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A new volume explores the research and policy implications of test-optional practices, considering both sides of the debate.

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Standardized tests, originally designed to offer a level playing field to students of diverse backgrounds, continue to be a cornerstone of the college admission process, even as some critics continue to claim that the tests are biased or misused.

A new volume released this week from Johns Hopkins University Press, Measuring Success: Testing Grades, and the Future of College Admissions assembles a comprehensive collection of new research on admissions testing from leading experts and practitioners on both sides of the debate, with an emphasis on methodological rigor that has too often been lacking from the discussion of such emerging practices as test-optional admissions.

Edited by Jack Buckley, Senior Vice President at the American Institutes for Research, Lynn Letukas, Associate Research Scientist at the College Board, and Ben Wildavsky, Senior Fellow and Executive Director of the College Board Policy Center, Measuring Success was conceived in response to the fragmented and incomplete state of the literature that informs debates and decisions related to college admission testing. “For many students, teachers, parents, policymakers – frankly, nearly all of those immediately outside the testing industry and college admissions – the role of college admission tests remains a mystery,” said Buckley. “This volume comes at a critical time in the discussion about admissions policies and decisions. As the college admissions debate continues, developing more useful, fine-tuned data for decision making will require more attention to rigorous research, not less.”

Several contributors to Measuring Success provide detailed evidence that standardized test scores (especially when combined with grades) have significant predictive validity for college performance and completion across race, gender, or socioeconomic status. What’s more, other authors reveal significant flaws in the research that institutions frequently cite to justify their claim that moving to test-optional admission policies boosts minority enrollment.

However, other chapters show that certain admissions leaders continue to view standardized testing warily. Some believe testing requirements are likely to intimidate and discourage potential minority applicants. In interviews, some enrollment managers suggest that establishing a test optional policy is the only effective way to tie their hands so that they are forced to live up to the rhetoric of considering test scores as one factor in a holistic admission process.

Highlights of this 12-chapter volume include:

• Authors address common myth about testing and admissions, including the claim that tests are compromised by bias. (Chapter 1: “Eight Myths about Standardized Admissions Testing” by Sackett and Kuncel)

• Contributors provide detailed evidence that standardized test scores - especially when combined with grades - have significant predictive validity for college performance and completion across race, gender, or socioeconomic status. (Chapter 2: “The Core Case for Testing: The State of Our Research Knowledge” by Shaw; and Eight Myths about Standardized Admissions Testing” by Sackett and Kuncel)

• Researchers document how high school grade point averages continue to rise, with significant compression at the high end, making it particularly hard to distinguish applicants from one another. With these trends especially pronounced among students at affluent, mostly-white high schools, the authors argue, the notion that relying more heavily on grades will reduce inequities in the admissions process seems implausible. (Chapter 3: “Grade Inflation and the Role of Standardized Testing” by Hurwitz and Lee)

• Several authors reveal significant flaws in the research that institutions frequently cite to justify their claim that going test optional will boost minority enrollment, showing that test-optional policies generally enhance selectivity but do not in fact increase racial diversity. (Chapter 10: “The Test-Optional Movement at America’s Selective Liberal Arts Colleges: A Boon for Equality or Something Else” by Belasco, Rosinger, and Hearn; and “The Effect of Going Test-Optional on Diversity and Admissions: A Propensity Score Matching Analysis” by Sweitzer, Blalock, and Sharma).

• Authors compare two institutions that have implemented test optional policies, examining how each approached its decision differently. They conclude that institutions should conduct their own incremental validity studies to understand the impact of standardized testing on predicting student success at their institution. (Chapter 7: “Going Test-Optional: A Case Study” by Maguire).

To purchase a copy of the book, please visit https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/measuring-success.

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