CollegeBoard

Research Survey Brief: Enrollment Leaders' Insights on Admissions Policy and Practice

In response to disruptions caused by the covid-19 pandemic, many institutions changed their policies and practices related to admissions and enrollment to better serve students during an unprecedented time. Today, many enrollment leaders are studying the impact of those policy changes on issues such as student outcomes and the ability to provide student supports, among many others. The results of this research can be used to drive future policy decisions. Throughout this research and reflection, enrollment leaders report that they remain committed to clearly communicating current policies to prospective students, giving applicants every opportunity to demonstrate their strengths when applying for admission, and helping students succeed once enrolled.

Over the last two years, College Board's new Admissions Research Consortium (ARC) surveyed enrollment leaders and researchers at 80 member colleges and research organizations. This brief summarizes their responses—the lessons they've learned and their thoughts about the future of admissions policy and practice. Three key themes emerged:

1. Colleges are relying heavily on data to drive decisions about future policies.

2. Colleges are committed to ensuring students continue to have multiple ways to show their strengths on applications.
3. Colleges know that policy language influences applicant behavior; they want to be both clear and transparent when communicating with prospective students.

This brief explores each of these themes in greater detail. As we look toward the future of admissions policy and practice, these insights can bring further clarity to enrollment strategies and planning.

Theme 1: Colleges are relying heavily on data to drive decisions about future policies.

Like virtually all colleges across the country, most ARC institutions adopted temporary test-optional policies during the pandemic, and most remain **test optional through the 2022-23 admissions cycle**. **Surveys reveal that enrollment leaders at ARC institutions are actively exploring what their future policies and practices might look like, and they're primarily using research and data to drive those decisions.**

- In addition to their participation in ARC, **75% of ARC enrollment leaders said they are conducting their own institutional research on the validity of admissions factors for predicting student performance**. Approximately 30% of leaders reported asking students enrolling this fall to submit test scores to support this research, and several others are planning to do so next year.

- **When it comes to informing future policies, ARC colleges are primarily focused on academic outcomes and performance** including college grades, credit accumulation, retention, and time-to-degree. Institutions want to ensure they have ways to identify students who may need additional support beyond test scores.

- **Additional factors will go into the decision-making process**, including input from campus stakeholders and policies of peer institutions.

Theme 2: Colleges are committed to ensuring students continue to have multiple ways to show their strengths on applications.

During the pandemic, admissions offices remained committed to the practice of holistic review, even as they adapted to new kinds of information and shifted the emphasis from some factors to others. They evaluated pass/fail grades alongside numeric and letter grades, considered the differential impact of the pandemic on students' lives as described in supplemental impact statements, considered standardized test scores for some students and not others, and put less weight on extracurricular activities given students' limited opportunities for involvement. Despite all these changes, **surveys show enrollment leaders are confident in their ability to make admissions decisions about individual students in the context of a holistic review**.

- When asked to rank many factors commonly considered in admissions, 9 factors emerged as at least "somewhat important" to ARC institutions on average. **While each institution combines and weights these factors differently, it's clear that students continue to have a variety of ways to show their strengths.**

- **High school GPA and participation in rigorous coursework were ranked consistently among the most important factors in a student's application.** Other factors that made the list include essays, extracurricular activities, SAT®/ACT scores, and letters of recommendation.

- **94% of enrollment leaders were as confident, or more confident**, making admissions decisions for the fall 2022 cohort compared to the fall 2021 cohort.

- **Close to 2/3rds of respondents said they would not be making changes to the factors they consider in the next cycle** (2022−2023 application cycle)**.**

Theme 3: Colleges know that policy language influences applicant behavior; they want to be both clear and transparent when communicating with prospective students.

In separate surveys with high school students conducted in 2021 and 2022 by College Board, more than 80% of students say they want the opportunity to send their scores to colleges, or that they want those scores to be required.[1] ARC research and surveys have illuminated the need for institutions to continue to hone the language they use to provide guidance so students can make an informed choice about whether to send their scores.

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[1] This finding has been consistent across multiple surveys of SAT takers and with high school students in the general U.S. population. The finding has also been consistent across racial and ethnic groups.

- On average, approximately 50% of applications to ARC colleges included a test score as part of the application. Research shows the strongest determinant for whether or not a student submits test scores is the score itself (higher scoring students are more likely to submit). This is true for all students regardless of background. When surveyed, students reported that the next most important factor is whether colleges are clear about the role of scores in their application review.

- In an effort to help ARC institutions understand how their messaging is understood by students, College Board analyzed test policy language from more than 80 institutions and how that language is associated with test score disclosure rates among applications to each institution. **Results show a direct relationship between test policy language and score disclosure. Students are significantly more likely to submit their scores to institutions that clearly articulate the way they use scores, compared with colleges where their use of scores was unclear.**

Higher Score Disclosure ←——————————————→ *Lower Score Disclosure*

*"Standardized testing **gives a useful statistical context for the holistic review we perform** … alongside your academic record and teacher recommendations, testing helps us better understand your preparation for college."*

*"Moving to test optional … allows us to **add more weight to the important characteristics and qualities that further focus on you**, your personal accomplishments, and academic record."*

- **100% of ARC enrollment leaders said these findings would inform their approach to improving the clarity of their test-optional policy language**, affirming their commitment to helping students understand and own this choice.

Above all else, these results underscore the commitment of colleges to ensure students are well positioned to put their best foot forward on their applications and enroll at an institution where they'll be successful. The impacts of the pandemic will continue to influence colleges' policies, processes, and communications in the years to come, but enrollment leaders are ready to take on these challenges and implement changes that are evidence-driven and in the best interest of students.

About the Admissions Research Consortium (ARC)

The Admissions Research Consortium (ARC) is a member-led, multiyear, collaborative research initiative with 80 participating colleges and associations, including the Association for Institutional Research (AIR), American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), and National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). Founded in response to higher education leaders urging College Board to help bring clarity to the disruptions felt by admissions offices since the covid-19 pandemic, ARC examines trends to applications, admissions, enrollment, and student outcomes. Data collected from consortium members yielded an aggregate analysis of fall 2021 applications, admissions, enrollment, and score sending trends (published in July 2022).