CollegeBoard

A Summary of Four Years of Research Evidence on Admissions, Testing, and Student Success Since the Pandemic

Introduction

The Admissions Research Consortium (ARC, hereafter referred to as "the consortium" or "ARC") is a collaboration among 80 colleges and associations, established to help institutions understand the impact of the evolving college admissions landscape. Formed in 2021 in response to widespread disruptions caused by the covid-19 pandemic—including the near-universal shift to test-optional policies—ARC supports institutions in analyzing trends in applications, admissions, and enrollments; student test score disclosure decisions; and college student outcomes. As the admissions environment continues to change with the elimination of race-conscious admissions and the introduction of new federal policies, ARC provides critical evidence and insights to help colleges inform future admissions practices.

Guided by Core Advisory and Research Committees, ARC has released three research briefs to date. The latest research presents updated data from 60 of the 80 consortium colleges, covering trends through the Fall 2024 application cycle and analyzing first-year college performance through the 2023-24 academic year. Notably, it highlights enrollment funnel trends, student test score disclosure patterns over time, and the continued utility of test scores in predicting first-year college outcomes. The brief also discusses the findings in relation to implications and strategies for supporting student success. Future briefs will examine changes in longer-term college outcomes, such as four- and six-year graduation rates.

Key Research Findings for Enrollment Practitioners

The findings summarized below and throughout this document represent a portion of the evidence that's fully detailed within the *Research Brief*.[1] This summary focuses on analyses and insights most relevant to enrollment practitioners today.

Following four years of research, we're sharing key findings and their implications to inform and support enrollment practitioners, campus leaders, secondary school educators and counselors, and policymakers. These insights are organized in three primary areas:

1. Application, Admission, and Enrollment Patterns
2. Student Behavior Related to Testing and Score Submission
3. Student Preparation and First-Year College Outcomes

Application, Admission, and Enrollment Patterns

- Between the Fall 2020 and Fall 2024 admissions cycles, applications to consortium colleges increased by 38%, admission offers increased by 21%, and overall enrollment increased by 11%. Enrollment growth was largest at selective public institutions that saw increases over 20% in this time period. Enrollment growth was slightly larger among first-generation college students than among non-first-

[1] Bloem, M., Edwards, A., Goyer, P., Howell, J., Hurwitz, M., Imlay, S., and Ma, J. 2025. *New Evidence on the Effect of Changes in College Admissions Policies After the Pandemic.* https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/ARC_Research_June2025.pdf.

generation students, and larger among low-income students than among non-low-income students.

- The racial/ethnic and socioeconomic composition of incoming classes at consortium colleges remained largely unchanged from 2018 to 2024. Small annual increases in the share of enrolling Black, Hispanic, and Native students mirror broader trends in racial diversification among U.S. high school graduates.[2] The share of students enrolling from higher-challenge neighborhoods has also remained stable year over year.

Student Behavior Related to Testing and Score Submission

- Roughly half of applicants to consortium colleges choose to disclose their test scores during the admissions process. While disclosure rates have slightly declined over time, the proportion of applicants taking a standardized test has increased.
- Students' decisions to disclose scores continue to be influenced by how their scores compare to the average at the institutions to which they're applying. Applicants with higher relative scores are more likely to submit them, while those with lower relative scores tend to withhold them, regardless of demographic background. *Campus test policy language also plays a meaningful role in influencing disclosure decisions.*

Student Preparation and First-Year College Outcomes

- As more students withhold test scores in the admissions process, ARC colleges are enrolling a greater number of lower-scoring students than in previous years. On average, these students exhibit weaker first-year outcomes, limiting institutions' ability to identify and support students early on. Meanwhile, the average high school GPA of enrolled students has risen–in part due to grade inflation–further complicating early identification of students in need of support. As a result, many ARC colleges now request or require students to submit test scores at the point of enrollment, post-admission, to better identify those who may benefit from early intervention.
- SAT scores remain strong predictors of college performance. Even among students with similar high school GPAs, higher test scores are positively correlated with stronger academic outcomes. SAT Math scores are especially predictive of success in STEM coursework, making them a valuable tool for appropriate major and course placement and academic support efforts.

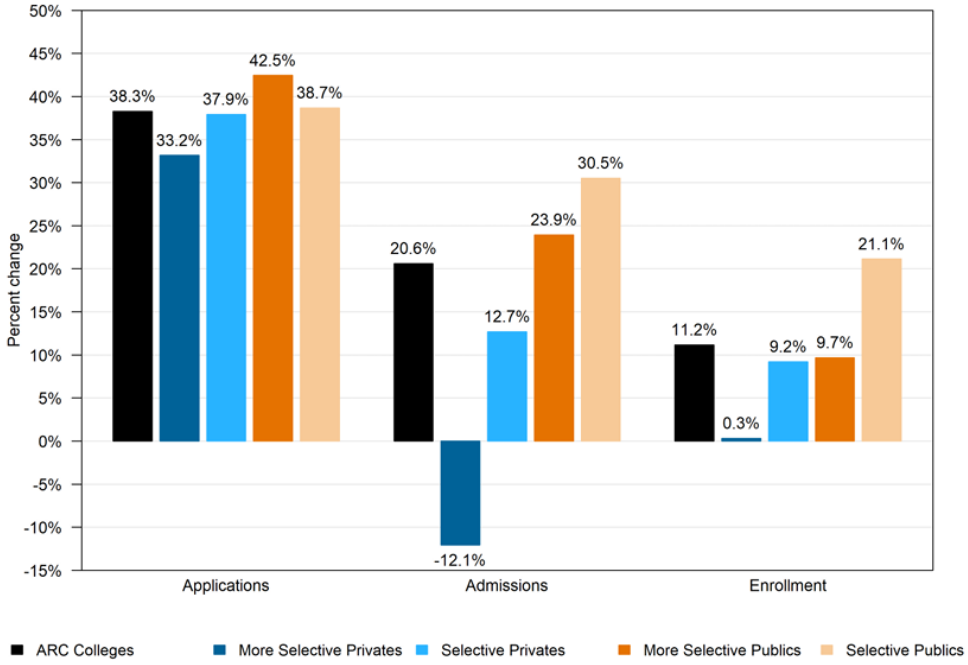
[2] Lane, P., Falkenstern, C., & Bransberger, P. 2024. *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. https://www.wiche.edu/knocking

Application, Admission, and Enrollment Patterns

Trends by Institutional Type and Segment

Between Fall 2020 (the final admissions cycle before the widespread adoption of test-optional policies) and Fall 2024, applications to consortium institutions increased by 38%. The most significant growth occurred at more selective public consortium colleges. While most institutional segments experienced increases in both admission offers and enrollment, more selective private colleges saw a 12% decline in admission offers and only a 0.3% increase in enrollment.

Figure 1: *Percentage Change in Applications, Admissions, and Enrollment Between Fall 2020 and Fall 2024, ARC Colleges and Segments*



Source: Bloem et al. (2025), Figure 3

Trends by Student Demographics

From Fall 2020 to Fall 2024, applications to consortium colleges increased across all student subgroups. First-generation students exhibited greater application growth than their non-first-generation peers. Application growth was also comparable between students from less challenging and more challenging neighborhoods.

Applications rose among all racial/ethnic groups. The highest growth was observed among international students and the lowest among White students. In the 2023-24 cycle—the first following the Supreme Court's decision to eliminate race-conscious admissions—applications from Black, Hispanic, and Native students increased at faster rates than those from White and Asian students.

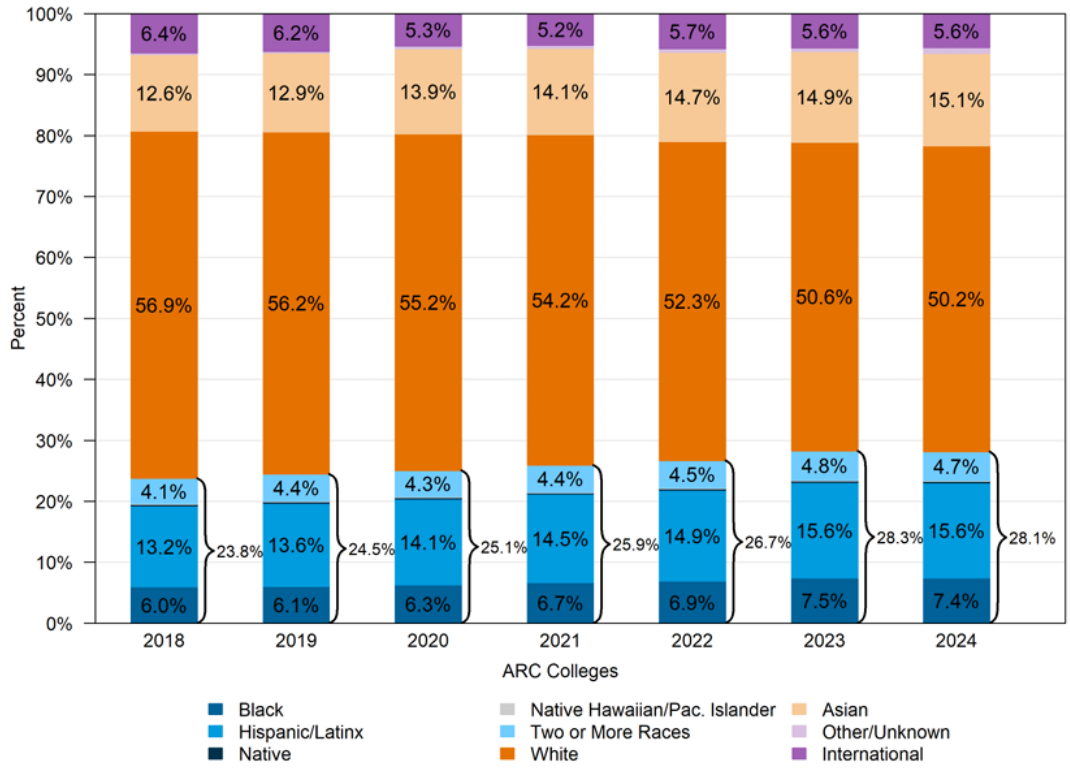
Trends in admission offers and enrollment by student subgroup closely mirrored these application patterns.

Proportional Representation

Although the number of historically excluded applicants, admitted students, and enrollees increased at consortium institutions between 2020 and 2024, these gains didn't result in significant changes in the proportional representation of enrolled students by race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

Figure 2 shows that the share of enrolled students identifying as Black, Hispanic, Native, or Two or More Races at ARC institutions rose from 23.8% in Fall 2018 to 28.1% in Fall 2024—a 4.3 percentage point increase. This change is consistent with national trends: the proportion of minority (URM) students among U.S. public high school graduates increased by 4.6 percentage points, from 42.6% to 47.2% over the same period.[3]

Figure 2: *Racial/Ethnic Composition of Enrolled Students from Fall 2018 to Fall 2024*



Source: Bloem et al. (2025), Figure 9

Trends in Socioeconomic Representation

Similarly, consortium institutions experienced increases in the number of applicants, admits, and enrollees from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as measured by neighborhood challenge quintile, an indicator of educational opportunity based on census tract data. However, proportional representation remained stable. From 2018 to 2024, the share of domestic first-year enrollees from neighborhoods in the top three challenge quintiles held steady at 25%, mirroring patterns observed among applicants.

Student Behavior Related to Testing and Score Submission

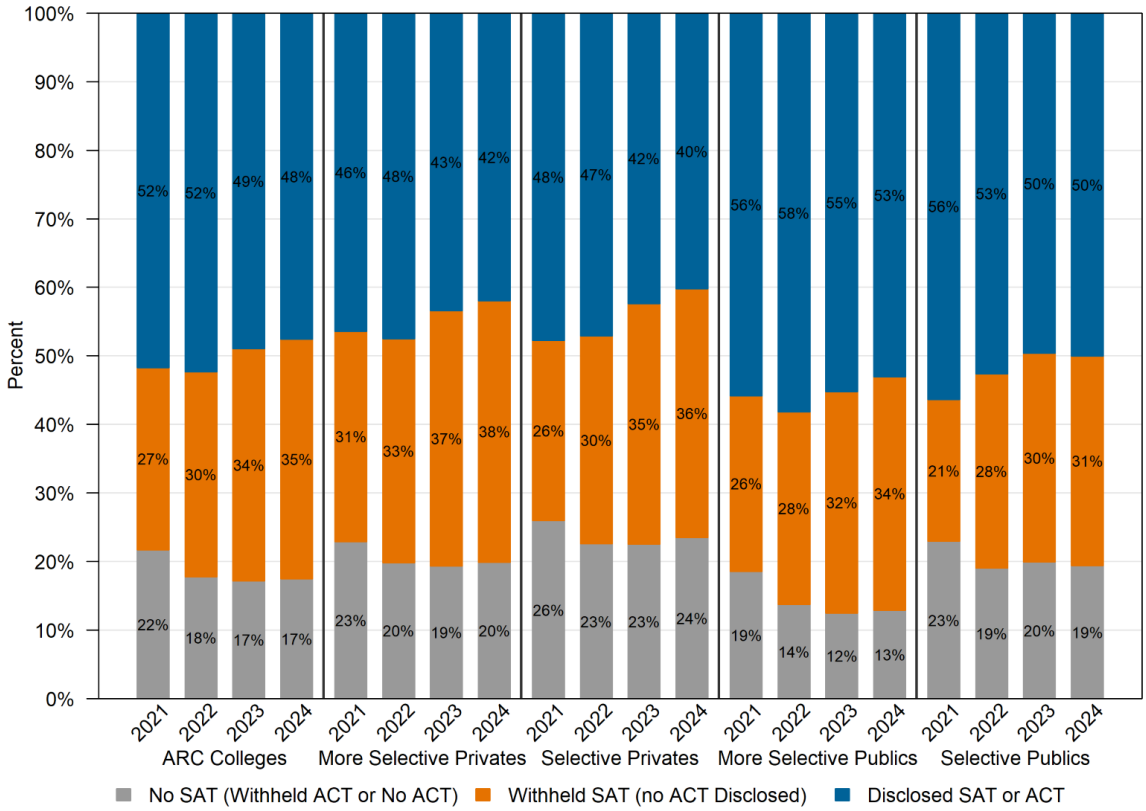
Test-Taking and Score Disclosure Rates

Figure 3 shows test score disclosure rates have declined slightly over time. In 2021, the first year of widespread test-optional policies, 52% of applicants to consortium colleges chose to disclose their test scores. By 2024, that figure had decreased to 48%. Disclosure rates also vary by institution type: students applying to more selective public institutions disclosed at higher rates than applicants to colleges in the other

[3] Lane, P., Falkenstern, C., & Bransberger, P. (2024). *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. https://www.wiche.edu/knocking

three ARC segments.

Figure 3: *Score Disclosure, Withholding, and Absence Among Fall 2021 to Fall 2024 Applications, by ARC Segment*



Source: Bloem et al. (2025), Figure 15

Despite the decline in score disclosure, the proportion of applicants who have taken a standardized test increased over time. In Fall 2021, at least 78% of applicants to consortium colleges had a test score; by Fall 2024, the share rose to 83%, reflecting a rebound in access to testing as pandemic-related school closures subsided. Since some applicants may have held ACT scores they chose not to report, these percentages likely underestimate the total share of students who had test scores.

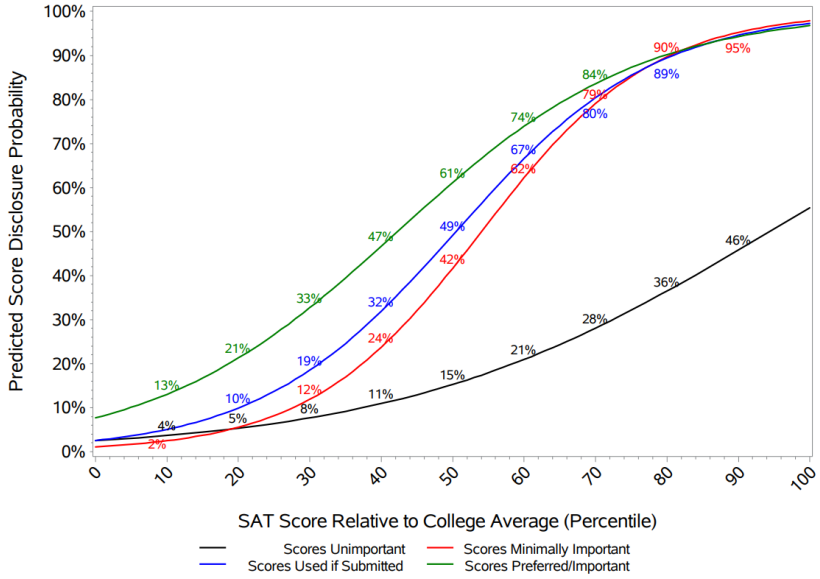
Score Disclosure Decisions

The data demonstrate that students made rational, score-driven decisions about whether to disclose their test scores. In general, students with above-average scores relative to the colleges they applied to were more likely to disclose, while those with below-average scores tended to withhold. This pattern remained consistent across demographic groups, first-generation status, and across all four years from 2021 to 2024.

However, disclosure rates among students with mid-range scores declined over time. The likelihood of disclosing a score at the 50th percentile fell from 57% in Fall 2021 to just 46% in Fall 2024, holding all other factors constant.

While relative score strength was the primary driver of disclosure decisions, campus test policy language also significantly influenced student behavior. As shown in **Figure 4**, students applying to colleges that downplayed the importance of test scores in their admissions process were less likely to disclose their scores compared to similar students applying to institutions that described test scores as “minimally important,” “preferred,” or “used in the admissions decision.” Said differently, the likelihood of disclosing a test score varies meaningfully depending on how a campus messages their test score policy.

Figure 4: *Probability of Test Score Disclosure Among ARC College Applications for Fall 2024, by Institutions' Test Policy Language*



Source: McManus et al. (2023), updated version of Figure A2.[4]

Student Preparation and First-Year College Outcomes

College admissions professionals aim to attract and enroll students who are well-prepared to succeed on their campuses. However, the covid-19 pandemic disrupted both student learning and college admissions processes, prompting questions about how pandemic-era cohorts would perform compared to their pre-pandemic peers and how colleges could continue to identify students most in need of support.

This research explores trends in precollegiate indicators of academic preparation as well as first-year college outcomes, including GPA, credit accumulation, and retention to the second year.

Precollegiate Preparation

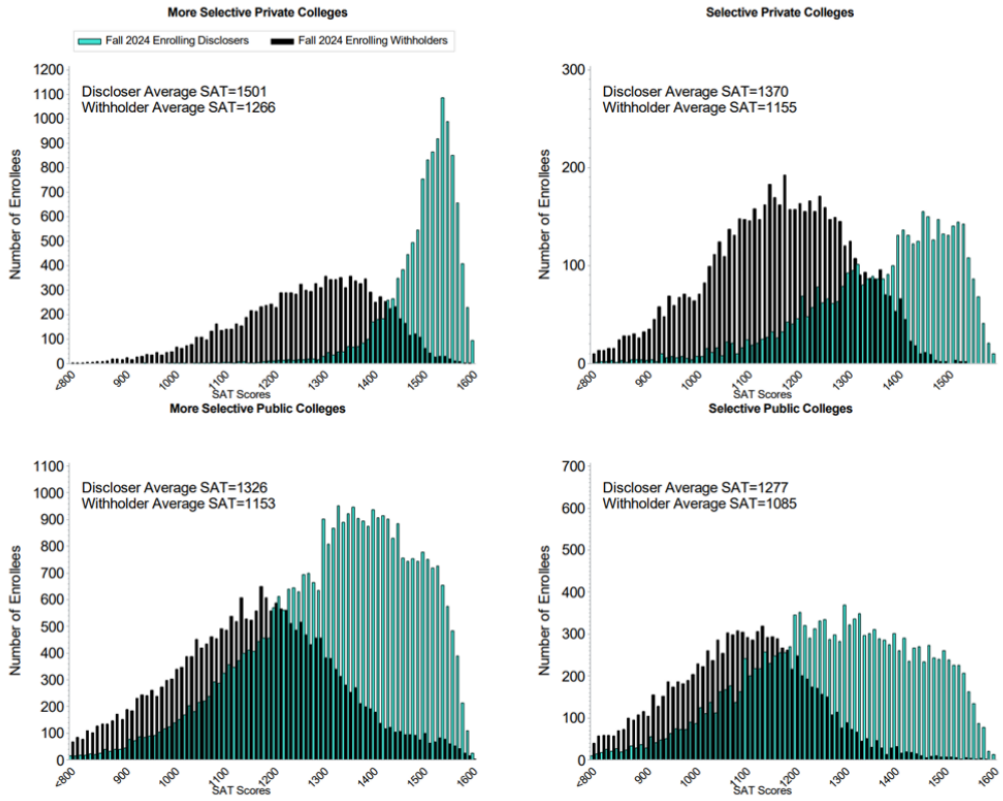
Across all ARC institutional segments, two slightly different pictures of student academic readiness emerge when studying Fall 2020 entrants through Fall 2024 entrants:

- **High school grades among applicants, admits, and enrollees are higher in Fall 2024 than in Fall 2020**. High school grades tend to be higher by roughly 0.1 HSGPA points among 2024 first-year college students, relative to 2020 in all institutional segments. In 2024, at least 80% of enrollees had HSGPAs of A- or higher.
- **Average SAT scores of enrolling students declined by approximately 45 points between Fall 2020 and Fall 2024.** Relative to 2020, there was a 62% increase in below-average-scoring students enrolling at consortium colleges in 2024.

This SAT score trend is largely driven by the growing number of lower-scoring students—many of whom withheld their scores during the application process. These students are shown in **Figure 5** below in comparison to higher-scoring students who disclosed their test scores.

[4] McManus, B., Howell, J., and Hurwitz, M. 2023. *Strategic Disclosure of Test Scores: Evidence from US College Admissions*. EdWorkingPaper: 23-843. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://doi.org/10.26300/1b54-b897

Figure 5: *Distribution of SAT Scores Among Enrolled First-Year Students at ARC Institutions in Fall 2024, by Score Disclosure Status and ARC Segment*



Source: Bloem et al. (2025), Figure 24

Together, the increase in HSGPA and the decrease in the average SAT scores present a conflicting picture of academic readiness among newly enrolled students. Compounding this, research on faculty from more than 1,200 postsecondary institutions found that students entering college since the pandemic are academically weaker than previous cohorts. In response, faculty have reported reducing course content, offering more academic scaffolding, and applying less rigorous grading standards.[5]

However, average first-year GPAs at consortium institutions have slightly increased over the past three years. This may suggest a broader trend in higher college grades being awarded, on average, for recent cohorts.

First-Year College Outcomes

To evaluate the effectiveness of these academic preparation indicators, we examine first-year college outcomes at consortium colleges.

Table 1 summarizes average first-year academic performance for the 2023–24 academic year across consortium institutions. The percentage of students earning a first-year GPA (FYGPA) below 3.0 ranged from 9.7% at more selective private colleges to 26.7% at selective public colleges. Average retention rates to the second year varied from 90.3% at selective public colleges to 96.1% at more selective private colleges.

[5] Westrick, P., Angehr, E., Shaw, E., and Marini, J. 2024. *Recent Trends in College Readiness and Subsequent College Performance: With Faculty Perspectives on Student Readiness*. https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Recent-Trends-in-College-Readiness-and-Subsequent-College-Performance.pdf

Importantly, these average academic outcomes mask subgroup differences. Students who disclosed SAT scores (typically those with higher test scores) tended to perform better academically than those who withheld scores or had no SAT on file. For example, at more selective public colleges, only 14.2% of score disclosers earned below a 3.0 FYGPA, compared to 26.0% of withholders and 25.4% of students with no SAT. Score-disclosing students also had the highest second-year retention rates: 94.3% compared to 92.3% for withholders and 90.5% for students with no SAT score. These trends were consistent across all institution types.

Table 1*: Average First-Year Academic Risk and Retention Rates in 2023-24, by ARC Segment and Disclosure Status*

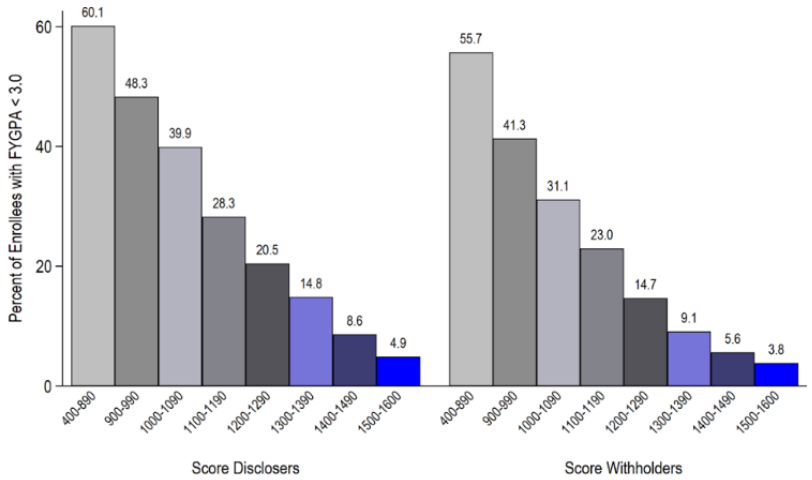
	More Selective Private			Selective Private		
	% of enrollees	FYGPA<3.0	Retention	% of enrollees	FYGPA<3.0	Retention
2023-24 Overall		9.7%	96.1%		16.7%	92.1%
Disclosers	52.3%	5.5%	96.4%	50.8%	12.2%	93.2%
Withholders	32.4%	13.8%	96.2%	31.4%	20.4%	91.4%
No SAT	15.3%	15.3%	95.0%	17.8%	22.9%	89.9%
	More Selective Public			**Selective Public**		
	% of enrollees	FYGPA<3.0	Retention	% of enrollees	FYGPA<3.0	Retention
2023-24 Overall		19.0%	93.3%		26.7%	90.3%
Disclosers	58.0%	14.2%	94.3%	67.1%	24.9%	91.0%
Withholders	29.7%	26.0%	92.3%	23.8%	28.4%	90.6%
No SAT	12.3%	25.4%	90.5%	9.0%	35.5%	83.0%

Source: Bloem et al. (2025), Table A4

Using the SAT for Student Support and Placement

Figure 6 shows the SAT remains a strong predictor of first-year performance, regardless of whether scores are disclosed during the admissions process, and it adds predictive value beyond high school GPA. Figure 6 shows that the share of first-year students earning a FYGPA below 3.0 declines rapidly as test scores increase. This relationship holds equally for disclosers (left panel) and withholders (right panel).

Figure 6*: Academic Risk by Test Score Band and Disclosure Status, 2023-24*



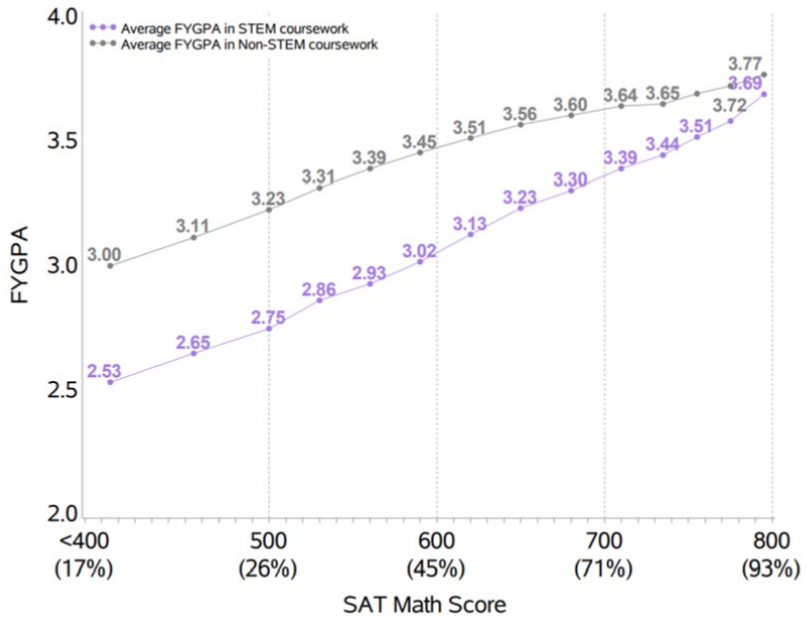
Source: Bloem et al. *(2025), Figure 29*

Even after controlling for HSGPA, SAT scores are predictive. Among students with an A average in high

school, only 3% of those with the highest SAT scores earned below a 3.0 FYGPA, compared to 53% of those with the lowest scores.

The analysis also highlights the role of SAT Math scores in STEM readiness. **Figure 7** presents average FYGPA in STEM and non-STEM courses (right axis) alongside the distribution of SAT Math scores among score disclosers and withholders (left axis). Across ARC institutions, SAT Math scores are positively associated with FYGPA, and SAT Math scores have a stronger relationship with STEM coursework than non-STEM coursework. Students with SAT Math scores below 600 tended to earn FYGPAs below 3.0 in STEM coursework. In contrast, most students earned above a 3.0 in non-STEM courses, even at lower SAT Math score levels. The percentages at the bottom of the figure represent the share of enrolling students who disclosed test scores. Therefore, only 26% of students, on average, disclose SAT Math scores of 500, limiting colleges' ability to identify those students most in need of early support.

Figure 7*: Average FYGPA in STEM and Non-STEM College Coursework in Post-Pandemic Cohorts, by SAT Math Score*



Source: Bloem et al. *(2025), Figure A2*

Implications

Because lower-scoring students are less likely to disclose their test scores, consortium colleges have the least visibility into the students who may need the most academic support. As shown in Table 1 above, consortium colleges now enroll first-year cohorts in which 50% or more of students didn't disclose a test score during the admissions process. That growing share of students, more likely to be lower-scoring, often possesses critical academic readiness information that isn't available to colleges at the point of admission, and remains invisible for use in academic placement, advising, support, and success.

Given the below-average academic outcomes among score withholders (detailed above), ARC institutions are increasingly recognizing the value of using test scores beyond the admissions process.

- A recent survey indicated that 46% of consortium colleges now request or require test scores at the point of enrollment to identify students who may benefit from early intervention. Others defer use of test scores until after admission, opting instead to consider them once students have confirmed enrollment.

- Several ARC colleges are expanding the use of placement exams and growing participation in summer bridge programs to help address preparedness gaps.
- Many have also introduced or expanded policies requiring students to demonstrate readiness for entry into specific majors or courses. Some institutions now use quantitative readiness metrics—including SAT Math scores—as one of several ways for students to demonstrate preparedness.
- Colleges also continue to observe how their public-facing messaging influences student behavior. Updated analysis on the effects of test policy language confirms that students make different score disclosure decisions based on how institutions describe their test-optional policies. For colleges seeking to influence the proportion of applicants who submit scores, changes to test policy messaging can be an effective strategy.

Collectively, these efforts reflect a broader institutional shift toward identifying and supporting students who may be at academic risk, particularly in an era of reduced visibility into academic readiness.

Looking Ahead

College Board will continue partnering with consortium institutions to collect enrollment data and examine long-term outcomes. Beginning in Fall 2025, the Admissions Research Consortium will initiate the collection and analysis of completion data, supporting a shared understanding of four-year graduation patterns across consortium colleges.