

Cold Open

[MUSIC UP - "Love Streams"]

REPORTER 1: More than 100 colleges and universities have made the SAT optional for the next school year because of the pandemic and that includes...

REPORTER 2: The University of California system cannot use SAT and ACT test scores for admissions.

Kyrstin Mitchell: I was on the Cal State website and I remember seeing, like, oh, we're not accepting SAT scores or ACT scores. And I remember getting really excited because I was like one, I don't have to study for this test. And two, I just was not confident from my PSAT score.

This is Kyrstin Mitchell. She graduated high school this year and now attends Cal State Long Beach.

She says she's not a test person... And that the PSAT felt like a guessing game.

Kyrstin Mithcell: And then when I got my test scores back, I kind of felt really discouraged because I knew how important the SAT scores were to get into college. So seeing that, I didn't do well and all my other friends are like, I got a good score. I just kind of felt like, am I going to be able to go to college after this? And it was just really discouraging, honestly.

So when the Cal State University system went test-optional... she felt like a world of opportunities opened up for her.

[MUSIC FADES]

Kyrstin Mitchell: Before that it was like, OK, well, I need to estimate my score and it needs to line up with this. And, you know, and now that that factor was gone, it was just like a free for all. Just apply wherever you can. And so I think that it did, like in a positive way, in my opinion, affect the way I decided to apply to my schools.

For decades, the SAT and ACT have been the name of the admissions game. It's like this barrier at certain colleges... you must have *this* score to enter.

I remember when I was applying to colleges, I used my ACT score as a roadmap. If I didn't fit the median score at a certain school, I didn't even bother applying.

Now, with that barrier eliminated... How will the admissions process change? Will test-optional policies bring new students to the door... and improve the diversity of

college campuses? Or are there other factors that prevent test-optional from making a greater impact?

[THEME MUSIC FADE UP]

[Higher Ed Rewired is a production of the California State University. The CSU is the largest, most diverse four-year public university system in the country, and an engine of social and economic mobility. Each episode examines exciting innovations taking place across the nation that has the potential to improve student success and to positively change the environment in which we teach, learn and discover. Each episode examines ground breaking research and exciting innovations take place across the nation that is transforming the landscape of student success..]

[THEME MUSIC POSTS]

Welcome to Season 3 of Higher Ed Rewired.

I'm Michael Wiafe. I'm a San Diego State University alum and past president of the Cal State Student Association.

Last year the COVID-19 pandemic shut down testing centers across the country, and the [ACT reported “an abrupt and significant spike” in schools going test-optional.](#)

But whether or not test-optional is improving campus diversity... remains to be seen.

Across the University of California system, for example, institutions received more applications from underrepresented groups than ever before. But the overall makeup of their applicant pool... [didn't change much.](#)

Today we'll see if test-optional really *has* moved the needle.

I'll talk to the CEO of the National Association for College Admission Counseling about how test-optional changed college admissions for the better.

A director of undergraduate admissions will explain how eliminating test scores upended the admissions process.

And we'll hear from a researcher at Penn State University who studied the effects of going test-optional at liberal arts schools across the country.

Through it all... we'll figure out how institutions can create an admissions process that welcomes students from *all* backgrounds.

[THEME MUSIC RINGS OUT]

ACT 1 - effects of test optional

Even before COVID, using standardized tests in admissions was under fire.

That's because a [growing body of research has found that SAT scores don't just reflect college readiness... but also socioeconomic class.](#)

For example, [a 2015 analysis by Inside Higher Ed](#) revealed a significant difference between low-income and high-income test takers. In the reading section, students with a family income below \$20,000 scored... on average.... 433 out of 600 — compared to a score of 570 for students with family income of \$200,000 and above.

Angel Perez: I know it's controversial and not all of my members agree, but the reality of the matter is there's a lot of data and research that shows that the tests tend to favor students who are wealthy and have a lot of advantage.

This is Angel Pérez. He's the CEO of the National Association for College Admission Counseling or NACAC. But before that he was the Vice President for Enrollment and Student Success at Trinity College in Connecticut — where he joined the test-optional movement.

Angel Perez: A lot of the research also shows that when colleges become test optional, their applicant pools become more diverse. Right. So low income first generation students, students of color are more apt to apply to institutions where the tests are not required.

And, [according to the American Council on Education](#), a diverse campus enriches the educational experience and promotes students' personal growth.

So, to attract diverse applicants, more and more universities joined the test-optional movement.

Angel Perez: And we actually saw that last year. There were lots of institutions, including some of the most selective schools in the country. Their application pool surged as a result of the fact that they were test optional and many of those students were students of color and low income, first generation students.

Angel Perez: That obviously has a lot of impact on admission officers, right, there is only so much capacity in an admissions office.

That's something Gary Clark experienced firsthand. He's the director of admissions at UCLA. And when the UC's went test-free last year, his department received *thirty thousand more* applicants than the year before.

[MUSIC ENTERS - "Turn on the Radio"]

Gary Clark: And I think there may be a variety of factors that contributed to that. But certainly I think the move away from considering standardized testing and the review process played a big role.

Besides increasing the *quantity* of applicants, going test-free also boosted the *quality* of applicants.

Gary Clark: One of the things we noticed was that our top performing students, as measured by GPA, whether you're looking at unweighted or weighted GPA, that was the group that grew with the highest rate. So I infer from that that there were students maybe in past years who were good students and performed well in the classroom. But... they had a test score that when they looked at our middle 50 percent, which is absurd, to be frank... they didn't see themselves in those numbers. And so they perhaps chose not to apply because they thought that test score was going to be the barrier to them potentially being admitted. So I think these changes, whether it's test free or test optional, certainly have an impact on applicant pools.

[MUSIC FADES]

Michael Wiafe: I'm curious about the makeup of the classes that you admitted with test optional review. Did you see changes in diversity? Were more students of color applying, more first generation students... What have you seen in terms of making a more equitable UCLA through this? [00:33:04][22.9]

Gary Clark: Yeah, so, I mean, this is the first year that we've been test free, but absolutely, I think increases in all of the groups that you just shared. Not only in the applicant pool, but we saw many of those same increases in our admitted student population. And ultimately... we anticipate seeing some of those same patterns in our enrolling class. So increases in African-American, Chicano, Latino, native students. In apps, admits, and enrolled. And in first-generation students. And I think that's something. We're excited to see that pattern emerge here as well.

For UCLA, going test-free... *did actually*.... increase campus diversity.

According to the LA Times...34 percent of incoming freshmen from California were... Black, Latino, American Indian and Pacific Islander students... That's actually the largest percentage of minority students that UCLA has accepted in decades.

If you look at just Black students, they made up... 7 percent of admitted freshmen. That may not seem like much... but it's *double* the percentage of Black admitted freshmen a decade ago.

So test-optional was the first step in the right direction, and for students at these campuses it changed the course of their college career.

Still... a surge in the applicant pool had some unintended consequences.

At UCLA, for example, Clark said that their Fall 2021 application pool surged to 139,000. But they still admitted roughly the same number of applicants. [So their admission rate actually decreased... from 14 to 11 percent.](#) Which makes their institution *even more* competitive to get into.

For some students, getting admitted to these highly selective schools... feels like a pipe dream.

[MUSIC TRANSITION - "slow healing"]

[ACT 2: How test-optional *doesn't* change the game](#)

Before COVID shut down testing centers nationwide... the UC system was wrestling with the results of a new report. The board had assembled a task force to investigate the role of standardized testing in UC admissions over the last year. And what they found... surprised people.

The Task Force did *not* find evidence that using test scores in admissions hurt minority students because the UC's holistic review process compensates for lower test scores.

But they did find that of the students granted admission through the statewide index... which favors test scores over GPA... "about 25 percent were members of underrepresented minority groups, and 47 percent were low-income or first generation students. These students would not have been guaranteed admission on the basis of their grades alone."

[MUSIC FADES]

The regents had been pressured to eliminate standardized testing to *help* disadvantaged students. And now they were being told that eliminating test scores would *harm* these students.

Ultimately, the UC system eliminated testing. And the early results of that policy are promising. This year, the UC system admitted their most diverse class ever.

But other institutions... haven't seen much of a change.

Kelly Rosinger: I would say if we're looking for a silver bullet to improve equity, we're not going to find one.

This is Kelly Rosinger. She's an Assistant Professor of Education at Pennsylvania State University.

Kelly Rosinger: I view test optional as this sort of first step that we have to take, but it's not sufficient on its own. If we really want to dramatically improve access to undergraduate education, we really have to rethink not just the role that standardized test scores play in kind of reproducing the same inequities that we see, but also the way that other factors that we consider in the admissions process come into play.

And I think it also goes beyond admissions... We have to think about recruiting, which sort of falls into the admissions world and we also have to think about other barriers like financial aid and college affordability more broadly.

[MUSIC ENTERS - "sunday in bed"]

About ten years ago... Rosinger studied a group of selective liberal arts colleges that went test-optional.

Kelly Rosinger: And what we found was that we didn't see changes in the racial or economic diversity of campuses that adopted test optional policies. What we actually found is that... they received more applications and had higher standardized test scores, that they then reported to rankings agencies. Right. Among enrolled students. So they actually seem to be policies that didn't so much benefit students, but actually sort of led to this kind of institutional advantage.

Rosinger says that because her study was focused on liberal arts schools, it might not reflect the experience of... all institutions... And with the way COVID has accelerated test-optional, it may be too soon to fully understand the effects of this policy on diversity.

But so far... her findings hold up. [A study this year from the American Educational Research Journal revealed that test-optional admissions increased the number of Black, Latino and Native American students... by only 1 percentage point. The number of low-income students also increased... by 1 percentage point.](#)

Rosinger says that one of the reasons going test-optional hasn't moved the needle... is because race and class are baked into almost every aspect of a college application.

Kelly Rosinger: Social and racial inequities in education are historical. They're deeply entrenched... It's not just the standardized tests; it's so many other aspects.

When we think about college admissions, obviously standardized test scores are the things that we hear the most about... And it made colleagues and I at Penn State here

start to think, well, what about the other factors that admissions officers consider similarly problematic?

[MUSIC FADES]

So we looked at extracurricular activities, essays, grades, the courses a student had taken in their high school, recommendations and all of these pieces of an application that go into it... and thinking about how these factors can similarly serve to benefit the same students that test scores do.

So, yes, we can move away from test scores, but unless we change the rest of the process, aren't we going to see the same exact results when we look at college enrollment? And sure enough, we don't really see with these other factors we might think of as a comprehensive review of an application. We don't see many of them really moving the needle when it comes to expanding diversity and access.

Angel Perez, the head of NACAC who we heard from earlier in the episode, says the issue doesn't start with admissions... but with the education system as a whole.

Angel Perez: The reality of the matter is the system is not equitable. There is nothing fair about highly selective college admissions. And also, if we were going to create an equitable system, we need to address issues of K through 12 education. When students do not have access to particular curricula, to particular professors, teachers, courses, that system is never going to be equitable. So I never really bought the argument that the SAT and the ACT provide a fair and equitable way to acknowledge students' ability to go to college, because the reality of the matter is they're not all playing on the same field.

[MUSIC TRANSITION - "Lovers Paseo"]

[ACT 3 - What can we do to make things more equitable / how to actually move the needle](#)

So what *can* administrators do to level the playing field? I asked that question to each of our guests. Here's what admissions director... Gary Clark... had to say.

Gary Clark: To be honest, the thing that I would really focus on is counseling. I think especially here in California, access to high school counseling is among the worst in the country. We have one of the worst counselor to student ratios of any state in the US... You know, the unfortunate fact of the matter is there's a lot of information out there, but it's not all good and it's not all coming from sources that really have the student's best interest in mind...

So I think we have to continue to really invest in counseling as a state... we need to ensure that every student who is motivated and interested in going to college, gets the kind of counseling they need to really be prepared early on. [00:37:43][80.7]

That's something Kyrstin Mitchell brought up too. She's the recent high school grad we met at the top of the episode.

Kyrstin Mitchell: I'm not sure how it is at other schools, but I know at my school I didn't really get much help. I just had, like, a sit down. Like, oh, well, what do you want to major in? OK, well, here's your schedule for next year. It was just. It wasn't very helpful, especially during these last two years. It's just been really hard. And having to figure it out on your own isn't great. So I think that high schools should really take the initiative in the last two years of your high school career to really help you and sit down with you and walk you through this process and explain to you the different aspects of the applications that you'll be sending in for your future.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Of course, universities must do their part, too... Angel Perez says administrators can start by *simplifying* the admissions process.

Angel Perez: We've been so good over the past several decades of adding requirements for what students need to do in order to get admitted to college. But we haven't removed any. And so... we have to figure out a way to make it a little easier for students to submit their applications and not require so many things. And we have data that actually shows that the more you require, the fewer students actually complete the process.

[00:16:24][29.0]

But that's just the first step. If we *really* want to address equity, we have to return to a systemic pain point for institutions.

Angel Perez: The way we fund higher education in this country has to change. If we are really going to achieve access, it's actually not about admissions officers admitting more students of color, first generation students. It is about giving those admissions officers the financial resources to be able to do that.

Perez speaks from experience here. [When he tried to admit more low-income students at Trinity College, he faced a daunting hurdle.](#)

[Remember that study linking standardized test scores to household income? Well, for decades, standardized test scores have served as a proxy for socioeconomic status... and... whether or not students can afford to pay full tuition.](#)

Private colleges like Trinity can only offer a certain amount of financial aid, and they rely on students paying full-tuition to make up the difference.

So if administrators want to diversify their campuses, they have to pay a price.

Angel Perez: And so at the federal level and at the state level, we need to rethink how we fund higher education, how we provide financial aid for students to take with them to higher education. Because the more that there is government subsidy in higher education, the more students, those admission officers will actually be able to admit.

Kelly Rosinger... the researcher we heard from earlier... says that *simplifying* financial aid will also bring marginalized students to the door.

Kelly Rosinger: Four year colleges are expensive. And so absent substantial financial aid and... broader changes that affect recruiting, admissions and financial aid more broadly, I think these kind of single policies are always going to be somewhat limited in their ability at least to effect dramatic changes in college access.

[MUSIC TRANSITION - "city smoke"]

CONCLUSION: Does test-optional make a difference?

Does test-optional make a difference? So far the research shows that it does... by one percentage point. Of course, test-optional has now been implemented at a much wider scale, so it may be too soon to say.

And as we've heard from Perez and Rosinger... colleges have a long way to go in making admissions more equitable.

[MUSIC FADES]

But for one student, Kyrstin Mitchell, test-optional made *all* the difference.

Kyrstin Mitchell: I think that especially for me kids who are just not really great at taking tests, they're fully capable, but it's just not one of their strong suits... I'm glad that they did take that aspect out and that people are starting to recognize, like, did we ever need this? So I think it's going good so far. [00:13:16][53.2]
[60.7]

[MUSIC - "Sun Latte"]

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[MUSIC FADE DOWN]