

Proposed Test-Optional Policy

Prepared by the Admissions and Retention Committee, spring 2022

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic closed many testing centers and prompted Westmont to adopt as an expediency a test-optional admission policy for the incoming classes of fall 2021 and fall 2022. Now, due to (1) scrutiny of the efficacy and equity of standardized testing for college admissions, (2) test-optional policies already adopted or under consideration at Westmont's sister colleges and (3) the strong market pressure brought on by the removal of testing requirements in the California state university systems, the Admissions and Retention Committee proposes that Westmont adopt a permanent test-optional policy for admission. This policy would enable students to decide whether to submit SAT or ACT scores to support their application for admission. The Admissions Office believes it will still possess ample data points with which to assess a student's preparedness for Westmont College.

Background

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early spring 2020, standardized testing across the United States became unavailable to the majority of high school students. While the bulk of students applying for admission for the fall of 2020 had already taken their exams, the dearth of testing options greatly affected the high school classes of 2021 and, subsequently, 2022. As a result, the Admissions Office quickly made the decision, with approval from the executive team, to institute a test-optional policy for fall 2021, meaning that students unable to take an exam could still be considered for admission. Students who had been able to take the exam were given the option of submitting scores. This proved a wise move, as just 30 percent of our fall 2021 applicants submitted any test score at all (SAT or ACT). As the pandemic lingered, it became evident that the policy would have to be extended to the high school class of 2022, as well. To date, just 22 percent of fall 2022 applicants have asked to have their application reviewed with test scores. Further, none of Westmont's sister colleges in California have required standardized testing as an admission requirement for either fall 2021 or fall 2022. This includes Point Loma Nazarene University, Pepperdine University, Biola University and Azusa Pacific University.

Even prior to the onset of the pandemic, standardized testing's supposed value to the college admission process was under attack. In May 2020, the University of California (UC) adopted a plan to replace the SAT or ACT with its own exam as an admission requirement by 2024.¹ Subsequently, UC elected to forego any standardized exam for undergraduate admission.² More recently, the California State University (CSU) system has also elected to drop testing

¹ "University of California to drop SAT, ACT test requirements," *Associated Press*, May 21, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/89e2fe1053af2d0f2f6e88135cd595e2>.

² Teresa Watanabe, "UC slams the door on standardized admissions tests, nixing any SAT alternative," *LA Times*, November 18, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-11-18/uc-slams-door-on-sat-and-all-standardized-admission-s-tests?utm_id=42788&sfmc_id=2422861.

requirements for admission.³ The shifts in the state systems alone have the real potential to dramatically shift student expectations around admission requirements at colleges in California. If these two major drivers of student behavior are no longer requiring standardized exams for admission, it would put Westmont at a severe disadvantage in the market.

The Committee's Work

Over the last several months, the Admissions and Retention Committee has been exploring the issues related to a test-optional policy. The Committee has sought to balance the research about standardized testing with the needs of the Admissions Office for assessing students' ability to succeed at Westmont. The Committee, heavily assisted by Tim Loomer, conducted its own research into the correlation between success and persistence at Westmont and leading indicators, like GPA and academic rigor.

Leading Indicators and the Admissions Decision

As part of the exploratory process, the Admissions and Retention Committee asked Tim Loomer to analyze recent admissions and student records data in search for correlations between a student's high school record and success at Westmont. Records from first-year students entering Westmont fall 2016-2020 were examined. The committee sought to identify any other significant predictors of academic success aside from high school GPA (already in use by the Admissions Office) and standardized test scores.

Among the most pertinent findings of this research was the strong correlation between advanced coursework (transfer credit or a qualifying Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate test score) taken in high school and success at Westmont (*Table 1*). Notably, students who entered Westmont with advanced credit typically withdraw from Westmont at a rate substantially lower than those without either marker (16.1% to 39.9%). Within that subset of higher performers, it was further found that the presence of AP credit was a stronger predictor of success than transfer credit (15.3% withdrawal rate to 25.2% withdrawal rate). Of those who entered Westmont with both AP credit and transfer credit, just 5.9% have withdrawn.

³ "CSU Trustees Vote to Amend Title 5 to Remove SAT and ACT Tests from Undergraduate Admissions," March 22, 2022, <https://www.calstate.edu/csu-system/news/Pages/trustees-vote-remove-SAT-ACT-standardized-tests-2022.aspx>

Table 1: Enrollment Status by Advanced Credit, Cohorts Entering 2016-2020

Advanced Credit	TOTAL Students	Currently Enrolled	Graduated	Withdrawn	Withdrawal Rate
AP & Transfer Credit	186	103	72	11	5.9%
IB Credit	31	19	10	2	6.5%
AP Credit	459	193	196	70	15.3%
Transfer Credit	290	138	79	73	25.2%
No Credit	787	287	186	314	39.9%
TOTAL	1753	740	543	470	26.8%

It is important to note that students receive college credit from Westmont for AP and IB coursework on the basis of optional exams taken during high school (typically at the end of the junior or senior year). Westmont currently grants credit for AP scores of 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale and IB Higher Level scores of 5, 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale. These scores are independent of grades awarded by the high school teacher for these classes. Test scores are typically submitted to Westmont during the summer prior to enrolling at the college. Transfer credit from dual enrollment courses or community colleges is awarded if the student earns at least a C- in a college-level course through an accredited college.

The Admissions Office rarely has AP or IB test scores from students at the time they apply. Most advanced placement score reports are not sent to Westmont until the summer of a student's senior year, meaning the College cannot review the scores until most students have committed to their respective colleges. Further, these exams come at a financial cost greater than the cost of sitting for the SAT or ACT. Many students may take the advanced classes, but never take the exam, particularly if it would prove a financial hardship. Not all school districts subsidize this opportunity for financially disadvantaged students.

At the time a student applies, the Admissions Office knows whether a student has taken an AP or IB course and, if completed, the grade awarded by the teacher. The rigor of an AP or IB class may serve as a reasonable proxy for the rigor of a Westmont course. Therefore, strong grades in such classes would give the Admissions Office reasonable confidence in students' likely success at Westmont.

In analyzing high school GPA data (*Table 2*), results paralleled a previous study conducted by Enrico Manlapig in 2019.⁴ Students entering Westmont with a high school GPA below 3.0 have

⁴ Enrico Manlapig, "Who comes and who goes? Observations from admissions data," 2019. In Dr. Manlapig's study, GPA bands were grouped at every 0.25 GPA interval. It was at a 3.25 GPA and below that students withdrew from Westmont at a rate greater than 50%.

recently withdrawn at a 52.5% rate (n=59). Those in a slightly higher GPA band (3.0-3.4), have withdrawn at a slightly better, though still troubling rate of 45.1% (n=235).

Table 2: Enrollment Status by GPA Band, Cohorts Entering 2016-2020

Weighted Academic GPA	TOTAL Students	Currently Enrolled	Graduated	Withdrawn	Withdrawal Rate
Above 4.6	112	81	24	7	6.3%
4.2 - 4.6	413	211	141	61	14.8%
3.8 - 4.2	550	199	217	134	24.4%
3.4 - 3.8	338	124	43	125	37.0%
3.0 - 3.4	235	86	43	106	45.1%
2.6 - 3.0	50	15	9	26	52.0%
Below 2.6	9	2	2	5	55.6%
TOTAL	1707	718	525	464	27.2%

Pros and Cons of Standardized Testing

Several arguments against the use of standardized testing in college admissions have been made over the years. Among the most benign, is that test scores strongly correlate with a student's high school GPA, making test scores a potentially redundant metric.⁵ This argument suggests that a test score adds little predictive value to a student's high school GPA.

More damning is the critique that standardized tests disadvantage students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who don't have the same amount of time or financial resources to invest in rigorous test preparation. A student from an affluent family, the argument goes, not only has the money to invest in private tutoring to help boost scores, but also has the luxury of leisure time that can be spent studying. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, on the other hand, may not only be able to afford tutoring, but may have to spend hours outside of school working to help support the family, rather than studying for the SAT or ACT. Relatedly, since students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be black or latino, critics argue that the requirement of standardized testing contributes to a racist system in college admissions.

Proponents of the continued use of standardized tests in college admissions counter these arguments, first, by pointing to research that suggests that test scores, when paired with high school GPA, is a strong indicator of college persistence. In the same vein, proponents argue

⁵ Joseph A. Soares, "For Tests that are Predictively Powerful and Without Social Prejudice," *Research Practice in Assessment* 7, no. 1 (summer 2012): 6. (http://www.rpajournal.com/dev/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Volume_7.pdf)

that removing test scores from admission criteria removes a counterbalance to the prospect of high school grade inflation, a phenomenon that has likely only accelerated through recent pandemic years.⁶

Countering the notion that standardized test requirements ought to be removed for racial equity, proponents point to colleges that have had long-standing test-optional policies and note that these colleges and universities have not increased their campus diversity as a result. If a test-optional or test-blind policy were meant to create more access for underrepresented populations, the results simply haven't been present.

Market Position

Aside from the above considerations, the current college admissions market nearly demands that Westmont adopt a permanent test-optional policy. With the recent declaration from UC and CSU that standardized testing will no longer be an admissions requirement, there will be little incentive for college and career counselors in California to advise or promote the exams to their students.

It is true that the UCs and CSUs do not constitute major cross-application schools for Westmont, with the exceptions of UCSB and Cal Poly SLO. Nevertheless, few of our major competitors are requiring standardized testing for admission, either. Westmont's top competitor, Point Loma Nazarene University, instituted a test-optional pilot policy prior to the pandemic, and they are likely to retain the policy indefinitely. Further, Biola University, Pepperdine University and Wheaton College (IL) adopted test-optional policies during the pandemic and are currently debating its permanence.

To return to a test-required policy would place Westmont as an outlier among our competitive set. Rather than serve as a distinctive, however, to take such a stance would discourage applications and likely reduce our share of interested students, relative to our peers.

The Current Proposal

We propose to adopt a permanent test-optional policy for admissions purposes. Such a policy would permit but not require an applicant to submit an official SAT or ACT score, if the student believed the resulting score could bolster her case for admission. Upon adoption, the policy would be reflected in the college catalog.

The Admissions Office believes that in the remaining elements of the application, they have enough evidence to provide reasonable confidence that a given applicant will succeed at Westmont. These factors include

- the student's GPA;
- the student's GPA in core academic classes;
- the level of rigor in the course work taken, including the presence of AP, IB or dual enrollment courses;

⁶ Seth Gershenson, *Grade Inflation in High Schools (2005-2016)* (Washington, DC: Fordham Institute, 2018), 23-24.

- the quality of the student's high school, as measured by a regularly updated high school profile score;
- the student's writing for the application essay(s);
- an academic recommendation from a core subject teacher;
- the student's active involvement in extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities.

In the case that the Admissions Office does not possess enough information on a student to lead to a sound decision, we would reserve the right to request of the student any of the following:

- grades from an additional semester of high school,
- an interview,
- an official score from an SAT or ACT.