

# The Reality of the Testing-Optional Trend

## Abstract

The trend of Testing-Optional institutions (colleges that do not require students to submit SAT or ACT results) has been increasing, from one school in 1969 to over 850 at present. Schools routinely opt into a Testing-Optional policy under the stated goals of increased socioeconomic and ethnic diversity and more holistic applicant consideration. It is the aim of this paper to illustrate 1) that the quality and quantity of schools that are Testing-Optional is largely overstated by Fairtest.org, 2) that the Testing-Optional trend has had no effect on diversity of school populations and 3) that there are ulterior motives to being a Testing-Optional school, and better ways to achieve these stated goals.

## Disclosure

This paper was written by Matt Larriva, owner of Powerful Prep, Inc., a premium test prep institution in Orange County, California, serving students both locally and internationally. As such, Matt Larriva has a vested monetary interest in maintaining the relevance of the SAT and ACT. Disclosure of this fact is warranted. In spite of such interests, this paper was written with an aim of objectivity, and sources and citations are enclosed for all factual claims.

## The Adopters

### Seeking an Accurate Count

The count of US colleges is a surprisingly murky number, as few bodies track it, and with striking infrequency. As of 2015, the most recent data available is from a survey from The National Center for Educational Statistics, which states that, as of 2011, there were 7,021 Postsecondary Title IV institutions<sup>1</sup>, schools that grant two and four-year degrees, and that abide by the title IV antidiscrimination statutes which allow these schools to be applicable for federal grants.

### Deciphering the Footnotes

According to Fairtest.org, there are 850 “colleges and universities that do not use SAT/ACT scores for admitting substantial numbers of students into bachelor degree programs”<sup>2</sup> At first glance, 850 out of 7,021 sounds quite high—that’s 12%, or nearly an eighth. But further inspection reveals this to be a somewhat spurious count.

First, nearly every school has a footnote, and the footnotes read as follows. To prepare a clean list of true Testing-Optional schools the list needs to be parsed.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12\\_005.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_005.asp)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fairtest.org/university/optional>

## Key

1	SAT/ACT used only for placement and/or academic advising
2	SAT/ACT required only from out-of-state applicants
3	SAT/ACT may be required but considered only when minimum GPA and/or class rank is not met
4	SAT/ACT required for some programs
5	Test Flexible: SAT/ACT not required if other college level exams specified by school, such as SAT Subject Test, Advanced Placement, or Int'l Baccalaureate, submitted -- contact school for details
6	Placement test or school-specific admissions exam score required if not submitting SAT/ACT
7	Admission/Eligibility Index calculated with 3.5 GPA and combined SAT Critical Reading plus Math score of 400

Footnote (1) is what one thinks of when one hears that a school is “Testing-Optional”—that is, if the school *is* looking at a student’s test score, it is only to place him in the appropriate classes, not to decide whether or not to admit him. Schools footnoted as such were kept in the study

But footnote (2) is a massive abuse of the phrase. A school cannot reasonably be “Testing-Optional” and yet require an SAT score from everyone *not* living in the state, that’s almost the exact opposite of Testing-Optional: that is a policy that will unequivocally reduce interstate diversity. Schools footnoted as such were removed from the study.

Footnote (3) is bizarre circumlocutory attempt to bloat the list. This footnote denotes the opposite of a Testing-Optional school: a school where standardized tests are *required*. Literally, a student without standardized test scores could not apply to these schools. Schools footnoted as such were removed from the study.

Footnote (4) is ambivalent, but generally test scores are required for the more competitive programs, and as such this would not be a true Testing-Optional school. Schools footnoted as such were removed from the study.

Footnote (5) is akin to setting a *higher* bar for students, via other tests. Schools footnoted as such were removed from the study.

Footnote (6) is acceptable. Schools footnoted as such were kept in the study

Footnote (7) is the exact opposite of what a Testing-Optional school does. Schools footnoted as such were removed from the study.

Ultimately, a clean list of Testing-Optional schools would only contain footnote (1), (6), or none. This leaves the list with 641 schools.

### Specialty Schools

Next, one must look at the types of schools on the list and ask: were these schools that were considering test scores in the first place? Does this school's switch to Testing-Optional imply a shift, or merely a clerical revision? Among the schools on the list, there are a very high number of rabbinical schools, music conservatories, online schools, and design & art schools. It is unreasonable to think that schools like INTSE bible College, Central Yeshiva Tomchei Tmimim-Lebavitch, or Ex'pressions (sic) were placing much if any emphasis on standardized test scores before officially going Testing-Optional. This is not to say that these schools are any less legitimate, simply to say that calling them Testing-Optional serves to bloat the list of Testing-Optional schools, a list that is actually much more scant than Fairtest's 850 number suggests. Said differently, if a typical high schooler (statistically one who wants to major in English or History) were to trust Fairtest's count of Testing-Optional schools, he would be disappointed and misled to find that the supposed plethora of Testing-Optional schools was composed in large part of hyper-specific institutions that would offer only one field of study.

### Trade Schools

It seems obvious that trade schools need not be placed on a list of Testing-Optional schools. Or, if they are to be included, then this becomes more a list of *alternatives to traditional four-year colleges* than a list of Testing-Optional schools. Yet, FairTest.org has found reason to include trade schools like the National Paralegal College.

### For Profit Schools

More concerning still is Fair Test's inclusion of for-profit schools. To the unfamiliar, the notion of a for-profit school might seem innocuous enough, but the body of evidence against the legitimacy of such institutions is unequivocal. "A new report from the Brookings Institution shows that for-profit colleges aren't just part of the student-loan crisis—they're a disproportionately large segment, and one that has swelled in recent years."<sup>3</sup> These institutions have recently been found to have inflated their job-placement statistics, and as a result, the Department of Defense has ceased paying veterans' tuitions to attend school like The University of Phoenix.<sup>4</sup> A New Yorker article sums up the problem of For Profit schools:

*For-profit colleges are far more expensive than community colleges, their closest peers, but, according to a 2013 study by three Harvard professors, their graduates have lower earnings and are actually more likely to end up unemployed. To make matters worse, these students are usually in a lot of debt.*<sup>5</sup>

To place these for-profits on a list of Testing-Optional schools in an attempt to suggest that they are viable options for the disenfranchised, or those seeking a more holistic admissions process is particularly heinous, considering these schools' track records.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/the-failure-of-for-profit-colleges/405301/>

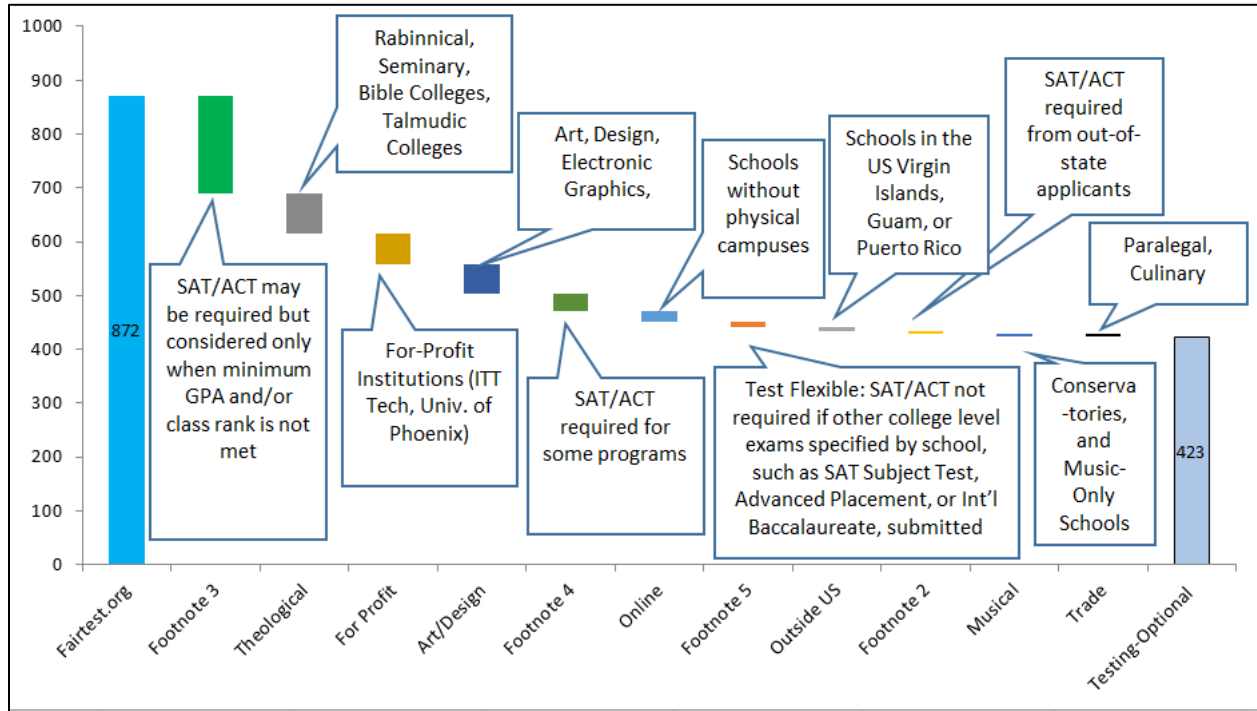
<sup>4</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/02/the-rise-and-fall-of-for-profit-schools>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/02/the-rise-and-fall-of-for-profit-schools>

## True Testing-Optional Schools

Thus to arrive at a more accurate list—one that includes schools offering a breadth of four-year programs with legitimate graduation and retention rates—it is necessary to cull schools that are outside the contiguous US, that are online-only institutions, that are purely art & design schools, that are seminaries or rabbinical institutions, or that are for-profit or trade schools. Further subtract out the schools footnoted with a 2,3,4, or 5 (for reasons discussed above). This leaves 423 schools, or just over 6% of degree granting schools.

In graphical form, this was the filtering process used:



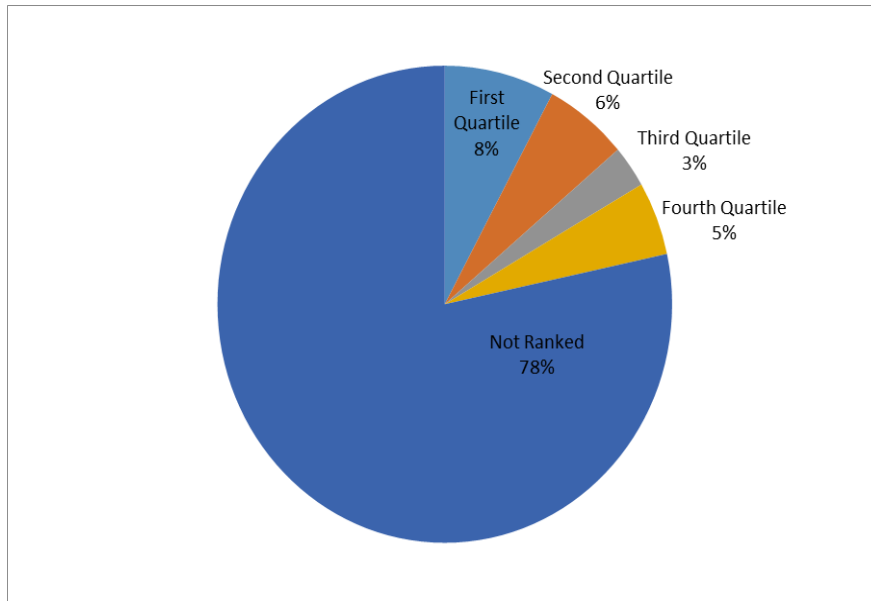
*Starting with Fairtest.org's list of Testing-Optional schools, and parsing out the mislabeled, hyper-specific, and for-profit institutions leads to a count far lower than originally suggested.*

## An Overview of the True Testing-Optional Schools

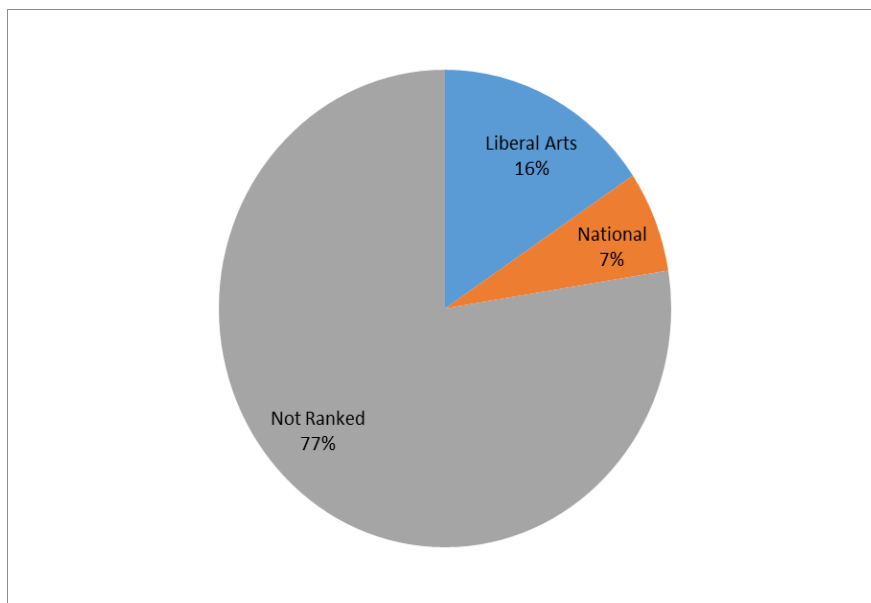
Now, of the 423 true, Testing-Optional schools that remain, the relevant question becomes, what kind of schools are these? To answer this question, this study cross-references the list with the US News and World college rankings. US News & World measures 1,376 colleges and universities. Each of the 1,376 schools will show up in one or more lists (Best Value, Highest Faculty to Student ratio). This study used the Top National Universities and Top Liberal Arts Universities lists combined (547 schools in total).

USN&W provides each school a rank. A “ranked” college will either receive a numerical rank (i.e., 1,2,3) or will receive a “Rank Not Published” designation. “Rank Not Published” means that U.S. News calculated a numerical rank and overall score for that school, but decided for editorial reasons not to publish them on usnews.com. U.S. News publishes numerical ranks for only the top three-fourths of each ranking category. Schools labeled, so “‘Rank Not Published’ are in the bottom 25 percent of their ranking category.”<sup>iii</sup> Any schools that USN&W did not consider, are considered “Unranked.”

When the Testing-Optional schools are broken out by rank, their distribution is underwhelming.



*Distribution of Testing-Optional Schools by Rank*



*Distribution of Testing-Optional Schools by Type. According to USN&W “Schools in the National Universities category, such as Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania, offer a full range of undergraduate majors, plus master's and doctoral programs. These colleges also are committed to producing groundbreaking research.” “The National Liberal Arts Colleges, including schools like Wellesley College and Bowdoin College, emphasize undergraduate education and award at least half of their degrees in the liberal arts fields of study.”*

The first takeaway is this: there is very little adoption of Testing-Optional admissions among the US News and World-ranked schools. This list is widely distributed, highly visible, and for the most part, respected. It is not without its detractors nor its critics, but it is an industry-trusted publication and one which most institutes of higher education strive to be on. For this reason, the absence of the Testing-Optional schools is noteworthy.

The second takeaway is that the Testing-Optional trend, inasmuch as it is penetrating the ranked-schools is seen most prominently in the first quartile, liberal arts schools. This is interesting for the fact that the highest tiers of schools have a history of dictating policy to the lower tiers. Therefore, the fact that 33 of the 146 first quartile USN&W schools are Testing-Optional is noteworthy. Equally noteworthy is that only 6 of the first quartile *National* Universities are Testing-Optional, none higher than a 27<sup>th</sup> in overall rankings.

But what of the 77% of Testing-Optional schools that are not in the USN&W report? These go a long way to sully the legitimate Testing-Optional schools. An anecdotal review of the schools, while not statistically significant, is worthwhile in an effort to understand the landscape of the vast majority of Testing-Optional schools.

These 77% include such schools as California Christian College<sup>6</sup> which lists its first two admissions requirements as, “1) Student has a living and vital faith in Jesus Christ. This is demonstrated by a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. 2) Student has a high standard of moral and ethical behavior that is in concert with general principles of Christian behavior (specified in the moral/ethical behavior document and verified through recommendations.)” Further down the list one finds California Christian College’s GPA requirement: 2.00. Other schools in the 77% grouping are Coleman University with its 100%<sup>7</sup> acceptance rate, and Donnelley College with its 22%, 4-Year graduation rate.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to suggest that the aforementioned schools are not legitimate institutions, but it is important to establish that schools with near 100% admissions rates are not selective to begin with. To tout these schools as Testing-Optional, is to imply that they look at a candidate from a more holistic view, or that they are making a stand against standardized testing, or at least to suggest that these are alternatives for students who seek academic institutions without the hassle of the SAT and ACT, when in reality these schools are not so much *Testing-Optional* as simply *academic optional*.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.calchristiancollege.edu/admissions/requirements/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.petersons.com/college-search/coleman-university-000\\_10003440.aspx+](https://www.petersons.com/college-search/coleman-university-000_10003440.aspx+)

<sup>8</sup> <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/donnelley-college-1914>

## Claims Versus The Realities

Institutions that eschew testing requirements usually do so under two banners: increased diversity, and a more holistic applicant-view.

The latter is asinine: how can *seeing less* of a candidate's abilities be considered *more* holistic? If anything, this is a head-in-the-sand viewpoint: if we can't see your scores are lackluster, they must not be. This is an unmeasurable and unevaluable goal, so further discussion will not be granted.

The goal of increasing diversity is laudable, but doing so via a reduced testing requirement is painfully misguided. The theory, one supposes, is that underrepresented minorities have worse test scores, so placing higher value on their GPAs will reconcile their tests' underperformance. This line of logic ignores the unfortunate fact that underrepresented minorities have GPAs that mirror their standardized test scores as seen in the table below. Therefore, GPA-based academic measurements are still ethnically biased.

Group	SAT Scores (2015)				GPA (2009)
	Critical Reading	Mathematics	Writing	Total	GPA
Black	431	428	418	1277	2.69
Mexican-American	448	457	438	1343	2.84
White	529	534	513	1576	3.09
Asian-American	525	598	531	1654	3.26

*Ethnicities with higher GPAs have higher SAT scores.*<sup>9 10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hsts\\_2009/race\\_gpa.aspx](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hsts_2009/race_gpa.aspx)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/09/03/sat-scores-drop-and-racial-gaps-remain-large>

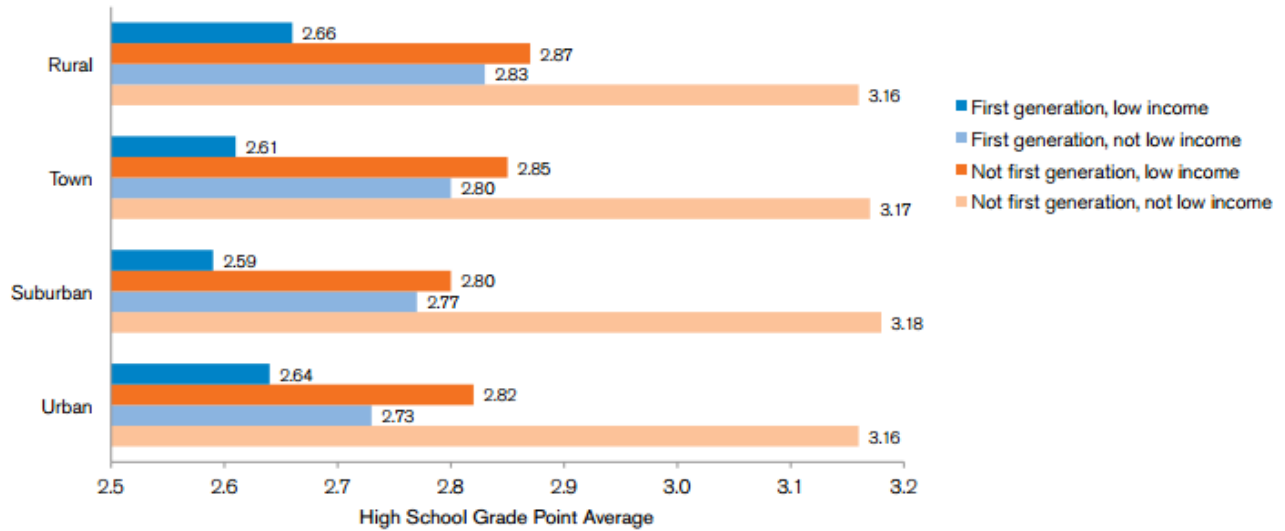


Some might argue that if the Testing-Optional policy then does not increase ethnic diversity, then perhaps it improves socioeconomic diversity. This is not the case. Once again, the wealthiest groups have higher GPAs than the less wealthy, after normalizing for parents' education level, indicating that GPA-based academic assessments are also economically biased.

## High School GPA by Student Background and School Location

RICHARD BUDDIN

High School GPA by First-Generation College and Low-Income Status for High School Locations



Note: Data come from 587,008 high school graduates in 2013 in at least one of eleven states that had ACT® college readiness assessment testing for all students. Families with annual incomes of less than \$36,000 are defined as low income. Students whose parents or guardians have no postsecondary education are defined as first-generation students.

Thus, we would expect that Testing-Optional policies have no effect on increasing diversity. And in fact that is the case, as indicated by Stephen Burd, citing US Department of Education Research: "The study did not find any evidence that test-optional colleges had made any progress in narrowing these diversity-related gaps after they adopted test-optional policies"<sup>12</sup>

A University of Georgia study, "which compared 180 selective liberal arts colleges, 32 of them test-optional, found no statistical difference in enrollment of low-income and underrepresented minority students."<sup>13</sup>

Why then are some schools shifting toward Testing-Optional policies? One theory posits they do so to improve their selectivity rankings. If a school shifts to a Testing-Optional policy, it is likely to receive media coverage, and thereby attract more applicants. More applicants without an increased class-capacity means a higher rejection rate, a lower acceptance rate, and thereby a higher selectivity rating. As ratings are one of the factors that the US News and World considers in its ranking of schools, there is a clear path to a higher ranking, via adoption of a Testing-Optional policy.

If this seems excessively conspiratorial for the halls of academia, consider the case of Claremont McKenna, an elite school whose dean inflated the school's SAT figures for years.<sup>14</sup> When the school was caught, it decided not to turn over a new leaf of honesty, but to transition to a Testing-Optional format. The example is anecdotal, no doubt, but elucidates the degree to which test scores and the Testing-Optional policy can be used for purposes other than egalitarianism.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/theres-controversy-because-colleges-are-dropping-sat-2015-9>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/education/edlife/the-test-optional-surge.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/education/edlife/the-test-optional-surge.html?_r=0)

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/college-inc/post/claremont-mckenna-sat-scandal-more-at-stake-than-rankings/2012/02/07/gIQAHIwVwQ\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/college-inc/post/claremont-mckenna-sat-scandal-more-at-stake-than-rankings/2012/02/07/gIQAHIwVwQ_blog.html)

## Recommendations

It is still unclear what schools are trying to accomplish through the Testing-Optional movement. This paper has hopefully cast doubt upon the claim that Testing-Optional equates with higher diversity or a more holistic applicant view.

If the goal were truly to improve diversity, then schools could refine their Affirmative Action policies or simply revise quotas. To achieve a more equitable student body by eliminating standardized tests seems more test-centric than student-focused.

If the goal were actually to create a more holistic applications process, then academicians could lobby for the use of EQ and IQ tests—tools that are less susceptible to coaching and present an applicant's emotional strengths as well as intellectual abilities.

But these solutions do not seem to be of interest to the academic community. It is more interested in vilifying a test for revealing a major flaw in the American education system: wealthier students outperform poor students; and white and Asian students outperform other ethnic groups. But eliminating evidence of injustice does not eliminate the injustice.

In ending: the Testing-Optional trend is largely a farce. Standing under the banners of equality and circumspection, it has had no measurable effect on increasing access to higher education or improving diversity. Furthermore, Fairtest.org's bloated list of "Testing-Optional" schools is a confusing resource filled with schools that are more academic-optional than Testing-Optional.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/rankings-faq#21>