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## As Duke becomes test-optional for 2020-21, experts see problems with college admissions tests

10-12 minutes

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Could the SAT become a thing of the past?

In June, Duke [announced](#) it will be test-optional for undergraduate applicants in the 2020-21 admissions cycle, meaning students who cannot or choose not to submit SAT or ACT scores will not have a disadvantage in admissions. In a statement announcing the change, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions Christoph Guttentag cited concerns about students having trouble registering for and taking tests during the pandemic.

Guttentag wrote in the statement that challenges with standardized testing have a disproportionate impact on “those with the fewest resources.”

Two education experts echoed Guttentag’s concern about standardized testing, with one arguing that colleges and universities across the country should remain test-optional for future admissions cycles.

Guttentag did not respond in time for publication to an email asking whether Duke has plans to make its test-optional policy permanent.

### Low-income students face difficulties

Students from low-income backgrounds can experience disadvantages in standardized testing before they even get to high school, noted Dana Griffin, an associate professor in the school counseling program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Those who attend schools with few resources are receiving a vastly different curriculum from those in more privileged institutions, Griffin said.

“If the students are not getting the same curricular offerings they need, by the time they get to high school, they’re not going to be educated in the same way to take the test,” she said.

She believes that students unable to go back to school due to the pandemic will be further hurt, especially those who don’t have reliable internet access or computers to complete online coursework.

Griffin added that some students may not be able to afford to take the SAT or ACT. With the essay component—which Duke [recommends](#), but does not require—the [SAT](#) costs \$64.50, and the [ACT](#) costs \$62.50.

High SAT and ACT scores are often achieved by multiple attempts at taking the test, which is not financially realistic for students from low-income backgrounds, said Erica Phillips, an educational equity and policy specialist at Duke’s Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity.

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Phillips noted that students who receive high scores often use academic coaches or take classes to prepare for the exams, which low-income students often cannot afford.

“There’s definitely barriers in terms of just knowing the strategies of how to take [the tests] and then having the ability to take them over and over again,” she said.

Griffin emphasized that the inequities associated with standardized testing are class-based and not a race issue, pointing out that there are “many students of color who are middle class or of higher [socioeconomic status] and do well.”

Some disagree with Griffin, however.

A 2018 [Teen Vogue op-ed](#) argued that standardized tests “have a long history of favoring white, middle-class students by testing bodies of knowledge that are fundamentally white and middle-class,” noting that “the tests reinforce the idea that white identity is the default American identity.”

One Duke student echoed that idea.

In the view of sophomore Sophia Jeffery, standardized tests “show how our culture values what professionalism is and how that’s tied to white supremacy culture, which is actively harming [students of] marginalized identities from childhood all the way up.”

## The adversity score

In an attempt to take these criticisms into consideration, the College Board introduced an “[adversity score](#)” in May 2019.

The score took into account 15 socioeconomic factors across the student’s neighborhood and school that are “correlated, according to research, with lower academic achievement and lower lifetime earnings,” according to the [New York Times](#).

These factors included median family income, percentage of households in poverty and the unemployment and crime rates.

The score was between zero and 100—the higher the score, the more adversity faced by a student.

Guttentag told The Chronicle in 2019 that Duke planned to “use it as insight into a student’s environmental context, more than as a measure of adversity.”

After receiving backlash, with critics [arguing](#) that the score would reduce students’ identities to a single number, the College Board worked to replace the adversity score with Landscape, which creates a profile of socioeconomic data for each student.

Jeffrey, the Duke sophomore, said that the adversity score only tries to “fix the top layer,” while failing to address the root causes of inequity or constructively help marginalized communities.

Griffin told The Chronicle that she liked that the score was “beginning to take into account context.”

She also noted that in some communities, neighborhood taxes play a big role in the development of schools.

“If a school is in a higher-social-class community, they’re going to have more money funneled—because people are making more money—versus a school that’s in a lower income area,” she said. “They’re not going to have as much, and therefore, they’re not going to have the same course offerings.”

But Phillips said that the adversity score doesn’t help colleges get “an accurate representation of who that student is”—and that there isn’t a need for an adversity score because she doesn’t believe standardized testing should be a requirement for college admissions.

She proposed using college essays or allowing students to create a portfolio as “what should really be the starting point of an application.”

## Other limitations

For students who are able to take standardized tests, Phillips said that a certain score may automatically discourage them from exploring their full potential.

“If they get a 1200 on their SAT, they wouldn’t even consider applying to Duke even if they’re a straight-A student because Duke has, more or less, a minimum score that they will accept,” she said.

These tests can also limit how teachers craft their curriculums, with many orienting their lessons toward preparing students for standardized Advanced Placement exams and SAT subject tests.

“It really limits the amount of project-based learning, group work and presentations that students can be doing instead of just taking pretests and post-tests or learning study skills,” Phillips said.

Griffin said that labeling test scores as an indicator of a student's intelligence "sets some students up for failure" and serves as a disadvantage, especially for those who are unable to afford test preparation services that help students of higher income levels to score higher.

In the School Counseling Master's program for which Griffin works, she said they use a more "holistic approach" to admissions and no longer solely rely on the Graduate Record Examinations as an indicator of application value.

If a student applying to the program received a GPA of 3.5 or higher as an undergraduate, Griffin said, they do not have to submit their GRE test score.

"We're looking for students who really want to get into counseling in schools, so we're looking at some of their past activities," she said. "We're looking at their work, their volunteer opportunities and activities that they did participate in."

## The future of testing

Griffin said that as an educator, she is hesitant to say that colleges and universities must get rid of standardized testing.

"I do think reform is always possible," she said. "I think that we can use tests, but I don't think that can be the only thing that we use."

She said that in order to engage in reform, institutions must begin collecting data and figuring out how standardized testing impacts "the effectiveness of what our students are able to do."

Griffin also said that students from low-income backgrounds may have families that did not attend college. She conducted a study and found that these students don't go to their parents for information about college, instead seeking out teachers, coaches and members of their school community.

"We need to talk to parents and we need teachers, counselors and the school having a career-and-college-readiness culture from elementary school," Griffin said. "If it starts early, then our students are better prepared by the time they get to high school. We have to start in elementary school with this."

She added that many tend to overlook the role that community colleges play in society and "don't look at them as a viable option for students."

Griffin underscored, however, that they are affordable and perfectly viable offerings for students who want to pursue higher education.

Phillips agreed that standardized testing is not just a university issue, with students in North Carolina being trained to start the exam cycle as early as third grade.

She cited a state policy that would fail third graders who didn't pass an end-of-year reading test. Students who fail have to go to summer school, repeating third grade if they fail again.

"Their confidence can be on the ground just from not passing a beginning-of-grade test their first month of third grade," she said.

Phillips proposed portfolios as a better way for students to showcase their high school experience, noting that "college is an application to the real world."

She also emphasized interviews as a way for a student to show "their truest self," allowing college admissions officers to "get to know them as a real person, not just a person on the paper or their test score."

"I know that COVID-19 has done more bad than good, but right now, this is creating an opportunity to see students for who they are instead of what their test scores are," she said.