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Wake Forest U. Joins Ranks of Test-Optional Colleges

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Wake Forest University will no longer require applicants to submit standardized test scores, the university announced last week. The move makes Wake Forest, in Winston-Salem, N.C., one of the most prominent institutions with a "test optional" admissions policy.

Officials there hope the move will help the university attract more applicants, particularly underrepresented students and those who may have had a "bad standardized-test experience," said Martha Blevins Allman, the admissions director. "Applicants have come to feel their achievement can be overwritten by a single test."

More than 750 colleges and universities do not require the ACT or SAT, according to the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, an advocacy group known as FairTest. That list includes many nonselective institutions and liberal-arts colleges.

Neither description applies to Wake Forest, which accepted 42 percent of its undergraduate applicants last year, and offers graduate programs in law, business, medicine, and divinity.

The university's decision reveals the increasing complexity of the national testing debate. Within higher education, views of the ACT and SAT vary widely, as do opinions of colleges that have dropped them as requirements. Some admissions officials say test-optional policies serve students well, but others dismiss them as tactics colleges use to inflate the average SAT scores they report to the public and to guidebooks.

Wake Forest officials said their new policy was an attempt to create a more diverse campus (83 percent of the university's undergraduates are white). Administrators made their decision after reviewing research, including the results of a recent study by Bates College, in Maine, which dropped its SAT requirement in 1985.

Bates found that, over 20 years, there was virtually no difference between the academic performances of applicants who had submitted scores and those who had not. The two groups ended up with the same graduation rates. Bates also concluded that the policy had helped it double its applicant pool and attract a more-diverse student body.

"There is mounting evidence the SAT's are not as good a predictor of college success as we once thought," said Jill Tiefenthaler, Wake Forest's provost. Officials there also worried that the tests had less predictive

value for minority students than for white ones.

Starting this fall, Wake Forest's admissions officials will emphasize applicants' grade-point averages and the strength of their high-school courses even more so than in the past.

The university also plans to encourage applicants to participate in personal interviews. Trained alumni would conduct off-campus interviews for some students who could not visit Winston-Salem. And officials also hope to create a virtual-interview option, in which students would answer timed questions online.

The changes may create more work for the admissions staff, but officials say the university's relatively small applicant pool (about 9,000 students this year) allows them to enhance their evaluations of applicants.

"Our process has always been very holistic and subjective," said Ms. Allman, the admissions director. "This is saying this more clearly to the public."

'More Than a Number'

The ACT and SAT are alive and well in admissions. Research by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, known as Nacac, suggests that the importance of standardized tests has increased during the last decade, as colleges have seen more and more applicants and applications.

Most selective colleges continue to require all applicants to submit their standardized-test scores, and many admissions officials doubt that will soon change. The College Board, which owns the SAT, has argued that while handfuls of colleges drop their testing requirements each year, their actions do not signify a national trend.

Proponents of test-optional policies, however, say that's not the point. After all, most admissions deans at test-optional colleges tend to talk about how the policy has benefited their campuses and their applicants, not about leading a movement to topple tests.

"We're one very small voice in a big world," said Steven T. Syverson, dean of admissions and financial aid at Lawrence University, in Wisconsin, which dropped its testing requirement two years ago. "For us, it's part of our philosophy."

Mr. Syverson said the new policy has been "liberating," and allows his staff to better evaluate students who have good grades but who lack high scores on standardized tests. Since the change, about a quarter of Lawrence's applicants have not submitted ACT or SAT scores.

Yet the policy does not necessarily improve the odds of admissions for applicants who decline to submit their scores. "In some ways, it pushes the bar higher in terms of what their achievement in high school was," Mr. Syverson said. A middling student with OK test scores, in other words, may not benefit from the policy at all.

Among selective colleges, types of test-optional policies vary. Some, like Bowdoin College, in Maine, have long allowed all applicants to choose whether to send in their test scores.

At Lewis & Clark College, in Oregon, all applicants may choose an option called "Portfolio Path," which allows them to send four graded writing samples and three teacher recommendations instead of standardized test scores.

Some colleges waive test requirements only for top students. For instance, George Mason University, in Virginia, limits the option to applicants who earned 3.5 grade-point averages in high school and ranked in the top 20 percent of their graduating classes.

Others define "test optional" differently. In 2001, Hamilton College, in New York, began an experiment: It would continue to require test scores, but allow applicants to choose them. Instead of submitting ACT or SAT scores, students could send scores from three exams — a quantitative test (such as International Baccalaureate math), a writing test (such as AP English), and a test of the applicant's choice.

Two years ago, Hamilton's faculty members voted unanimously to make the policy permanent. The college found that students who had not submitted SAT scores (about 40 percent of students each year) earned slightly higher grade-point averages than those who had submitted them. Admissions officials also said the policy had helped them increase the quality and diversity of Hamilton's students.

"These polices empower applicants to determine what puts them in the best light," said Robert A. Schaeffer, public-education director for FairTest, which advises colleges on testing policies. "Colleges that have done this are better off in every dimension — more applications, better applicants, more diversity of all sorts."

Skeptics Weigh In

Some college officials do not buy that. One of them is Colin S. Diver, president of Reed College, in Oregon. In 2006, Mr. Diver published an opinion column in *The New York Times* called "Skip the Test, Betray the Cause." In it, he accused test-optional colleges of gamesmanship, and dubbed the trend "disheartening."

Mr. Diver argued that colleges were dropping their test requirements to improve their standings in guidebooks, such as *U.S. News & World Report*'s annual ranking of colleges. Applicants with higher scores, he wrote, are much more likely to submit them than applicants with lower scores: So "when a college computes the mean SAT or ACT score of its enrolled students, voilà! Its average will have risen."

His critique hinged on the assumption that colleges do not include the test scores of enrolled students who were nonsubmitters when they calculate those averages. Is that true?

Usually, according to research by Jonathan P. Epstein. Recently, Mr. Epstein, a senior consultant with Maguire Associates, an admissions consulting firm, surveyed 28 liberal-arts colleges with test-optional policies. Only one, he found, said that it required all students to submit their scores after enrolling and that it included those scores in its institutional average.

Wake Forest officials said that to provide accurate data to third parties, the university will require admitted students to submit their scores before they enroll. The data would also allow the university to evaluate the effect of its new policy.

Research has prompted at least one college to leave the ranks of the test-optional. Lafayette College, in Pennsylvania, experimented with such a policy but found that standardized test scores did, in fact, help predict students' performances, according to Roberto Noya, dean of enrollment services.

Mr. Noya applauds the stated intentions of colleges that have gone test-optional, but he does not think the policies are necessary. "Schools have said the SAT makes it difficult to have a diverse student body," Mr. Noya said. "Well, if you know that, you don't have to make the score optional; you just have to act

professionally. What is stopping you from interpreting the scores you do have correctly?"

Questions about test-optional policies seem unlikely to abate. For one, they relate to another major concern in admissions: how to interpret high-school grades.

Over the last 20 years, the percentage of SAT takers who said they earned A averages in high school has increased significantly, according to the College Board, which owns the test. "A standardized measure such as the SAT is especially important for colleges because of rampant grade inflation," said Alana Klein, a spokeswoman for the College Board.

Meanwhile, recent changes in the ACT and SAT have invited closer scrutiny of their effects on college applicants. Last year, Nacac convened a panel of secondary and higher-education officials to examine the role that testing should play in admissions.

The panel, called the Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission, is considering a range of issues that includes the effect of test preparation, test biases, and the link between standardized tests and high-school curricula. The panel plans to release its findings, with recommendations for colleges and high schools, later this year.

At Nacac's annual conference last fall, Philip A. Ballinger, director of admissions at the University of Washington and a member of the commission, said the debate about the college-entrance test had evolved far beyond asking whether the ACT and SAT are good or bad.

"The SAT for many, if not most, institutions adds predictive value," he said. "But are there social or cultural effects that outweigh the predictive value?"

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