Test-Optional Policies: Takeaways from a STEM-Focused Institution

Bridget Lavin - Assistant Director of Admissions; Partnership Management at Carnegie Mellon University

Julie Franzetta - Assistant Director of Admissions; Aid and Staff Development at Carnegie Mellon University
STEM at Carnegie Mellon Quiz

Which department(s) at CMU do you think have recently discussed the impact of Chat GPT on their field?

- Philosophy
- Music
- Art
- Artificial Intelligence

You may also select any combination of any of the above!
Carnegie Mellon: A STEM-Focused Institution

- Top Programs:
  - Computer Science
  - Electrical and Computer Engineering
  - Business Administration
- Unique approach to computer science
  - Focus on theoretical computing and use of mathematical modeling
- Many non-STEM programs have a focus on data or technology
  - Business, Cybersecurity (Strategy and Technology/Politics), Game Theory (Philosophy), Technical Writing (English)
- Only (or first) undergraduate programs in:
  - Computational Biology
  - Human-Computer Interactions
  - Decision Science

Full list of Carnegie Mellon undergraduate programs: https://www.cmu.edu/admission/majors-programs
What is Carnegie Mellon’s Current Standardized Testing Policy?

- Tests are not required for Fall 2024 applicants
  - We will review scores *only* if you indicate you’d like your scores considered
- Consider self-reported, unofficial score reports, or official score reports
- Superscore SAT, do not superscore ACT
- Do not review essay component of SAT or ACT
- Do not review AP scores
- Do not review any SAT II scores
  - *Since they were discontinued in January 2021, most applicants have not taken these*

Review Carnegie Mellon’s full policy here: [https://www.cmu.edu/admission/admission/standardized-testing](https://www.cmu.edu/admission/admission/standardized-testing)
Will this remain Carnegie Mellon’s Standardized Testing Policy?

- Set by university leadership, including the President and Provost
  - Evaluate year-by-year basis
  - No policy has been set beyond Fall 2024 cycle
- Leadership re-evaluate our policy each year to ensure Carnegie Mellon continues to do what is best for the student and the university based on existing research
  - We are actively reviewing the impact of test-optional policies on the current student experience and performance
- We initially adopted a test-optional policy in 2020 for Fall 2021 applicants
  - Three classes so far have entered Carnegie Mellon who applied with test-optional policies
- We don't have any benchmarks we aim for regarding the number of students admitted or enrolled with scores

Review Carnegie Mellon’s full policy here: https://www.cmu.edu/admission/admission/standardized-testing
Tests in Practice at Carnegie Mellon

Among the 1,716 enrolled students who entered in Fall 2022, **70.2%** chose to submit their test scores
  - **50.5%** chose to submit the **SAT**
  - **19.7%** chose to submit the **ACT**

Among the 1,896 enrolled students who entered in Fall 2021, **69.6%** chose to submit their test scores
  - **47.7%** chose to submit the **SAT**
  - **21.9%** chose to submit the **ACT**

Carnegie Mellon works hard to ensure that the % applied with test scores and % admitted with test scores are within 10% of one another.

Find Carnegie Mellon’s 2022-23 Common Data Set here: [https://www.cmu.edu/ira/CDS/cds_2223.html](https://www.cmu.edu/ira/CDS/cds_2223.html)
Carnegie Mellon’s Testing Profile

Find Carnegie Mellon’s 2022-23 Common Data Set here: [https://www.cmu.edu/ira/CDS/cds_2223.html](https://www.cmu.edu/ira/CDS/cds_2223.html)

### SAT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>25th Percentile</th>
<th>50th Percentile</th>
<th>75th Percentile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SAT Composite</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>1540</td>
<td>1560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT English, Reading,</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Writing (ERW)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT Math</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ACT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>25th Percentile</th>
<th>50th Percentile</th>
<th>75th Percentile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT Composite</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT English</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT Math</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What do we advise students?

• If you feel your scores are an accurate reflection of your academic ability, feel confident submitting them! We never want a student to feel like they can't submit scores they were proud to earn.

• We will never tell a student to submit or not submit scores based on their results. We will advise students on how they can make the decision for themselves on whether or not to submit scores.

• When we say we’re test-optional, we mean it: if you ask us not to consider test scores, we won’t read into why or why not you might be making that decision, we’ll just have one less piece of data to consider with your application.

• We train our readers to disregard scores if a student self-reports them on the Common App but has indicated they wish to be considered test-optional.
National Trends

Number of Students Taking Standardized Tests - SAT

SAT Test Takers

Pennsylvania SAT Test Takers
National Trends

Number of Students Taking Standardized Tests - ACT

National Trends

### SAT Test Taker Mean Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2020 Graduates</th>
<th>2021 Graduates</th>
<th>2022 Graduates</th>
<th>2023 Graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Total Score</td>
<td>1051</td>
<td>1060</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>1028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean ERW Score</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Math Score</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>508</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ACT Test Taker Mean Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2020 Graduates</th>
<th>2021 Graduates</th>
<th>2022 Graduates</th>
<th>2023 Graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Composite Score</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean English Score</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Math Score</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Reading Score</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Science Score</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
National Trends

Figure 1. Slowing Growth in Number of U.S. High School Graduates, then Decline (U.S. Total High School Graduates)

Pre-COVID-19 Testing Landscape

• The College Board found 55% of Asian-American test takers and 45% of white test takers scored a 1200 or higher on the SAT in 2019, compared to 12% and 9% for Hispanic and Black students, respectively.

• According to FairTest, SAT score gaps between demographic groups has been growing in the years leading up to 2020.

• A 2021 study analyzing data in 2005-06 and 2015-16 found test-optional policies were associated with:
  • 3% to 4% increase in Pell Grant recipients
  • 10% to 12% increase in first-time students from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds
  • 6% to 8% increase in first-time enrollment of women
Impact of COVID-19

According to the Common Application, 43% of applicants reported a test score [through their system] in an application this season. The rate fell from 77% in 2019–20 and 73% in 2018–19.

First-generation and underrepresented minority (URM) applicants were less likely to report test scores.

Nearly 90% of Common App colleges and universities offered students the opportunity to apply without standardized test scores.
What the SAT Predicts

- Among those with the same high school GPA, studies have found SAT scores align more closely with socioeconomic status.
- Data suggests negligible difference in college GPA correlated to SAT scores.
  - UChicago, one of the early adopters of test-optional policies, found after removing contextual variables (like leaves of absence for mental health) standardized testing had no effect on students’ ability to graduate in six years.
- Inside Higher Ed in 2021 found of newly test-optional or test-blind schools:
  - 47% saw increase of black, Latinx, or Native American applicants.
  - 55% admitted more black, Latinx, or Native American Applicants.
  - 45% saw increase in number of students applying for financial aid.

Interested? Learn more in SAT Wars: The Case for Test-Optional College Admissions by Joseph Soares.
Lessons from Incoming Students

• Since 2020, faculty have observed more incoming students struggling with calculus and other math coursework
  • Follows national trends of college performance, particularly in math
• No data links lower college performance to test scores alone
• Carnegie Mellon is annually re-reviewing our data so our policies reflect what we’re observing is working best for students