

# Admission Innovations: SAT<sup>®</sup> and Test-Flexible Policies

## A Case Study on the Value of the SAT and Other Assessments in a Test-Flexible Admissions Environment

As colleges and universities refine their admissions policies and practices in the face of dynamic demographic shifts and a recognition of student talent globally, some institutions are employing “test-flexible” admissions policies. Although these policies vary, all provide students with an opportunity to submit a variety of standardized test results as part of their application for admission. While they typically accept traditional college entrance exam results, such as the SAT<sup>®</sup> or ACT<sup>®</sup>, students may substitute scores from SAT Subject Tests<sup>™</sup>, Advanced Placement<sup>®</sup> (AP<sup>®</sup>) Exams, International Baccalaureate (IB) Exams, or standardized exams offered in different countries.

In addition to increasing students’ opportunities to display skill and talent, admissions and enrollment leaders may use these assessments to help predict student performance in college, place students in appropriate first-year courses, or identify students who need additional academic assistance.

One of the first institutions to adopt a test-flexible policy was New York University (NYU) when it established two campuses abroad; in Shanghai and Abu Dhabi. NYU believes that students learn best when interacting with students from around the world. To accommodate this, NYU’s admissions policy allows students to submit one of a number of standardized test scores. Vice President for Enrollment M. J. Knoll-Finn notes:

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*“A test-flexible policy [came about] because we’re international—because when Abu Dhabi opened, and when Shanghai then opened, we were thinking about the NYU applicant pool and the degree to which students would have access to certain standardized exams. ... We are now a global university and that meant we had to be thoughtful about what might be a student’s ‘local’ kind of standardized exam.”*

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### Key Takeaways:

- Institutions with test-flexible policies provide students with the option of submitting standardized test scores from a range of different assessments.
- These assessments may include traditional tests such as the SAT, as well as SAT Subject Tests, AP Exams, IB Exams, and country-specific standardized exams.
- Test-flexible policies provide students with the option of providing multiple test scores or submitting scores that assess their capability in a specific discipline or course (AP, SAT Subject Tests, IB).
- Institutions may benefit from a test-flexible policy if they wish to recruit students internationally where the availability of standardized test offerings may be uncertain or where students are required to complete a nationalized college entrance exam.
- Including standardized test scores as part of the admissions process provides colleges and universities with important objective information that can be used to predict students’ likelihood to succeed, place students in appropriate first-year courses, and identify students who might benefit from additional academic assistance.

### Advantages for Students

The advantage of a test-flexible policy for students is clear. It provides them with an opportunity to submit standardized test scores that best represent their unique and specific capabilities. Some students might wish to reveal a breadth of skills as tested by the SAT. Others may wish to highlight their exceptional understanding of a specific discipline, such as those represented by AP or the SAT Subject Tests. For

students living outside the United States—where access to U.S. standardized tests may not be readily available—the opportunity to submit other kinds of test results, such as country-specific national exams, broadens and expands students' opportunities to attend college in the U.S.

Like NYU, Drexel University recruits students from around the world and wants to provide students with a variety of entry points for admission. It has instituted a test-flexible policy. In lieu of SAT or ACT scores, students may submit scores from SAT Subject Tests, AP, or IB. If a student chooses not to submit SAT or ACT scores, Drexel requires that they submit a test that assesses quantitative reasoning skills and one that assesses verbal/writing skills. In addition, Drexel may accept, if approved in advance, results from a national exam that signifies completion of senior secondary school in that country and is used for entrance into a local university.

Beyond admissions, Drexel also uses standardized test scores diagnostically to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses and provide support in areas where students may struggle academically. Domestic or international students may present strong qualifications in STEM fields, for example, but may need additional assistance with the English language to ensure that they are successful in courses throughout the curriculum.

## Institutional Advantages

Test-flexible policies offer several advantages. Standardized test scores represent an important anchor point to evaluate GPAs, particularly where there is little information about the course offerings and rigor at a high school. Admissions officers have greater confidence in the students they select when multiple measures of accomplishment are available for review. This is especially true for colleges and universities that recruit international students. It is beyond the reach of even the most well-financed universities to possess detailed information about the quality of secondary schools globally. The use of well-designed and widely accepted standardized test scores, along with other measures of accomplishment, provide colleges and universities with baseline information about the qualifications of students who apply to them from abroad.

For institutions that receive a high volume of applications, incorporating a test-flexible policy also provides admissions and enrollment leaders with greater flexibility in evaluating admissions applications. For example, if an applicant presents multiple indicators of achievement that are consistent with one another—GPA, SAT scores, and AP scores—admissions readers can reasonably devote additional time to applicants whose credentials may require a closer look. As one reader noted “Although all applicants receive a holistic review at NYU,

the amount of time for any applicant may shift depending on the quality of the applicant pool.”

Anticipating student yield can also be a challenge, even for veteran admission leaders. Standardized test scores help predict the likelihood a student will accept an admission offer. As one NYU admissions reviewer noted, “Chances are, a student with a higher SAT score has more college options.” Over the years, enrollment leaders have developed sophisticated models that help track yield using consistently available data such as GPA and SAT scores acquired over many admission cycles.

Finally, institutions with test-flexible policies can draw upon more data to help establish the validity of admissions practices. They can examine how GPA, standardized test scores, and other measures help select students who will succeed at their institutions. Data collected at the point of admission, such as SAT and AP scores, may be combined with other information to identify retention and completion trends. For example, one large public flagship institution uses the SAT and other admissions data to place first-year students who might struggle into learning communities and other high-touch programs that help ensure their academic success. As the enrollment leader at NYU explains, “If you're trying new [programs] to improve sophomore retention, ... you need to have data coming out of your admissions process.”

## Implications for Enrollment Leaders

Test-flexible models allow students to demonstrate their capabilities in multiple ways either through scores from multiple assessments or by presenting scores that reflect their capabilities in specific disciplinary areas. For institutions interested in gaining insight into the rigor of unfamiliar secondary schools, test-flexible policies can help anchor high school GPA information, placing those grades and courses in a context that provides a fuller picture of a student's readiness for higher education.

The use of various standardized assessments also highlight an important but necessary challenge for enrollment professionals. Test-flexible admissions processes should be regularly evaluated since different assessments often involve different scales and measure different outcomes. How such measures are used collectively in evaluating students' readiness for college is a vital institutional research question. The key is to ensure that all parts of a student's application are considered thoughtfully and in ways that effectively inform your institution's decision making.