

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Issue Summary:
**Standardized Testing
and Admissions**



Standardized Testing and Admissions Issue Summary

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Introduction

In spring 2020, due to the inaccessibility of standardized tests caused by the COVID pandemic, Johns Hopkins University (JHU) paused requiring standardized testing (*i.e.*, the SAT or ACT) for undergraduate applicants to the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences and the Whiting School of Engineering. The submission of standardized test scores was made optional for applicants through the entering class of fall 2026.

Over the past year, with three years of test-optional admissions experience and related outcomes data, the Office of the Provost has revisited the test optional policy in the context of recent findings and evolving considerations about the value and challenges of standardized testing. The Office's analysis was reviewed by a faculty advisory group, the Deans of the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences and the Whiting School of Engineering, and the Johns Hopkins University Council, who offered valuable guidance and confirmed that standardized testing is an important component of a holistic admissions review process at JHU.

This conclusion forms the basis of our decision to reactivate the standardized test requirement for undergraduate applicants to the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences and the Whiting School of Engineering, beginning with those seeking admission to the class starting in fall 2026. As we prepare for this policy change, following faculty advice and recognizing the compressed timeframe as it relates to test accessibility, undergraduate applicants in the current application cycle – those seeking to join the class starting in fall 2025 – will be encouraged but not required to submit standardized test scores.

Key Findings from Johns Hopkins Data¹

Standardized test scores are a reliable predictor of academic performance in the first two years of college, even in a test-optional environment.

Our assessment demonstrated that SAT scores are a significant predictor of both first- and second-year academic performance at JHU. First-year and second-year JHU GPAs of test-optional students tended to be lower, even after controlling for a variety of demographic and socioeconomic factors and choice of first-year major. Furthermore, the average first-year GPA of students who did not submit test scores was statistically similar to the average GPA of students whose submitted test scores were in the bottom quartile of the test score distribution. Additionally, although only a small proportion of the first-year class received a D, F, or W

¹ On June 29, 2023, the Supreme Court decided two cases—*Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. University of North Carolina* and *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*—that severely limit universities' consideration of race in admissions. Consistent with the Court's decision, JHU no longer considers race as a factor in its admissions process.

(withdraw) course grade, those who were admitted without test scores were statistically more likely to be among that group.

The test-optional environment has discouraged some applicants from less-advantaged backgrounds from submitting test scores that would have provided an additional positive signal of their academic abilities.

We have evidence that some less-advantaged students with very favorable test scores have chosen to suppress them and, in doing so, have withheld important information that would have provided positive context to their application. Each year from 2021 to 2023, a certain number of first-generation, limited-income students and students from underrepresented groups chose to suppress their test scores – even when they scored 1500² or above – rendering their applications less compelling than they might have been. We cannot know for sure, but in addition to those applicants who submitted and then suppressed their scores, there may also have been other less-advantaged, high-scoring applicants who did not submit their test scores at all, a lost opportunity for them and for our university.

The test-optional period has coincided with a modest increase in the diversity of the admissions funnel.

From 2019 to 2023, during the test-optional period, there were small increases in representation of first-generation, limited-income students and students from underrepresented groups. Additionally, during the same period, admissions-focused outreach and recruitment efforts and a transformative increase in financial aid – along with the creation of an Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the adoption of the university-wide *Second Roadmap on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion* in 2021 – likely also played roles in attracting first-generation, limited-income applicants and applicants from underrepresented groups.

Under a test-optional policy, those who provide test scores fared better in the application review process.

In each of the past three admissions cycles, the applicant pool has been almost evenly divided among students who provided test scores and those who did not; however, in the incoming class, the proportion of students who provided test scores has outpaced the proportion of students who did not by 15% or more. Much of this dynamic can be attributed to the admissions office seeking to gain confidence in the math preparation of applicants who indicate an interest in math-intensive courses of study like engineering and natural sciences. Because JHU's applicant pool is made up of students with exceptionally strong grades, measures like standardized test scores can help provide an important additional signal with regards to an applicant's level of math preparation.

Academic Literature & Peer Findings

² The 25th percentile of SAT scores for those we admitted.

The findings at Johns Hopkins are consistent with academic literature on the subject of testing in admissions and the findings of several peer institutions when examining their data from recent periods of test-optional admissions. Numerous studies have shown that standardized test scores are highly correlated with success in college measured via grade point average (GPA), retention rates, four-year graduation rates (Bettinger et al., 2013; Buckley et al., 2018; Friedman et al., 2024; Sánchez & Comeaux, 2020; Shaw, 2018), and even a propensity to take more difficult courses and pursue more challenging majors (Sackett & Kuncel, 2018). Indeed, a number of peer institutions cited the power of standardized test scores to predict academic success at their institution as a factor underlying their decisions to once again require test scores for undergraduate admissions. Peer universities' definitions of academic success varied by analysis, but included college grades, academic standing, and reenrollment each semester (Ad Hoc Committee on Admissions Policies, 2024; Cascio et al., 2024; Schmill, 2022; Task Force on Testing in Admissions, 2024; Yale College Undergraduate Admissions, 2024).

Despite concerns raised by some critics of standardized testing who put forward high school GPA as a better predictor of college success (Geiser, 2020; Bowen 2009), the relationship between test scores and academic success in college persists even after controlling for a variety of demographic and socioeconomic factors (Chen & Sánchez, 2023; Sánchez & Comeaux, 2020; Shaw, 2018). In fact, some have found that test scores were *better* predictors for underrepresented groups than majority groups (Sánchez & Comeaux, 2020) while others found that standardized tests actually overpredict performance of underrepresented groups with non-white students earning lower grades in college than their testing would have predicted (Sackett & Kuncel, 2018; Shaw, 2018). Published analyses demonstrate that a combination of high school GPA and standardized test scores is more predictive of college success than either measure alone (Belasco et al., 2015; Chen & Sánchez, 2023; Geiser & Santelices, 2007; Sackett & Kuncel, 2018).

Moreover, studies have found that the predictive power of test scores has increased while the predictive power of high school GPA has decreased (Hurwitz & Welch, 2018; Sánchez & Comeaux, 2020). This may be due in part to grade inflation over time. There is evidence that SAT scores have fallen at the same time that the high school GPA of students taking the SAT has risen (Buckley et al., 2018). Because there is an upper limit to grades, grade inflation leads to compression and a decrease in grade variance (Hurwitz & Lee, 2018). This compression in high school GPA makes it more difficult for admissions offices to distinguish among top performers (Hurwitz & Lee, 2018). It is also important to note that not all students are impacted equally by grade inflation. Scholars have observed that there is greater grade inflation among white, Asian, wealthy, and private school students than among black, Hispanic, less wealthy, and public-school students (Hurwitz & Lee, 2018).

In addition to doing away with information that could be valuable to admissions offices, test-optional strategies do not seem to increase the diversity of undergraduate classes. One large-scale study of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data from all four-year,

public and private, not-for-profit, baccalaureate-granting institutions of higher education shows that test-optional policies lead to a short-term increase in applications but have no effect on other measures of quality and selectivity and no effect on diversity (Belasco et al., 2015). Similar results were demonstrated in a time series analysis of data from 180 selective liberal arts colleges in the United States. That study found that, while test-optional policies increased the number of applications and reported scores (thus increasing the perceived selectivity of test-optional schools), the policies did not lead to an increase in low-income or minority students actually enrolling in these schools (Saboe & Terrizzi, 2019). These findings were consistent with the information shared by Dartmouth and Cornell in their reports supporting a return to requiring standardized testing in undergraduate admissions (Cascio et al., 2024; Task Force on Testing in Admissions, 2024).

Conclusion

Though imperfect, test scores stand out as a significant quantitative metric to assess the likelihood of students' academic success at Johns Hopkins. The past three years under a test-optional policy have helped refine our understanding of the value of standardized testing in the admissions process and have shown that these tests provide relevant information about applicants.

Johns Hopkins conducts a holistic or comprehensive review, taking applicants' personal circumstances and educational environment into account as the best way to assess admissibility. Just as we view high school GPA as a critical piece of the admissions package – despite challenges posed by grade inflation, compression, and the potential for inequities – we also need to include standardized test scores in a holistic review, with a similar awareness of the challenges posed by these measures.

Based on a sharper understanding of the impact of a test-optional approach to the admissions process and relationship to college outcomes, Johns Hopkins University has made the decision to reactivate the standardized testing requirement for undergraduate applicants to the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences and the Whiting School of Engineering for the class matriculating in fall 2026. Since a change in JHU's testing requirements at this point in the application cycle could present challenges related to test access and preparation time, applicants seeking to join the class matriculating in fall 2025 will be encouraged, though not required, to submit standardized test scores as part of their application materials.

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