A HARD LOOK IN THE MIRROR:

The Case for Test-Optional Independent School Admissions

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Should independent schools make SSAT and ISEE admissions testing optional in their own admissions processes?

The inevitable conflict between exclusivity and equity came to the fore in a recent movement of Northern California independent schools to adopt a “test-optional” policy in admitting students into middle and secondary school. The issue is in sharp focus at the college admissions level, led in a burgeoning movement by colleges such as the University of Chicago, an elite institution that dropped requiring the SAT or ACT score submissions, and with lawsuits filed against the University of California claiming that requiring standardized test scores is unconstitutional and discriminatory.

The Feb. 10 issue of Inside Higher Ed stated:

Pressure has been mounting on the UC system to hop on the test-optional train, as more than 1,000 other institutions — including the University of Chicago and George Washington University — have done. A lawsuit against the system, alleging that the standardized tests are biased and exacerbate inequality, is pending.

Let us look at five reasons why the time might be right for schools to consider that option in the independent school sector:

1. **Implicit Bias**: The use of test scores by schools, specifically by teachers and admission officers, carries great dangers of implicit bias. Often, we have heard in our schools a teacher who makes some version of the following complaint to a principal or admission officer: “I don’t understand why this

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student was admitted — this kid is drowning in my Algebra I class.” The response usually goes something like this, “Let’s look at the student’s file. Ah, I see this student had weak math scores but was a... (fill in the blank: a student of color, an athletic admit, or a legacy).” That response should not necessarily have a “but” because those kids may have attributes that make them “high value” in other important ways, and whose low scores could be mitigated by high growth potential, good advising, after-class help, and strong motivation. Unfortunately, there is little understanding of how stanines should be used to analyze growth potential; in particular, the relationship of a Quantitative Reasoning score to a Math Assessment, or a Verbal Reasoning score to a Reading Comprehension score. The scores are basically simplified and analyzed like letter grades: a nine and an eight equal an A, or a one and a four equal a C. The relationship of reasoning scores to the other scores is important in that the reasoning scores are generally measures of IQ or ability, essentially problem-solving skills that are less content or curriculum dependent. If there is a stanine difference of two or more (which is statistically significant), the differential in scores shows overperformance or underperformance of the student. So, imagine a student with a seven in Quantitative Reasoning but a five in math: These scores indicate that the student is likely underperforming in math. Compare that student with a Quantitative Reasoning of one and a math score of four, indicating that the student is significantly overperforming. Which kid would most independent schools prefer? Which kid is more likely to have growth potential? The correct response to the teacher complaint or to an admissions office placement conundrum would be to ask whether or not anyone had analyzed the growth potential of that student in context rather than assumed a struggle in our highly sequenced curriculum. Implicit bias related to poor analysis would have erroneously cast that student with lower scores as having less potential. Shouldn’t we surely be admitting students exhibiting significant growth potential? With proper support, that student may eventually outperform many of the students with higher stanine scores who have not internalized a growth mindset or resilience to overcome their academic gaps and challenges.

2. Inequitable Standardized Testing and Inadequate Tutoring: Virtually all the SAT and ACT test prep companies provide SSAT and ISEE test prep. If one travels to Beijing, it is incredible to see the amount of money that is made by these test prep organizations: they are now almost ubiquitous in the U.S. as well. Unequal access to test prep tutoring is an unfair advantage. If those who can afford test-prep perform better than those who do not, do those scores indicate they are likely to fare better in school? Many prior research studies on the ACT and SAT indicate a high correlation between standardized testing and socio-economic standing (and presumably more access to tutoring). Again, should we be embedding such inequity in our admissions systems?

More importantly, the most recent research has produced surprisingly important results that, contrariwise, indicate that grades, not ACT test scores, are overwhelmingly better predictors of graduation from college, so much so that one could posit that standardized testing results add little if any value to the admissions process. A study released and published in the journal Educational Researcher shows high school grade point averages predict college graduation rates five times more accurately than ACT scores. The study examined 55,084 students who graduated from Chicago Public Schools between 2006 and 2009 and immediately attended a four-year college. The GPA correlation is consistent regardless of which school the student attended, according to the study. Conversely, there was no correlation between ACT score and college graduation rate at some schools, and researchers also found in some schools
that higher ACT scores resulted in lower graduation rates. The study shows each incremental increase in GPA improved the odds of the high school student graduating from college. In a press release, the researchers said the results of the study run contrary to the assumption that standardized test scores are reliable, neutral indicators of success and that the findings suggest grades are powerful gauges in determining college readiness. (Source: Education Drive)

This research should be a powerful incentive to favor, in the name of socio-economic justice, lower socio-economic applicants who evidence over-achievement since evidence of academic "grit" and success in overcoming socio-economic disadvantage augers well for candidates in school, college, and life.

3. Alternative Forms of Performance Evidence:
The public schools in Tennessee were struggling with ways to capture growth and show, in their own words, "value-added," and so they, along with many schools around the country, are going down the portfolio route of assessment: the adoption of 500,000 student portfolios allows teachers to take snapshots of student performance, evaluate those snapshots according to performance criteria at intervals, and encourage or require their students to upload evidence. (See link to Portfolio Guidebook, below). The student portfolios capture not only academic performance but also co-curricular and extra-curricular excellence from internships to projects and badges. They enable a more holistic picture of the child including social and emotional learning contexts. Most importantly, student portfolios illustrate, literally, the shift from "knowing to doing," as defined by the MacArthur Foundation (Chicago) in the foundation's research on the changing landscape and imperatives for education. This particular shift in the education paradigm, "from knowing to doing," incidentally confirms a wise and ancient Chinese saying: "I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand." (Attributed, probably misattributed, to Confucius.)

4. A Grading and Assessment Renaissance:
There is a long-overdue focus on the transparency and accuracy of grades and how a refreshing educator perspective can lead to better teacher intervention, and thereby increased student opportunity for growth. Better K-8 transcripts have arrived: assessment and Resources for #3:

- "The Big Shifts" (e.g., Project-based learning in the context of "Schools of the Future" (in three formats):
  - i.) Videos: 30-minute and/or 90-minute versions - Email bassett@headsuped.com for a link to download;
  - ii.) PowerPoint: Email bassett@headsuped.com for the link to download;
  - iii.) Articles: Schools of Future: The Big Shifts; The Innovation Imperative.
- The Enrollment Management Association: Its publication on alternative assessments is an outstanding catalog of options to substitute for or supplement standardized admissions testing: Think Tank on the Future of Assessment: Special Report.

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transcripts are becoming more holistic and incorporating whole child indicators from social-emotional learning projects to the integration of experiences and activities that form a more comprehensive learner record. The PIVOT Transcript partnership of OESIS with IMS Global Learning Consortium is leading some of that work. Competency-Based Education provides a proficiency framework that is increasingly cross-curricular and more student-driven, with a greater variety of student pathways towards demonstrated mastery. All this together makes surmising an admission candidate’s “match” by observing a couple of numbers on a test report look very scant. It is time for our schools to look deeper into the transcripts of their feeder schools and demand more. It may take greater training at the admissions officer level, and also transformational professional development for teachers in the new project-based, experiential, student-directed curricula, but that time has come.

5. Diversity and Inclusivity Without Equity:

Diversity itself doesn’t help children learn. Knowing that, how can we blame the colleges and universities for all the ills in curriculum and pedagogy without looking in the mirror ourselves? We ask for colleges to accept alternative forms of transcripts, to look deeper and to a more equitable range of acceptances, but are we holding ourselves equally accountable for shallow and unfairly stacked practices at our intake point? We hold conferences on diversity and inclusivity, and yet the topic of learning equity in the core curriculum seems curiously missing. For the authors of this article, equity means equal opportunity: for every student, a personalized context that embraces rather than pigeonholes the variability of student ability and starting points for learning. Is it too much to see this subject of equity in the core curriculum addressed at enrollment management conferences or at diversity fairs and people of color conferences in the near future?

Caveats:

Here are four caveats to this article’s “call to arms” that our independent school practitioners might consider as counterweights to the findings articulated in this article:

1. In the shrinking market that most, if not all, independent schools face as a consequence of skyrocketing tuitions, we have been admitting less academically prepared candidates for some time, even at many of the wealthy and elite schools (except for the elite of elite with “need-blind” admissions based on exceptional financial aid resources). Test-optional admissions may accelerate that trend. With optional testing, we may end up accelerating the trend of more students needing additional help and at all family income levels. Is the price of equal opportunity too high? Should schools simply settle for the predicament created by an increasingly vulnerable business model?

2. Test-optional policies may also unconsciously bias those schools that choose the option, with a subconscious or conscious assumption in admissions offices that those who submit test scores do so because their scores are high, demonstrably so; contrariwise, for admissions offices evaluating applicants who don’t submit test scores, the assumption might be they do so because their test scores are low. Ironically, it’s not far-fetched to speculate within the non-test submitted pool there would be test scores that would meet the test scores of many in your accepted pool when standardized test results were required. Why? Because our secondary schools often post their senior class average SAT scores, and if one’s middle school child’s SSAT scores are lower than the secondary school’s average, some families would assume their child would not be admitted. In fact, that score may be at the top of the second quintile where a significant proportion of the class has been admitted in the past and flourished at the school.

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3. To be more objective, it may be useful to gather better data on your school’s graduates through longitudinal studies: compare their grade-point averages and other “success” variables over time in your school and in their successive schools and colleges. It’s possible the old (and in many ways insulting) school adage has some validity: “The A-students become teachers and preachers, and the B students work for the C students.” It was true for the authors of this piece.

4. The Enrollment Management Association and ERB, providers of the SSAT and ISEE, should be invited to counter these arguments with data and research that contradicts the premises here. The Enrollment Management Association’s Think Tank on the Future of Assessment: Special Report is an outstanding contribution to the literature on assessments for school admissions and for the emerging debate on required vs. optional testing in our sector, concluding that admissions standardized testing is useful while agreeing that such testing could and should be accompanied by other equally important assessments measuring a host of other factors that contribute to success in school and life.

The time is ripe for a test-optional movement in independent schools. In fact, it’s already moved in this direction in Northern California (although currently stalled). Independent school accreditation organizations have made recommendations to their members about standardized testing, including dropping the requirement for grade-level standardized tests at various intervals. Is it not the time for their Boards to make a statement of their views on this question? We plan to ask and report back in the next issue. The authors of this article believe it is time for us to throw down the gauntlet nationally for more equitable admissions at the college-feeder level, independent schools. Over time if a substantial number of schools (100 or more would be the statistical minimum) compile group longitudinal research (such as the NAIS College Age Survey and the NAIS Survey of High School Engagement) we’ll start to see how test-required vs. test-optional admissions compares in terms of maximizing appropriate numbers of candidates applying, being accepted, enrolling, and succeeding in our schools and thereafter in college and in their life pathways.

When it comes to considering admissions testing factors in the context of equitable access for a diverse pool of applicants, we might think, “Physician, heal thyself!”

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