



In a Pandemic, Test-Optional Admissions is Necessary but Insufficient

**By Dominique J. Baker, Ph.D.
Southern Methodist University**

**& Akil Bello
FairTest**

Policy and Practice Brief | August 2020

See all briefs at hackthegates.org and www.chhs.colostate.edu/rise/public-engagement/hack-the-gates/





INTRODUCTION: THE DECLINE OF TESTING REQUIREMENTS

In addition to being a state high school graduation requirement, it is practically a cultural rite of passage for many current day college hopefuls to take the SAT or ACT along their pathways to college. However, test requirements for college admission barely a century old practice. The rise of testing requirements in the early to mid-twentieth century was not clearly solidified in higher education until some key public university systems adopted testing policies in admissions in the 1950s and 1960s. Notably, the University of Texas adopted the SAT in the mid-1950s as “a bureaucratic cudgel to maintain Jim Crow.”¹ The University of Georgia System adopted the SAT requirement in 1957. Still, by 1960 only 422 colleges required the test. The University of California only began requiring the test in 1968.

By 1969, most colleges and universities still did not require a test for admission though the use was rapidly growing. The formal rejection of the test began that year when Bowdoin College was the first institution to have required a test, and then establish an optional policy. Since that time and long before the pandemic, concerns about weak predictive validity^{2,3}, economic and gender bias^{4,5}, test form reuse⁶, and cheating⁷ spurred the growth of test

¹ Price, A. (2019, September 19). A secret 1950s strategy to keep out Black students. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/how-ut-used-standardized-testing-to-slow-integration/597814/>

² Allensworth, E. & Clark, K., (2020, January 28), *High School GPAs and ACT Scores as Predictors of College Completion: Examining Assumptions About Consistency Across High Schools*, Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/0013189X20902110>

³ Korets, D. Yu, C. et al, (2016, December), Predicting Freshman Grade Point Average From College Admissions Test Scores and State High School Test Scores, Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2332858416670601>

⁴ Author. (2020). SAT-Math gender bias: Causes & consequences. *FairTest*. Retrieved from SAT-Math Gender Bias: Causes & Consequences

⁵ Hartocollis, A., (2016, June 26), Tutors See Stereotypes and Gender Bias in SAT. Testers See None of the Above, *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/27/us/tutors-see-stereotypes-and-gender-bias-in-sat-testers-see-none-of-the-above.html>

⁶ Strauss, V., (2018, September 6), *The Washington Post*, Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2018/09/06/college-board-sued-over-allegedly-recycled-sat-test-questions/>

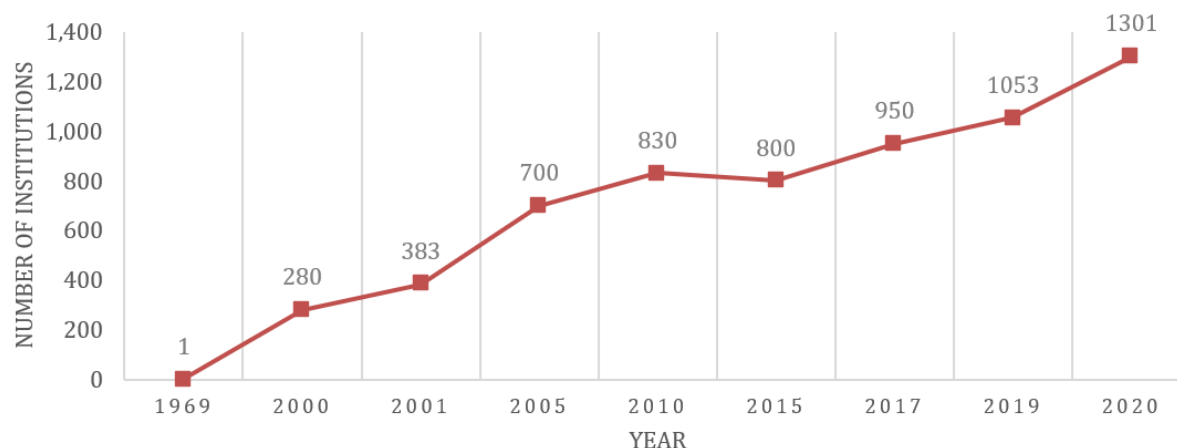
⁷ Anderson, J., & Applebome, P. (2011, December 1). Exam cheating on Long Island hardly a secret. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/02/education/on-long-island-sat-cheating-was-hardly-a-secret.html>





optional admissions policies. The number of institutions with either blind, flexible, or optional policies before the pandemic was at an all-time high, as figure 1 illustrates.⁸ The pandemic has merely added motivation and rationale for expediting the adaptation of test optional policies.

FIGURE 1: TEST BLIND, FLEXIBLE, OR OPTIONAL INSTITUTIONS



Data source: Retrieved from Fairtest.org using https://web.archive.org/web/*/fairtest.org

Though the distinction in policies are not often acknowledged in the popular use of the term, test optional is a blanket term that encompasses three major policies: test optional, test flexible, and test blind. In order to ground this paper in consistent terminology, the following definitions of test optional, test flexible and test blind will be used.

- **Test optional:** The institution allows the majority of applicants to apply for admissions with or without test scores based entirely on the students' discretion.⁹ This formal practice emerged in 1969 when Bowdoin College announced that applicants would have the choice of whether to submit the tests or not.

⁸ Figure 1 tracks the number of institutions that rescinded admission policies that required tests, and does not reflect the number of schools that just never required the test up until 1969.

⁹ Under a test-optional admissions policy, students who are homeschooled or who are international are generally still required to submit test scores.





- **Test flexible:** The institution allows applicants to most of its academic programs to submit one of a wider array of testing products beyond the two most popular brands (ACT and SAT). Going back to the early 1900s there have been dozens of different tests used for admission, from the 1900s to the 1940s essay based “college boards” consisted of a battery of tests, and as recently as 1982-2009, Florida public colleges invited applicants to submit the CLAST (College Level Academic Skills Test).¹⁰ Prior to the COVID-19 crisis only 3 institutions had test flexible policies.
- **Test blind:** The institution refuses to consider any test scores in the admission process at all. Hampshire college has been test blind in their admission process since 2014 and a total of 30 colleges have such a policy as of June 2020. Notably, in the wake of the pandemic, some institutions, such as the California Institute of Technology¹¹, have announced the intention to implement test-blind admissions policies.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC HALTS ADMISSIONS TESTING

Over the last 50 years, the responsibility of administering the SAT and ACT has largely been borne by high schools around the country. High school buildings host the administration of the test. High school counselors advise and coordinate registration, and high school staff—teachers and administrators—organize and proctor the exams.

The pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the disparities in resources between well-funded (and largely White) schools and underfunded (and largely Black and Latinx) schools. These disparities are reflected not only in access to testing but also in the availability of support to navigate a fractured registration and administration process. Public school counselors have

¹⁰ Florida Department of Education. (2020). Assessment archive: College-level academic skills test (CLAST). Retrieved from <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7490/urlt/AA-CLAST.pdf>

¹¹ Hoover, E. (2020, June 7). Testing shakeup: Caltech won't consider ACT/SAT scores for next 2 years. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Testing-Shakeup-Caltech/248938>





spent the first half of 2020 juggling a growing list of responsibilities.^{12,13,14} In schools with dedicated college counseling staff, the likelihood of an SAT or ACT being administered and the availability of timely information about how to secure one of the scarce seats for the July ACT or August SAT in 2020 was much greater than in a school where the counselor is not only responsible for administering tests but also has multiple other responsibilities, including finding technology for students working at home and supporting the socioemotional and wellness needs of students.

The global pandemic disrupted for students, particularly those from lower income backgrounds, not only schools but also systems of support and logistical arrangements, often provided by not-for profit or community organizations, for testing and applying to college. Most test administrations in the first seven months of 2020 have been cancelled nationally by the College Board and ACT or cancelled locally by the individual host school. In 2019, the College Board administered 1,208,238 SAT exams in March, May, and June.¹⁵ In 2020, the May and June SATs were entirely cancelled. The March administration, which in 2019 was 38% of the tests given during the set of March, May and June administrations, was sporadically cancelled across the country. Estimates from April show that approximately 1 million high school juniors could not take the SAT due to cancellations.¹⁶

The College Board and ACT have added new test dates to their regular

¹² Blagg, K., Luetmer, G., (2020, April 28), Even before the Pandemic, Students with Limited Technology Access Lagged behind Their Peers, Urban Wire, Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/even-pandemic-students-limited-technology-access-lagged-behind-their-peers>

¹³ Walsh, C., (2020, July 6), Will coronavirus change college admissions?, *The Harvard Gazette*, Retrieved from <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/07/how-college-admissions-might-change-in-the-wake-of-the-pandemic/>

¹⁴ Morton, N., (2020, May 8), Counseling kids during the coronavirus: A tough job made even tougher, *The Hechinger Report*, Retrieved from <https://hechingerreport.org/counseling-kids-during-the-coronavirus-a-tough-job-made-even-tougher/>

¹⁵ Based on authors' calculations on data extracted from the College Board Educator Portal in March 2020

¹⁶ Anderson, N. (2020, April 13). One million-plus juniors will miss out on SATs and ACTs this spring because of coronavirus. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/one-million-plus-juniors-will-miss-out-on-sats-and-acts-this-spring-because-of-coronavirus/2020/04/12/4ccc827c-7a95-11ea-b6ff-597f170df8f8_story.html





calendar in hopes of meeting some of the demand for testing opportunities. However, further analysis shows that these efforts will likely be insufficient to meet demand.

With a resurgence of COVID-19, a return to normal school operations appears unsafe and unlikely, and the dearth of testing opportunities is expected to continue. Some high schools (for example Stephen F. Austin High School in Austin, Texas) have announced that they will not offer weekend testing for the 2020 - 2021 school year.¹⁷ If more schools follow suit then the capacity for testing in the coming year will be even lower than current estimate.

The converging factors of decreased testing capacity and increased demand implies that the testing agencies will not be able to test students at any rate approximating a normal year. Given the cost of the SAT and ACT for students and the disruption of school based resources, access to limited testing seats in the fall will likely favor students with the privilege and support of independent college counselors to help navigate registration, test prep tutors to provide timely information, and multiple parents with credit cards to complete registration. Basic concerns about economic stability and health will also skew the playing field to favor wealthier students who will not face compounding factors such as unemployment, food insecurity, health care concerns, family care, etc., which make testing and navigating the college application labyrinth a decreased priority.

The lack of available testing opportunities has prompted some colleges to suspend testing requirements or otherwise adopt some form of test optional policy for the coming admissions cycle or for longer periods. This solution will in part help students in this time of significant disruption. Enrollment management leaders need to consider these decisions in conversation with research evidence, to make thoughtful assessments and policy determinations.

¹⁷ Korn, M. (2020, June 19). Princeton, Northwestern latest to not require SAT, ACT. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/stanford-princeton-northwestern-latest-to-not-require-sat-act-11592505889>





CRITICAL ISSUES WITH TEST OPTIONAL POLICIES IN LIGHT OF COVID-19

While removing the requirement to submit test scores has gained popularity in recent years, there are critical concerns with the actual implementation of test optional policies in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has and continues to upend several facets of the holistic admissions review process. We provide an overview of three of these issues below but recognize that there are several other concerns created by the pandemic. The three issues and potential obstacles to policy implementation include: states requiring students take a college entrance exam to graduate, the speed with which institutions have decided to go test optional, and recent term grades.

First, several states require students to take a college entrance exam as part of their requirements to graduate from high school. In academic year 2018-2019, approximately 25 states required students to take either the SAT or ACT in order to graduate from high school.¹⁸ Policymakers have created this requirement as part of graduation in order to encourage college going among high school graduates. Generally, districts or high schools will offer one of the college entrance exams for free for students. Research shows that these types of policies increase college enrollment, particularly of low-income students.^{19,20} However, the pandemic has drastically changed the testing capabilities in the United States, as mentioned earlier. The cancellation of testing dates for both the SAT and the ACT coupled with the closing of the physical high school campuses makes it incredibly challenging for students to physically take a college entrance exam. However, that does not automatically change the state or district requirements for graduation. Policymakers will

¹⁸ Gewertz, C. (2019, April 9). Which states require students to take the SAT or ACT? *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/states-require-students-take-sat-or-act.html>

¹⁹ Hurwitz, M., Smith, J., Niu, S., & Howell, J. (2015). The Maine question: How is 4-year college enrollment affected by mandatory college entrance exams?. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37(1), 138-159.

²⁰ Hyman, J. (2017). ACT for all: The effect of mandatory college entrance exams on postsecondary attainment and choice. *Education Finance and Policy*, 12(3), 281-311.





have to make swift decisions about these types of graduation requirements in light of the pandemic.²¹

Second, institutions' decisions to go test optional in light of the pandemic are happening more swiftly than the decisions are traditionally made. Historically, institutions announced that they were going test optional after months or years of study on their own data and consultation with peer institutions that have already transitioned. Currently, a significant number of institutions have decided to go test optional for the next admissions cycle in May and June, three months before academic year 2020-21 starts. This does not allow for a significant amount of time for institutions to prepare for the shift. Organizations like Admissions Community Cultivating Equity & Peace Today (ACCEPT) will likely need to draft guidance based on the advice of admissions professionals who have worked at institutions that went test optional before the pandemic. This advice will be useful up to a point, since the pandemic means that even institutions that were already test optional will have to adjust since prior adopters will still need to adjust evaluation of prior academic performance (detailed below). Still, it is unlikely that institutions choosing to go test optional during the summer of 2020 will have significant time to study and create protocols for a new version of admissions review.

Third, admissions professionals rely on applicants' prior academic performance as a key factor in the evaluation of students for admission. Prior academic performance is often represented by students' academic transcripts, including completed and in-progress courses and grades at the point of application. Admissions officers will look at students' GPAs for an overall understanding of their academic achievement, but will often put particular weight on the grades earned in the most recent academic term. This is done for two reasons. Paying particular attention to the most recent term allows students the opportunity demonstrate academic performance, growth, and an intellectual trajectory in their most academically challenging classes.

²¹ Nadworny, E. (2020, June 12). Colleges are backing off SAT, ACT scores -- But the exams will be hard to shake. NPR. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/12/875367144/colleges-are-backing-off-sat-act-scores-but-the-exams-will-be-hard-to-shake>





This would mean that for high school students, junior year grades can be weighted more heavily than other year's grades. Because a significant number of application deadlines for regular admission decisions are in January or later, students cannot provide final semester grades from senior year when admissions officers are reviewing their applications. For college transfer students, this means the most recent academic term is generally the spring semester or quarter. Often, when institutions go test optional, their admissions officers rely on other measures of academic achievement, like grades, to determine who is admitted.²²

This reliance on prior, and most recent, grades becomes more difficult to navigate considering the current pandemic, which upended all schooling starting in March 2020. In light of the pandemic, some high schools and colleges decided to allow students to switch their grades to pass/fail. Others were not able to provide classes for all their students due to structural issues like a lack of internet access.^{23,24,25} Admissions officers will have to take into account the real academic disruption caused by the pandemic when evaluating the grades of applicants. Most importantly, these professionals will need to factor in this academic disruption while not exacerbating structural inequities that already exist.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Practitioners—who for the purposes of this paper are the admissions officers who make decisions based on test scores and institutional and state scholarship agencies who award aid and grants based on test scores—need

²² Tough, P. (2019). *The years that matter most: How college makes or breaks us*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

²³ Lederman, D. (2020, July 1). The role of learning in colleges' decisions about fall. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2020/07/01/presidents-give-their-colleges-mixed-grades-remote-learning-how>

²⁴ Liberman, M. (2020, June 29). A third of K-12 students aren't adequately connected for remote learning, report says. Retrieved from https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2020/06/digital_divide_teachers_students.html?cmp=soc-tw-shr

²⁵ Simonetti, I. (2020, June 12). "It may be that I never go back to the grading system." *Vox*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2020/6/12/21288116/coronavirus-covid-19-schools-teachers-grading>

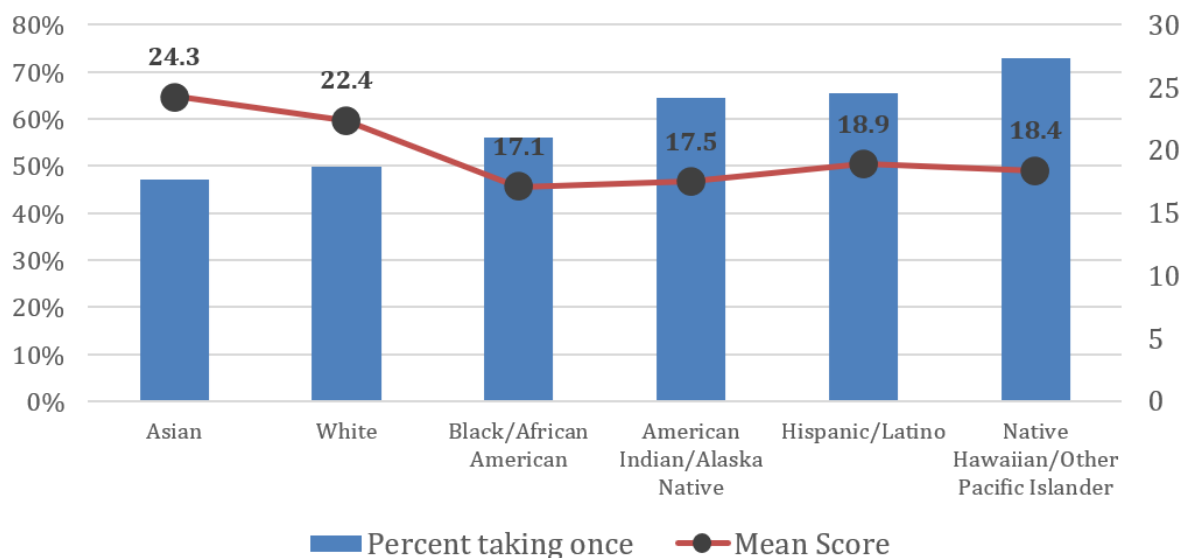




to reconsider the use of test scores in the immediate future. The demands of a rapidly changing landscape and constantly evolving logistic feasibility of delivering the SAT and ACT will put an increased burden on students, families, and school staff. The assumption that opportunities to test are equitable, frequent, and only minimally logistically difficult are no longer (and likely never were) true. Any implementation of a test optional policy should account for the following considerations to ensure that the policy is thoughtfully implemented and equitably applied.

First, ensure systems of initial screening or sorting do not disadvantage or otherwise make assumptions about non-submitters' academic abilities compared to that of submitters. Prior to the exacerbated inequalities created by the pandemic, low-income students and students of color, especially Black, Latinx, and Native Americans, took the SAT and ACT less frequently than their counterparts and were more likely to have taken the test only once (Figure 2). Research shows that groups taking the test more frequently achieve higher scores, strongly indicating that its familiarity with the test more so than academic ability that is accounting for at least part of the score differential.²⁶

Figure 2: 2017 ACT Single Test Takers



Data source: ACT

²⁶ Harmston, M. & Crouse J., (2016), *Multiple Testers: What Do We Know About Them?*, ACT, Retrieved from: <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/5195-Multiple-Testers.pdf>





Second, address the relationship between awarding of “merit” aid and measures of “academic success” like test scores.^{27,28} Given that in a test optional environment some students will submit test scores and others will not and that those with test scores are likely to already be wealthier, any award of non-need based aid should be decoupled from metrics that are much more likely to reward already wealthy applicants. This is especially important given the research about the disparity in college lending based on race and family income.^{29,30,31} Creating bifurcated scholarship pathways for submitters and non-submitters is a sub-optimal approach that some institutions have implemented. The optimal approach would be test blind for awarding of scholarship dollars. This practice is justifiable and consistent with existing approaches at many universities which already award some scholarships based on residency, participation in sport or activity, affiliation with a particular organization, service to state or community, or any other number of non-academic factors.³²

Finally, ensure that the policy regarding score use is complete, transparent, and addresses all constituencies, including but not limited to homeschooled, international, honors programs, and non-traditional applicants. Homeschool and international students may have the fewest testing options of all students for the coming year as homeschools are dependent upon the kindness of schools at which they have no connection in order to find a testing center and

²⁷ Heller, D. (2006, March), *Merit Aid and College Access*, Center for the Study of Higher Education The Pennsylvania State University, Retrieved from <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.544.2863&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

²⁸ Quinton, S. (2019, Dec 10). Some states move toward financial aid based on need rather than merit. *Pew Charitable Trusts*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2019/12/10/some-states-move-toward-financial-aid-based-on-need-rather-than-merit>

²⁹ Scott-Clayton, J. and Li, J., *Black-white disparity in student loan debt more than triples after graduation*, Brookings Institute, Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/black-white-disparity-in-student-loan-debt-more-than-triples-after-graduation/>

³⁰ Espinosa, L. and Baum, S., *OPINION: Black students' 'unprecedented and unequal' college debt should cause alarm*, The Hechinger Report, Retrieved from <https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-black-students-unprecedented-and-unequal-college-debt-is-cause-for-alarm/>

³¹ Baker, D. J. (2019). When average is not enough: Examining the variation in the influences on undergraduate debt. *AERA Open*, 5(2). Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858419860153>

³² SUNY. (2020). The Excelsior Scholarship is leading the way to college affordability. Retrieved from <https://www.suny.edu/smarttrack/types-of-financial-aid/scholarships/excelsior/>





must search for a host school with no assistance from the College Board or ACT. International testing is generally cancelled first and by country, thus what might be onerous travel in the US becomes onerous and expensive travel internationally, further intensifying existing economic class inequalities.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Policymakers need to consider three primary concerns. First, certain states will need to revisit the requirement for students to take a college entrance exam in order to graduate. Due to the cancellation of a significant share of the testing dates and current uncertainty about mass testing in secondary schools during the pandemic, it is unlikely that students can fulfill this requirement.

Second, state boards of education will have to consider how to systematically communicate about grade changes from the most recent academic term for secondary students. This information could be updated school-by-school on the school profile. However, it is likely that schools that are underfunded and serve a disproportionate share of students of color and from lower income backgrounds will not have the capacity to update the school profile in addition to the several other responsibilities school personnel have. A way to solve this would be for the state to take the burden of creating a single database of grading shifts that occurred over the spring that would be made available to admissions professionals. While this would add a bit of time to the review process, this would be one of the most systematic ways for information on recent academic term grading to be compiled.

Third, state boards of education will need to evaluate how best to communicate with colleges and universities about the impacts of the pandemic on different communities. As admissions professionals evaluate prospective students, it will be important for them to keep in mind things like layoffs, infection rates, and deaths from the pandemic. Providing deep contextual information to admissions professionals can help them to evaluate applicants more thoroughly. For example, admissions professionals are





more likely to admit students from lower income backgrounds when detailed information about the students' context is provided.³³ This does not mean creating a mechanized index of the issues facing students. Based on prior research, it would be most useful to provide admissions professionals with detailed, contextual information and then to provide them with training in using the data while evaluating students. These non-academic concerns will have an effect on students' academic achievement in addition to their mental and physical health. This is one of the reasons that traditional measures of "academic success" will likely be less accurate during the pandemic.

Similar to the second recommendation to policymakers, state boards could present unemployment, infection/hospitalization, and death rate information that is collected in other areas of the government linked to either the nearest high school and college. This database could also present information on internet access in neighborhoods near the high school or community college for students currently enrolled. While college students do not have to live in the surrounding neighborhood, prospective transfer students will likely have some ties to the neighborhood surrounding their institution (for example, faculty or staff members that work with the student will likely live near the institution). Again, this would increase the review time slightly for admissions professionals. However, this would do two positive things that outweigh the additional work. One, it would send a strong signal that admissions offices are taking into consideration the very real toll faced by students and their families during the pandemic. Two, if admissions professionals work to incorporate this type of information into their holistic review, then they will acknowledge the enormous hurdles some students faced to still be living much less applying to college. And this would be accomplished without forcing students to write essays about the trauma they have experienced.

³³ Bastedo, M. N., & Bowman, N. A. (2017). Improving admission of low-SES students at selective colleges: Results from an experimental simulation. *Educational Researcher*, 46(2), 67-77. Retrieved from <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~bastedo/papers/BastedoBowman2017.pdf>





Acknowledgements

This policy and practice brief was made possible by funding from the [Joyce Foundation](#) for the Hack the Gates project—a joint partnership between [ACCEPT: Admissions Community Cultivating Equity & Peace Today](#) and the [RISE Center at Colorado State University](#).



TheJoyceFoundation

© 2020 ACCEPT & CSU RISE Center
All rights reserved.