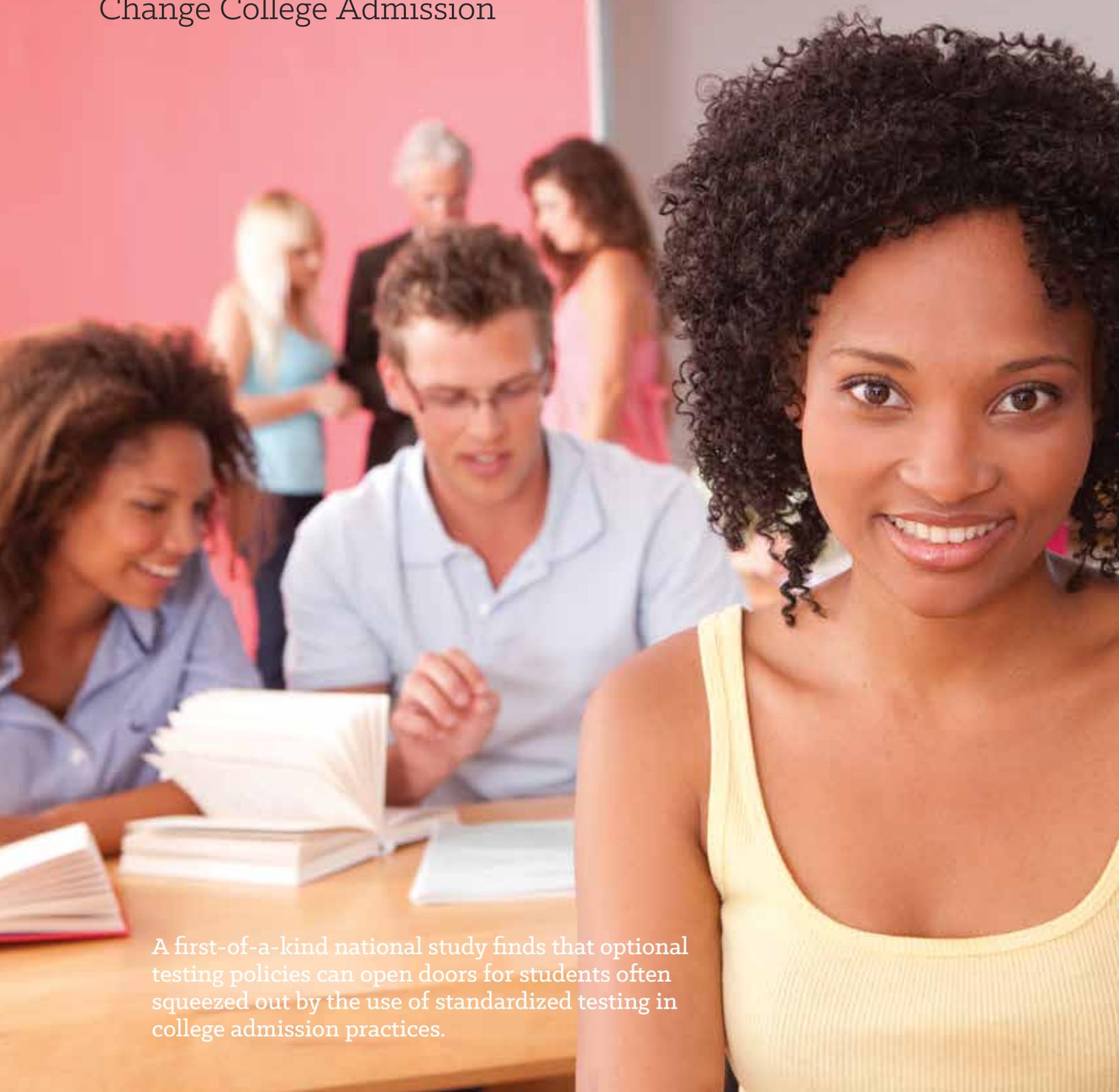


# Brave New World:

How Test-Optional Policies Could (and Should)  
Change College Admission



A first-of-a-kind national study finds that optional testing policies can open doors for students often squeezed out by the use of standardized testing in college admission practices.



By William C. Hiss and Valerie W. Franks



Natalie Casimir cried tears of joy when she received her admission and financial aid letters from Wake Forest University.

The young woman chose not to submit SAT scores with her application, but, nonetheless was accepted by the highly-selective North Carolina school, Casimir recounted in a November interview with *CBS News*.

Moreover, the institution had offered Casimir a four-year, full-ride scholarship.

"I felt valued," the first-generation college student recalled in a nationally televised interview, "...not by a number, but by my character."

The story was aired in response to a report we had released on the NACAC website showing that students admitted to college without test scores being considered as part of the admission decision are performing as well as students admitted with much stronger test scores.

Wake Forest is one of more than 850 test-optional US colleges and universities, meaning applicants are not required to have their SAT or ACT scores considered for admission.

New research provides evidence that this increasing trend of colleges and universities going test-optional provides a successful path to enrolling *and graduating* a wider range of students.

This research examined data from 33 public and private institutions, representing academic and demographic data from 123,000 students and alumni. Within the sample, 30 percent of the students—a total of 37,000—were non-submitters, meaning they were accepted to college without test scores being considered in the admission process.

Our analysis focused on the comparison between submitters of testing, and non-submitters of testing. Our results were clear: non-submitters performed just as well in college as submitters.

Specifically, non-submitters earned cumulative GPAs that were only .05 points lower (2.83 versus 2.88) than submitters; the difference in their graduation rates was 0.6 percent (63.9 percent versus 64.5 percent). By any standard, these are trivial differences. Yet on this we hang the national sluiceways about who can go to college and where they go?

We came across another important finding. When comparing their demographic profiles, we found that non-submitters were more likely than submitters to be first-generation-to-college

enrollees, minority students, Pell Grant recipients, and women.

This strongly suggests that test-optional policies reduce barriers to admission, permitting a larger, and more diverse array of students to discover how much they are capable of achieving.

### AMERICA'S LOST TALENT

By playing an oversized role in shaping who gets to go to college, our research shows that standardized testing seems to profoundly hurt the chances of college admission for many students who would succeed in college.

Some prospective college students apply and are turned down based on their testing. For other students, including many who performed well in high school, low scores on standardized tests lead them to never apply, or to apply to less-challenging institutions. How do they scan through the vast numbers of colleges to select their top choices? The answer for many: standardized test scores.

A recent Bates College (ME) alumna, a Hispanic woman from rural Texas, remembered, "When I was looking at schools... if my SAT score didn't fit that range, I just nixed it."

Looking at our database of 37,000 non-submitters, it's easy to conclude that there are stunning numbers of students who have proven themselves to everyone except the testing agencies. Statisticians would call the test scores of these 37,000 students "false-negatives," in that these students demonstrated college success beyond what their test scores predict.

This leads to an ethicist's question, if we had a medical test for a serious condition, such as liver or heart failure, that had a 30 percent rate of false-negatives—that is, the test said you didn't have the condition when in fact you did—would it continue to be used?

Of course it wouldn't! The firm supplying that test would be sued out of business or closed by the FDA.

With roughly one-third of the students in our study as non-submitters, we offer a hypothesis: given the importance of quality postsecondary education, the damage done by false-negative results in college readiness testing are comparable to false-negatives in a medical test.

And if 30 percent is the non-submitter share of *enrolling* students—those blessed with grit



or family support or good guidance counseling—what is the true share of false-negatives created by testing, including those refused admission, attending community colleges and for-profit colleges, or not attending at all?

What is the real percentage of qualified students with low test scores? Is it 35 percent or 40 percent of graduating seniors? Fifty percent? America cannot afford these levels of lost talent.

There is an immense pool of low-income students who now do not attend college at all, or attend institutions where they often leave with debt but no degree, according to calculations from the Lumina Foundation, America's largest educational foundation.

These students need access to institutions where they will be challenged and graduate. Our study offers evidence that optional testing is one route to achieve that goal.

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## Our conclusion is that standardized testing gets in the way, obscuring sizable slices of the human landscape.

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### MOVING BEYOND TESTING

Our research shows a student's academic performance in high school—their test scores—best predicts postsecondary success.

Those results challenge the widely held (but often unexamined) assumption that standardized testing is a common standard, used to compensate for wide differences in academic quality among high schools.

We found largely the opposite to be true. Hard work and good grades in high school matter, and they matter a lot.

Cumulative college GPAs closely tracked with high school GPAs in our study, despite wide variations in students' performance on standardized tests.

Students with strong high school GPAs generally performed well in college, despite modest or low standardized test scores. In contrast, students with weak high school GPAs—even those with markedly stronger test scores—earned lower college GPAs and graduated at lower rates.

Our conclusion is that standardized testing gets in the way, obscuring sizable slices of the human landscape. It can cause institutions to make poor decisions as they try to anticipate guidebook ratings or protect score averages. It can lead guidance counselors and parents to wave students off from applying to selective colleges.

And hundreds of thousands of students each year take themselves out of applicant pools based on published test scores.

The search for a national standardized test, with consistent predictive value for college performance across huge pools of different kinds of students is a massive trip up a blind alley for America, and the world.

We now know college admission decisions made without testing are just as reliable as those made with testing.

The human mind is too complex, too subtle and too variable to hope to find a single standardized test that can be administered in a few hours. We are shaped by everything from multiple intelligences to cultures to various kinds of learning differences, making "standardized" testing impossible.

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### NEXT STEPS

Additional research is necessary, both to examine our findings and to deepen the understanding of students admitted under test optional policies. In particular, we believe these areas merit further study:

- **Repeat the study with a different set of test-optional colleges:** Good research protocols require that important research findings be retested and duplicated. Use four-year college GPAs and graduation rates as markers, not first-year GPAs.
- **The admission funnel:** Examine the complex funnel from potential prospect to enrollee to see how non-submitters help colleges build applicant pools, enroll talented classes, spread out geographically, and improve financial stability. For example, from 2003 to 2010, the percentage of non-submitters enrolled at the 20 private institutions included in our study rose from 26 percent to 35 percent. What is driving this trend? Public universities, with "automatic/guaranteed admission" policies for students with certain high school ranks or GPAs, seem largely to be succeeding with these policies.
- **Financial aid:** Our study found that lower-scoring non-submitters are commonly passed over for merit awards, despite slightly better college GPAs and markedly higher graduation rates than submitters who received awards. Are institutional policies to blame for that discrepancy? Institutions may be wasting millions of dollars and hurting their profiles by requiring cut-off scores for merit awards.
- **Alumni outcomes:** How are submitters and non-submitters, respectively, faring after graduation?
- **False-positives:** Our study shows false-negative results in testing. What is the prevalence of false-positives significantly created by test coaching? Does the coaching that inflates test scores also improve college GPAs? If not, the tests may be losing predictive value at both the low and high ranges of scores.
- **Test scoring methods:** Do college admission exams measure speed processing skills rather than intelligence or academic promise? How have students with learning differences fared under test optional policies?

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We challenge you to conduct your own investigation... re-examine the enrolled and graduated students at your institution *without their testing* and see if you find what we did.

This brave new world—where all students will have the choice to apply to college without testing barriers—is coming. Help us get there. [↗](#)

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**Bill Hiss**, who led the Admissions and Financial Aid offices at Bates College for 22 years, has studied and published research on optional standardized testing since 1984. **Valerie Franks** is a former assistant dean of admissions at Bates College, and has 17 years of experience conducting and publishing research for Fortune 500 companies and educational institutions.

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Read the full study at: [www.nacacnet.org/research/research-data/nacac-research/Documents/DefiningPromise.pdf](http://www.nacacnet.org/research/research-data/nacac-research/Documents/DefiningPromise.pdf)

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Visit <http://ow.ly/Dr1Zq> to learn why three NACAC member colleges have adopted test optional policies.