How Admission Assessment Fits into a Post-Pandemic World

BY DR. KEITH WRIGHT, VICE PRESIDENT, PSYCHOMETRICS & ASSESSMENTS AT THE ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION (EMA)

It comes as no surprise that COVID-19’s impact has reached far and wide, resulting in much loss for students around the world. Ongoing research studies suggest that young people in grades K–12 tragically have emerged from the pandemic with a deficit in both academic and social development opportunities. Time will reveal the impact of these losses on society and the lives of this generation.

In addition to the effect on students, COVID-19 has upended the admission process, changing everything overnight—from face-to-face interviews and on-campus tours and revisit days, to standardized admission testing as the foundation of each student’s application file. For years, standardized tests have been a cornerstone within the comprehensive admission decision-making system for independent schools. Then, the pandemic caused in-person testing to come to a screeching halt, and many independent school admission teams were left scrambling for ways to evaluate their incoming applicants without test scores. What did school enrollment leaders do to assess students without the full package and how did they approach selection decisions without this information? How has the pandemic changed the admission process specifically when it comes to testing, and what will the new normal be going forward for student selection into our schools?

To get answers to these questions, we turned to EMA’s assessment and research expert, Dr. Keith Wright, VP, Psychometrics & Assessments, for a conversation on what the future of assessment might look like. In turn, Dr. Wright spoke with several of EMA’s seasoned enrollment leaders to gauge their experiences during the pandemic and to look ahead to the future.
When it comes to admission applications and testing, independent schools seemed to follow four different pathways during the pandemic in order to determine a student’s readiness and fit for their schools. Some of EMA’s member schools required standardized testing as part of the admission process, a large percentage of EMA’s members moved to become test-optional during the pandemic, still other EMA member schools refused to accept any test scores, and finally a small number of EMA member schools turned to alternative forms of assessment to build new information into each candidate’s admission file. Each of these options presents inherent advantages and disadvantages. And, each option requires careful consideration as we look ahead to evolving new practices.

With a heightened awareness of the impact COVID-19 has had on enrollment management and on student learning, I have been analyzing the assessment landscape before, during, and now as we emerge from the pandemic. It is my aim to help inform independent school enrollment leaders about differing practices, so that your policies for the future are shaped objectively and fairly for all students applying to your school. As you and your team look to review your current testing policies, here are some questions to consider:

- Can testing data provide deeper information about a student, especially as we emerge two years later from intense pandemic educational disruptions and uneven learning?

Further, in 2022 and recent years, societal change regarding systemic racism has fueled many conversations in the independent school community, which, together with COVID-19 lockdowns, has politicized the use of assessment scores inside of an admission selection process. These conversations and concerns about equitable access are worthy of ongoing discovery. Indeed, our peer association in higher education, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), has produced numerous reports and recommendations for a review of processes that need to be reconsidered inside of the journey into colleges and universities. And EMA has convened a think tank on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion that will look into the whole admission system within independent schools, talk to top researchers and innovators who are working on new ways of thinking about admission processes, and report back to the membership after their studies. Led by Frankie Brown, Director of Admissions and...
The Yield

Financial Aid at Sidwell Friends School (DC), this think tank is being built as I write. You can look forward to their deliberations to guide you in considering the best way forward for your institution as they conduct their research and begin to issue recommendations for the EMA member community.

It will surprise no readers is that my contention, as an assessment researcher, is that admission testing continues to spotlight on the inequities in our wider community but is not the cause of such differences. As a researcher who believes in the power of science to change lives, I know enrollment leaders in EMA’s community have rarely (if ever) used test scores alone to deny a candidate admission. I have also seen numerous students (including myself and those in my family) gain access to top institutions as a result of our academic skills and character traits. I believe standards matter for all students as we select those who will benefit from our particular programs. Still, the pervasive, systemic concerns surrounding equity must be addressed inside of the admission process as we look to our community’s future.

Lawrence Sampleton, Associate Head for Enrollment Management and Financial Aid at St. Stephen’s Episcopal School (TX) explains, “Given all the information in a student file including parent statements, teacher recommendations, transcripts with grades, personal interviews and student questionnaires, I find that the use of test scores provides valuable insight into the other parts of the file that have been provided.”

Although Lawrence did not use this term, the practice of “triangulating data” to better understand and draw insights on candidates is why Lawrence recommends admission testing as part of his school’s process for admission. In considering different measures together (teacher recommendations, grades, and test scores), patterns emerge allowing decision makers to better understand a student’s depth of knowledge, and the additional information provided by testing has been useful for those selecting students at St. Stephen’s Episcopal School. From my research perspective, when you combine the use of different measures, you increase the possibility of better decisions and results for those in your applicant pool. (Again, from a researcher’s perspective, each measurement tool being used in the admission process has some risk of bias, but by combining subjective measures with evidence-based standardized test scores, you insert greater objectivity into the decision making and reduce the overall bias through this triangulation methodology.)

Lawrence Sampleton further explains, “It is not that testing is the driving factor in our school’s student selection process, but it is part of the overall mix that allows our team to properly assess students and to better support them when they arrive on our campus.”

Pros for Required Admission Testing:

- When testing is required, all applicants must present this objective measure of academic ability.
- Testing offers additional information inside of a holistic process, allowing those who are selecting students to have one standard measure to compare and contrast candidates.
- Test scores allow enrollment leaders to triangulate information within each candidate’s file.
- Test scores allow schools to compare students’ cognitive skills and provide reliable information about each candidate’s performance for their first year in school.
- Test scores, when used wisely, allow comparisons across peers and counter both grade inflation concerns, as well as potentially biased information provided by teachers.
- Using psychometric science inside of the enrollment process allows enrollment professionals to have insights to ensure greater predictiveness in each student’s onboarding.
- After the pandemic years, test scores may serve a new purpose in allowing decision-makers to better understand learning gaps and to prepare each student well by building an academic/advising program which meets their unique needs.
- When used with other application tools, standardized scores help provide a holistic view of each candidate.

Cons for Required Testing:

- In some corners of the independent school world (and beyond), there is significant pressure to perform well on standardized tests, adding stress to both students and to parents who wish to have their child prepared to do well on this “entrance exam.”
- There are additional costs involved in taking and preparing for a test that not all families can afford.
- In extreme cases, there have been incidents of cheating (notably high profile in the university world with the “Varsity Blues” scandal).
- Opponents of standardized testing claim that admission testing unfairly disadvantages candidates with lower socioeconomic status as well as people of color, given less access to test preparation support and fewer financial resources to afford the test and test practice programs.
- In some states and school districts, students’ test performance has been used to rate educators and incentivize performance-based pay resulting in significant concern of having teachers “teach to the test.”
- In both formative and summative testing, these issues persist when there are “high-stakes” outcomes associated with the test results.

grade inflation—a real phenomenon that has been chronicled in research studies about independent schools for several decades. I pressed Lawrence about why he wouldn’t just use grades to determine a candidate’s academic readiness and he shared several scenarios where the grades didn’t line up with teacher recommendations, resulting in additional questions for those reading the applications.

Recently, an article by MIT Admissions, We Are Reinstating Our SAT/ACT Requirement for Future Admissions Cycles, circulated explaining the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s return to the requirement of standardized testing. Explaining their decision, MIT Dean of Admission and Student Financial Services Stu Schmill says, “After careful consideration, we have decided to reinstate our SAT/ACT requirement for future admissions cycles. Our research shows standardized tests help us better assess the academic preparedness of all applicants, and also help us identify socio-economically disadvantaged students who lack access to advanced coursework or other enrichment opportunities that would otherwise demonstrate their readiness for MIT. We believe a requirement is more equitable and transparent than a test-optional policy.”
2. GOING (OR REMAINING) TEST OPTIONAL

Test optional is a policy colleges, universities, and private schools have adopted where students are not required to submit standardized test scores as part of their application materials. If scores are submitted, they will be reviewed as one part of the application process, yet all students will receive consideration for admission, regardless of the inclusion of test scores or not.

This option was created to protect disadvantaged students and to increase diversity in the educational admission processes, as well as to allow students to “show their best selves” inside of an application. For many schools, the test-optional movement was also a market decision to build more applicants for their school, college, or university. In the world of higher education, the test-optional movement has allowed colleges and universities to “play the game” with external rankings groups like the U.S. News and World Report, which rank colleges by a number of indices including test scores for enrolled students. (By removing students with scores from those students who do not submit them due to concerns about lower scores, colleges are able to report higher scores of those candidates who enroll. In other words, their median test score increases, which influences rankings.) While the current rationale for eliminating admission test scores has been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and access to testing, test-optional practices date back to 1969 when Bowdoin College, the first higher education institution in the United States, embraced a policy of allowing students to choose whether or not to include test data in their application.

Test-optional supporters frame their policy decisions in many ways, but arguably, the bias argument attracts the most attention, while being the least understood. Bias in the context of standardized testing typically refers to students of color performing differently than their White counterparts on the exam.

According to John McWhorter in his recent New York Times article Making the SAT and ACT Optional Is the Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations, the motivation to remove test scores “is based on an assumption that because Black, Latino, Pacific islander, American Indian, and Alaska Native kids, on average, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, don’t perform as well on these tests as their White and Asian peers, the tests must be, in some way, racially biased. But what, really, does that mean? Is it that the tests ask racially biased questions? Which ones? Is it that it is somehow unfair to give a Black or Latino student a test of abstract cognitive skill and that Black and Latino students should be tested differently? This would seem dangerously close to saying that they aren’t as intelligent as others. If that isn’t the intention, then is the inference that there is something cultural, broadly speaking, that hinders their ability to perform well on these tests? If so, what?”

John Hutchins, Director of Admission and Financial Aid at Phillips Exeter Academy (NH) feels it is too early to know the impact of test-optional practices within independent schools. There needs to be an analysis conducted of those applicants who submitted scores with those who did not, and a comparison group research study should be undertaken.” – JOHN HUTCHINS, DIRECTOR OF ADMISSION AND FINANCIAL AID AT PHILLIPS EXETER ACADEMY (NH)

“Given the significant learning loss of students through the pandemic, I believe our enrollment community may need to consider the SSAT for post-enrollment placement purposes. It is our job to prepare each newly enrolled student for success in the appropriate coursework to meet their particular pandemic learning gaps.” – LAUREL BAKER TEW, ASSISTANT HEAD OF SCHOOL FOR ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT AT VIEWPOINT SCHOOL (CA)
Character Collaborative Annual Conference by other schools, colleges, and universities speaking about the challenges stemming from not using standardized test scores.

St. Stephen's Lawrence Sampleton says, "The number and the narrative matter; schools need to become skilled at using both the numbers in a student’s file as well as understanding the narrative of each candidate." Lawrence offers this insight regarding test-optional: "Many families think testing has been used to penalize students, hence, that schools will not admit students with low scores. This may be factual at some institutions, but it is not at St. Stephen’s. We have never used scores to reject a student. And we work hard to actively enroll students of color. Black students make up 38 percent of our campus."

While Laurel Baker Tew, Assistant Head of School for Enrollment Management at Viewpoint School (CA) has embraced test-optional to support her families through the pandemic, she agrees with the need for ongoing research to understand the effects of the policy on the school’s educational community. She offers, "Given the significant learning loss of students through the pandemic, I believe our enrollment community may need to consider the SSAT for post-enrollment placement purposes. It is our job to prepare each newly enrolled student for success in the appropriate coursework to meet their particular pandemic learning gaps."

Dean of Admission and Financial Aid Erby Mitchell at The Hotchkiss School (CT) agrees with the need for ongoing research on test-optional practices in independent schools. He believes in the value of test score data to manage student success measures and suggests offering testing to students AFTER their first year of enrollment to benchmark their performance, after one year of enrollment in a rigorous academic curriculum such as the program found at The Hotchkiss School.

Pros of Going (or Remaining) Test Optional:

- Many schools have found a barrier to entry at their school has been removed.
- Reports of higher volumes of applicants and positive feedback from parents worried about their children being hurt by test scores in the decision-making process.
- School staff no longer need to review test scores, and families do not need to spend time and money on test prep, test costs, and test administration.
- Schools able to meet students where they are and welcome all— with or without test scores.

Cons of Going/Remaining Test Optional:

- Uncertainty and fear for students who may test but do not like their scores. Will they receive a fair review, or will they hurt their chances by not including test scores? What percentages of students who don’t offer test scores are admitted (especially to highly selective institutions)?
- Given the differences between application files, some families feel that the process is biased—even with affirmations from schools of fair review and consistent practice in selection of students regardless of scores in the file.
- Anecdotally, inside of schools, educators have grappled with student course placement without the additional information found in an enrolled student’s file, which has resulted in school placement testing and new practices for those students who have been enrolled.

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— ERBY MITCHELL, DEAN OF ADMISSION AND FINANCIAL AID AT THE HOTCHKISS SCHOOL (CT)
3. BEING TEST FREE

In 2020, when COVID-19 caused a worldwide shutdown, travel limitations, and in-person bans, some independent schools decided to become “test free”—in addition to the inability for many families to access admission testing, these schools were also committed to equity work and linked their decisions to continued commitment to widening access at their schools. With a test-free policy, enrollment leaders do not review any test scores as part of the application and actively request no scores be submitted as they will not be used by the selection committee to render an admission decision.

In 2022, the most widely known “test-free” educational institutions are the universities and colleges in the state of California—both the UC community as well as the California State community. In a recent *U.S. News and World Report* article from December 8, 2021, *How to Understand the Changes in Standardized Testing*, Brian Galvin, chief academic officer at Varsity Tutors explains, “For admissions offices at all levels of education, the shift to test-optional is driven in large part by the need to keep application volume high. Faced with testing challenges and decreasing applicant flow, schools had to look for a way to reduce barriers. Foregoing tests was an easy way to handle that.” For the few schools in EMA’s membership that have gone test free, their main reason for doing so has surrounded equity concerns and a desire to actively recruit more families from all backgrounds to their community.

“Given the complexity of evaluating applicants from all over the world, my school was never a user of standardized assessment scores, in part due to data security concerns, but assessing academic readiness for our institution takes place during our holistic application review process, and continues once students are enrolled. With the dramatic differences among countries and national educational systems, we find it far more useful to conduct placement exams in order to set students up for success.” — COURTNEY KNIGHT, DIRECTOR OF ADMISSIONS AT THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF PARIS

### Pros of Test Free:

- Schools are widening their application pool, allowing for more socioeconomic and racial diversity.
- Schools have taken a philosophic testing stance consistent with their school’s mission and orientation to education.
- Students who may not be good test takers have a more equitable opportunity for admission since test scores are not factored in the selection process.

### Cons of Test Free:

- Eliminates the only objective scientific measurement inside of each student’s file, which allows a new level of bias to enter the process, due to only subjective measurements being reviewed.
- Schools may struggle with new student placement into appropriate coursework without testing data to better understand depth of knowledge in core subjects.
- Testing inside of a school’s academic community may be called into question, given the school’s active policy inside of the admission process.
- A school’s philosophy on academic testing should be consistent in all practice areas and schools may wish to explain their methods for assessing students on coursework and other areas.
4. USING THE ALTERNATIVES—IS THERE ANOTHER SOLUTION?

As a researcher, I actively watch innovation happening in the wider admission community and I couldn’t be more excited about new projects underway to look at student measurement anew. One pandemic effect that is clear, is that measurement science and researchers must review the testing ecosystems to address issues of difference and to work hard to employ new tools to reduce systemic issues that may appear due to differences in race, gender, etc.

In many areas where innovation is occurring, I note that the new methodologies combine both objective and subjective measurement to allow for a complementary view of each candidate. With a nod to Lawrence Sampleton, “It’s about the number AND the narrative.” Objective information—that only standardized assessment scores provide—offers a performance metric to understand where the students are and where they may struggle in an academic environment. Test scores also allow for an objective comparison across candidates (Wright & Brenneman, 2022). Subjective information—grades, personal statements, and letters of recommendation—provides narrative and important contextual information that helps interpret standardized assessment scores in light of a student’s journey and life experiences.

But there may be other methods or practices to consider as we look to better know our applicants in the years ahead.

Courtney Knight, Director of Admissions at the International School of Paris, explains ISP’s practices: “Given the complexity of evaluating applicants from all over the world, my school was never a user of standardized assessment scores, in part due to data security concerns, but assessing academic readiness for our institution takes place during our holistic application review process, and continues once students are enrolled. With the dramatic differences among countries and national educational systems, we find it far more useful to conduct placement exams in order to set students up for success.”

At Crossroads School (CA), Director of Enrollment Management Eric Barber has used EMA’s Character Skills Snapshot inside of his admission process to better know his applicants’ intellectual, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills. (For those who don’t know about the Snapshot, it is a 20-minute online, unproctored assessment tool that students use to answer questions about their orientation toward teamwork, initiative, intellectual engagement, social awareness, resilience, open-mindedness, and self-control. During the pandemic, use of the Snapshot grew by 10 percent as another measure to include for reviewing students.)

Pros of Alternative Methods:
- Tailoring the application process and customizing it to one’s mission or school orientation, enables enrollment leaders to experiment with new ways to assess young people that are in line with holistic processes.

Cons of Alternative Methods:
- Application requirements must be weighed carefully to ensure the school is not relying too heavily on subjective components and can make a fair assessment of every student applicant.
- If students are applying to more than one school, it can be onerous if a single school has a very different method for student selection.
In Conclusion

To best support student development and to drive diagnostic help for students entering independent schools after two years of pandemic losses, I have come to understand that each application file offers a beginning of a narrative for the student within their new school. As a researcher, it is clear to me now more than ever, that independent schools have an opportunity to use the admission process to establish a beginning point to track a student’s journey within their schools. Given that the pandemic truly affected K–12 in demonstrably difficult ways, there are new pressures on those working in admission and enrollment to understand placement of students for success, as well as to give them the best chance for restarting their academic studies with consistent support and progress.

At EMA, we are committed to being part of the transformational journeys that begin inside of the admission process, and we recognize the power of our enrollment leaders to make decisions that change the lives and the trajectory of those young people who are admitted to our institutions. Evidence-based holistic assessment fits the times that we are in; while we must continue to investigate new innovations and rethink some of the design of our ecosystem for independent school admission, we stand ready to support all of our members in the options selected with regard to student testing and assessment, and to support each of these practices with additional research and insight.

Where Do We Go from Here?

To know whether or not test-optional/test-free policies are beneficial to long-term student success, our community should invest in research that is objective and multi-year, understanding the drivers of both academic and community performance. Questions that our community must answer include:

- Is there a difference in the lifelong educational outcomes between those students who submitted test scores and those who did not?
- Have we created unintended consequences (both positive and negative) by moving to test-optional or test-free practices?
- Although anecdotal evidence suggests that applications increase for schools with test-optional policies, what is the outcome for all cohorts that we track in terms of admission offers? What proportion of applicants without test scores are being offered admission? What proportion of students without test scores enroll? What proportion of students without test scores perform well academically? What proportion of students without test scores are retained in the school community?

If your school would like to join the research efforts described above, get in touch with me directly at kwright@enrollment.org.
EMA Believes in the Power of Assessment

EMA was founded to provide an equitable process for admission to independent schools. While we know test-optional/test-free policies are a permanent fixture in the enrollment landscape, we believe that standardized testing is the most effective and objective way to evaluate students and their skills.

When used as one component in an overall applicant portrait, tests like the SSAT allow enrollment professionals to compare students’ cognitive skills in similar circumstances. It’s the one scientifically objective measure in a process that otherwise relies on subjective admission criteria, such as grade point average and teacher recommendations, which may be influenced by systemic inequalities, uneven grading practices, parent involvement, and inconsistent academic standards.

EMA’s assessment tools can help schools take a holistic view of each applicant. Our admission tools go beyond the SSAT and include myriad tools and resources, such as the Character Skills Snapshot, the Standard Application Online (SAO), and Student Prospect Lists (SPL), to provide a more complete picture of a student and make the admission process easier for schools and students.

At EMA, we are committed to fairness, access, and equity for all families. We continually provide fee waivers to students needing financial assistance, including free testing and related services. Fee waivers are available at no charge for any digital or paper-based SSAT test, the SSAT Practice Portal to help students prepare for and access the SSAT, the Character Skills Snapshot, and EMA’s Admission Academy.

We adhere to the standards that outline best practice and proper use of assessments in admissions, such as the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing. Our test construction process follows the standards and best practices for test development. We conduct at least five internal/external reviews of all item content for bias-free language that could result from regional expressions, knowledge of a particular religion, idioms, etc. In addition, we treat all groups of people with appropriate respect in test materials. People who are members of what are traditionally considered to be minority groups must be represented. People of different ages, physical abilities, and social classes should be depicted. A wide variety of life situations, living conditions, types of housing, types of families (including single-parent families), and regions should be depicted. Finally, we conduct differential item functioning (DIF) on our test items. DIF is a statistical measure of whether items are potentially “biased” toward/against one group versus another.

A Word About Bias

What is bias in testing? No one can argue that tests demonstrate variable performance by specific geographic, gender, racial, or ethnic groups. However, well-designed assessments do not make a “test” unfair or biased. Those terms have very specific meanings in testing (Wright, 2018). Test bias can be viewed as a systematic difference between either examinees or assessment items that should be equal (Carnilli, 2006). Theoretically, if two groups of examinees are considered to be of equal proficiency on the construct being measured (equality is determined by total assessment score), they should have the same probability of answering the assessment item correctly. If one group has a higher or lower probability after being matched on ability, this could potentially be an indication of bias. This is where we need to make a distinction between bias and impact, where the latter is the observed difference of the average performance on an assessment or an assessment item between two groups. Again, “tests” are often criticized for bias when there are observed score differences between two groups (e.g., male vs. female, White vs. African American). This is NOT correct. Impact ≠ Bias.

Humans are not immune from bias. Indeed, EMA has offered continuous programming since the beginning of the pandemic on the topic of anti-bias, so that admission officers might learn more about how to “check” their own biases during the admission selection process.

By design, a selection process for our schools will feel unjust to those who do not receive an offer of admission. Indeed, many of EMA’s member schools have significant demand and reject far more students than they are able to enroll, creating ongoing questions about access, fairness, and evaluation metrics for selection.

As part of our ongoing work, the independent school enrollment community should review our requirements for admission (see Table 1). Even the common application (https://www.commonapp.org/) — a tool that was intended to reduce the time, energy, and effort put into applying to college and used by just under 900 colleges — states directly to applicants that there is variability in requirements by each college. Although a customizable approach to the application process allows schools to signal their local distinctiveness, it inevitably places an undue burden on the student applying to school and, more importantly, from a psychometric/measure-ment perspective, introduces a lot of error when evaluating the application file (Wright & Brenneman, 2022).

The application requirements listed in Table 1 are overwhelmingly subjective, non-standardized pieces of evidence. This subjective information means there will be a high degree of variability within the measure. Subjective data is based on personal opinions, interpretations, points of view, emotions, and judgment.

Conversely, objective information is standardized and fact-based, measurable, and observable. Consider school transcripts as one example. Transcripts highlight a student’s courses (scope, sequence, level of difficulty) and their performance (grades) in each course. However, not all schools offer the same courses. A student attending School A may not have the same choices as a student attending School B. This lack of conformity to standardized curriculums and standardized grading was a primary reason why standardized assessments were created in the first place.
Meet Dr. Keith Wright

Dr. Keith Wright, Vice President, Psychometrics & Assessments at The Enrollment Management Association (EMA), has an extensive background in statistical research and academic administration, and technical expertise in computer science. At EMA, he is responsible for overseeing the design and operation of assessment scoring, quality assurance, trend analysis, and research related to the measurement of cognitive and non-cognitive domains. Keith is a frequent presenter at conferences, including the annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the Psychometric Society. His research has been published in *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, *International Journal of Testing*, and *Journal of Educational Measurement*. In 2019, he co-authored a chapter in *Certification: The ICE Handbook* (3rd Edition) for the Institute for Credentialing Excellence, focusing on the reliability and validity of assessment scoring. Dr. Wright has a doctorate in research, measurement, and statistics from Georgia State University, an MBA in finance/marketing from Loyola University of Chicago, and a master of science in computer science from Illinois Institute of Technology. He also serves on the National Partnership for Educational Access (NPEA) board and on the advisory board of The Character Collaborative.

Survey: We’d love to know more about your assessment, recruitment, and admission process over the last few years. This information will help us create programs and reports to best help all our members. Take our short survey: