The Critical Examination of Test-Optional: A Review of Case Study Research Design & Methodology

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Overview & Guiding Research Questions

The *Test-Optional Policies and Equitable Admissions* research project is an explanatory, sequential mixed-methods research project that examines the impact of test-optional admissions policy on the enrollment trends of Black, Latinx/e, Indigenous, Asian, and students from low-income backgrounds. Specifically, the case study research sought to examine how test-optional and corresponding admissions processes are (a) implemented across postsecondary institutions within larger racial and economic policy shifts; and (b) experienced by historically excluded students and university stakeholders during the 2022-23 academic year. With the preceding in mind, the following research questions guided the case study research design effort:

1. How do institutions characterize their admissions climate prior to test-optional (e.g., overall admissions recruitment and management)?
2. What led to test-optional changes at these selected institutions? And how did test-optional changes impact the admissions climate?
3. How did admissions officers implement test-optional policy changes? Were there any challenges?
4. How have test-optional policies influenced admissions practices and related admissions policies?
5. How have test-optional policies impacted the representation of historically excluded students?
6. How are institutions considering the use of test-optional policies in the long term?
7. What values, practices, and policies have structured admissions at diversity-leading institutions, and how do they differ from selective and/or low-diversity institutions?
8. Have test-optional policies led to increases in applications submitted, increased admissions offers, and yield increased enrollment by Black, Latinx/e, and Indigenous students in one of the four groups noted at more selective institutions of higher education?
9. What impact do test-optional admissions policies have on Black, Latinx/e, and Indigenous students in at least one of the four groups and their decisions to apply and enroll in more selective institutions?
10. What experiences are students in these groups having regarding applying to or considering applying to selective institutions of higher education? Specifically, what are students in these groups’ perceptions of college accessibility?
11. Has recruitment and admissions practices among said groups changed due to test-optional policies and have led to a more diversified applicant pool and an increase in Black, Latinx/e, Indigenous, and students from low-income backgrounds enrolling in more selective institutions? How do these changes differ by sector? If student cohorts have become more diverse, how much is due to test-optional admissions policies or are there other reasons?
12. Are institutions that have implemented test-optional policies making any specific changes to practices any policies to recruit more students from at least one of the four groups listed?

Methodology

We conducted six in-depth case studies that examined admissions data, forward-facing admissions documents (e.g., recruitment materials), and university communications regarding COVID-19, admissions policy changes, and diversity-driven enrollment goals. The identification and analysis of these documents constituted case study portfolios for each case study site. This information was utilized to augment our in-depth interviews with students and university stakeholders. While the case studies were exploratory (Yin, 2003) per the test-optional studied trends, we employed a multiple case-study approach (Yin, 2003; Campbell & Ahrens 1998) to explore differences within and between types of institutions (selective, MSIs, etc.), and differences outside of types of institutions (please see The Margins). What follows is the case study and interview research design and methodology.

Site and Participant Selection

We began the case-study site selection process by crafting selection criteria informed by a meta-analysis of test-optional research and a preliminary analysis of student enrollment trends (before 2020) utilizing the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). This process allowed us to focus the data analysis on the adoption of test-optional, corresponding racial and economic representation, and exemplary admission models that advanced equitable admission policies and processes. The finalized analytical file was constructed utilizing publicly available data from IPEDS (academic year 2019-20) and restricted data from Barron’s competitive index containing the following key sources of information for each test-optional four-year postsecondary institution:

1. Institutional selectivity (e.g., Barron’s competitive index ranking, NCES yield percentage)
2. Institutional sector (e.g., public, four-year, private not-for-profit, four-year)
3. Whether submitting standardized tests is optional during the undergraduate admissions process (e.g., considered but not required; neither required nor recommended)
4. Flags for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Hispanic Serving Institution (HSIs) status (e.g., yes, no)
5. Six-year graduation rates by race and ethnicity
6. Percentage of total enrollment by race and ethnicity
7. The proportion of tuition and state appropriations that count as core revenue

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1 IPEDS is a lagging dataset; and, as such, the test-optional indicator and resultant data may not effectively capture the full sample of test-optional four-year colleges and universities given the recent widespread adoption of test-optional policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Colleges and universities included in this list adopted test-
In our selection process, we also considered institutions that have experienced seismic policy shifts at the local and/or state level within the past three academic years (AY 2019 to present), including institutional-wide changes to admissions policies (e.g., adoption of test-optional admissions, significant changes to tuition policies, and passage of in-state tuition policies for undocumented students).

We utilized this information to identify potential sites based on the following broad categories:

1. Most Selective Test-Optional Public and Private Colleges/Universities (e.g., Barron’s ranking of “most competitive” or “highly competitive”)
   a. Public Institutions: We were particularly interested in those that (struggle to) graduate BIPOC students, rely on tuition as a core aspect of revenue generation, or rely heavily on state appropriations for revenue generation. We hypothesize that adopting test-optional is either a bid to bolster yield rates (and subsequently selectivity) and/or a function of shifting political contexts.
   b. Private Institutions: We were particularly interested in institutions that rely heavily (>75%) on tuition and fees as core to revenue generation. We hypothesize that the decision to adopt test-optional policies is a bid to increase the pool of applicants and, subsequently, yield rate/selectivity; but also, to generate more revenue through tuition and fees (e.g., enrolling larger class sizes, charging more on tuition and fees because of selectivity, etc.).

2. Least Selective Test-Optional Public and Private Colleges/Universities (e.g., Barron’s ranking of “less competitive” or “non-competitive”)
   a. For both institution types, we were interested in institutions that have succeeded in graduating and struggled to graduate BIPOC students despite having sizable BIPOC student populations. Additionally, we are interested in institutions that rely heavily upon tuition as core to revenue generation. We hypothesize that the decision to adopt test-optional policies is a bid to bolster revenue generated from tuition and fees.

3. Test-Optional at Historically Black Colleges and Universities
   a. For both institutional types, we are interested in institutions that have success in graduating Black students or struggle to graduate Black students, rely upon tuition and state appropriations as core to revenue generation, and that span the selectivity index. In part due to historic levels of underfunding at HBCUs, we hypothesize that the decision to adopt test-optional policies is likely a function of boosting revenue generated from tuition and fees (as a part of this underfunding) or is emanating from a desire to remain competitive in attracting a diverse group of students. HBCUs have historically done far more with less, and this decision to adopt test-optional policies may be a response.

Here, we focused on identifying reasons and rationales as to why institutions across Barron’s competitive index adopt test-optional admissions policies. From the pool of test-optional

optional policies pre-COVID-19 and likely for a different set of reasons than we see presently in the field. Our case study design critically examined admission policies change the pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic.
institutions, we selected three selective institutions (where racial/economic representation in admissions is an issue) and three institutions that primarily serve the Global Majority and espouse a Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) designation. We intentionally selected institutions that explicitly serve the Global Majority to elevate the admissions models that already successfully enroll and graduate a higher number of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. We identify our six case-study sites below; note the use of institutional pseudonyms to protect the identification of in-depth interview participants:

1. Maritime University - Highly Competitive Public Research University (R1) that established a holistic admissions review process and is a recent adopter of test-free admissions
2. Freedom University - Competitive Private University with low diversity that established a holistic admissions review process with a longstanding test-optional admissions policy
3. Brickman State University - Historically Black Public University with rolling admissions and a recent adopter of a test-optional policy
4. Legacy College - Historically Black Private University that established high school coursework completion requirements to be considered for admission
5. Ponderosa State College - Public State University, an award-winning Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) establishing a guaranteed admissions process; a recent adopter of test-free admissions
6. University of the West - Public Research University (R1) and HSI that established a guaranteed admissions process and a 100% admission acceptance rate with a longstanding test-optional admissions policy

The research team constructed a recruitment sampling frame for prospective university stakeholders and students from the case study sites. Specific to university stakeholders, the research team utilized purposive sampling to identify key institutional figures from each case study site who either worked within the admissions office directly or were responsible for access, retention, and engagement of the historically excluded student population within the case-study sites.

Since the research team sought to ensure that at least half of the student in-depth interview participants espoused a historically excluded identity, the recruitment sampling frame for prospective students constituted student affinity groups engaging in student advocacy work on campus. In particular, we searched for student affinity organizations within the case-study sites that worked and represented the interest of the following student populations: justice-impacted students; undocumented students; Black, Asian, Latinx/e, and Indigenous students' rights, equity, and representation; concerns from students from low-income backgrounds; and

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2 Black, Indigenous, Latinx/e, and Asian people constitute the Global Majority. Historically excluded student populations include Black, Indigenous, Latinx/e, Asian, and low-income, first-generation students; historically excluded students are part of the Global Majority.
coalitions related to part-time students with full-time work obligations, as well as students who are parents.

Interview participants were contacted during the 2022 fall quarter via email about the study and invited to participate in the interview process up to three times. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded with the participants’ permission. Each interview participant received a $50 gift card and the ability to make a $20 donation to a nonprofit of their choice for participating. A total of 10 university stakeholders and 27 students participated in the interview process. See demographic tables (separate tabs for university stakeholders and student interview participants) here for interview participant demographic information per the case-study sites.

**Data Collection**

**Document Review Process**

Given the critical orientation of the project, we developed a three-part document review process to systemize the construction of case study portfolios for each site:

1. Identify and catalog all relevant artifacts and documents on admissions, university communications regarding COVID-19, local and statewide policy changes, and diversity-driven enrollment goals.
2. Identify specific admission policies and noting changes over time that shaped test-optional environments during and after COVID-19. This operationalized a key concept related to test-optional rise over time (Furuta, 2017) — namely, postsecondary institutions with higher institutional and individual personhood indexes were likelier to adopt test-optional policies (Furuta, 2017).³
3. Recognize individual student personhood and agency, how institutions characterize their student body, the type of admissions support provided, and key takeaways related to institutional (organizational) personhood.

After completing this three-part document review process, we developed one-page memorandums for each case study site that summarized the admissions policy and climate per forward-facing communication, elevated key admissions decisions, and synthesized the organizational personhood per the institution’s forward-facing artifacts and documents.

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³ The Furuta (2017) study established a process to measure how students are characterized (e.g., distinct features of their student body, recognition of student individuality and agency) within test-optional institutions, and the extent to which the institution places importance on the following aspects during the admission review process: admissions essay, student special talents and abilities, school or community activities, GPA, supports the personalization of undergraduate degree, and letters of recommendation.
Case-study data was collected during the 2022 fall and winter quarters and analyzed during the 2022 winter and 2023 spring quarters. Accordingly, case studies were bound by the data collection timeframe, their respective admissions response to COVID-19, and the 2022-23 admissions cycle.

**In-Depth Interview Protocols**

In tandem, we developed in-depth interview protocols to conduct interviews with students and university stakeholders from the case-study sites. Considering the interview participants' ability to inform the test-optional trends, the university stakeholder protocol was developed to understand the university's process to become a test-optional institution. This included the characterization of test-optional rhetoric, university stakeholder involvement in admissions policy changes, and how decisions made on behalf of the university aligned with the espoused mission, vision, and values. The interview protocols included a synthesis of the institution’s organizational personhood to understand if the university portrayed itself corresponded to the university stakeholder experiences.

The in-depth student interview and focus group protocols focused on understanding college admissions pathways, the extent to which participants understood the varying definitions of test-optional, and how this shaped their college-going experiences. The student interview protocol also allowed participants to expand upon their campus climate experiences within the institution to compare their experiences with the forward-facing portrayal of the institution (organizational personhood).

Both student and university stakeholder protocols included interview sections that examined the consequences of the global pandemic and allowed participants to critically examine social constructs that permit disparate realities for historically excluded populations. To conclude the interview and help generate transformative policies and practices during the data analysis process, the interview protocol asked all study participants to reimagine what higher education admissions would look like when institutions truly realize equity in admissions and atone for the consequences of systemic inequality. We referred to this as the radical reimagination of higher education.

Finally, to excavate the nuances of power and further affirm the agency of each participant, we developed accompanying interview intake forms for university stakeholders and students. The university stakeholder intake form identified and differentiated between participants who designed admissions policies and participants who must enact university policies and processes with lesser agency and influence. The student intake form sought to understand familial education history, work obligations, and corresponding demographic information. The university stakeholder and student intake forms included a section where the interview participant could share their worldview (i.e., positivist, constructivist, emancipatory, etc.) per the provided definitions so we could include worldview as part of the demographic information.

Members of the research team heavily reviewed the interview protocols, and proposed edits were discussed at length to augment critical perspectives. Upon finalizing drafts of the
university stakeholder protocol, the interview protocol was piloted with two admissions officers who worked at private liberal arts institutions that are committed to providing full financial support to their historically excluded student population. These officers provided feedback on the interview protocols after the pilot interview and a review of the written protocol. Similarly, the student protocols were piloted twice: independently by undergraduate research fellows and through a pilot interview conducted by the senior researcher with a volunteer undergraduate student. Undergraduate student feedback was written by the research fellows after observing the pilot interview. The finalized interview protocols implemented feedback from the pilot interviews, mostly concerning the length of the protocol and expanding upon prompts of key terms.

Data Analysis

A deductive and inductive codebook was developed to analyze student and university stakeholder data. Categories and a priori themes were first derived from the interview protocol and used to frame the analysis (through the lens of the guiding research questions). Deductive codes emerged within the categories and in relation to the theoretical framework, Process-Centered Intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall 2013; Choo & Ferree, 2010). This critical theoretical orientation allowed an examination of identified asymmetrical power structures and the experiences of multiply marginalized interview participants. For example, the deductive codes for the student codebook included codes for college access, experienced admissions, barriers, and understanding of test-optional. The inductive codes captured experienced marginalization, community cultural wealth, and agency. Thus, the finalized student codebook emphasized the interaction effects across the axis of power (i.e., race, socioeconomic status, immigration status, etc.) to determine co-occurring inequalities, encouraging the use of multiple codes to understand the experience.

In comparison, the university stakeholder deductive codes catalogued admissions policies as a test-optional institution and espoused institutional values and student enrollment objectives per the mission and vision of the university. The inductive codes captured the university stakeholders’ ability to construct admissions policies, their experienced admissions climate, and when their values contradict the university admission policies and practices. The objective in coding student and university stakeholder data is not to assign a primary code to the experience but to identify “interactions-plus” to emphasize the interaction effects. Each codebook was piloted among two senior EqRC researchers, and interrater reliability was over 90% for the student and university stakeholder codebook.

Findings from the university stakeholder interview data were utilized to triangulate case study portfolios, paying particular attention to when the university stakeholders’ experience was contradictory to the forward-facing information, provided new insight about admissions policies that were not visible in forward-facing information, and further informed test-optional environments (see Effects of Test-Optional in the EqRC Test-Optional Data Hub).
The student interview data findings were utilized to develop the test-optional handbook, *Admissions Justice Reimagined: Moving Beyond a No-Test Admissions Climate for a Freedom Dream*. Altogether, findings from the transformative mixed-methods study informed broader admissions practices and their relationship to historically excluded students’ persistence and retention.

**References**


