Research Notes

Test-Optional Admissions Practices in the COVID-19 Era

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ETS

Given the early testing center closures and general uncertainties, the COVID-19 crisis pushed many schools to shift into test-optional policies for student admissions. An explosion of schools removed mandatory requirements for standardized assessments in their graduate admissions through test-optional or test-blind policies in the spring of 2020, with most maintaining those policies through at least 2022. ETS is conducting research to better understand how these seismic shifts in admissions policies affect the graduate admissions process and its stakeholders. We are learning about the goals of these policies, decision-making strategies implemented by test-optional and test-blind programs, and the experiences of admissions officers and department leaders working under these policies. To that end, in the summer of 2021 ETS partnered with NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, to conduct a pulse survey regarding the extent and nature of these policies.

Pulse surveys are ideal instruments for taking quick snapshots in rapidly evolving contexts, an apt description of admissions in the COVID-19 era. The ETS-NAGAP survey was sent online via two weekly NAGAP News emails and one specific email to the NAGAP membership in August of 2021.

Respondents

An invitation to the survey was sent to the NAGAP membership email list through their regular NAGAP news email (NAGAP has more than 1,500 members). A total of 124 members completed at least 50% of the survey questions. All respondents were presented with 10 questions tailored to their role in the school (faculty or admissions staff such as admissions officers and deans) plus an option to volunteer for future interviews; respondents spent an average of 3.6 minutes completing the survey. While 8% of respondents were faculty members, the remainder were staff or both faculty and staff. The pool represented a diversity of school sizes (see Figure 1) and range of experience levels (see Figure 2).
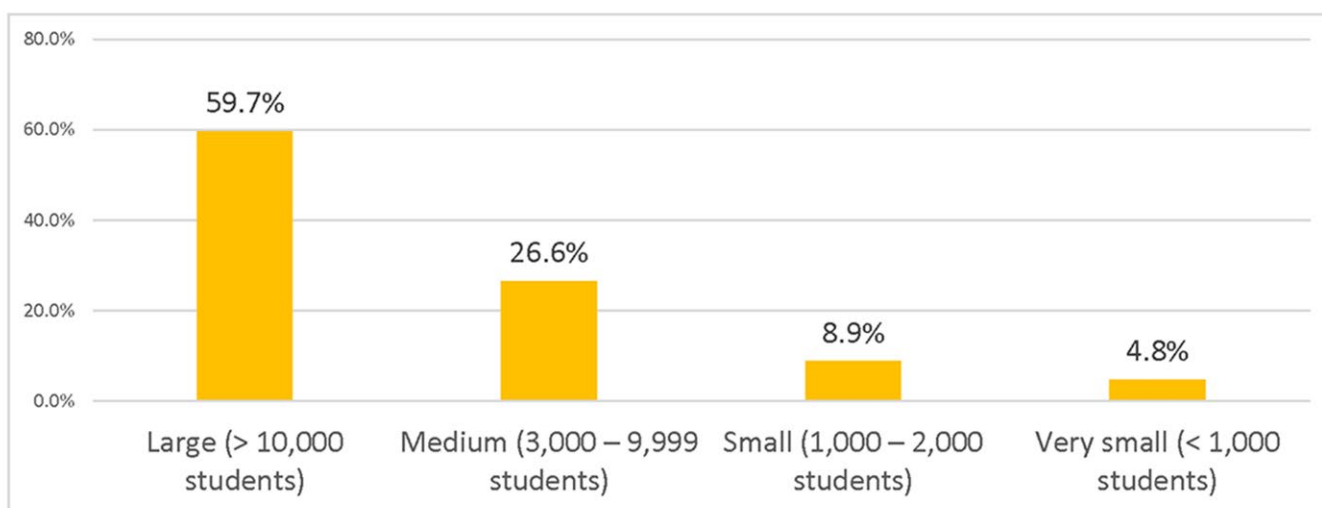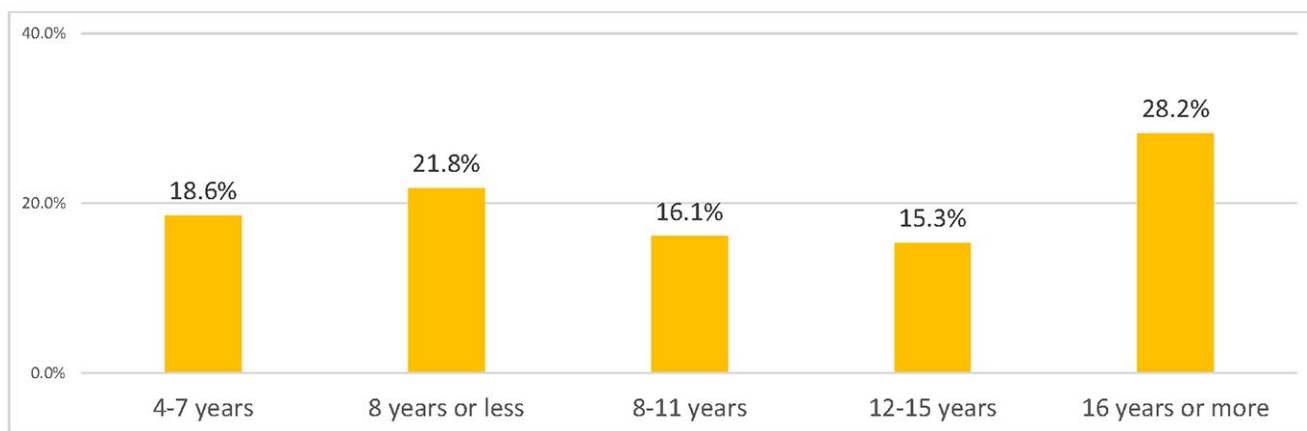
FIGURE 1: School size (*N* = 124)

FIGURE 2: Years respondent worked in graduate education (*N* = 124)

Testing policies

Out of 124 respondents, only 13 worked in schools or units that required admissions tests for all applicants. Fifty-eight reported that some, but not all, of their programs required the test, and 52 reported that none of the schools or units they worked with required tests.

Respondents who noted the tests were not required in some or all of their programs were also asked whether their school or academic department considers test scores if submitted; 53.6% responded they do, and 46.4%, do not.

We classified programs into a continuum based on their responses to these questions (see Table 1). Those remaining fully test-required as of the summer of 2021 comprised only 10.6% of the sample; roughly half of the remaining respondents worked in a school or unit that was partially test-optional (some of their programs did not require tests, but they would consider tests if submitted) or fully test-optional (none of their programs required tests, but they would consider tests

if submitted). About one in five respondents worked in a school or unit that was partially test-blind (some of their programs did not require tests, and those programs did not consider scores even if submitted) or fully test-blind (no programs required or would accept test scores).

Of the small schools classified in our data (those with fewer than 2,000 students), two cases were reported as test-required and about 65% did not require testing for any program. Figure 3 demonstrates that as school size increased, the percentage of schools in the test-required category still hovered between 9 and 11%, but the proportion that had some programs that did not require tests shifted as the school size increased. That is, larger schools were more often reported to have variation in their testing requirements by programs or schools, which may in part be driven by the volume of programs they have. The test requirement patterns exhibited in the data were not statistically significantly different across school size (likelihood ratio chi-squared(6) = 10.55, p = .13). [1]
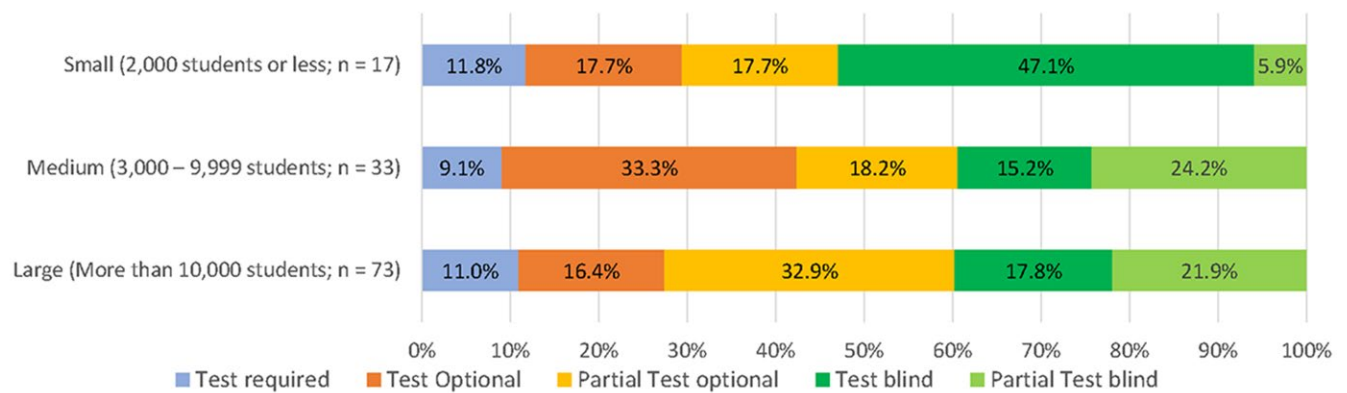
TABLE 1: Distribution of test requirements in the NAGAP survey sample

TEST REQUIREMENT	N	%[a]
TEST-REQUIRED	13	10.6
TEST-OPTIONAL FOR SOME PROGRAMS (PARTIALLY TEST-OPTIONAL)	33	26.8
TEST-OPTIONAL	26	21.1
TEST-BLIND FOR SOME PROGRAMS (PARTIALLY TEST-BLIND)	25	20.3
TEST-BLIND	26	21.1
TOTAL	123	100

Note: Test-blind = test scores are not considered.
[a] Frequency Missing = 1. Column total ≠100% due to rounding error.

FIGURE 3: Testing requirements by size of school (N = 123)

Small (2,000 students or less; n = 17): Test required 11.8%, Test Optional 17.7%, Partial Test optional 17.7%, Test blind 47.1%, Partial Test blind 5.9%

Medium (3,000 – 9,999 students; n = 33): Test required 9.1%, Test Optional 33.3%, Partial Test optional 18.2%, Test blind 15.2%, Partial Test blind 24.2%

Large (More than 10,000 students; n = 73): Test required 11.0%, Test Optional 16.4%, Partial Test optional 32.9%, Test blind 17.8%, Partial Test blind 21.9%

■ Test required ■ Test Optional ■ Partial Test optional ■ Test blind ■ Partial Test blind

Regional differences

The distribution of cases varied by region in complicated ways, as demonstrated in Figure 4. Among the survey sample, no schools were represented in New England or the Pacific Northwest that were fully test-required; the Pacific Northwest also had no schools that were fully test-blind. The test requirement differences across region were not statistically significant (likelihood ratio chi-squared(24) = 31.85, p = .16). [1]

COVID-19 response and policy permanence

Respondents were asked to describe whether the testing policies at their school were changed in response to the COVID-19 crisis and whether these policies were temporary or permanent. Policies that were developed in response to the pandemic elicited the most uncertainty, with roughly one third of the respondents not sure whether they would continue. See Figure 5. Generally, policies that were not developed in response to the pandemic were perceived to be much more permanent. This trend was statistically significant (likelihood ratio chi-squared(4) = 20.01, p = .0001). [1]

Table 2 looks more closely at the nature of the enacted policies and whether those policies were in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Roughly 60% of the respondents described their school policies as having been introduced in response to the pandemic.

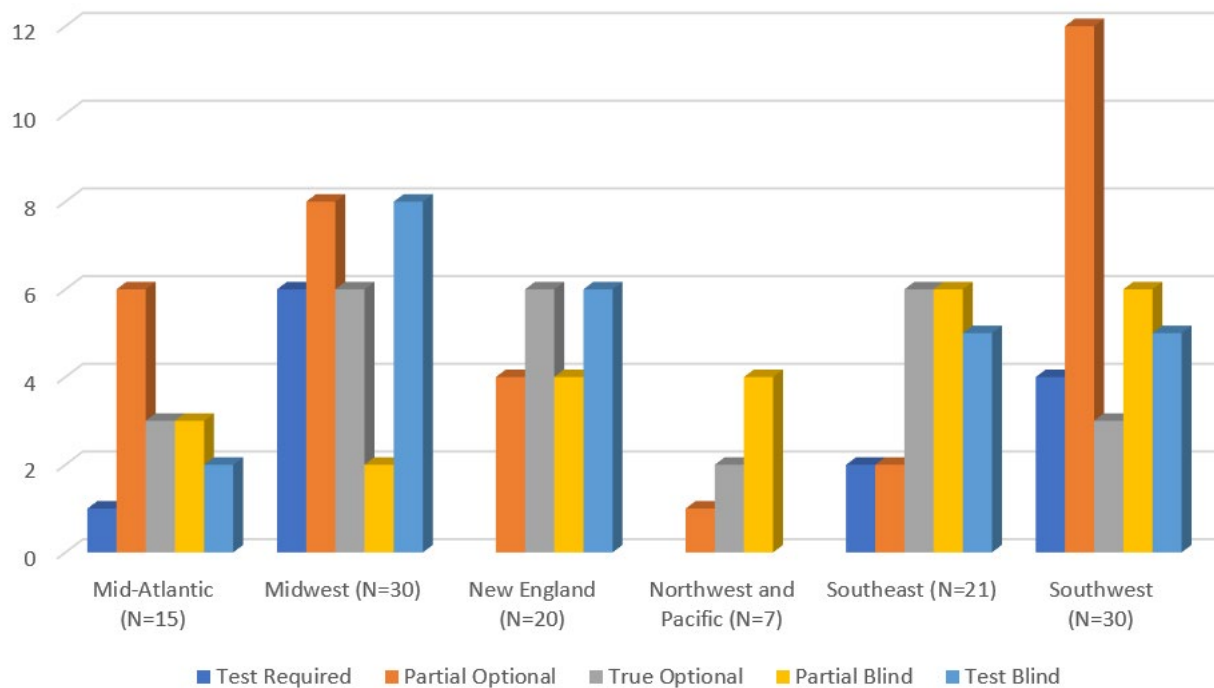**FIGURE 4: Testing requirements for graduate admissions among survey respondents by region**

Legend: ■ Test Required ■ Partial Optional ■ True Optional ■ Partial Blind ■ Test Blind

FIGURE 5: Testing policy changed in response to the pandemic by temporary/permanent status (*N* = 110)

Category	Blue	Orange	Gray
In response to the pandemic	28.6%	36.5%	34.9%
Not in response to the pandemic	68.3%	9.8%	22.0%
Unsure	66.7%	33.3%	
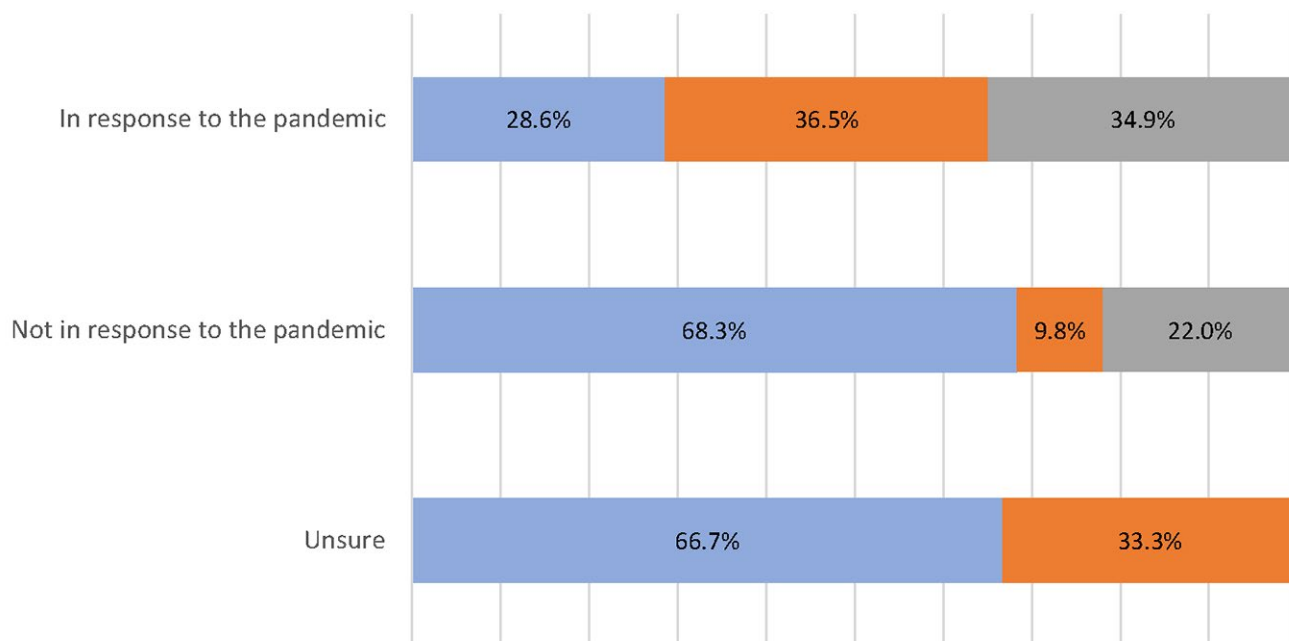
Interestingly, of those 60%, respondents who said their schools had adopted partially or fully test-blind policies more often reported that those policies were permanent. Respondents who said that their schools adopted partially or fully test-optional in response to COVID-19 more often reported that these shifts were temporary (likelihood ratio chi-squared(2) = 7.59, *p* = .03). [1] This statistically significant result suggests that programs that have entered into test-blind admissions tend not to plan this as a passing phase.

It is important to note that these are survey respondents' perceptions of testing policies in their schools or programs; some may be official policy, others may not. Any may change as the admissions environment changes in the coming years. Future study to monitor how these policies continue to evolve will be important moving forward.

Discussion and conclusion

The ETS-NAGAP pulse survey offers insights into how COVID-19 is affecting testing requirements for graduate admissions. In the second summer of COVID-19, admissions processes remained largely test-optional or test-blind, with only one in 10 schools remaining fully test-required. Schools that changed policies in response to the COVID-19 crisis had greater general uncertainty; survey respondents were not so sure whether the policies enacted would be retained.

Schools that moved toward partial or fully test-blind were more likely to consider these changes permanent, even if that move was in response to the pandemic. However, for roughly half of the schools that are partially or fully test-optional, the future was less clear.

TABLE 2: Distribution of test requirements in the NAGAP survey sample

TEST OPTIONAL STATUS	CURRENT POLICY IN RESPONSE TO PANDEMIC: NO	CURRENT POLICY IN RESPONSE TO PANDEMIC: YES	TOTAL
PARTIALLY TEST-OPTIONAL	**7 (23.3%)**	**23 (76.7%)**	**30**
PERMANENT	3 (42.9%)	2 (8.7%)	5
TEMPORARY	1 (14.3%)	13 (56.5%)	14
UNSURE	3 (42.9%)	8 (34.8%)	11
TEST-OPTIONAL	**8 (30.8%)**	**18 (69.2%)**	**26**
PERMANENT	6 (75.0%)	5 (27.8%)	11
TEMPORARY	1 (12.5%)	5 (27.8%)	6
UNSURE	1 (12.5%)	8 (44.4%)	9
PARTIALLY TEST-BLIND	**11 (45.8%)**	**13 (54.2%)**	**24**
PERMANENT	5 (45.5%)	5 (38.5%)	10
TEMPORARY	2 (18.2%)	3 (23.1%)	5
UNSURE	4 (36.4%)	5 (38.5%)	9
TEST-BLIND	**15 (62.5%)**	**9 (37.5%)**	**24**
PERMANENT	14 (93.3%)	6 (66.7%)	20
TEMPORARY	0 (0.0%)	2 (22.2%)	2
UNSURE	1 (6.7%)	1 (11.1%)	2
GRAND TOTAL	**41 (39.4%)**	**63 (60.6%)**	**104**

Schools that were fully test-optional were more likely to be permanent if that policy was enacted separate from COVID-19; if the policy was in response to COVID-19, only about 3 in 10 considered that permanent. Schools that went partially test-optional in response to COVID-19 appeared the most likely to view these changes as temporary.

The results highlighted previously depict a system in flux, with a great deal of COVID-driven change. However, a short pulse survey cannot tell us the antecedents of a policy shift, satisfaction with the shifts, and the likelihood for these shifts to persevere. In other words, was the pump primed for a move away from traditional testing requirements? While it is early to get a sense of how these policies are related to outcomes, as we continue through admissions cycles, will stakeholders be happy with the results? Will they see any reason to shift back to pre-COVID-19 policies?

Next steps

Our team is beginning to answer those questions. At the conclusion of the survey, respondents were invited to participate in a 45-minute interview on these themes with members of the ETS research team. These interviews allowed the research team to delve more deeply into the goals schools were pursuing with test-optional and test-blind policies and how the standardized tests fit into the broader practice of holistic admissions. Over the course of 6 weeks, the team conducted 26 interviews, which are presently being coded and analyzed.

Notes

[1] Because of the small cell sizes, Monte Carlo *p*-value estimates were used rather than the asymptotic values.

Acknowledgments

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.

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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.

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