

Loyola joins SAT-optional colleges

Proponents note diversity goals, doubts about standard tests' predictive accuracy

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Admissions director Elena D. Hicks says Loyola will give students the option of submitting SAT or ACT scores with their applications. (Baltimore Sun photo by Lloyd Fox / June 5, 2009)

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Loyola College's Jesuit tradition calls for it to serve students who did not start with every economic, social or geographic advantage.

Widespread research, meanwhile, shows that standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT favor those from privileged backgrounds and that such tests are less predictive of college success than excellent grades and a rigorous course load in high school.

So, in search of a more diverse and accomplished student body, Loyola has joined a growing list of colleges and universities that no longer require applicants to submit an SAT or ACT score. Among Maryland schools, Goucher College, [Salisbury University](#), Washington College, St. John's College and McDaniel College also practice forms of "test-optional" admissions.

Officials from these schools say they've received more applications - and some say they have improved the socioeconomic diversity of their student bodies - since making the switch. Because of such positive examples, advocates of test-optional admissions believe their cause has gained tremendous momentum in recent years.

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school juniors and seniors, added Florence Hines, vice president of enrollment management at McDaniel.

"We're telling them, 'If you're worried about being a poor test-taker, don't worry about the test,'" Hines said. "We want students to know that it was never a big enough factor that we couldn't just let it go. We can take away one of the things that freaks them out the most."

Skeptics of the test-optional approach argue that grade-point averages are relative because of the wide disparity in quality among high schools. Standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT help admissions officers to put high school performance in perspective, advocates say.

"There is ample evidence that the SAT does an excellent job of predicting college grades," said Brian O'Reilly, spokesman for the College Board's SAT program.

O'Reilly said he doesn't understand why college admissions officers wouldn't want as much information as possible about applicants. No college would allow an applicant to submit grades for some classes and not others, he said, so why would the school count the SAT as a positive for many students but ignore it for many others?

O'Reilly said a recent College Board study of 110 colleges and universities found that the

"We have a very strong retention rate, the students are performing well, our faculty is satisfied," said Ellen Neufeld, vice president of student affairs at Salisbury. "My mind draws a blank when I try to think of anything negative associated with it."

Test-optional policies might calm the widespread SAT anxiety felt by high

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organization that promotes test-optional policies, lists 819 schools that use some form of test-optional admissions.

Last year, a panel led by William Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid at the Center for Fair Testing in Education, recommended that colleges and universities move away from their reliance on standardized tests. Fitzsimmons said that Harvard might eventually make the tests optional.

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Were going to a point where there is a critical mass of test-optional choices," said Edward Schaefer, public education director for FairTest. "Students can select from a list of the nation's finest institutions, public or private."

Admissions counselors emphasize that test scores aren't the be-all and end-all, but no matter how often they say it, students dwell on average SAT scores. Faced with the cold, hard truth, some high achievers with mundane test scores feel dissuaded from applying, counselors say, which is the last thing colleges want.

"We want to give them the option to say, 'This score represents me,' or 'No, this doesn't represent what I've done inside the classroom and outside,'" said Elena D. Hicks, director of undergraduate admissions at Loyola.

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Though test-optional advocates list increased applications as one benefit, Hicks said, "I don't necessarily think of it as a marketing tool. I think of it as a way of helping students to put their best foot forward."

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test predicted college performance almost as well as high school GPAs. He said the test did a better job than grades of predicting college performance for students of color.

Critics of the test-optional approach add that some colleges promote a rise in average SAT scores after adopting the policy. This is misleading because a college effectively eliminates most of the low scores from its applicant pool by making the test optional.

Despite such criticisms, almost one-quarter of the nation's top 100 liberal arts colleges, according to *U.S. News & World Report*, have moved to a test-optional approach, and other highly selective universities such as Wake Forest and New York universities have also joined the pack. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest), a Boston-based organization that promotes test-optional policies, lists 819 schools that use some form of test-optional admissions.

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Most test-optional colleges and universities allow students to submit test scores if they want, and the majority of applicants (about 75 percent at Salisbury and Goucher and 85 percent at McDaniel) include an SAT or ACT score. Admissions counselors

at Maryland schools that have made the switch say scores don't carry any less weight than they did when they were mandatory.

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