

# FairTest

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## **HARVARD REVERTS TO ADMISSIONS TEST POLICY THAT HELPED CREATE VAST SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITY IN ITS STUDENT BODY; OVER 80% OF COLLEGES REMAIN TEST OPTIONAL OR TEST FREE**

In a stark reversal, Harvard has prematurely ended test optional admissions before the impact of that policy could be fully studied. Harry Feder, FairTest Executive Director, said this about the move: “For decades when Harvard required standardized testing for admissions, according to the Opportunity Insights study, it enrolled a student body remarkable for its stark socioeconomic lack of diversity, with more students from the top 1% of family income enrolled than the bottom 40%. Given the acknowledged disparity in results based on income and race on the SAT and ACT, the claim that reinstating the testing requirement will produce greater socioeconomic diversity is not credible. Something else is going on here.”

“And while Harvard has reinstated the test requirement it has done nothing to address the two principal barriers to providing greater opportunity to qualified lower income student enrollment identified by the Opportunity Insights report: legacy and athlete admissions.”

He added, “Furthermore, in the years (for which we have data) that it suspended the testing requirement, Harvard has done marginally better in terms of racial diversity, even with the overhang of the affirmative action lawsuit. For the rest of the Ivy Plus schools, test optional policies have had a positive impact on racial diversity.”

The claim that Harvard needs required testing to find qualified minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged students does not hold water. “For decades, requiring standardized testing did not magically find a socioeconomically diverse pool of students. This isn’t surprising. In 2022 only .6% of the lowest income group scored above a 33 on the ACT. In that year only .3% of (or 435 total nationally) of Black ACT test takers scored above a 33, as did only 1% of Latinos.”

Akil Bello, FairTest Senior Director of Advocacy added, “What Opportunity Insights and Harvard don’t discuss is the barrier to qualified lower income candidates posed by having to prepare for and take the test. For every hypothetical qualified student given access by a great test score, a test requirement will crush opportunity for countless others who will be deterred by the financial, logistical, and psychological obstacles of the test. The flood of college applications nationwide prompted by test optional and test free policies is evidence of the opportunity-generating quality of those policies.”

Bello also noted, “While Harvard can trot out the heart-warming story of the rare successful graduate ‘saved’ by the test, they do not publicize the countless individual narratives of deserving, capable, hard-working low income students whose college dreams were snuffed by standardized testing.”

While the socioeconomic and racial disparities are baked into the DNA of admissions tests, the resource disparity in crafting essays and student experience can be dealt with through an improved, attentive admissions process. According to Bob Schaeffer, Director of Public Education at FairTest, “With better reader training, admissions offices can scrutinize applicants’ submissions with an eye towards how students perform under the conditions and limitations they experience. Rather than going back to requiring a discriminatory instrument, Harvard could address its student rating scores, along with legacy and athlete admissions.”

Schaeffer added, “Of course the SAT and ACT are highly coachable, time-sensitive, culturally particular snapshots that are very poor measures of the skills and knowledge that we would like to see in successful college students, citizens and workers.”

Grades do a better job of predicting performance in college over time. Feder noted, “Decades of data and various studies demonstrate that the best predictor of college performance is high school grades, that test scores add only a small additional predictive factor to freshman year grades that dissipates by the end of undergraduate studies, and that removing tests as a barrier improves the diversity of the applicant pool. Studies of the Texas and California state systems show that an admissions policy based on high school GPA improves access for talented socioeconomically disadvantaged students who go on to succeed in college and career.”

The shadow of the testing companies should not be ignored in the Harvard decision. “There is one entity that stands to benefit financially from the Harvard shift—the College Board,” noted Bello. “What the Harvard announcement does not highlight is the financial and data relationship between Opportunity Insights and the College Board, which is of such a contractual nature that Opportunity Insights had to disclaim in the paper relied upon by Harvard that it does not in fact speak for the College Board.”

By FairTest’s count, more than 1,865 schools have ACT/SAT-optional or test free policies for fall 2025, with other institutions’ decisions about extending policies from the current admissions cycle pending. FairTest’s frequently updated directory of test-optional, 4-year schools is available free online at <https://www.fairtest.org/university/optional>

We invite you to read FairTest’s report: “Why College Admissions Should Remain Test Optional/Test Free. The report can be accessed on the [Fair Test website](#). The report is designed to capture in one place the studies, data, and arguments that support adoption and retention of test optional and test free admissions policies. The paper also directly takes on recently reconstituted arguments in support of testing requirements, including those promoted by the Opportunity Insights team.