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We have no known conflict of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Guangming Ling, Educational Testing Service, 660 Rosedale Road, Princeton, NJ 08541, United States. E-mail: gling@ets.org
U.S. Undergraduate Test-Optional Policies for International Applicants during the COVID Pandemic: An Exploration of Admissions Webpages

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Abstract

Although the adoption of test-optional policies (TOPs) has risen, there is little research documenting the types of TOPs (e.g., test-blind, test-optional) utilized across higher educational institutions, particularly for international applicants, who have been traditionally required to submit additional application components (e.g., proof of English language proficiency [ELP]). Using the content of undergraduate admissions webpages from 518 U.S. 4-year universities, the current study examined how standardized test policies are implemented in admissions for international applicants. We found that only 2.5\% of the institutions explicitly required ACT/SAT scores, whereas 43.1\% stated ACT/SAT scores as optional requirements for admissions. Some institutions provided unclear TOP information, with some listing ACT/SAT together with the ELP requirements. Most institutions (82.0\%) explicitly required an ELP test score. Lastly, we found that, of the differing test policies, utilizations of the ACT test as both a main requirement and proof of ELP were associated with lower rates of international student admissions to institutions, and for private institutions in particular.

1 Introduction

The adoption of test-optional policies (TOPs) in admissions has steadily risen from the late 1990s to the 2010s in 4-year educational institutions in the U.S., largely as an effort to increase equality and diversity in a decentralized secondary education system (Furuta, 2017). If a college or university carries out a test-optional admissions policy, that means that each applicant can choose whether to submit their standardized test scores, such as the ACT or SAT in the application process (College Board, 2019). In other words, colleges or universities will accept and make admissions decisions based on each application package as a unique whole description of an applicant, regardless of whether the standardized test scores are included in the submission. This trend has accelerated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in part due to students’ limited access to standardized testing (Freeman et al., 2021). A national-level report shows that nearly 90\% of U.S. universities adopted test-optional policies in the U.S. in 2020, with 40\% of the applicants submitting test scores (Freeman et al., 2021). This was down from around 70\% of applicants submitting test scores in the 2018 and 2019 application cycles.

A better understanding of TOPs and their variations among institutions could be more critical for international applicants, as they face unique challenges in the application process. For example, international students are typically required to provide a proof of English language proficiency (ELP), in addition to other application components generally required from their domestic peers (i.e., U.S.-based applicants). As we will soon show in our study results, this practice has not changed even after the onset of the global pandemic, which restricted access to standardized admission testing.

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at the international scale as well. Moreover, there are several different ELP tests that international applicants can use as proof of ELP, which vary by institution to institution in higher education. This unique situation for international applicants has likely caused an added confusion as they consider applying to colleges/universities in the U.S.

Although international students encompass about 5% of the enrollees in U.S. undergraduate institutions (Open doors, 2021), there is next to no research that explores how TOPs are implemented for international undergraduate applicants. Furthermore, in contrast to the large number of studies about institutions using or not using admissions test scores in admissions decision-making, there is little research documenting the types of TOPs (e.g., test-blind, test-optional, flexible) utilized across undergraduate institutions (Anderson, 2020). It is critical to understand different test-score-related policies universities are adopting given that it could serve as an important piece of information for applicants to make choices regarding their selection of prospective institutions and the types of materials to prepare for the application. This information could also be useful to higher educational institutions that are seeking to enhance diversity by attracting more international students.

The current study addresses this important gap by analyzing the content of undergraduate admissions webpages to examine how different types of test policies are adopted for and communicated with international applicants seeking an undergraduate education in the U.S. We focus on describing standardized admissions test policies currently adopted to gauge applicants’ abilities in both general academic aptitude and English language. We also advance knowledge in the field by exploring how admissions practices may mold international student admissions, as well as how that may vary by the type of institution. We consider this as one of the initial efforts to explore the environment that international applicants encounter when applying to a U.S. undergraduate institution and its role on international admissions.

Our specific research questions are:

1. How do university websites describe the international student admission requirements for ACT/SAT scores?
2. How do university websites describe the international student admission requirements for proof of ELP test scores?
3. What are the associations between international student admissions policies and the rate of international student admissions?
4. How does the association between international student admissions policies and the rate of international student admissions differ by school type (i.e., public versus private)?

2 Background

2.1 TOPs for International Undergraduate Applicants

International applicants to U.S. undergraduate universities are likely to find a confusing ‘patchwork’ of standardized testing policies in admissions practice (Redden, 2019). For example, the TOP options for ACT and SAT scores are often different for international compared to domestic applicants (Redden, 2019). In addition, there is a wide variety as to which and how ELP documents are accepted (e.g., main requirement, waiver). This likely would add confusion for international students in determining which materials they need to prepare for the application. In order to understand the hurdles that international undergraduate applicants may face in the admissions process, it is critical to explore how TOPs are communicated with international applicants across different undergraduate institutions through the main admissions webpage channel. To our knowledge, no research has explored how TOPs for international applicants are carried out across U.S. colleges, and particularly, since the beginning of the pandemic.

2.2 TOPs in Undergraduate Admissions

There are a few reasons behind educational institutions adopting TOPs in their admission process. Proponents of TOPs argue that standardized admissions test scores do not necessarily predict student outcomes such as increasing students’ likelihood of enrollment and graduation (Syverson et al., 2018), and thus may not serve as a useful tool to help assess who will succeed in school. However, there are mixed findings as to whether admissions test scores do (Westrick et al., 2015) or do not (Syverson et al., 2018) positively and significantly predict student success such as undergraduate grades or persistence. Another major rationale behind adopting TOPs has been to increase the diversity of the student pool. This is based on evidence that admissions test scores vary by demographic and socioeconomic
status (SES) backgrounds, with higher scores shown among White, Asian, and high-SES test-takers (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), and therefore may increase the racial inequality in college enrollment (Posselt et al., 2012; Syverson et al., 2018). However, findings are mixed as to whether the adoption of TOPs are (Bennet, 2021) or are not (Rubin & Canché, 2019) associated with enrollment rates of students of certain demographic groups (e.g., Pell grant recipients, gender, racial/ethnic background). A recent example from the University of California’s Standardized Testing Task Force (STTF) supports the idea that minimizing the role of standardized test scores might not improve the diversity of enrollment. Using enrollment data from 2001 to 2018, the University of California STTF found that disadvantaged and URM students are more likely to be penalized in admissions when more weight is placed on high school grade point average than on ACT/SAT scores (the University of California STTF, 2020). While these lines of research explore whether and how TOPs can be used by educational institutions in admissions and predicting student success, no research so far has examined how TOPs function for international applicants, including what policies have been adopted and the purposes they serve in admissions.

2.3 Standardized Admissions Test Scores and International Student Success

Related to the current study are investigations into how standardized admissions test scores are associated with the academic success of international undergraduate students after matriculation, which could provide evidence to support the value of TOPs for international applicants.

2.3.1 General Standardized Admissions Tests (ACT/SAT)

Whereas there is extensive research on the role of admissions test scores, such as ACT/SAT, in predicting student success outcomes (e.g., grade, graduation rate, career success; Zwick, 2006), most are focused on domestic students. Existing work on the role of admissions tests shows mixed findings as to whether SAT scores more strongly predict academic success among language minority groups (e.g., Hispanic) compared to native English speakers (Zwick & Sklar, 2005; Zwick, 2006). Focusing on international students, limited evidence suggests that international students who had high SAT scores were more likely to have a high overall college GPA, and that the association was stronger than what was found among native students (Fu, 2012). This line of research points out that although admissions test scores tend to positively predict academic performance among international students, the results are mixed as to whether ACT/SAT test scores play a stronger role in predicting GPA for international students than for domestic students.

2.3.2 English Language Proficiency Tests

Research on the association between ELP and academic success is well established, but results are mixed in terms of the nature of the associations. For example, using meta-analyses studies have found significant and positive associations between ELP (e.g., TOEFL, Abunawas, 2014; Ihlenfeldt & Rios, 2022; IELTS, Daller & Phelan, 2013; Ihlenfeldt & Rios, 2022) and GPA scores. However, there were variations in the strengths and direction of the association, with the relationship varying by moderators such as degree level (i.e., undergraduate versus graduate, Abunawas, 2014), major (Daller & Phelan, 2013), test version (higher for computer-based than paper-and internet-based; Abunawas, 2014) and test sections (Daller & Phelan, 2013), or not showing any moderator effects across school type, school level, and publication type (Ihlenfeldt & Rios, 2022). These findings suggest that the role that ELP-related test scores play in predicting student outcomes may vary by the context and the type of tests.

These lines of research demonstrate whether and how international students’ performance in standardized admissions tests predict their academic success in college. However, what lacks in research is the admissions landscape that precedes, and may mold, these processes in the rapidly changing admissions environment, namely the adoption of TOPs and the role it may play in international admissions. The current study aims to address this important gap by exploring how each institution consider certain admissions tests and how that may shape international student admissions outcomes. Specifically, using higher education institutions’ admissions web-page data, we provide information on the general landscape of which tests and how they are utilized in U.S. international undergraduate admissions. We further explore how the TOPs may be associated with international student admissions across public and private institutions.
3 Method

3.1 Data

3.1.1 Webpage Information of Admissions Test Requirements

Data Source. In order to acquire webpage descriptions of institutional admissions requirements, we first referred to the National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest; 2022) website, where a compiled list of bachelor’s degree granting institutions that adopted TOPs was provided. FairTest also compiled a separate list of 520 institutions that adopted TOPs for international applicants (Loring de Garcia, S., 2022). Our research is based on this list (as of May 2021), including URL links of international undergraduate admissions webpages provided for 219 of the 520 institutions. We identified the main international admissions webpage links for the remaining 211 institutions, and then extracted the text content from each link. The final number of websites in the analyses was 518 after removing one institution that was duplicated and one institution that we found was not accepting international students during that time.

Coding Scheme. To identify the descriptions of test requirements, we first classified each webpage’s content according to whether they included words representative of six standardized admissions tests (e.g., SAT, ACT, TOEFL iBT, IELTS, Duolingo English test [DET], PTE). We only focused on text containing terms associated with specific standardized admissions texts. Each of the sentences containing any specific information about the tests, as well as sentences closely surrounding those sentences, were coded to determine whether the tests were required, optional, test blind (not considered), or served as a waiver (defined as an alternative test criterion, generally with designated minimum scores, which can be used by applicants to replace a test score listed as a main requirement). These codes were given to each of the six admissions tests of interest for each webpage.

Coding Procedure. Three research team members read and manually coded the texts extracted from each webpage, focusing on the standardized test-related requirements for each institution. We followed several steps to ensure the coding results were consistent. First, all team members reviewed a small number of admissions webpages and created an initial coding rubric, which was then refined through discussions to maximize the consistency of coding. After that, we assigned the rest of the webpages to two coders, with 50 webpages (about 10%) being coded twice by both coders. In other words, two coders each took half of the remaining webpages with a 10% overlap. The interrater reliability across different standardized test policies was 84%. For all instances of disagreement, an adjudicator reviewed the discrepancies and finalized the coding after discussions with the two coders.

3.1.2 Institutional Characteristics

In order to answer our third and fourth research questions exploring the associations between admissions test policies and the rate of international student admissions, we used data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021) regarding the number of international students accepted that year as well as other institutional characteristics and linked them with or admissions website data using the names of the institutions. For international student admission rate, we calculated the percentage of international students at each institution by dividing the number of accepted international students by overall number of accepted students in the fall of 2021. Other institutional characteristics data we used include school type (0 = public [N = 152], 1 = private [N = 365], 2 = did not report [N = 1]) and institution size (number of enrolled students reported in 2019; 0 = less than 1,000 [N = 32], 1 = 1,000 - 4,999 [N = 237], 2 = 5,000 - 9,999 [N = 87], 3 = 10,000 - 19,999 [N = 81], 4 = 20,000 and above [N = 81]).

3.2 Analyses

The first and second research questions regarding information on admissions test policies carried out for international students were answered in a highly descriptive manner (i.e., percentage) and did not involve statistical inference. For the third and fourth research questions exploring the associations between admissions test policy practices and the rate of international student admissions, we conducted multiple regression analyses using R (R Core Team, 2020) and RStudio (Rstudio Team, 2020), to test whether admission test policies predict international student admissions rates. The percent

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1 As of September 13, 2022, we confirm that the list is no longer posted in the FairTest website. However, we do provide the original URL that was previously linked to the website content.
of international students accepted that year was our dependent variable, and we used several of our coded test policies as independent variables. Because of the similarities between ACT and SAT, we decided to only focus on the acceptance of ACT scores, including if ACT is used as an ELP in our model. We also included the usage of TOEFL and IELTS, two major ELP tests utilized by U.S. higher education institutions, in our model. Institutional characteristics such as school type and size were used as control variables.

4 Results

4.1 Test-Optional Policies for General Standardized Assessment

Of the 518 institutions, 172 (33.2%) did not have the words SAT or ACT appearing in their main admissions webpage, and 336 (64.9%) had both test names appearing. One institution's webpage had a description of ACT only and not SAT, and nine webpages (1.7%) had the word SAT only and not ACT. Of those that did not include the words SAT or ACT in their webpages, examples include webpages that required another link to get the information needed (e.g., simply noting that international applicants should follow the same requirements as first-year domestic applicants). Some institutions did not list the tests in the requirement (i.e., clearly describing other application requirements [e.g., transcript, recommendation letter], without any mention of ACT/SAT), alluding they are likely not required.

The percentage of institutions with various test requirement policies for ACT/SAT scores as an admissions requirement is shown in Figure 1. Both ACT and SAT scores were required in 13 institutions (2.5%), and 222 institutions (42.9%) stated they were test optional for ACT, and 223 institutions (43.1%) were test optional for SAT. Only eight institutions (1.5%) explicitly stated they are test-blind for ACT and SAT scores. Around 14% of the institutions (70 for ACT [13.5%], 77 for SAT [14.9%]) did not list ACT/SAT as a main requirement, and instead listed it as a waiver for proof of ELP.

![Figure 1: ACT/SAT Test Policies as General Standardized Assessment for International Applicants (N = 518)](image-url)
Precise admissions policies from 25 institutions (4.6%) was not determinable; of these, about a third were cases in which there was no clear indication of whether ACT/SAT scores are used for demonstration of general academic ability or as proof of ELP. To be specific, nine institutions required ACT/SAT scores for application, but without specifying what purpose the test(s) will be used for (e.g., general admission test requirement or ELP requirement). Six institutions added a plain statement on their webpage that ACT/SAT are required for native English speakers or for those whose English is their first/primary language, without any specific guidelines. The remaining cases included webpages with a statement that ACT/SAT may be required ‘if applicable’ or depending on major (four institutions), may be used for funding decisions (two institutions), and are strongly encouraged (one institution).

4.2 Test-Optional Policies for English Language Proficiency Requirement

Figure 2 shows the percentage of the types of ELP policies among the webpages that mentioned proof of ELP for international applications. Of the 518 institutions, 84% had an explicit statement of ELP requirements, with the majority of them requiring test scores. Only 10 institutions (1.9%) listed ELP test scores as optional. There were five websites (1.0%) that were considered not clear in terms of the ELP test score requirements. All of them vaguely indicated that the test scores might be required if applicable but did not elaborate what the applicable conditions would be. 78 institutions (15.1%) did not specify ELP requirements at all. Most of the cases were webpages that did not have any information about how or if ELP tests are considered, while a small number of cases listed multiple ELP tests but still without clarifying whether or how any of them is used as proof of ELP (7 institutions).

![Figure 2: Proof of English Language Proficiency Policies for International Applicants (N = 518)](image)

We disaggregated the ELP test requirements by test types (i.e., TOEFL iBT, IELTS, DET, PTE, SAT, ACT; See Figure 3). We found that 386 institutions (74.5%) accepted TOEFL iBT, 375 institutions (72.4%) accepted IELTS, 298 institutions (57.5%) accepted Duolingo, and 134 institutions (25.9%) accepted PTE. When we only examined the

\[^2\] 25 institutions, with one institution only mentioning ACT and one institution only mentioning SAT.

\[^3\] One webpage did not list ACT/SAT as a requirement, but it was listed as one of the primary factors of admissions decisions. Another webpage stated ELP is required, with ACT/SAT school codes, among other test school codes, listed at the end of the webpage. One school mentioned ACT when referring to the ACT global assessment certificate program.
webpages that had specific instructions about ELP requirements, the percentages were higher (TOEFL iBT = 88.7%, IELTS = 86.2%, Duolingo = 68.5%, PTE = 30.8%). More than 30% (n = 172 for SAT; n = 157 for ACT) of the institutions also accepted ACT/SAT scores as ELP qualification, with about 6% (n = 32 for SAT; n = 27 for ACT) accepting them as waivers. Additionally, 17 institutions were coded as unclear regarding the requirement of ACT/SAT scores. This included seven cases in which requirements for proof of ELP were not stated, while ACT and/or SAT were listed as optional alongside other required ELP-related tests, and two cases in which the requirements were ‘either ACT/SAT or ELP.’ The remaining cases included a variety of circumstances (e.g., could be a source of funding, some programs may require it, may be required for those who are native English speakers, may be required ‘if needed’). Of the 17 institutions, eight were also coded as vague for ELP-related tests, the reason being the webpages listing both ACT/SAT and ELP-related tests without specifying the purpose of considering the tests (e.g., proof of ELP).

![Figure 3: Policies Regarding Specific Tests for Proof of English Language Proficiency (N = 518)](image)

### 4.3 Associations between Admissions Test Policies and Rate of International Student Admissions

In addition to exploring the landscape of different types of test requirements a student might encounter, we were also interested in investigating whether different test policies might be associated with the rate of international admission to institutions (Research Question 3). Table 1 shows the regression results predicting the rate of international admissions from admissions test polices. Of the four test policies in our model, the two that significantly predicted the percentage of international students were the usage of ACT scores as a general admissions test and as a proof of ELP, respectively. Specifically, we found that institutions with test blind policies on ACT had significantly higher international student acceptance than schools where it was required ($b = 0.094$; $t(497) = 2.91$; $p = .004$). For ELP ACT policies, we found that institutions that did not list the ACT as a proof of EPL have significantly higher international student admitted than those institutions where the ACT fitted the ELP requirement ($b = 0.028$; $t(507) = 2.75$; $p = .006$). We also saw that both institution type and size were significant covariates in our model.

To answer our fourth research question, we replicated the regressions analyses after splitting our data into private (N = 365) and public (N = 152) institutions (Table 1). The results in our overall model remained similar for private institutions, but we did not find significant associations between the implementation of test policies and rate of international admissions among public institutions.
Table 1: Linear Regression predicting Percent of International Student Acceptance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall Sample</th>
<th>Institution Type ¹</th>
<th>Institution Type ²</th>
<th>Institution Type ³</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b(SE)</td>
<td>Private b(SE)</td>
<td>Public b(SE)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N=518)</td>
<td>(n=365)</td>
<td>(n=152)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACT (Ref=Required)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blind</td>
<td>0.094 (0.032)**</td>
<td>0.096 (0.041)*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not mentioned as Main</td>
<td>0.019 (0.024)</td>
<td>0.029 (0.033)</td>
<td>0.002 (0.016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional</td>
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<td>0.018 (0.030)</td>
<td>0.010 (0.014)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>0.022 (0.036)</td>
<td>0.002 (0.017)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word not in Webpage</td>
<td>0.032 (0.023)</td>
<td>0.041 (0.032)</td>
<td>0.010 (0.015)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACT as ELP (Ref = Required)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not listed as ELP</td>
<td>0.028 (0.010)**</td>
<td>0.041 (0.014)**</td>
<td>-0.013 (0.008)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>-0.012 (0.031)</td>
<td>0.004 (0.015)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiver</td>
<td>0.025 (0.016)</td>
<td>0.033 (0.022)</td>
<td>0.005 (0.011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOEFL (Ref = Required)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.037 (0.079)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>-0.005 (0.034)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiver</td>
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<td>-0.039 (0.088)</td>
<td>–</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Word not in Webpage</td>
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<td>0.031 (0.030)</td>
<td>0.011 (0.020)</td>
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</tr>
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<td><strong>IELTS (Ref = Required)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Accepted</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<tr>
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<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word not in Webpage</td>
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<td>-0.025 (0.028)</td>
<td>-0.002 (0.021)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institution Size (Ref = Under 1,000)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 – 4,999</td>
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<td>-0.039 (0.017)*</td>
<td>0.014 (0.030)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5,000 – 9,999</td>
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<td>-0.043 (0.019)*</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>10,000 – 19,999</td>
<td>-0.017 (0.016)</td>
<td>-0.015 (0.021)</td>
<td>0.023 (0.029)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,000 or above</td>
<td>-0.001 (0.017)</td>
<td>0.015 (0.026)</td>
<td>0.037 (0.030)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institution Type (Ref = Public)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Private</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not Report</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
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<td>.096***</td>
<td>.190*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
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<td>.054***</td>
<td>.101*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Ref = Reference Group. ¹One school had missing information on institution type. ²“Word not in Webpage” code was omitted given that it was identically coded in the ACT (as general test) test policy variable. ³Codes were not found in the subsample group.
5 Summary and Discussion

In summary, with regard to admissions test requirements, we found that only 2.5% of institutions required ACT/SAT scores for international students, while about 45% clearly stated that ACT/SAT scores were optional, including less than 2% that did not consider ACT/SAT scores at all (test-blind). A small portion (7%) of institutions were not clear in their webpage about whether ACT/SAT scores are required, with some institutions listing them together with ELP requirements as accepted standardized tests but with no specific information about what they are needed for. Regarding the ELP requirements, most institutions clearly stated that ELP test scores were required, with about 30% of institutions also listing ACT/SAT as options to qualify for the ELP requirement. We also found variations in the type of ELP-related tests the schools were accepting. Lastly, we found that, of the differing test policies, utilizations of the ACT test as both a main requirement (compared to test blind) and proof of ELP (compared to no consideration) were associated with lower rates of international student admissions to institutions, and for private institutions in particular.

Our findings show that the widespread trend of going test-optional in higher education (Freeman et al., 2021) also applies to international student admissions at the undergraduate level. However, with a modest number of institutions not clarifying what the ACT/SAT scores are being considered for in the admissions decision-making process, and a fair number of institutions accepting ACT/SAT as an ELP requirement or waiver, international students may be confused about whether or not to prepare for the ACT/SAT. For example, given that ACT/SAT are likely to be optional as a standardized admissions test, while at the same time could serve as an option for proof of ELP, some students may feel a stronger need to prepare for ACT/SAT as it can demonstrate both types of skills (e.g., general academic ability and ELP). On the other hand, some students may decide to instead focus on and submit ELP-specific test scores as they believe only a limited number of institutions will consider the ACT/SAT as a possible replacement for major ELP tests. These conflicting ideas may also trigger some applicants to prepare for and submit both ACT/SAT and ELP tests, to avoid any risk.

The same notion applies to other ELP test requirements. Given that multiple standardized tests are considered as proof of ELP, international applicants may face challenges in determining which test to prepare for, or whether they need to prepare for more than one test, to effectively demonstrate their English skills. From the institutions’ perspective, they can help international students gain a better idea of which application materials are required or most useful to demonstrate their specific skills by providing more guidance and transparent information on how they value and use each test. This can in turn help students to make effective application decisions that could lead to a higher chance of getting accepted.

We would like to add that although the current study was able to provide descriptive statistics regarding the percentage of institutions considering standardized admissions tests in specific ways, a deeper investigation into the institutional covariates of TOPs could help us identify why we are seeing variations in the implementation of TOPs, especially given the variances in the predictive power of English language proficiency scores on student success across major, degree-level, and test versions (Abunawas, 2014; Graham, 1987). For example, graduate programs or hard science majors that have shown a more positive correlation between ELP test scores and GPA may be more likely to ask international students for proof of ELP in the application process. This would be a fruitful area of research to understand the characteristics of institutions or programs that are likely to adopt specific test requirement/optional policies, and how that may help them enhance student success.

Lastly, there have been efforts to discover how TOPs can contribute to shaping admissions (e.g., enhancing racial equality/diversity [Bennett, 2021; Rubin & Canché, 2019]) and student success (Syverson et al., 2018; Westrick et al., 2015) outcomes. Advancing this line of research, specifically focusing on international applicants, our study demonstrates that moving away from a strict consideration of admissions tests that could qualify for both generic and language-related academic abilities could increase the representation of international students in U.S. higher education. We also found that this trend was pronounced among private higher education institutions, which generally accept more international students compared to public institutions. The implications behind these findings remain unclear. While this shows a possibility that employing flexible test policies may benefit private higher education institutions to promote applications/admittance of international applicants, clearly more research is needed to explore and replicate the associations between test policies and outcomes. Exploration on how these admissions tests are considered in conjunction with other application components and how that could shape admissions decisions (e.g., University of California STTF, 2020) would also be a critical area.
to provide insights for institutions to develop equitable and effective admissions policies.

5.1 Limitations

There are limitations worth noting. We found that many schools provided information on specific test sections or cut scores considered, particularly as proof of ELP, consistent with earlier findings regarding requirements of English test scores for admissions purposes (Ling, et al., 2014). Although this information could provide insights into how lenient or restrictive institutions are when evaluating applicants’ test scores, along with how specific institutions are when providing instruction about test requirements, we did not collect this data in the current study. Incorporating information on which sections of the tests are used for ELP qualifications and the existence and level of cut scores for tests could provide a more detailed portrait of how specific test policies are associated with admissions and student outcomes.

Limited by resources available, we only used one international admissions webpage per institution that was either assigned according to the list provided by the FairTest website or was determined by the research team as the main source of information. There could be inconsistencies when FairTest and the research team decided which webpage should serve as the main admissions information webpage for each institution. This might have influenced our findings as some webpages we investigated did not have texts regarding specific standardized tests and were classified as ‘test title not mentioned,’ where specific test information could have been found on a different web page. Further, many of the institutions required more than one click to acquire information about specific standardized test requirements, and thus, applicants would likely need information from a combination of multiple links to gather more accurate and comprehensive information about application requirements. Lastly, some website data were not interpretable as they mainly consisted of menus pointing to different types of information or had images of texts, in which useful text information was not extractable by our web-scraping method. Using more advanced methods to track the link of multiple webpages, and multiple types of information in them, could help improve the accuracy of our findings.

Despite our limitations, the current study is one of the very first efforts to provide a big picture of the landscape of admissions test policies carried out for international applicants applying to U.S. institutions during the global pandemic.

References


[4] College Board. (2019, February 1). What is Test Optional? https://blog.collegeboard.org/what-is-a-test-optional-college#:%3A:text=A%20%E2%80%9Ctest%2Doptional%E2%80%9D%20policy%20means%20the%20college%20allows%20all%2C%20don’t%26%238211%3B%E2%80%9D


