

Considering the Impact of Standardized Testing on Workforce Diversity

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ABSTRACT

Today, we revisit our initial stance of eliminating standardized test scores from the college admissions process to improve equity and student diversity. With refreshed data about test-optional admissions, we address the import of institutional responsiveness to redress persistent equity gaps that impact our state's workforce diversity and hiring challenges. Leveraging data to inform advocacy is representative of the skillset cultivated in the CANDEL program for evidence-based decision-making. Moreover, the pre-pandemic position over standardized testing exemplifies how CANDEL encouraged us to explore novel approaches to address persistent and troublesome equity issues. With leadership roles in the community college and the University of California systems and a particular emphasis on workforce development, we reflect on the CANDEL ethos of scholar-practitioner leadership in our practice areas to promote equitable educational and career outcomes.

KEYWORDS

standardized tests, college admission, workforce development, CANDEL

Historically, standardized testing has played a critical role in college admissions throughout the United States, ostensibly providing a standardized metric to gauge academic aptitude and college readiness. However, substantive test-score differences for ethnic and socioeconomic groups have prompted lingering apprehensions about the fairness and equity of standardized tests (Zwick, 2021). In 2016, as cohort members in the CANDEL education leadership doctorate program at the University of California at Davis, the authors collaborated on a paper for a course on data-driven decision-making for educational change, positing that eliminating standardized test scores from the college admissions process could improve equity and student diversity. The data presented indicated better measures of college success, and we described how standardized test scores serve as a sorting mechanism based on a false model of meritocracy that disproportionately benefits those with privilege and preserves the elitism of the institutions that require it for admission.

At the time, eliminating standardized testing was improbable given the longstanding tradition—and business—of student test-taking and submitting scores for college admission. Our position for the assignment, which was to explore novel approaches to address persistent and troublesome equity issues with standardized testing,

is now plausible. The current debate now can encompass the merits or flaws of test-optional admissions, including the 2021 decision by the University of California system to no longer require these tests. This decision, backed by our research and the growing body of evidence, instills confidence in the potential of test-optional policies to improve diversity and equity in college admissions.

CANDEL has engendered a community of practice with equity-minded professionals uniquely situated to manage the complexities of educational organizations, effect policy change, and shape the academic and workforce outcomes for our region and state. With leadership roles spanning the community college and UC systems and a particular emphasis on workforce development, we opted to revisit our initial stance with refreshed data about admissions and equity, which led us to a discussion of retention efforts and the import of institutional responsiveness to redress persistent equity gaps that ultimately impact our state's workforce diversity and hiring challenges. In short, our position is that alterations in college admissions policies directly affect the composition of the workforce.

The Arc of Standardized Testing

Introduced in the early 20th century as an adaptation of the U.S.



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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.



This journal is supported by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate: A Knowledge Forum on the EdD (CPED) cpedinitiative.org

impactinged.pitt.edu
Vol. 9 No. 3 (2024)

ISSN 2472-5889 (online)
DOI 10.5195/ie.2024.466



Army IQ test (Zwick, 2007), the initial Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was developed by the College Board, a consortium of colleges formed in 1900 to establish a uniform test "based on the curricula of the boarding schools that typically provided graduates to the colleges of the Ivy League and Seven Sisters" (Lemann, 2004). Thus, the inception of standardized tests was intended to benefit students who could afford boarding school and attend Ivy League colleges.

The GI Bill substantially increased the number of collegegoers, leading to mass higher education expansion in the United States. In this context, the American College Testing (ACT) exam was introduced in 1959, and college entrance exams were widely adopted, as colleges needed a consistent mechanism to screen large numbers of applicants.

Modern critics of these standardized tests argue that despite the presumptive use of these exams to expand socioeconomic diversity, today's strong scores on the SAT or ACT are likely markers of privilege, as wealthier students can more readily prepare for the exams, hire tutors, purchase additional books and training, and retake tests on route to achieving those scores. Indeed, SAT taking correlates with student socioeconomic status (Avery et al., 2004), and retaking college exams are associated with improved performance in both U.S. and non-U.S. contexts (Frisancho et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2020). Additionally, the substantial test-score differences among ethnic and socioeconomic groups continue to cause concern. Asian and White test takers score higher on average than their Black, Latiné, and Native American counterparts, and test takers from higher-income families perform better than lower-income test takers. While differences do not demonstrate that a test is biased or unfair, a heavy emphasis on test scores in admissions decisions will result in lower selection rates for candidates who identify as Black, Latiné, Native American, or are from low-income families (Zwick, 2023).

As specified in our 2016 class assignment, a different response to the barriers and inequities created by entrance exams should be introduced. Since 2020, institutions have suspended their use entirely (as enacted by the University of California system) or implemented test-optional policies, allowing applicants discretion in reporting scores from these assessments. Test-optional policies began in the early 2000s as a niche practice primarily among liberal arts institutions. These policies have continued to grow in popularity, with institutions that varied substantially on various attributes aiming to increase socioeconomic and racial diversity among their students. The college entrance exam landscape is shifting rapidly, with changes hastened by the disruptions to standardized testing brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. While some colleges are reverting to pre-COVID practices as the pandemic subsides, the pandemic has pushed institutions to make admissions decisions in a test-optional context or without standardized test scores. Still, the U.S. News ranking of institutions—a recognized driver of institutional decision-making—continues to rely on student SAT/ACT performance as a factor in their ratings of colleges and universities. In 2022, US News announced a modest change to its methodology regarding college entrance exams. Specifically, if less than 50% (down from 75%) of an institution's entering class of 2020 submitted test scores, the institution's SAT/ACT percentile distribution value would be deflated by 15% before use in rankings calculations (Dynarski et al., 2023). Such a policy creates a strong incentive for ratings-sensitive institutions to work to admit more of their incoming cohorts from among applicants who report standardized test scores.

Test-Optional Admission

Test-optional policies could affect college-going outcomes via at least four potential channels (Bennett, 2021). First, students may add to their institutional choice set one or more schools that adopt a test-optional policy. Second, test-optional policies remove SAT/ACT taking as a step in the college application gauntlet (Klasik, 2011). Third, more students may see themselves as college-qualified without the SAT/ACT metric. Finally, students may view test-optional colleges as better aligned with their ideals, as test-optional policies may signal that institutions value applicants' unique contributions. Critics of test-optional admissions argue that these policies may lead to increases in institutional selectivity and ranking status, driven by an increase in applicants without a corresponding change in the average test scores used in rankings, as lower-scoring applicants may withhold their scores (Ehrenberg, 2003).

A key challenge to investigating the effects of test-optional policies is that such policies often need to be implemented in collaboration, resulting in conflicting findings. For example, the University of Chicago introduced simultaneous efforts to increase diversity, including test-optional. These efforts included providing full scholarships for applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds and increasing recruitment activities in rural and urban areas (Dynarski et al., 2023). Still, evidence suggests that test-optional policies may not help colleges achieve goals of increased diversity but may boost the indicators used in college rankings. First, Belasco et al. (2015) found that at several U.S. liberal arts colleges, test-optional policies increased applications but did not affect the share of students from low-income or minority backgrounds and positively affected average SAT scores among enrolled students. Examining a broader set of 4-year institutions, Saboe and Terrizzi (2019) found that test-optional policy adoption did not affect diversity, and in contrast to Belasco et al. (2015), found no effects on average SAT scores.

Conversely, in a study examining 100 private institutions that implemented test-optional policies between 2005 and 2015, Bennett (2021) estimated that test-optional policies among these institutions increased the share of students who were Pell Grant recipients or ethnic/racial minorities each by one percentage point, with no effects on application volume and no evidence of heterogeneity by institutional selectivity. Complicating efforts to identify apparent trends resulting from test-optional policies during the pandemic are the varied approaches colleges have taken to implement them. Based on interviews at 16 colleges and universities, researchers found admissions officers were overwhelmed with the volume of applications and worried about replacing test scores with metrics that "were even more biased toward wealthier students, such as letters of recommendation and expensive extracurricular activities" (Barshay, 2022). The effects of eliminating college entrance exams from admissions processes may differ, and future research should explore how policy and pandemic-related disruptions to standardized testing practices may affect the distribution of students across institutions going forward.

Research at the University of California, Berkeley suggests that the 2021 entering cohort of first-year students was the first cohort under the test-optional policy, and the 2023 entering cohort is the first cohort under the test-blind policy. Therefore, it is too early to tell the impact on graduation rates; the university will only know at the end of the 2024-25 academic year to get our earliest hint. Regarding applicants, admits, or applicants who have committed to attend,

there must be a clear signal that removing the test requirements had demographic implications.

A move away from college entrance exams may also lead colleges and universities to put even more weight on students' high school rank and GPA in making college admissions decisions. A concern related to this point is that grading practices in U.S. public schools indicate steady grade inflation trends, particularly in schools that serve more affluent students (Gershenson et al., 2022; Hurwitz & Lee, 2018). Regardless of the cause of admissions test score gaps, a heavy emphasis on test scores in the admissions process will result in lower selection rates for candidates who identify as Black, Latiné, Native American, or are from low-income families. Therefore, less diversity in our educational institutions affects lower diversity rates in our state's workforce pipeline.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

California community colleges (CCCs) are open-access campuses, with "admission open to all who can benefit" (California Community Colleges, CCCApply). Regarding access, CCCs can be a touchstone for comparing student diversity with test-optional admissions. For example, the percentage of Latiné students in our community college system is double that in the University of California (UC) system, at 46[^] and 23.3%, respectively. Black/African American student population at CCCs is 6%, compared to 4% at UCs. (See Table 1 Students by Ethnicity.)

Table 1. Student Enrollment by Ethnicity in California Higher Education System

Ethnicity/Race	Percent Population of Student Body		
	CCC-Community College	CSU-State University	UC-University of CA
American Indian/Alaska Native	0	0.2	0.6
Asian	10	16	33
Black/African American	6	4	4.7
Filipino	3	5	3
Latiné/Hispanic	46	47.7	23.3
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian Native	0	0.3	0.3
White	24	21	21.6

Sources: California Community Colleges, LaunchBoard <https://www.calpassplus.org/LaunchBoard/Community-College-Pipeline.aspx>; The California State University <https://www.calstate.edu/csu-system/about-the-csu/facts-about-the-csu/enrollment/Pages/student-enrollment-demographics.aspx>; University of California, <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/about-us/information-center/fall-enrollment-glance>

While open access may engender diversity, institutional responsiveness is critical for ensuring student success as CCCs transition from Primarily White Institutions (PWI) to serving a more diverse student population. A stated goal for community colleges is to eradicate institutional racism, discrimination, and biases from our system (CA Title 5 CCR § 51201 1(c)). The complexity of doing so is reflected in the pernicious and persistent equity gap that persists in Latiné and Black/African American completion rates, which continue

to lag behind that of Asian and White students (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, Data Mart, Student Success Scorecard). Vision 2030 outlines priorities for CCCs to serve students better and foster California's economic competitiveness (California Community Colleges, Vision 2030). One of the strategic directions is to ensure equitable workforce development.

With over 200 career education (CE) programs, CCCs are also the "largest provider of workforce training in the world" (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, cccco.edu). Career education certificates and degrees prepare students for the workforce, either as new entrants, returning skills builders, or through incumbent worker training. Further, federal and state funding for CE programs involves work plans designed to enhance participation and completion by targeted or disproportionately impacted student populations, with regular required reporting on expenditures and progress toward regional strategies and statewide goals.

Per California education regulations "establishing and maintaining a richly diverse workforce is an ongoing process that requires continued institutionalized effort" (CCR Title 5 Section 53024.1). This includes acting locally, relying on local labor market data, and coordinating with regional workforce initiatives. In healthcare, student demographics for these programs in the North/Far North and greater Sacramento regions differ from statewide enrollment in healthcare programs: most notably, Latiné at slightly more than half the statewide rate and White at double (Table 2). Furthermore, while the enrollment rates by ethnicity superficially align with the race and ethnicity breakdown for the Greater Sacramento microregion, White students are overrepresented regarding completion (i.e., earning a certificate or degree) (California Community Colleges, LaunchBoard, www.calpassplus.org). Consider too the exclusion of data for some student populations due to "insufficient data," represented only by dashes or asterisks. The implication of these inversed enrollment ratios and over- and under-representation of students completing a health program of study is a less diverse pool of trained allied health professionals to serve the greater Sacramento area. There are people in our communities for whom access to healthcare and healthcare education should be accounted for in local strategies and initiatives for services and education access and attainment. Appropriately, the health sector is a priority for local community colleges to meet the pressing need for nurses, technicians, and other caregivers, notably those trained in culturally competent caregiving and from historically under/improperly served populations to serve the region's diverse population and healthcare needs.

Acting Locally

The community colleges serving the greater Sacramento region offer an array of CE programs in health professions pathways, and partner with health systems and employers to identify and address local workforce needs. Recently, education and healthcare workforce representatives engaged in a Talent Pipeline Management initiative, employ the model developed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation to identify critical jobs such as surgical and cardiovascular technicians for which the colleges are now revising or developing targeted academic programs. Another effort is the LVN-to-RN Apprenticeship program, a collaboration with industry and community partners to build and diversify the nursing pipeline by preparing licensed vocational nurses to earn an Associate in Science degree and eligibility to take the licensure exam needed to practice



Table 2. Population and CCC Healthcare Enrollment by Ethnicity (2020-21)

Ethnicity/Race	Percent of Population		Percent of Student Population	
	Greater Sacramento (Microregion)	Statewide	North/Far North (Macroregion)	Greater Sacramento (Microregion)
American Indian/Alaska Native	-	-	1	-
Asian	15	10	10	12
Black/African American	7	6	6	6
Filipino		5	3	4
Latiné/Hispanic	23	45	27	28
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian Native	1	-	1	1
White	48	26	42	38

Source: California Community Colleges, LaunchBoard, Community College Pipeline <https://www.calpassplus.org/LaunchBoard/Community-College-Pipeline.aspx> U.S. Census Profiles, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/31000US40900-sacramento-roseville-folsom-ca-metro-area/>

as a registered nurse. The nursing pathway continues with the RN to BSN and RN to MSN programs, where students concurrently earn units and eligibility to transfer to a participating institution to earn a terminal degree. The intent is to offer cost and time savings to pursue career mobility in nursing leadership roles. At Los Rios Community College District, with four colleges and outreach centers serving the region, initiatives are underway to improve student success in allied health programs, particularly for Black/African American and Latiné students. Focus groups were conducted to hear directly from students about their challenges and the best practices they encountered during their study. Follow-up work with select allied health programs involves students and faculty co-creating approaches to address specific concerns and develop recommendations to improve retention and achieve more equitable outcomes. These efforts to better support underrepresented students ultimately benefit all students, leading to living-wage careers for completers who join the local workforce to meet the region’s healthcare needs.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND DIVERSITY

A diverse workforce is crucial for addressing health disparities among different patient groups in healthcare. Research has shown that patients receive superior care when attended to by healthcare professionals who share their racial or ethnic background (Gomez & Bernet, 2019). The transformation of college admissions policies carries profound implications for the composition of the workforce, with potential ramifications for diversity and inclusion. A preliminary analysis might suggest that removing standardized tests could lead to more diverse student populations, resulting in a more varied pool of college graduates and a corresponding surge of well-educated, diverse job seekers. However, it is crucial to recognize that the effectiveness of this approach depends on mitigating other forms of academic malpractice that may inadvertently favor individuals with privilege. Failure to address such issues could perpetuate a lack of

diversity in the workforce, particularly in professions requiring bachelor’s degrees.

Drawing parallels to the impact of Proposition 209, which eliminated affirmative action as a tactic to diversify the workforce, the recent move to eliminate standardized testing in University of California admissions is poised to have significant implications for workforce diversity recruitment strategies. While these changes are still in their early stages, it is imperative to anticipate potential impacts on various sectors, and one area that stands out is healthcare. Consequently, eliminating standardized testing from college admissions may influence the diversity of healthcare professionals, ultimately affecting the quality of care provided to diverse patient populations.

The Talent Acquisition unit at UC Davis Health, a prominent healthcare provider in the Sacramento region, has been proactive in implementing innovative recruitment strategies to diversify its workforce, even within the constraints imposed by Proposition 209. These strategies include incorporating health equity, diversity, and inclusion messaging into outreach materials, using inclusive language in job descriptions, providing training to mitigate implicit bias, and engaging in train-the-trainer sessions with community leaders to demystify the recruitment process. Additionally, the organization has collaborated with community-based organizations, organized targeted outreach events, and established pathway programs with local partners to facilitate entry into healthcare careers. As the consequences of eliminating standardized testing from University of California admissions unfold, organizations like UC Davis Health must remain vigilant in monitoring the impact on admissions, leveraging workforce projections for graduating students, and instituting innovative programs to source diverse talent within an evolving higher education landscape.

Eliminating standardized testing from the University of California admissions process undeniably reshapes the higher education landscape. As the repercussions of this paradigm shift continue to unfold, it is crucial to scrutinize its influence on workforce diversity, especially in pivotal sectors such as healthcare. Striking a balance between equity in admissions and the imperative for a diverse and proficient workforce demands careful consideration and continuous evaluation to ensure that the University of California persists in fostering an inclusive and representative workforce for the future. This ongoing assessment is vital to navigate the evolving higher education landscape and address potential challenges while championing diversity and equity.

REFLECTION

As scholar-practitioners, CANDEL has distinctively positioned us to engage in a community of practice with equity-minded professionals who are uniquely situated to interrogate the validity of current and future practices that affect school change and share the educational policies that bear on the practice of the diverse educational settings in Northern California. This community of practice allows us to tap into and nurture thought partnerships that enhance the educational experience of all students from the entry point into higher education and continue through successful entry into the workforce. Such touchpoints are unique because they enable us to serve at the nexus where theory meets practice. This engagement allows us to collect and analyze data that helps us



develop informed opinions about the value and implications of standardized tests.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading our work. Your support and feedback are greatly appreciated. If you have any questions, comments, or would like to discuss our work further, please feel free to reach out.

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We are always open to engaging with readers and fellow Scholar-Practitioners. Don't hesitate to connect.

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