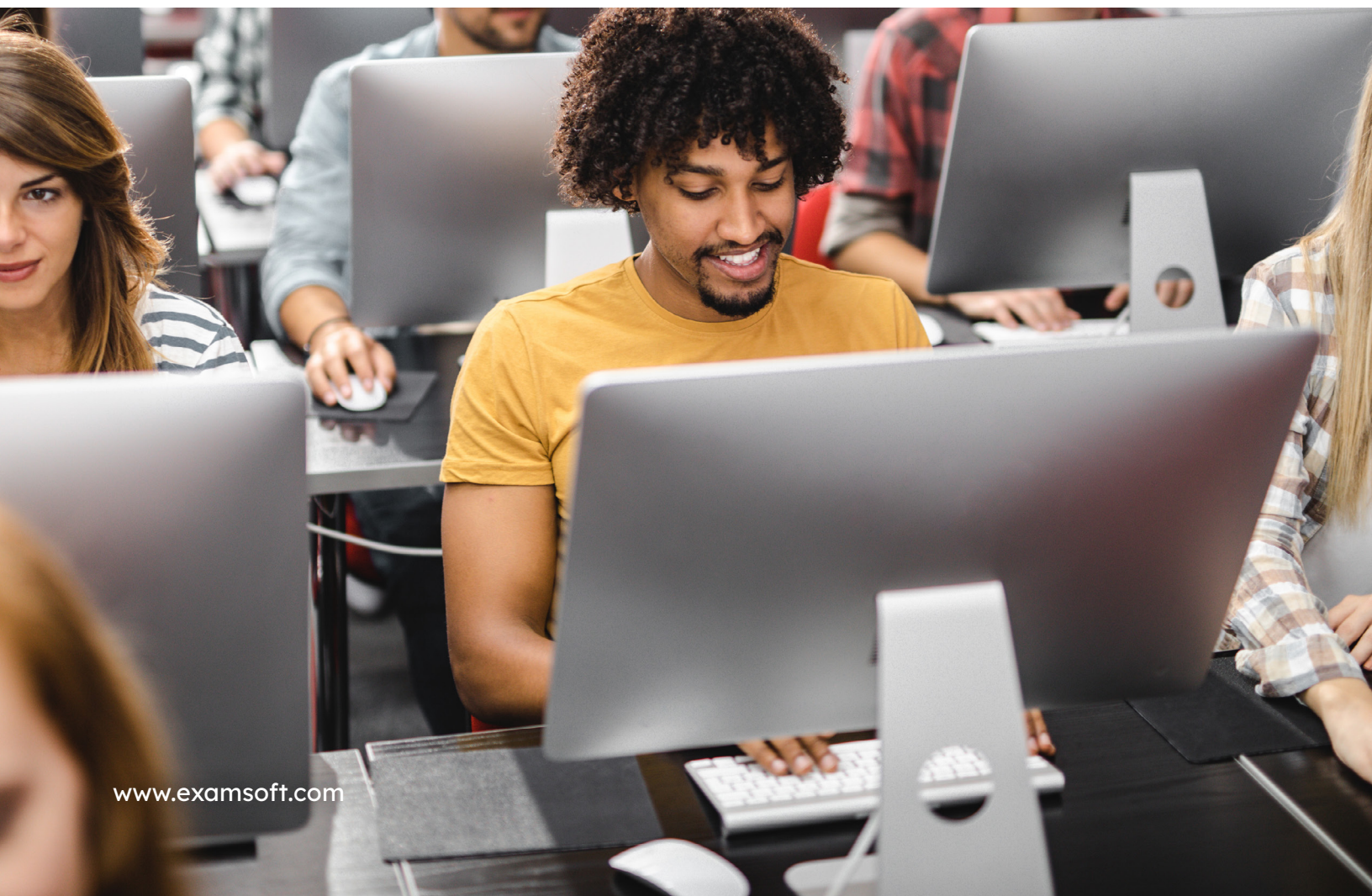ExamSoft®
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eBook

Holistic Alternatives to Standardized Testing in College Admissions

Introduction

In recent years, colleges and universities nationwide have reconsidered their requirements for standardized testing. Many of the resulting policy changes arose from efforts to increase student diversity and to make the admissions process more equitable. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020, most higher ed institutions moved to an online learning model, bringing socioeconomic disparities between students into sharp focus. Many testing centers closed to admissions exam sessions due to social distancing regulations, which only increased the access gap by disadvantaging students without the means to travel to a testing location outside of their immediate area.

One notable example of the shift from standardized testing is the University of California system's decision to go "test-optional" for fall 2021 and 2022, then "test-blind" through 2024. As an alternative to standardized testing, the UC system has proposed developing a homegrown admissions test by 2025 [1]. Other schools are implementing similar plans.

Why Are Universities Moving Away from Standardized Testing?

According to a recent report from the Institute of Higher Education Policy, "[M]any institutions, including public universities with an explicit mission to serve qualified state residents of all backgrounds, continue to use admissions policies that disproportionately and gratuitously benefit students from White and affluent families" [2]. Of these policies, one of the most heavily weighted is standardized testing.

Data released by College Board seems to reveal racial disparities in standardized testing: "With regard to race, in 2018, combined SAT scores for Asian and White students averaged over 1100, while all other groups averaged below 1000. With regard to income, a 2015 analysis found that students with family income less than $20,000 scored lowest on the test, and those with family income of above $200,000 scored highest" [3].

And according to a 2020 article from the U.S. Census, "Blacks and Hispanics continue to be over-represented in the population in poverty relative to their representation in the overall population" [4].

Students with means can afford test prep services and tutors who can help them increase test scores significantly, compared to students of lower socioeconomic status without access to these services [5].

Keeping racial bias and socioeconomic disparity out of the admissions process is a top priority for many higher ed institutions, and eliminating standardized testing may seem like a worthwhile place to begin.

Why Do We Have Standardized Admissions Tests Anyway?

At first glance, the idea of standardized tests for admissions make sense. Originally, these tests were intended to assess cognitive ability alone, though the SAT and ACT have since evolved to support school learning: "The ACT is designed to cover skills taught in a typical high school curriculum, and the SAT is an enforcement mechanism for the Common Core," writes Ben Paris in an article for *Inside Higher Ed.*

Schools use certain metrics to predict how well students perform academically and to increase the likelihood of retention. While high school GPA has traditionally played a large role in admissions, differing degrees of academic rigor make it risky to judge students on these factors alone. *Forbes* explains: "For example, one student may receive all As at a less challenging high school, and another gets all Bs at a much more challenging high school. The admissions committees…would have difficulty researching each applicant's high school to determine how to fairly compare these two students" [3].

In light of growing concerns about high school grade inflation, standardized testing has been cited as a viable way to benchmark student performance [6]. Nevertheless, standardized testing is on the way out for many colleges and universities in search of more equitable criteria for admissions that considers the whole student, beyond a grade point average or test score. With that in mind, the question becomes: How can selection committees identify qualified candidates for admissions?

3 Holistic Alternatives to Standardized Testing

Here are a few ways colleges and universities are rethinking the admissions process without standardized test scores.

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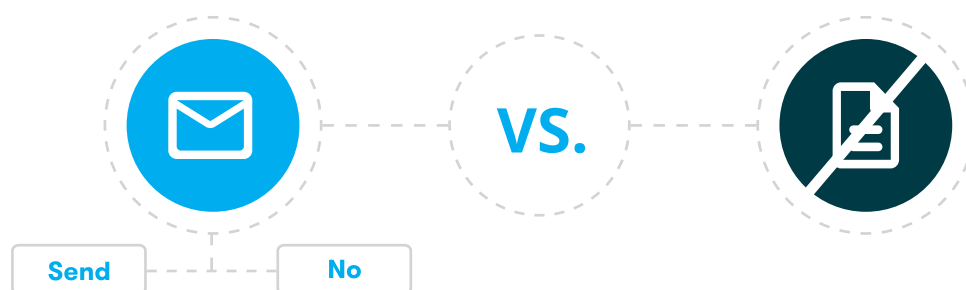
1. Test-Optional vs. Test-Blind Policies

In an effort to mitigate some of the above-stated problems with standardized testing, many institutions are choosing a test-optional or test-blind admissions process. But, test-optional policies can fall prey to issues of their own. Are all schools defining "test optional" the same way? Do students who do not submit scores have an advantage over those who don't? Some college leaders have noted that test-optional policies may actually create a barrier to equitable admissions [7].

While a test-optional policy is intended to ensure scores aren't used to determine admittance, those scores could be used to determine course placement and scholarship eligibility [1], and the mere presence of a high test score could sway a selection committee's decision. Because of the potentially subjective nature of a test-optional process, a test-blind approach may be a better option.

By instituting a test-blind policy, an institution promises that it will not look at test scores even if students submit them. Going test blind removes some of the confusion over test-optional policies, while also leveling the playing field for students who could not afford to travel to take the tests or pay for test-prep services [7].

2. Multiple Mini Interview Process

The Association of American Medical Colleges defines MMI: "The Multiple Mini Interview (MMI), developed by McMaster University, is an interview format that consists of a series of six-10 interview stations, each focused on a different question or scenario." These interviews were created to measure critical competencies, such as communication, social skills, and teamwork [8].

Each interview in the series lasts about 10 minutes. Interviewees are given a real-world scenario and prompted to answer related questions. Candidates may also be asked to engage in role-play during these interviews [9].

MMIs can provide more reliable and less biased results due to the multiple interviewers participating, each located in separate stations. Many higher ed leaders consider MMIs more relevant than a standardized test because they give faculty and admissions officers a better idea of how the prospective student might fit in with the campus culture at a specific university.

3. Homegrown Admissions Testing

Institutions like the UC system, are considering creating new tests that would increase fairness to students and relevance to school values.

Though according to a *Los Angeles Times* article published in January 2021, "The UC panels, in their reports released Monday, said it was not feasible for UC to develop its own test because it would take too long and recommended that the university instead explore using a modified version of the state's high school assessment — but only as an optional 'data point' in comprehensive applicant reviews." Instead, UC faculty, admissions directors, and testing experts are considering a version of "Smarter Balanced," the test given to California 11th graders. This assessment — if they choose to implement it — should also be "optional and limited," said UC President Michael V. Drake [10].

But this test could have many of the same problems as the SAT and ACT when it comes to racial and socioeconomic disparities. "For instance, about 70% of students classified as Asian meet or exceed the 11th-grade standard for math compared with 45% of Whites and 20% of Black and Latino students" [10].

Families with means may pay to enroll students in prep courses for these tests as well, creating a similar situation to that of the SAT and ACT.

How Can ExamSoft Help?

No matter how schools decide to handle the admissions process in the coming years, a few things are critical — security and objectivity are key to effective admissions testing, and with the help of longitudinal data, institutions can gauge the efficacy of new admissions processes.

1. Rubrics

Rubrics are a set of criteria by which student responses are measured to ensure an objective score. Graders typically use this method to evaluate essays or short-answer responses. Rubrics take the guessing game out of the equation for both students and assessors [11].

How does an instructor or admissions professional objectively evaluate an essay? When multiple people review the same group of essays, it's hard to ensure that they are each "graded" in the same way. Some graders may have biases, others inordinately busy, and yet others may have different opinions on the importance of a content area or skillset. For example, an English professor may have a different opinion on a writing sample than an admissions dean or alumni volunteer. Without rubrics, it's almost impossible to make this task a fair assessment.
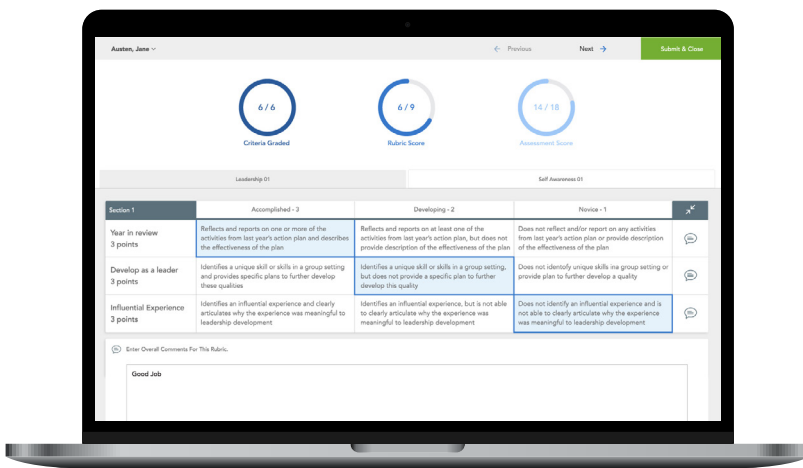
2. Secure, Remote Testing

Exam security is crucial for any high-stakes assessment. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, professionals across industries realized the importance of the ability to accomplish tasks remotely. Not only is remote testing necessary, but the ability to provide secure, remote testing can help increase equity.

Using ExamID and ExamMonitor, prospective students can take a given institution's admissions assessments from anywhere in the world, at any time. Connectivity issues experienced in some rural and urban areas aren't an issue; assessments through ExamSoft are completely offline, only requiring WiFi to download the exam before test time and upload it once the exam is complete.

ExamID, the identity verification tool, allows exam-takers to verify their identity through photo matching, and ExamMonitor uses an offline proctoring function to flag any incidents that could indicate academic dishonesty. That information is then sent to the institution for review.
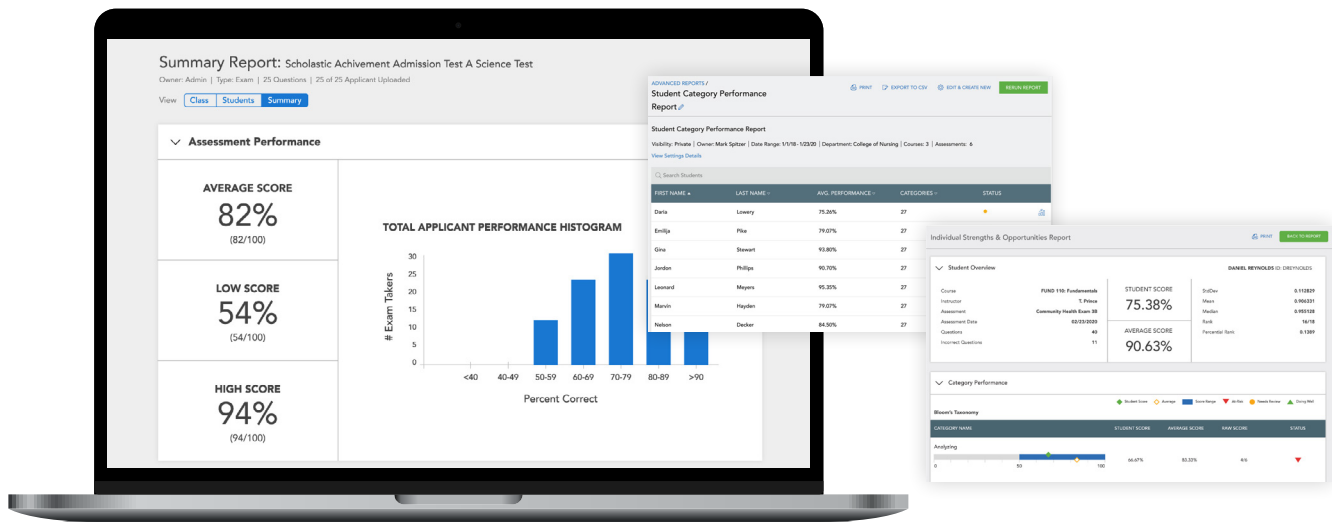
3. Data for an Improved Admissions Process

Security isn't just about maintaining academic integrity; it's also essential to generating data that's accurate and reliable. As universities and colleges move into this experimental phase of admissions processes, data can help education leaders see which methods work and which don't. ExamSoft can provide that data in a straightforward, usable way.

Primarily, admissions tests are meant to predict how well a student will perform academically in any given institution so it's important to know — especially when trying new methods — whether the assessment accurately predicts success.

Programs that use ExamSoft will have access to the longitudinal data they need throughout a student's academic career to see how well the admissions process or admissions testing predicted that success. From this data, the school can make adjustments as needed.

ExamSoft Client Case Studies

As this new era of admissions progresses, ExamSoft clients are innovating and experimenting with new ways to use the platform for admissions.

Mohammed Bin Rashid University of Medicine and Health Sciences – College of Medicine

Mohammed Bin Rashid University of Medicine and Health Sciences – College of Medicine (MBRU-COM) began using ExamSoft in 2018 to score and rank prospective students based on their MMIs. The focus of MBRU's MMI program is "soft skills" such as ethical reasoning, empathy, problem-solving, and communication.

The MMI process at MBRU follows four crucial steps:

1. Candidate Preparation:

A candidate receives a question or scenario and prepares a brief answer.

2. Candidate Observations:

An assessor observes the candidate's response to the question or scenario.

3. Interview Stations:

The candidate completes 10 active and five rest stations; assessors rank and score candidates.

4. Ranking with Rubrics:

The admissions team creates an aggregate score to rank and select candidates.

During the pandemic, MBRU adopted the MMI program for the university-wide admissions. Adding a video conferencing tool and using rubrics through ExamSoft, the school has streamlined the process for selecting prospective students. ExamSoft offers the flexibility to enable every college at MBRU to use MMIs, even though the scenarios may differ. Because, the entire process is done online, students from across the globe can apply, which allows MBRU to enroll a larger and more diverse group of students [12].

The University of Nebraska Medical Center – College of Allied Health Professions

The College of Allied Health Professions (CAHP) at University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) recently revamped their admissions process. As they developed the new process, they discussed several factors, many centered upon equity and diversity.

Dr. Sarah McBrien, CAHP Director of Curriculum & Assessment elaborates: "We talked a lot about increasing diversity, and in doing that we wanted to increase structure and fairness and opportunity in the application process. That's a huge barrier for a lot of students of minority status or first-generation attenders" [13].

Of course, a strong academic record is still a part of their admissions process, but they also want to ensure the student's values align with the college's mission and goals.

Dr. McBrien notes, "We want to know if we can make connections between who our students were at admissions and at the end of the program or during the program. Leadership skills and community service, for example, are important factors we want to measure in our students" [13].

To evaluate candidates for this match, they use eight non-cognitive attributes originally developed by Dr. William Sedlacek, Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park [14]. Starting in 2019, UMNC began asking students to provide short responses to each of those attributes, and they use rubrics to ensure a fair analysis of student answers.

Using ExamSoft, CAHP leadership seeks to find the connections to those traits and program performance by correlating scores throughout the entire program — from application to graduation [15].

Begin the Path to More Equitable Admissions

As we move forward in a post-pandemic era, working to increase access and diversity in all aspects of our lives, education is a top priority. Some aspects of the traditional admissions process have created a barrier to higher education, but with careful thought, research, and the right technology solution, institutions can begin to assess students holistically to find the most qualified candidates to join their campus communities.

Contact us today to learn how ExamSoft can help you create a holistic admissions strategy that meets the needs of your institution.

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