

BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

NO.: BHE 23-64

BOARD DATE: June 20, 2023

MOTION TO AMEND THE BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION'S ADMISSIONS STANDARDS FOR STATE UNIVERSITIES AND THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS FOR THE PURPOSE OF ADOPTING A TEST OPTIONAL POLICY

MOVED: The Board of Higher Education (BHE) hereby amends its admissions standards to adopt the following test optional admissions standard for the purpose of approving admissions policies at all four-year, undergraduate public institutions in the Commonwealth. As described in the attached document, the BHE's test optional admissions standard includes, specifically, the following elements:

- Effective for the 2023 application cycle (for Fall 2024 entry and beyond), the submission of standardized test scores will not be required for first year applicants to be considered eligible for admission to Massachusetts State Universities or University of Massachusetts institutions;
- Individual institutions may opt-in to requiring standardized test scores on a program-by-program basis, following DHE approval; and
- In accordance with the admissions practices of each individual institution, students may themselves choose to submit test scores for consideration.

VOTED: Motion approved and advanced to the full BHE by the Executive Committee on 6/12/2023; and adopted by the BHE on 6/20/2023.

Authority: M.G.L. c. 15A, §§ 9(c) and 9(h)); and Chapter 75, §§ 1, 1A(h), and 2.

Contact: Dr. Clantha McCurdy, Senior Deputy Commissioner & Interim Chief Academic Officer

Christine Williams, Assistant Commissioner for Regulatory Affairs &
Strategic Initiatives

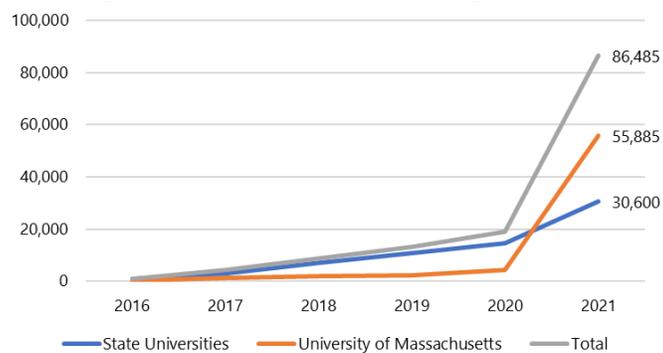
Dan Hay, Assistant Director for Access & Success Strategies and
Program Approval

BACKGROUND

The Board of Higher Education's (BHE) enabling legislation authorizes the BHE to set minimum admissions standards for the public higher education system. M.G.L. c. 15A, §§ 9(c) and 9(h). Public higher education institutions' admissions standards that are not in alignment with the BHE's standards are subject to BHE disapproval. *Id.* from public higher education institutions are subject to The current BHE Undergraduate Admissions Standards establishes "minimum standards for undergraduate admission to Massachusetts' state universities and University of Massachusetts (UMass) campuses."¹ These standards include minimum thresholds for high school grade point average (HSGPA) and SAT/ACT scores below which applicants are not eligible for admission. Citing concerns regarding the relevance and equity of standardized test scores, Massachusetts public four year institutions began to voluntarily transition to test optional in 2016, with all public four-year institutions doing so by academic year 2020-21.

Between the start of this test optional pilot in 2016 and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic) in academic year 2019-20, there was a steady upward trend in the number of applicants applying without test scores, as seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Applicants applying without test scores by segment, 2016-21.

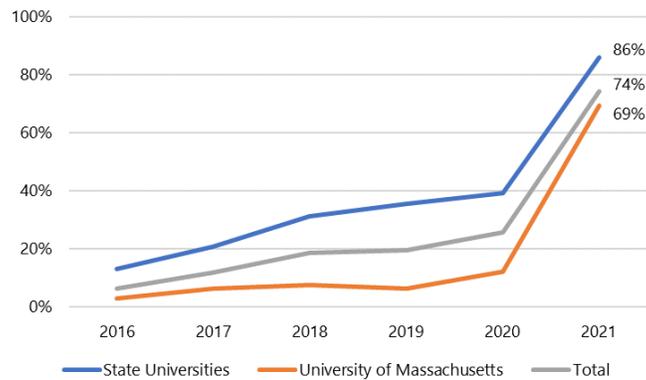


Source: HEIRS.

While the pandemic led to a dramatic increase in students applying test optional (i.e., without test scores) in 2021, this increase was already underway prior to the pandemic. The increases could in part be explained by additional institutions joining the pilot over time, yet the proportion of eligible applicants applying without test scores (i.e., those applying to an institution with a test optional policy) also increased during this time frame, as seen in Figure 2.

¹ Board of Higher Education [BHE]. (2019). *Undergraduate admissions standards for the Massachusetts state university system and the University of Massachusetts*. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Page 1.

Figure 2. Percent of eligible applicants applying without test scores by segment, 2016-21.

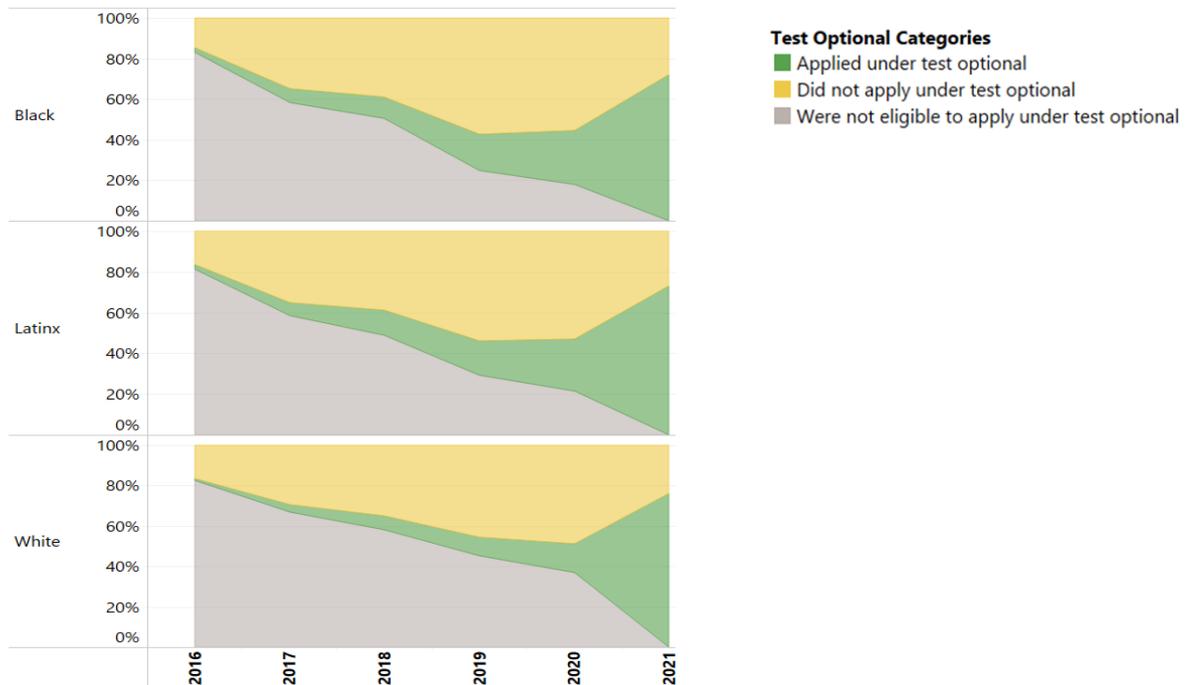


Source: HEIRS.

The rate at which applicants opted to apply without test scores was also increasing at test optional institutions at a steady rate prior to the onset of the pandemic. By 2020, this had reached 40 percent of eligible State University applicants and 12 percent of eligible UMass applicants before spiking during the pandemic. Once all institutions moved to test optional, nearly three quarters of applicants to Massachusetts public institutions took advantage of the policy.

This increase in percent of eligible applicants applying without test scores occurs across demographic groups, but it is more pronounced among Black and Latinx applicants, visible in Figure 3 below. The area shaded yellow represents those applicants that applied to a test optional institution and *did not submit* test scores; the green area represents those applicants that applied to a test optional institution and *did submit* test scores; and the gray area represents those applicants that applied to institutions that were not participating in the pilot at the time of application.

Figure 3. Percent of demographic group applying test optional, 2016-21.



Source: HEIRS.

The share of applicants applying without test scores (green-shaded area), grows for each of these demographic groups between pre-pandemic years 2016-2020, but the growth is much more pronounced among Black and Latinx applicants than for White applicants. In 2021, during the height of the pandemic, there is an increase across all groups to approximately three quarters of applicants applying without test scores.

Due to the demonstrated impact of standardized test scores on racial equity in the admissions process, as well as the growing popularity of prospective students applying without test scores, DHE staff began to explore a move to a more permanent policy during academic year 2021-22. Throughout this work, DHE staff presented to the BHE Academic Affairs and Student Success (AA&SS) Advisory Committee five times on the admissions standards and test optional policies, covering the following topics:

- Background on standardized tests and test optional policies.** DHE staff reviewed extensive research demonstrating the limited utility of standardized tests in predicting students' subsequent success in higher education. DHE staff specifically addressed: 1) the limited predictive value of test scores in relation to HSGPA and other measures and 2) bias in test scores based on test taker characteristics (e.g., race).
- Massachusetts context and the recent history of standardized testing, as well as the development of the test optional pilot.** This presentation demonstrated that standardized test score disparities across race/ethnicity are

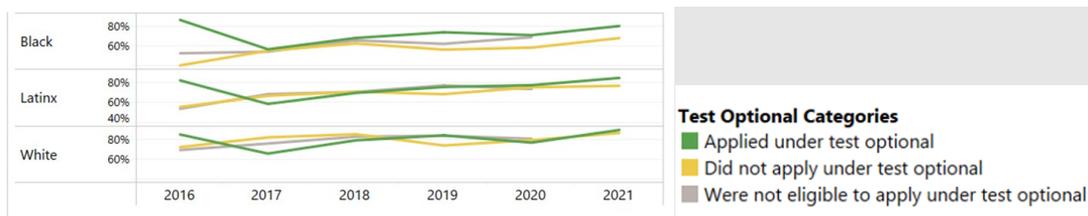
present and persistent over time in Massachusetts. Institutions led the transition to test optional policies following their own analyses of the academic literature and institutional data.

- **Case studies of peer states.** This included addressing the legal challenges some states (i.e., California) have faced in implementing system-wide test optional policies, and the successes other states (e.g., Maryland) have experienced with institution-led test optional pilot programs.
- **Evaluation of quantitative and qualitative data on the Massachusetts test optional pilot policies.** Staff presented on trends in applications, admission, and yield across those applicants submitting or not submitting test scores, disaggregated by race. Staff also spoke with admissions and enrollment management staff at most institutions to gauge support and concerns related to test optional policies.

In considering whether a test optional policy is successful, there should be evidence that students applying without test scores are admitted and retained at similar rates to those that do submit test scores. Such a trend would mean that admissions personnel are comparably accurate in their assessments of applicants' capacity for success, which are then borne out by similar levels of retention.

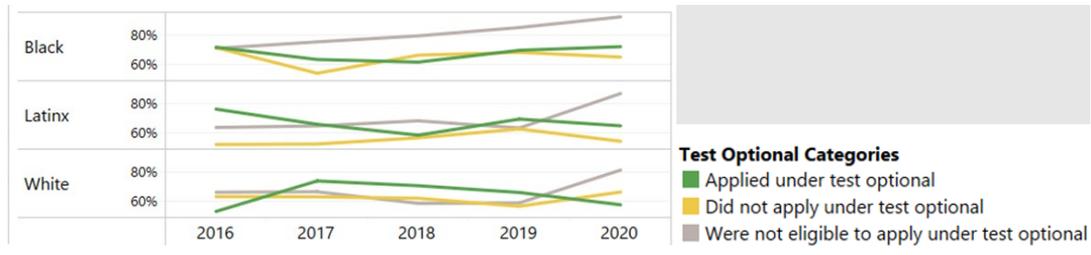
The data indicate that, at the system level, institutions are admitting and retaining at higher rates students of color that apply without test scores than those that submit scores (Figures 4 and 5, respectively).

Figure 4. Admission rates across score submitting and non-submitting applicants, 2016-21.



Source: HEIRS.

Figure 5. Retention rates across score submitting and non-submitting applicants, 2016-21.



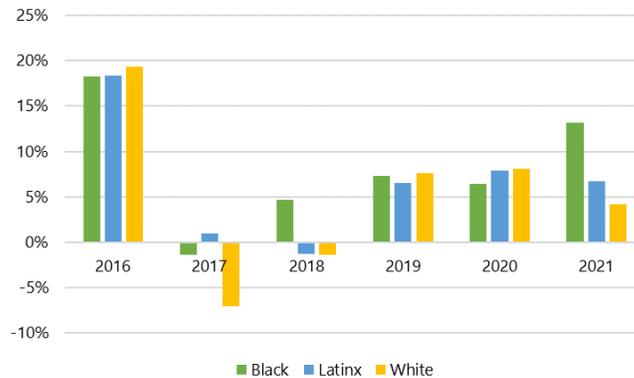
Source: HEIRS.

However, at the segment level, there were noticeable differences in admission and retention rates (from first- to second-year) across these demographic groups. In 2020, prior to the pandemic spike in applications without test scores, State Universities admitted 77 percent of Black applicants that did not submit test scores, compared to 51 percent at the UMass segment. For Latinx students, the rates were 64 percent and 61 percent, respectively. Both of these rates are below those for White applicants (80 percent and 62 percent at the respective segments). Similarly, while retention rates for student applying without test scores were higher than those submitting test scores, those rates were generally higher at the UMass segment than the State University segment.

DHE data indicate that Black and Latinx applicants are, at the system level, more likely to gain admission and retain at an equal or higher rate than those who do submit test scores. These trends demonstrate that admissions personnel are equally successful in identifying and admitting applicants that, with appropriate institution support, have the capacity to succeed in postsecondary education and persist in their studies, with or without the consideration of standardized test scores in admission decisions.

Beyond admissions and retention, the yield rate, or the rate at which an applicant matriculates after being offered admission, represents another measure of success for the institution itself. A higher yield rate indicates greater interest in an institution, as admitted students are choosing to enroll in that institution over another. Figure 6 represents the differences in yield rates across the system between applicants that *do not submit* test scores and those that *do* submit scores.

Figure 6. Differences in yield rates across score non-submitting (+) and submitting (-) applicants, 2016-21.



Source: HEIRS.

In the first year of the pilot (2016), the yield rate for applicants that did not submit scores outpaced those that did by approximately 18 percent, which was consistent across demographic groups. As the pilot expanded, there is some fluctuation in yield rates. In 2017 and 2018, the yield rates were fairly similar, with a relatively small difference hovering between zero and seven percent. However, beginning in 2019, the data show that admitted applicants who did not submit test scores consistently yielded at higher rates than students that did submit test scores. These rates stayed in the 5 to 10 percent range, with a spike in yield rate among Black applicants in 2021.

Numerous factors lead to a student to decide to matriculate at a given institution, including geography, cost and financial aid, academic programs, and others. But the data show a clear trend that a student admitted without test scores is more likely to matriculate than those that do submit test scores. When paired with the preceding data on retention rates, which showed that students admitted without test scores are retained at greater or comparable rates, it becomes clear that institutions are successfully identifying and admitting students that have interest in the institution and will succeed upon arrival.

Beyond yield and retention rates, graduation rates would further illuminate the effects of this policy, but there are currently several obstacles to accessing and analyzing graduation data at this time. In considering graduation rates, DHE would consider, 4-, 5-, and 6-year graduation rates, but most public institutions joined the pilot between 2018 and 2021. Those that did join in 2016 and 2017 initially had relatively few applicants applying without test scores (see Figure 1), making those data unreliable for evaluating the policy. To effectively evaluate graduation rates in relation to test optional admissions, additional data will need to be collected.

Following these evaluative efforts, DHE staff propose that the attached proposed Test Optional policy be approved for inclusion in the Undergraduate Admissions Standards,

and replace the current section on standardized tests for first-year applicants. The proposed policy is included in the accompanying document *Attachment: Proposed Admissions Standards Test Requirement*.

Procedural Background

Department staff first presented on the test optional pilot program on September 22, 2021, at the Board of Higher Education annual meeting, and subsequently presented to the Academic Affairs & Student Success (AA&SS) Advisory Council five times between October 2021 and October 2022. During that time, Department staff spoke with 17 admissions and enrollment management personnel across nine public, four-year undergraduate institutions to better understand their implementation of test optional admissions and to gauge institutional support for the policy moving forward.

On May 5, 2023, the proposed policy was shared for review and feedback with State University Presidents and University of Massachusetts Chancellors and President, as well as Community College Presidents. Following a two-week review period, the only feedback received a note of support from one president to reiterate their support for the permanent transition to test optional admission.

Staff Recommendation

Staff have thoroughly researched the proposed policy and have vetted the same with stakeholders. Staff recommendation is for approval.

Attachment: Proposed Admissions Standards Test Requirement

Standardized Tests and Admissions

Effective for the 2023 application cycle (for Fall 2024 entry and beyond), the submission of standardized test scores will not be required for first-year applicants to be considered eligible for admission to Massachusetts State Universities or UMass institutions.

Students should note, however, that State University and UMass institutions may opt-in to requiring standardized test scores for specific academic programs. This requirement will be determined on a program-by-program basis. If an institution does require test scores for admissions eligibility for specific programs, those requirements will be clearly communicated to prospective applicants and included in relevant admissions materials (e.g., admissions and program websites).

In accordance with the admissions practices of each individual institution, students may themselves choose to submit test scores for consideration.

BHE Policy with State Universities and UMass campuses regarding Standardized Test Scores

Program-specific Test Requirements:

As stated above, State University and UMass institutions may establish additional admissions requirements and thus opt-in to requiring standardized test scores on a program-by-program basis.¹ However, given the evidence of the negative impact of standardized tests on equitable admissions practices, the BHE requires that institutions seek approval from the DHE to require test scores on that basis, and provide appropriate evidence to support a decision to require scores for programmatic admissions eligibility. Further, any “test required” policies must be clearly communicated to prospective applicants and included in relevant admissions materials (e.g., admissions and program websites).

The DHE will, in partnership with stakeholders, continue to assess the degree to which test optional admission policies affect institutions’ admissions practices. For more information regarding the transition to test optional admissions in Massachusetts public institutions, please see the following Board of Higher Education motion and supporting materials: (insert link).

Test Scores and Special Admissions:

As stated in the *Minimum GPA Requirement* section, a high school GPA (HSGPA) of 3.0 is the required minimum HSGPA for admission to State Universities and UMass campuses. First-year applicants with a high school GPA (HSGPA) of greater than a 2.0 but less than a 3.0 are nonetheless eligible for admission to State University and UMass institutions.² However, for reporting purposes, they will be considered “Special Admissions Applicants,” which includes those students who demonstrate their potential for academic success through indicators other than their HSGPA (e.g., improving grades, special talents, strong recommendations).

Therefore, per this policy, all first-year applicants with a HSGPA of 2.0 or greater will be eligible to apply for admission without test scores. However, if those students choose to submit test scores, we will continue the prior policy that those students satisfying the preexisting scale for admission, shown below, will not be considered special admissions for reporting purposes.

SAT Score Sliding Scale Tables for University of Massachusetts

Table 2: SAT Test Administration After March 2016

Required SAT or ACT scores for first-year applicants to UMass

Campuses Weighted Average GPA	Combined SAT Score (Evidenced Based Reading & Writing and Mathematics)	ACT Score
2.51 - 2.99	1030	20
2.41 - 2.50	1070	21
2.31 - 2.40	1110	22
2.21 - 2.30	1140	23
2.11 - 2.20	1180	24
2.00 - 2.10	1220	25

SAT Total Score Sliding Scale Table for State Universities

Table 3: SAT Administration After March 2016

Required SAT or ACT Scores for first-year applicants to State Universities

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Current Admissions Standards Test Requirement

SAT/ACT Score Requirements for Applicants

Note: For Fall 2016, 2017, and 2018, a number of Massachusetts State Universities and UMass campuses are participating in a test optional pilot. At present, Bridgewater State University, Fitchburg State University, Framingham State University, Mass Art, Salem State University, UMass Boston, UMass Dartmouth, UMass Lowell, and Worcester State University allow SAT test optional.

Please note that some programs at these institutions may require SAT submission. For further information, please contact the admissions office at these institutions.

If an institution is not participating in the test optional pilot, all first-year applicants (including international) who meet the minimum average weighted GPA of 3.0 and are within three years of their high school graduation must submit their SAT or ACT scores.

International first-year students may be exempt if it is not possible to take these tests due to extreme hardship. For first-year applicants (including international) who do not meet the minimum weighted 3.0 GPA requirement, they must earn the following SAT or ACT scores in order to be eligible for admission.

NOTE: AN APPLICANT WITH A HIGH SCHOOL MINIMUM WEIGHTED GPA BELOW 2.0 MAY NOT BE ADMITTED TO A STATE UNIVERSITY OR UMASS UNDERGRADUATE CAMPUS.

SAT Score Sliding Scale Tables for University of Massachusetts

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