



Jan. 13, 2022 Published reply to Eric Hoover's article

[https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/letters/the-real-reason-so-many-students-still-take-optional-standardized-tests?cid2=gen\\_login\\_refresh&cid=gen\\_sign\\_in](https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/letters/the-real-reason-so-many-students-still-take-optional-standardized-tests?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in)

## The Real Reason So Many Students Still Take Optional Standardized Tests

In "[Extension of Harvard's Test-Optional Policy Fires 'a Shot Across the Bow' of Higher Ed](#)" (*The Chronicle*, December 17), you write that Harvard's decision to extend its test-optional policy through 2026 signals a "slow-marching" decline of the ACT and SAT. Does it? Or is it, as you suggest later in the article, a strategic marketing decision that benefits some students — but benefits colleges even more?

You ask why, in a test-optional world, so many students still flock to take these tests. The answer you provide quotes a Massachusetts high-school counselor as saying that high-achieving kids "live for the challenge" of a "top score," while their college-educated parents consider testing a "rite of passage." In "Testing's Slide 'If It's Happening at Harvard...,'" Eric Hoover writes that Harvard's decision to extend its test-optional policy through 2026 signals a "slow-marching" decline of the ACT and SAT. Does it? Or is it, as he suggests later in the article, a strategic marketing decision that benefits some students—but benefits colleges even more?

As someone who tutors and advises families about standardized testing and college admissions, that just doesn't ring true. I can think of dozens of ways my students would rather challenge themselves or spend their time—including some true rites of passage like learning to drive or getting a first job.

The truth? Students take the tests because they're afraid if they don't, they won't get in.

One reason students and parents don't take colleges at their word is because of the incredibly confusing and frustratingly opaque "it depends" language from admissions. Since the article specifically discusses Harvard, let's look at what Harvard actually says in their standardized testing FAQs:

*... "SAT and ACT tests are better predictors of Harvard grades than high school grades, but this can vary greatly for any individual. Students who have not attended well-resourced schools throughout their lives, who come from modest economic backgrounds or first-generation college families have generally had fewer opportunities to prepare for standardized tests. Each application to Harvard is read with great care, keeping in mind that talent is everywhere, but opportunity and access are not."*

The shift to test-optional admissions is a wonderful initiative to improve access for low-income and first-generation students. However, until colleges are willing to 'fess up and say "unless these special circumstances apply to you, we'd prefer to see test scores," the same old lack of transparency is still alive and well.

So, let's be honest: for most applicants, "test-optional" really means "test-preferred."

---

Valerie Erde has been tutoring and advising high school students on the ACT/SAT and college admissions as founder and director of VeridianPrep, LLC. Prior to founding VeridianPrep, Ms. Erde was a multimedia content managing editor/producer (Brainscape, HarperCollins Publishers, Penguin Books) and a publishing industry management consultant.

# 'If It's Happening at Harvard ...'

**THE LATEST NEWS** about changes in standardized-testing policies tends to pique people's interest. But the latest news about changes in standardized-testing policies at Harvard University? That sends folks into breathless fits of joy or despair, depending on their view of the universe and the rightful place of the ACT and SAT within it. Because, you know, Harvard.

Last month *The Washington Post* first reported that the nation's oldest university, which temporarily suspended its ACT and SAT requirement due to Covid-19, would extend its test-optional policy for four years, through 2026. Why? Harvard cited just one reason: concerns about how the pandemic might continue to limit high-school students' access to testing centers. The bottom line is significant: The granddaddy of the Ivy League, which played a huge role in popularizing the SAT, just told the world it would forgo its testing requirements until today's eighth graders finish high school.

Whether you like it or not, Harvard casts an extra-long shadow. What the university does has long influenced other institutions, as well as the public's thinking about admissions. And what Harvard seems to be doing now is slow-marching the ACT and SAT into decline and diminished relevance. It's hard to imagine the university would end up rolling back its test-optional policy after so many years on the books.

Jon Boeckenstedt, vice provost for enrollment at Oregon State University, which adopted a permanent test-optional policy in 2020, said that Harvard's announcement "does fire a shot across the bow of everyone down the food chain — which is everyone."

Though most colleges have at least temporarily stopped requiring the ACT and SAT, many big-name institutions haven't yet announced that such policies will be permanent. Harvard's announcement probably just made it more likely that they will do so. The university, Boeckenstedt said, had made "a bold 'We're going to end this

now' move. I give them credit for using their power. They can do what they want, and they did the right thing."

Angel B. Pérez, chief executive of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, expects that the announcement will accelerate discussions of testing policies at many other

institutions, not just superselective ones: "When Harvard speaks, your alumni ask, 'What are we going to do?' There's a pressure to respond. If this ends up trickling down and influencing more and more institutions to make this change permanent, I think that's a win."

Perhaps it's tempting to view the recent rise in test-optional policies as a high-minded revolution in which college officials searched their souls and decided that, by gosh, requiring tests that disproportionately disadvantage low-income and underrepresented-minority students really was a harmful and inequitable thing to do. Sure, on some campuses over the last few decades, that's kind of what happened.

But the truth is, colleges are businesses. The pandemic disrupted the admissions business model that relied heavily on testing. And after the admissions process didn't grind to a halt, and application totals soared far and wide, many colleges made the business decision — for competitive reasons, if nothing else — that tests are no longer necessary. That leaves more applicants to decide whether submitting a score might help or hurt them, a business decision in its own

right — and often a difficult one.

Many applicants will, for one reason or another, continue to take the ACT, the SAT, or both — and submit their scores. Those tests might die out one day, but they're certainly not dead yet.

Beverly Low, director of guidance and college counseling at Manchester Essex Regional Middle High School, in Massachusetts, told *The Chronicle* last summer that many of her school's high-achieving students would continue taking the ACT and SAT, "no matter what."



GETTYIMAGES

because they wanted a top score:

"They live for the challenge."

Last month, though, Low said that Harvard's move could help ease the skepticism of students and parents who don't believe that test-optional really means test-optional. The toughest audience to convince that a college won't penalize an applicant without scores? College-educated parents, for whom testing was a rite of passage, Low said.

"I've been trying to convince them that a student's teachers, who instruct, challenge, mentor, and evaluate their children over time have a much better sense of a student's academic ability and potential for success in college than a score obtained from a four-hour multiple-choice test. But, heck. If it's happening at Harvard, then it must be real. Right?"

— ERIC HOOVER