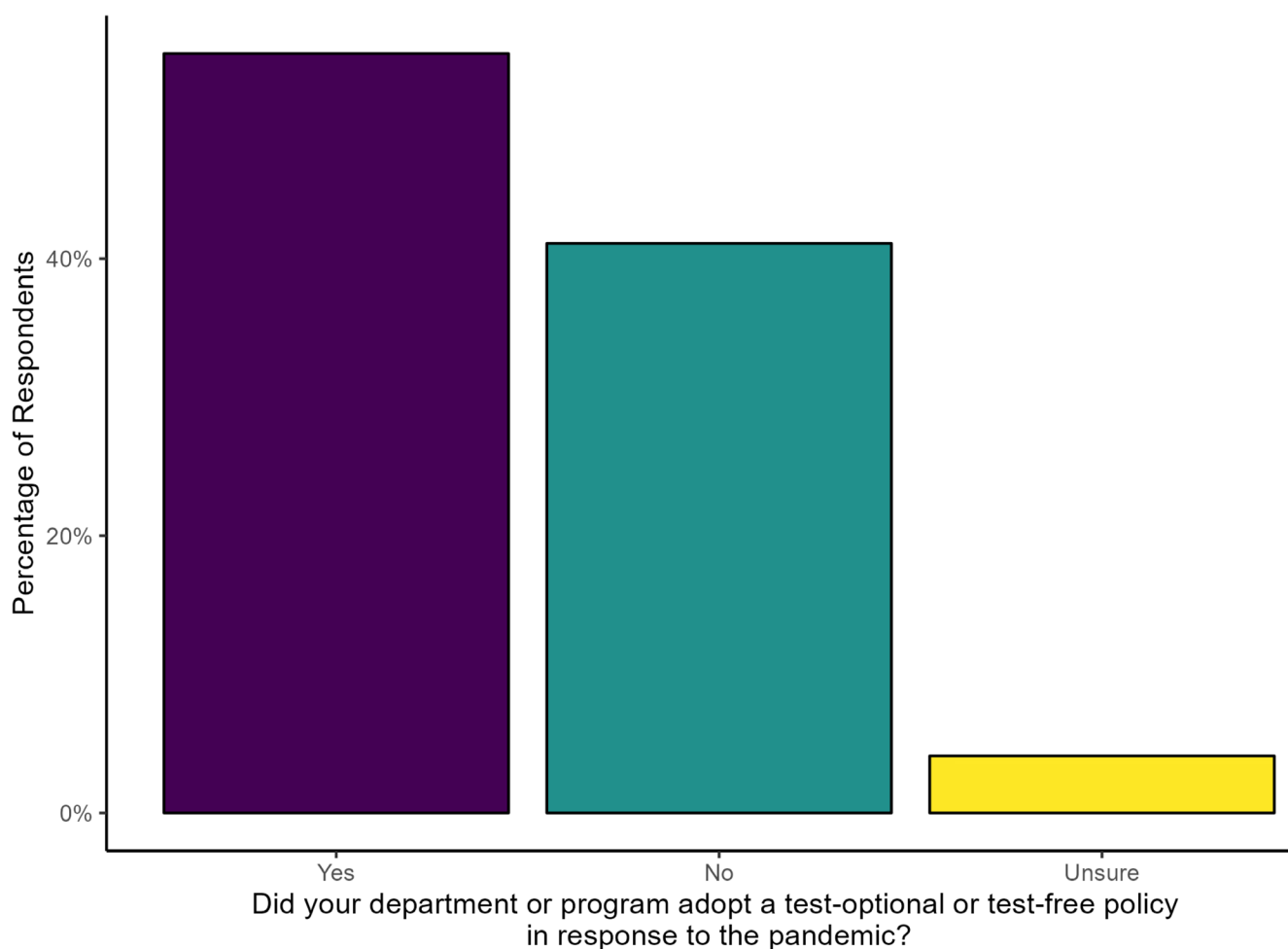


With a variety of motivations, test-optional policies appear to be here to stay

When considering the question if test-optional policies were adopted in response to the pandemic, more than half (54%) of respondents at institutions with test-optional or test-free policies indicated that these policies were adopted because of the pandemic (see Figure 4). Similarly, in Haviland et al. (2022), 59% of respondents indicated their test-optional or test-free policies were adopted in response to the pandemic.

This year, however, most believed that their institutions would retain the same policies in the future (see Figure 5). Of the 123 respondents to the question, 77% of institutions were not actively considering returning to test-required admissions whereas 15% were unsure. Last year, 29% of respondents remained unsure whether their institutions' test-optional or test-free policies would continue in the future, indicating that

FIGURE 4: Whether test-optional was in response to pandemic (N = 74)



graduate enrollment management professionals may have gained more clarity about future test-optional or test-free policies in their programs or at their institutions over the past year.

Reasons for adopting test-optional policies often reflect the goals and priorities of each institution and their beliefs around testing. Figure 6 depicts the factors that prompted participants' institutions to adopt a test-optional policy. Each participant could select up to five

factors; 167 participants selected a total of 598 factors. The top factor chosen was improving equity, with 82 participants (49%) selecting that factor (16% of the total factors). Seeking a more diverse admitted class factored into the decision to adopt a test-optional admissions policy at 37% of respondents' institutions. Many respondents (39%) felt that standardized tests did not measure what they needed to know or that there were other ways to learn what the tests told them (26%).

FIGURE 5: Whether a return to test-required admissions is being considered (N = 123)

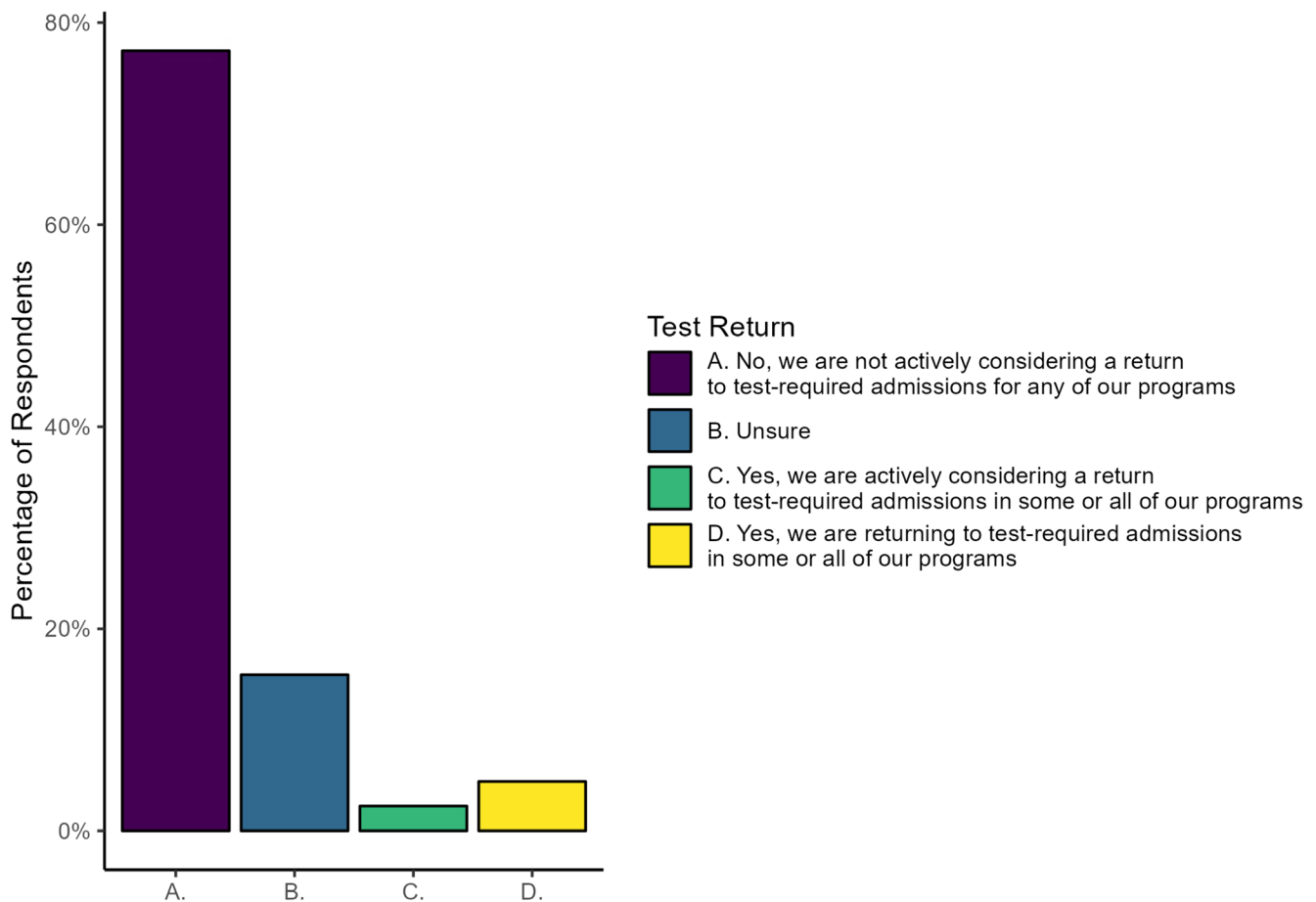
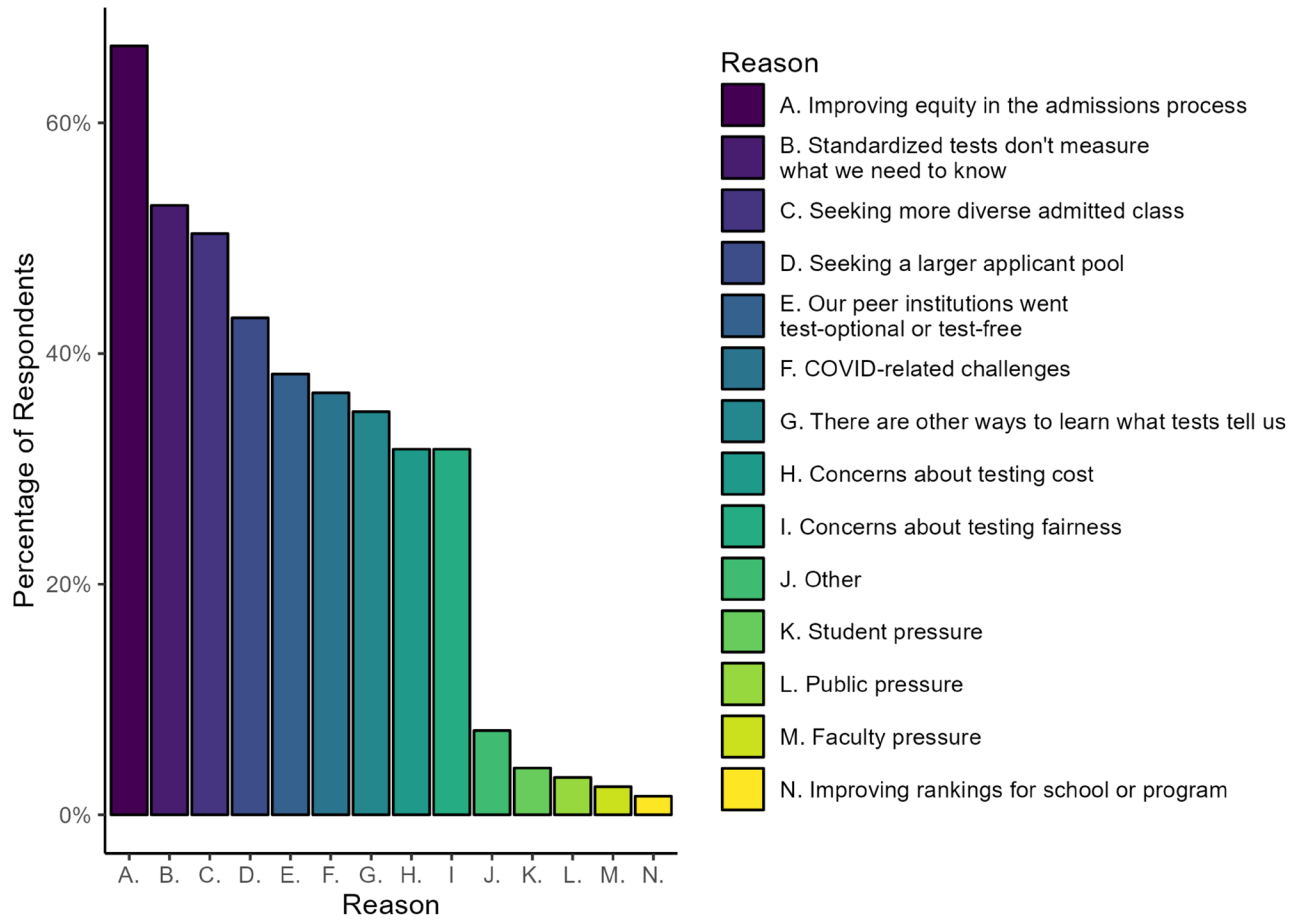


FIGURE 6: Reasons why institutions adopted test-optional policies (N = 167)



Holistic admissions perceived as path toward equity

In tandem with the proliferation of test-optional and test-free policies, it is increasingly common to hear that graduate programs and institutions are pursuing a holistic admissions approach. Definitions of this approach may vary, but typically holistic admissions involve considering the ways in which applicants' individual characteristics may contribute to the learning environment of their intended graduate program through an individualized, serious consideration of the applicants' whole admissions package (Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003). In this section, respondents were asked whether they would consider their school's or program's graduate admissions practices to be holistic admissions; an overwhelming 79% responded that they believed they were (see Figure 7).

Participants were asked to consider the advantages of holistic admissions, as demonstrated in Figure 8. Each participant could select up to five advantages out of 10 options. Our full sample of 167 participants answered the question, making 701 total factor selections. The top perceived advantages of holistic admissions were that it may better highlight student strengths and abilities (82% of participants selected), may improve equity (81%), and may foster a more diverse admitted student class (78%).

Figure 9 depicts respondents' concerns about holistic admissions. Each participant could select up to five concerns from 11 options. Our full sample of 167 participants answered the questions, making a total of 574 factor selections. The top concerns with holistic admissions were that application evaluation may be inconsistent/unreliable (69%), it may introduce too much subjectivity in the decision process (69%), standards for application evaluation may be unclear

(63%), and application evaluation may take longer (57%).

When asked whether holistic admissions had improved equity at their institution, 73% of respondents believed that it had (another 22% were unsure; a very small minority of 4% did not believe it had improved), as depicted in Figure 10. Respondents who answered affirmatively were further asked how specifically holistic admissions had improved equity at their institutions; they were presented with five common answers gleaned from interviews conducted in conjunction with the 2021 ETS-NAGAP Pulse Survey and were able to select all that applied.

These 97 respondents made a total of 302 selections. The two options that participants selected the most often, with 72% of our sample selecting each of those options, were (a) they accepted students that they might have missed and (b) they accepted students who do not do well on tests but can succeed in graduate school. Increasing diversity was also seen as a result of adding students from a broader range of socioeconomic statuses (67%) and making the class more representative in terms of race and ethnicity (55%). The least-often picked option noted that the admissions test was irrelevant to the program, so they removed that barrier (45%).

FIGURE 7: Whether institution uses holistic admissions policies (N = 167)

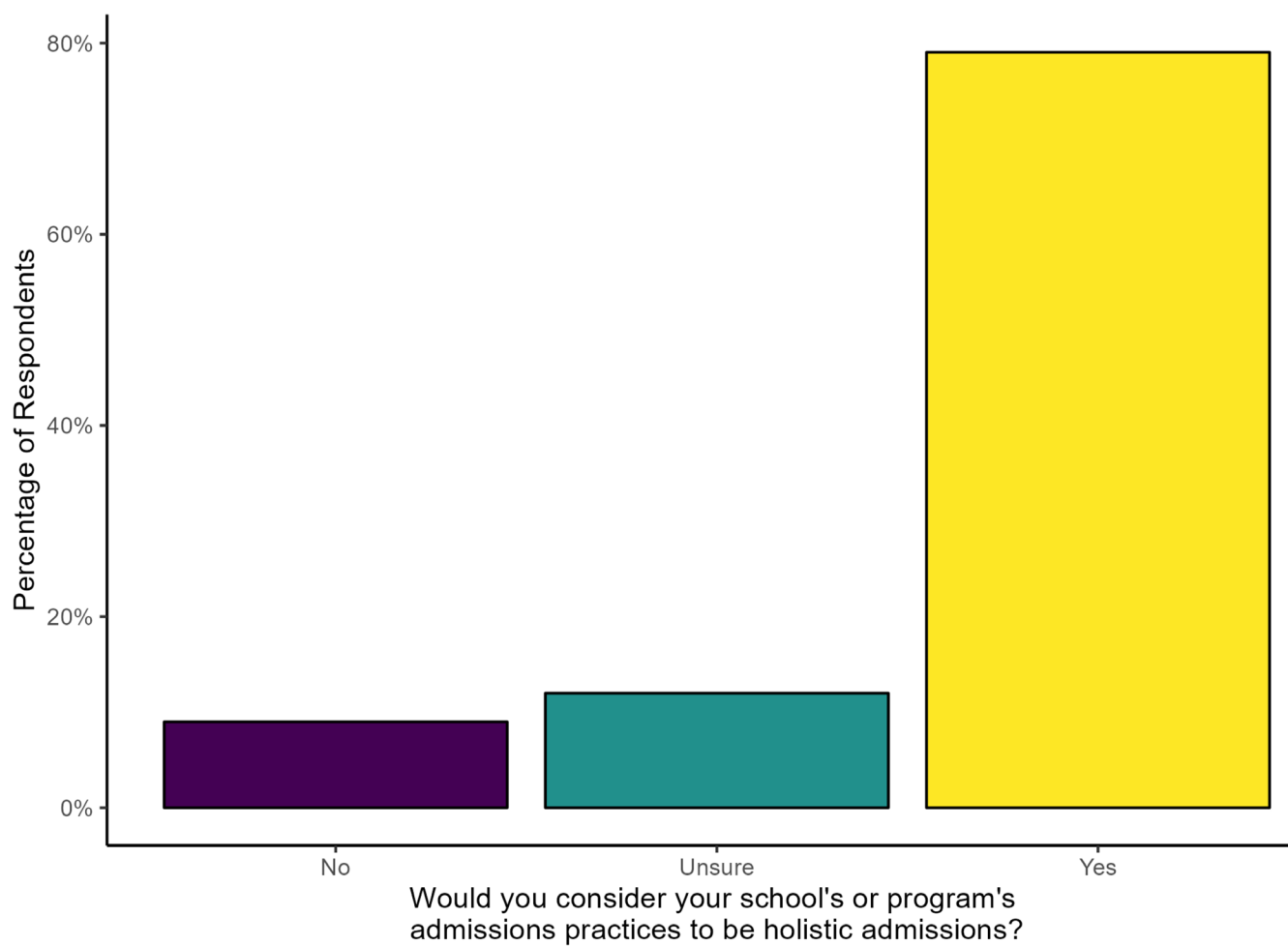


FIGURE 8: Advantages of holistic admissions (N = 167)

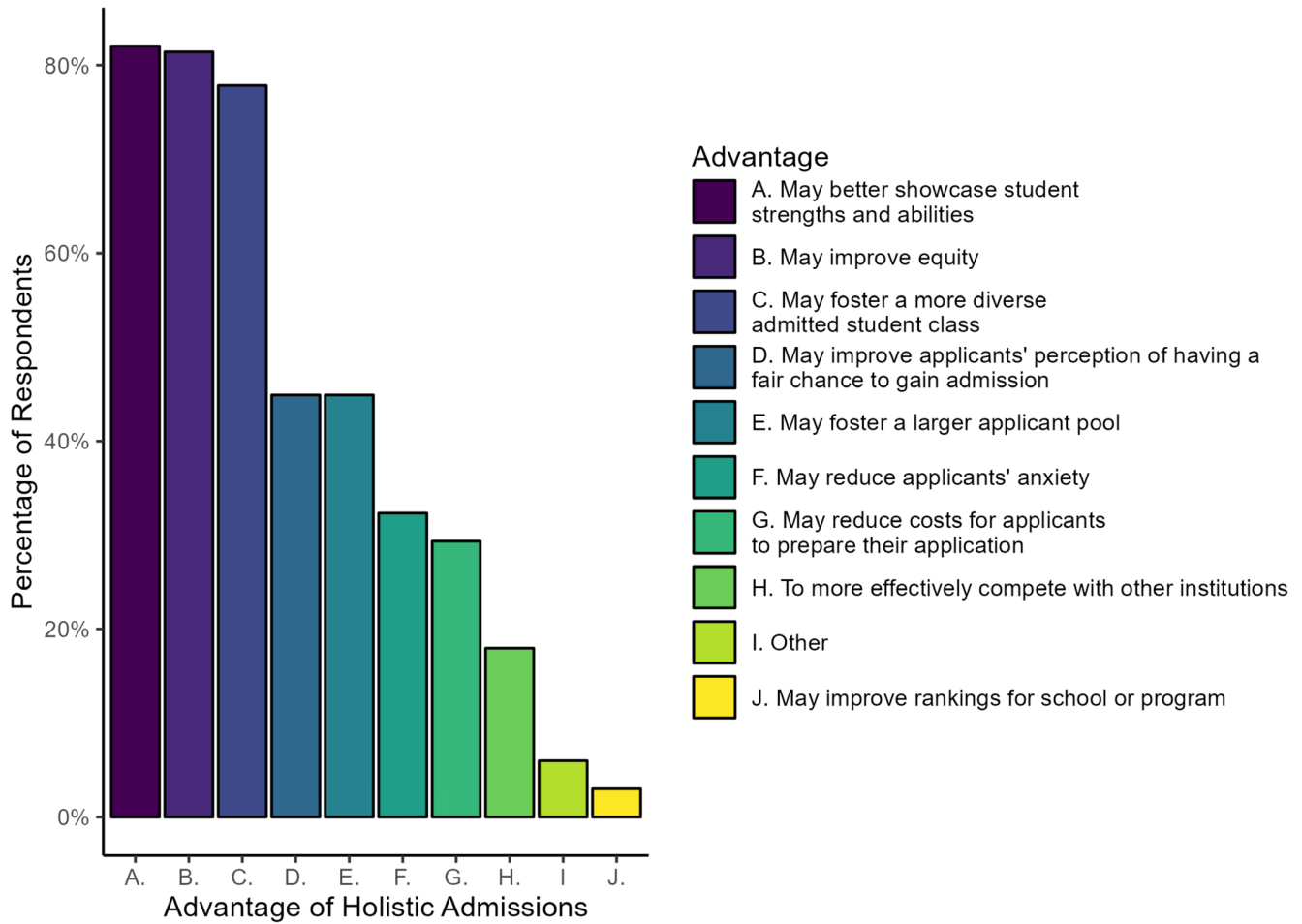


FIGURE 9: Concerns about holistic admissions (N = 167)

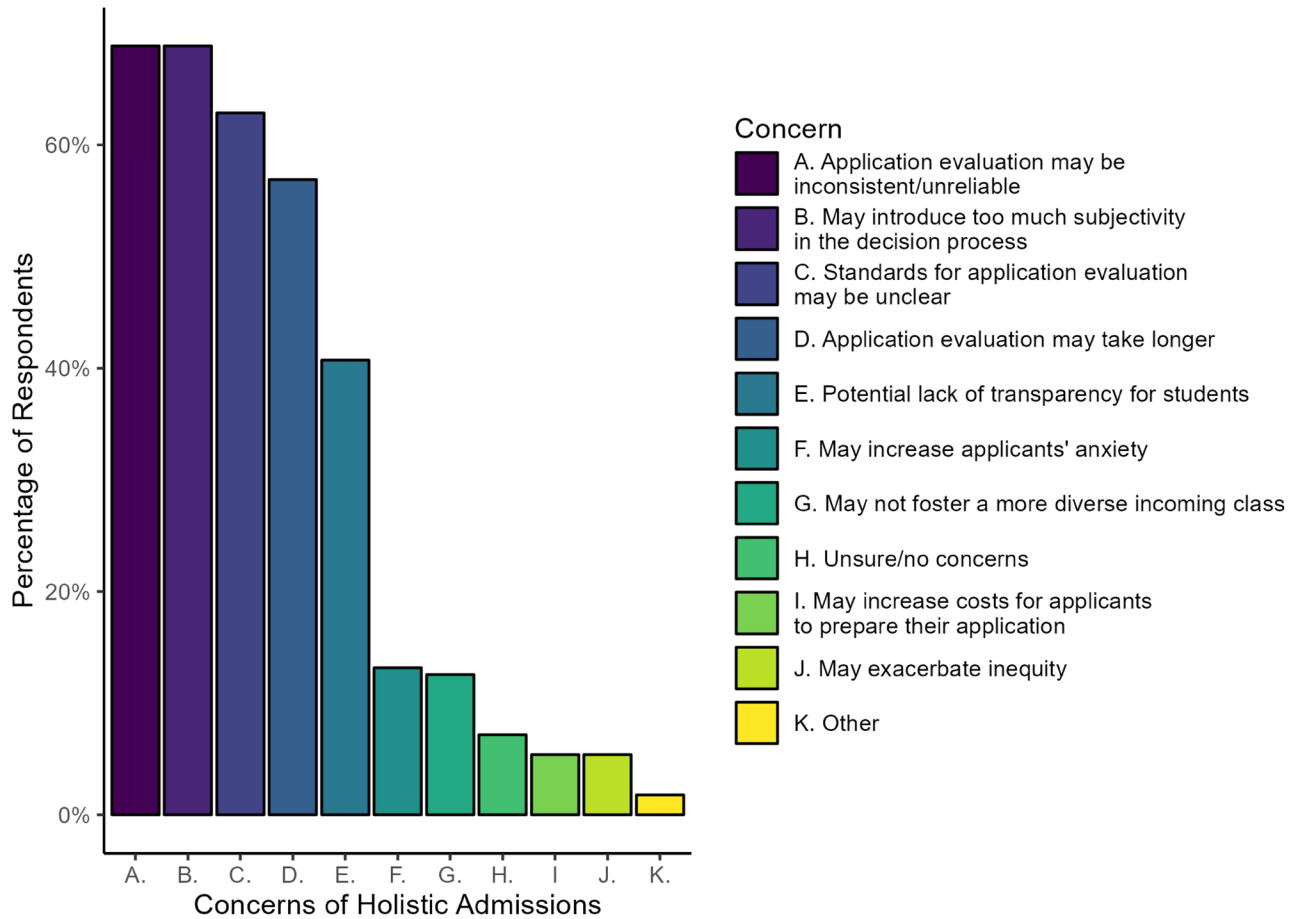
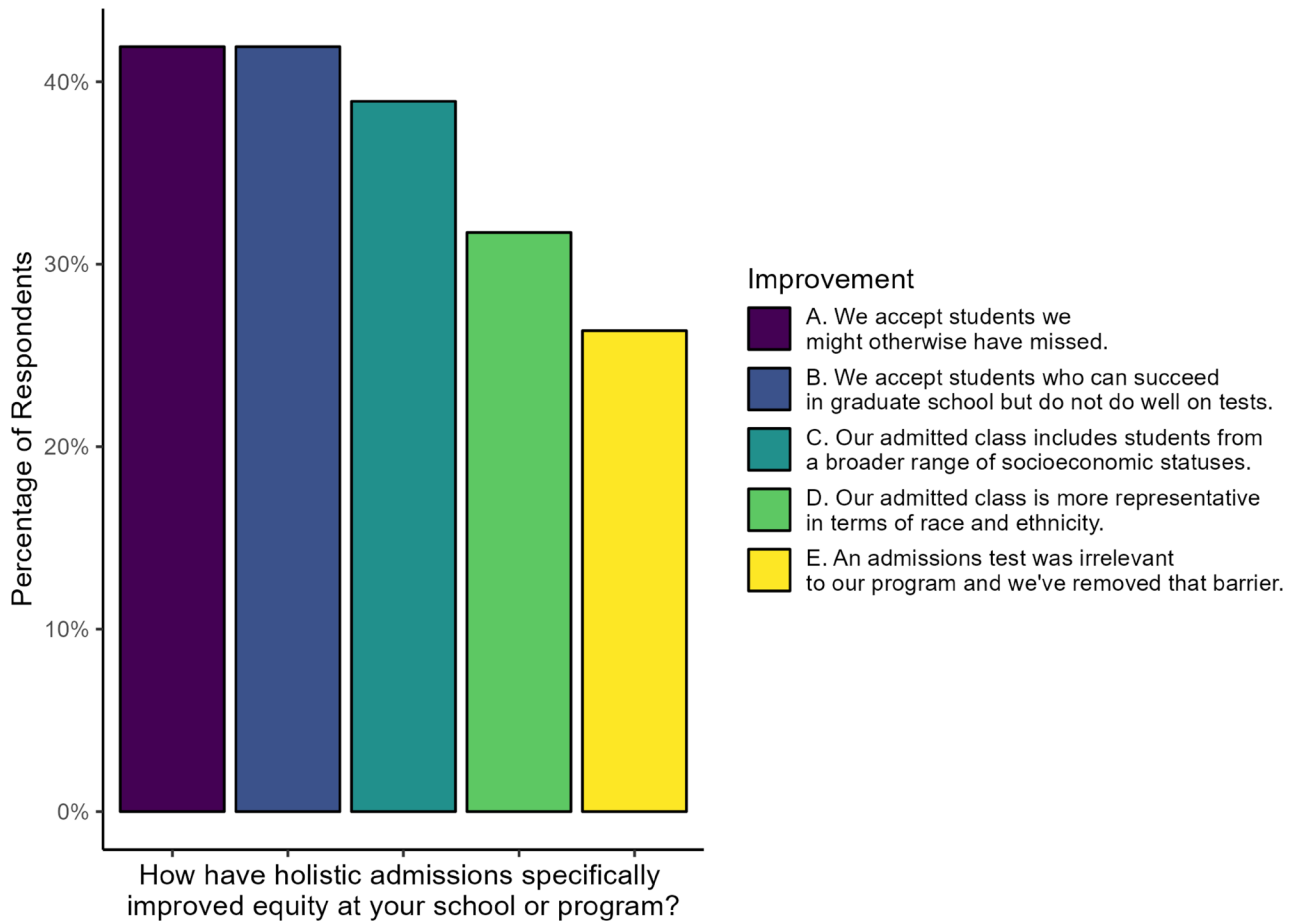


FIGURE 10: How holistic admissions have improved equity (N = 97)



Discussion and conclusion

As we enter a third year of pandemic living, some of the societal adjustments made in response to the pandemic are now being incorporated into a “new normal.” Compulsory admissions testing, to the extent that it ever was universal, is no longer assumed in most institutions’ graduate admissions practices, though these practices may vary from program to program within institutions. Today, it appears that testing remains an important tool in the graduate admissions toolkit, but it may be less common for every applicant to have submitted scores. Determining how to fairly and equitably interpret scores across an applicant pool will be critical as institutions manage variations in test score submissions.

Fairness and equity motivate most institutions that pursue test-optional and test-free admissions policies, and many respondents are optimistic that these policies are having that effect. However, at this point, research is in the early stages of understanding whether these policies can help or hinder such goals (e.g., Cho-Baker & Keller, 2022; Pellegrino, 2022). As colleges and universities move forward, closely examining institutional data will be critical to test these assumptions, determining whether pools of applicants, admitted students, and enrollees meet diversity goals. Institutional data can also illuminate whether test-optional and test-free cohorts are retained and graduate at the same or better rates than in the past.

Holistic graduate admissions practices are widespread, according to respondents. As with test-optional and test-free policies, holistic admissions practices are viewed as a way to give applicants more opportunities to showcase their strengths and abilities and to encourage fairness and equity. However, there are concerns that it may introduce challenges such as

inconsistency, subjectivity, and unclear standards thereby increasing the time it takes to evaluate an application. Building intentional systems, with clear internal guides and rubrics that are aligned to institutional goals and practices, may help to overcome these challenges. Holistic admissions practices may also be strengthened by providing opportunities for those involved in the evaluation of admissions candidates to engage in training focused on norming, establishing shared understandings of applicant qualifications, and recognizing how implicit bias may shape admissions decision-making.

Respondents shared that a top reason for practicing holistic review was to ensure that otherwise qualified applicants were not overlooked. This view suggests that holistic admissions practices may reflect the increasing importance of graduate student enrollment as a tuition revenue imperative while also recognizing the high-stakes nature of admissions as a gateway to graduate education and the benefits it confers. Future research might explore the extent to which holistic admissions are effective for attaining graduate enrollment objectives while promoting equitable access to graduate education.

Graduate admissions practices and policies remain in an accelerated state of evolution, and ETS and NAGAP are committed to understanding how this evolution can support a fairer and more equitable system. Future research will continue to examine these topics.

References

- Cho-Baker, S., & Kell, H. J. (2022). *Longitudinal trends in U.S. undergraduate admissions policies: 2001–2020* (Research Notes). ETS. https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/Research_Notes_Cho-Baker_Kell.pdf
- Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003). <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/l1/usrep/usrep539/usrep539306/usrep539306.pdf>
- Haviland, S., Walker, M., Cho-Baker, S., Yang, Z., & James, K. (2022). *Test-optional admissions practices in the COVID-19 era* (Research Notes). ETS. https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/Research_Notes_Haviland_Walker.pdf
- Pellegrino, C. (2022). Test-optional policies: Implementation impact on undergraduate admissions and enrollment. *College and University*, 97(2), 4–19.

Notes

¹ This response rate is calculated based on the total number of responses and the total number of invitations sent; we are unable to ascertain if these emails were all received or opened by their target recipients. By comparison, the 2021 ETS-NAGAP survey yielded 124 responses. Survey responses were geographically distributed across the United States with most responses coming from the Mid-Atlantic (25.7%) and the Midwest (23.4%).

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful for the NAGAP leadership team, particularly Keith Ramsdell and the External Relations and Partnerships Committee, for their generous partnership and insights. They are also grateful to the NAGAP membership, particularly the respondents who took time from their busy schedules to participate in the survey and/or interviews.

Sara Haviland is a senior measurement scientist at ETS.
shaviland@ets.org

Joseph Paris is the dean of Graduate & Professional Studies at Delaware Valley University.
joseph.paris@delval.edu

Reginald Gooch is a research project manager at ETS.
rmgooch@ets.org

Jose Sotelo is a doctoral fellow at ETS and a doctoral student at Northwestern University. jsotelo@ets.org

About ETS

At ETS, we advance quality and equity in education for people worldwide by creating assessments based on rigorous research. ETS serves individuals, educational institutions, and government agencies by providing customized solutions for teacher certification, English language learning, and elementary, secondary and postsecondary education, and by conducting education research, analysis, and policy studies. Founded as a nonprofit in 1947, ETS develops, administers, and scores more than 50 million tests annually—including the TOEFL® and TOEIC® tests, the GRE® tests and The Praxis Series® assessments—in more than 180 countries at over 9,000 locations worldwide. ets.org



About NAGAP

NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, is the only professional organization devoted exclusively to the concerns of individuals working in the graduate enrollment management environment. The mission of NAGAP is to engage and advance graduate enrollment management professionals by promoting excellence and collaboration through education, research, and professional development. nagap.org



Suggested citation: Haviland, S., Paris, J., Gooch, R., & Sotelo, J. (2023). *What's now and what's next in graduate admissions policies: Results from the ETS/NAGAP 2022 Admissions Survey* (Research Notes). ETS.

Cover photo by George Pak for Pexels.

Copyright © 2023 by Educational Testing Service. All rights reserved.

ETS, the ETS logo, GRE, THE PRAXIS SERIES, TOEIC, and TOEFL are registered trademarks of Educational Testing Service (ETS). All other trademarks are property of their respective owners.