

Test Optional Proposal

Approved (with provisions) by AAC and endorsed by Faculty Senate

For discussion/vote at April 11, 2018 Faculty Meeting

MOTION: The Faculty of Augsburg University supports the University Enrollment Committee's proposal to implement test-optional and holistic-essay assessments (non-cognitive and cognitive) in undergraduate admissions starting with the Fall 2019 admissions cycle, under the following provisions:

1. Approval is for a four-year pilot, and test-optional admissions will be reviewed annually during those four years and in the year following the graduation of those admitted through these alternative assessments in the Fall 2019.
2. AAC will be informed annually by Admissions with data, interim assessments, and feedback on the pilot.
3. AAC will be informed on the impacts and implications for financial aid awards.
4. After the four-year pilot, the program will be evaluated and--if a more permanent adoption of the policy is sought, the approval process then in place will be followed (currently: AAC, Faculty Senate, entire faculty).

Current University Enrollment Committee Members: Robert Groven, Stacy Freiheit, Michael Wentzel, Jill Dawe, Jayoung Koo, Devon Ross, Aaron Griess, Nate Gorr, Rebekah Dupont, Katie Bishop, and Katie Asfeld.

DEFINITIONS: As used in this proposal and in admissions practice nationally:

- Test Optional Admission Policy gives applicants the option of submitting their standardized test scores or choosing not to submit them to be considered for admission
- Holistic Essay Assessment, previously referred to as Non-Cognitive Assessment, indicates qualities not adequately measured by standardized tests. After conversation with Faculty Senate and at the all-faculty meeting in March, we agree the assessments do measure both non-cognitive and cognitive skills. Therefore, we propose using AACRAO's suggested terminology, Holistic Essay Assessment, found in the [Holistic Essay Questions and Scoring Rubrics - AACRAO Consultant](#).
 - A [policy paper on non-cognitive skills posted on the Economic Policy Institute website](#) defines holistic (cognitive and non-cognitive) skills as critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, emotional health, social skills, work ethic, and community responsibility. It also includes factors affecting personal relationships between students and teachers (closeness, affection, and open communication), self-control, self-regulation, persistence, academic confidence, teamwork, organizational skills, creativity, and communication skills.

BACKGROUND, CONTEXT, RATIONALE

As communicated in the Provost's March 2018 Update, this change is both urgent and important for Augsburg. The urgency reflects the need to secure (and maintain) a market position that supports undergraduate enrollment growth in a competitive environment. The importance stems from our public mission and institutional identity.

Nationally, the number of institutions--across the spectrum of selectivity--moving to test-optional admissions has increased significantly with each passing year. When this conversation began at Augsburg in 2015 (Enrollment Committee), there were under 700 institutions in the U.S. that were test optional. Nationally, there are now over 1,000 institutions that have gone test-optional. They do so for various reasons--reasons with varying degrees of relevance or persuasiveness. For us, the primary issues are market and mission. Market: Test-optional admissions will help secure and maintain our competitive position in our region, perhaps even help us to realize our aspiration to grow the undergraduate program by admitting a higher number of better prepared students who can succeed at Augsburg. Mission: test scores correlate primarily to socioeconomic status--our intentionally diverse mix of students deserve alternative ways to demonstrate their capacity to succeed at Augsburg. See <https://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/27/sat-scores-and-family-income/>

[Click here for a list of some of institutions who have gone test-optional](#), sorted by national liberal arts colleges, national universities, and regional universities, or [click here to view the chronology of institutions who have gone test optional since 2005](#). Although it appears fewer institutions in the midwest have made this move, we do know that several institutions in our region are also actively considering or proposing this change--**Hamline University, Macalester College, Concordia University (St. Paul), and St. Catherine University** among them. Gustavus Adolphus College has been test optional for twelve years. I direct your attention, as well, to a 2016 Harvard report, ["Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions."](#) It raises important questions for us (as well as more elite institutions) about how reshaping the college admissions process can (1) promote more meaningful contributions to others, community service, and engagement with the public good; (2) assess students' ethical engagement and contributions to others in ways that reflect varying types of family and community contributions across race, culture, and class; and (3) redefine achievement in ways that both level the playing field for economically diverse students and reduce excessive achievement pressure.

An [Inside Higher Ed article](#) from 2014 discusses the findings of the largest study of students at test-optional institutions, which found, "there is "virtually no difference" in the academic performance (measured in grades or graduation rates) of those who do and don't submit scores. The study -- involving 123,000 students at 33 colleges and universities of varying types -- found that high school grades do predict student success. And this extends to those who do better or worse than expected on standardized exams. So those students with low high school grades but high test scores generally receive low college grades, while those with high grades in high school, but low test scores, generally receive high grades in college."

The study was led by former Vice President and Dean of Admissions at Bates College, William C. Hiss. The article further argues, “As the numbers on that list [of test-optional institutions] have grown, there has been speculation about whether colleges that are test optional are paying any price in terms of the academic performance of their students. While many individual test-optional colleges have studied the issue (answering in the negative), the new report is the largest such analysis (also answering in the negative, saying that the differences are so small as to be “trivial”). Further, the report backs the thesis of test-optional advocates that such policies may help diversify the applicant pool.”

Among the findings:

- The difference in grades between submitters and non-submitters is five one-hundredths of a grade-point-average point.
- The difference is six-tenths of 1 percent in graduation rates.
- About 30 percent of students who enroll at these colleges did not submit test scores.
- Students who do not submit test scores are more likely than those who do to be the first in their families to go to college, non-white, female or Pell Grant recipients.
- By income group, those with the lowest and highest incomes are more likely than others to apply without test scores.

In 2008, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) issued a report on admissions testing, calling for colleges to step back and see if they really needed to require it. Another recommendation of the report was to produce more independent research on admissions testing (much of which is done by admissions testing organizations), and the study released came from NACAC (with foundation support) as part a response to that latter recommendation.

HISTORY

In 2015, William Mullen, then VP of Enrollment Management, initiated a discussion of test-optional and non-cognitive admissions assessments in the Admissions and Enrollment Committee (AEC). In 2016, following discussions that included faculty and staff, members of the AEC met twice with Faculty Senate. While it chose not to approve moving forward with test-optional admissions at that time, in March 2016 Faculty Senate approved a motion affirming the continued exploration of “alternative and supplemental admissions criteria, with the goal of student success and retention.”

Since then, that exploration has continued, under the auspices of the UC-Enrollment Committee. Our own Honors Program voted for a test-optional process three years ago. While it hasn't implemented it fully yet, it has reduced the weight of the ACT significantly with no decline in the quality of students admitted to the program. More recently, our Office of Planning and Effectiveness analyzed the predictive value of high school GPA and ACT scores for undergraduate students who joined us in 2013 and 2014: congruent with several test-optional studies reviewed by our enrollment department. This analysis found high school GPA to be more predictive than the ACT, albeit by a small margin. Further, a January 2017 report by a

group engaged by Enrollment, AACRAO Consulting, identifies two sets of possible holistic-assessment essays questions and scoring rubrics for assessing student responses--this project was customized to align with Augsburg's mission, enrollment objectives, and five holistic (cognitive and noncognitive) variables that we chose (realistic self-appraisal, long-term goals, successfully handling the system, leadership, and community involvement). We welcome the Faculty's perspective on which of the two set of questions might serve us best, as well as its continued and active involvement in strengthening noncognitive assessment questions and scoring practices.

In early February of 2018, Nate Gorr, Interim VPEM, Katie Bishop, Chief Student Success Officer, Devon Ross, Director of Undergraduate Admissions, and Katie Asfeld, Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions met again with Faculty Senate to affirm the ongoing interest of Admissions, faculty, and the UC-Enrollment Committee in test-optional admissions and non-cognitive assessments. Note: we did not understand or appreciate at that time--or, indeed, at early points in the conversations with Senate--that AAC has a key role in admissions policies.

The Interim VP-Enrollment, Chief Student Success Officer, and Provost collectively believe that test-optional admissions would (a) better position us for undergraduate enrollment growth (given the experience of other institutions, which have seen an increase in completed applications when moving to test-optional); (b) increase our ability--and the range of measures available to us--to assess applicants' capacity to succeed at Augsburg; (c) better align with Augsburg's public commitment to equity, inclusion and justice, given the well-documented correlation between socioeconomic status and standardized test scores; and (d) send a strong message to our current and prospective students that this key institutional practice is in alignment with our core institutional commitments.

Other internal and external voices supportive of a test-optional admissions policy include, but are not limited to:

- Joanne Reeck, Augsburg's Chief Diversity Officer (Director of Campus Activities and Orientation).
- Carrie Carroll (Senior Partnerships Manager for College Possible, a college readiness program partnered with Augsburg and former AVP of Admissions at Augsburg).
- Augsburg Athletics - At a 2018 athletics meeting, over forty individuals, including Athletic Director Jeff Swenson, staff, and coaches unanimously supported the idea of becoming test optional.
- Former Honors Director, Bob Groven, and current Honors Director, Phil Adamo, support the proposal for the Honors applicants. Groven is also part of the University Enrollment Committee that has proposed test optional for all first-year applicants, as referenced earlier, excluding home schooled applicants.

We invite your engagement with the proposal and are happy to answer any questions you may have. Our hope is that we can secure the support necessary for the faculty to endorse the proposal at its April 11 meeting.

NOTES and RESOURCES

1. [Holistic Essay Questions and Scoring Rubrics - AACRAO Consultant](#)
2. [University of Georgia Study](#): “46% of top-tier liberal arts colleges, and a good number of large research universities, no longer require the tests.” Study by Univ of Georgia states applications and selectivity rates go up.
3. George Washington University - interview with Director of Recruitment, Brian Toll. Toll was a former admissions professional at a liberal arts college in MN (Univ. of MN-Morris). Toll reflected back to when GW became test optional, noting that completed applications, selectivity, and yield rates of admitted students increased at George Washington for multiple years. “Nobody at GW is considering going back to the days before we became test optional”, Toll added. He also noted it would be a wise move for a school like Augsburg given its location and diverse populations around it. Lastly, he said to consider your out-of-state recruitment strategies... every college knows where the growth in high school graduates is coming from and where there are shrinking numbers of graduates. If you head to the southwestern states, students of color will gravitate toward schools that offer admission policies that don’t discriminate against them.

GW Test-optional [policy/explanation](#)
4. Gustavus Adolphus College Test-Optional Admission Policy - <https://gustavus.edu/admission/apply/test-optional.php>
Gustavus includes a [video interview with William C. Hiss](#), who led the largest study of test-optional schools to date, referenced earlier in this proposal.
5. Interview with Beloit College Admissions Director, Kate Virgo. Virgo shared that the the VP of Enrollment, a social psychologist, arrived in July of one year and changed the policy within a few months. Virgo confirmed that completed applications and selectivity increased after going test optional. Multiple competitors quickly moved to test-optional policies soon after. There are no plans to reverse the policy at Beloit at this time.
6. None of Augsburg’s graduate-program directors believe strongly enough in the predictive value of standardized tests such as the GRE or GMAT to require them. MBA was the last, perhaps only, graduate program to require a test (GMAT), but discontinued the policy approximately five years ago.
7. [Star Trib article regarding students at the U of M](#): “Two conclusions stand out. Students with very high ACT scores (in the 30s) do tend to have higher GPAs, and those with very low scores tend to do significantly worse. But for the vast majority in the middle, the results are quite different. For those with a score of 28 (desirable students, according to the U’s admission policy), about three-quarters had GPAs in the range of 2.9 to 3.4. And for those with a score of

22, three-quarters had GPAs in exactly the same range. But these latter are disproportionately African-American students, and they are now being turned away at a higher rate than 10 years ago.”

8. Fairtest.org