

Applying to college in a test-optional admissions landscape: trends from Common App data

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced several unique challenges for students and their families, as well as for colleges and universities, as they navigated the 2020-21 application season. High schools [were operating via fully remote instruction](#), students [lacked access to standardized testing](#), and families faced immense strain and financial uncertainty as a result of the global health crisis. Colleges faced the dual realities of [reduced first-time student enrollment](#) and fears about current students [returning to campus](#) as well as the possibility of reduced application volume for the 2021–22 school year.

Many colleges took steps to reduce barriers to applying during the pandemic, most notably in the relaxation of test score reporting requirements. Proponents of test-optional policies have long noted inequities embedded within college admissions and the disparities in opportunity that test scores often reflect. This season, 89% of Common App member institutions did not require test scores from their applicants (compared to roughly one third in 2019–20).

In this Common App research brief, we highlight changes in first-year applicant behaviors during a pandemic year when many colleges and universities scrapped their standardized testing requirements. Specifically, we explore changes in applicants' test score reporting rates and the extent to which these rates varied across communities and student subgroups in 2020–21. We then discuss how test score reporting trends varied based on the characteristics of the colleges receiving the applications. We close the report with considerations for college and universities considering whether to employ test-optional policies as a part of their long-term admissions strategy.

Contents

[Key findings](#)

[Overall reporting rates and evidence of access gaps](#)

[Variation in applicants' test score reporting patterns](#)

[Variation in reporting rates by member characteristics](#)

[Conclusion](#)

Key findings

Applicants responded to a changed standardized testing and admissions landscape by reporting scores less often, but their reporting behaviors varied meaningfully across several dimensions. In our analyses, several themes emerged:

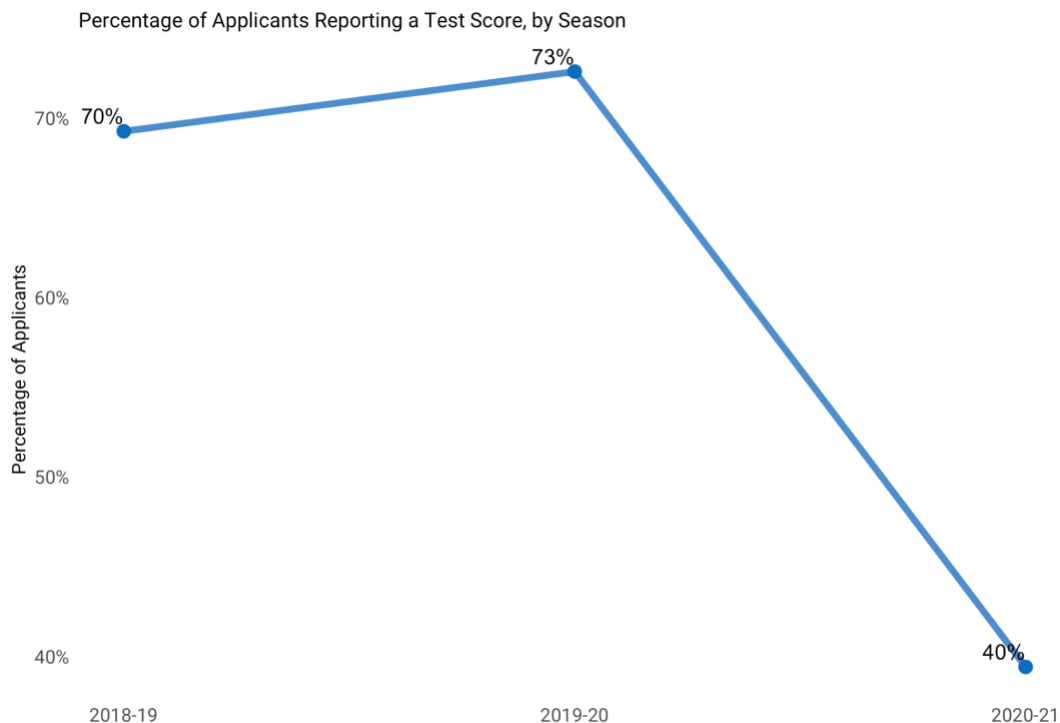
1. Overall, 40% of applicants reported a test score in an application this season. The rate fell from 73% in 2019–20 and 70% in 2018–19. Changes in institutional policies certainly influenced this trend, but we also observed major changes in when students reported taking their standardized tests this season.
2. Test score reporting patterns varied meaningfully across communities. Specifically, we found that test score reporting rates were highest in several southern and midwestern states and lowest in several northeastern and western states. We also observed far higher average reporting rates among applicants living in more affluent communities, as defined by local median household income in applicants' local ZIP codes.
3. First-generation and underrepresented minority¹ (URM) applicants were less likely to report test scores than non-first-generation and non-URM applicants. Their rates of reporting also declined at sharper rates relative to 2019–20.
4. Some applicants demonstrated different test score reporting behaviors across their various applications. Specifically, six percent of applicants reported scores in some, but not all, of their applications (up from four percent last season).
5. Finally, more selective member institutions, both public and private, more often received test scores with applications than did less selective colleges. Test score reporting rates declined for all member subgroups and rates of decline were similar across subgroups.

¹ We use the term underrepresented minority (URM) in alignment with conventions employed by the [National Science Foundation](#). In this report, applicants identifying as Black or African American, Latinx, Native American or Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander are classified as URM applicants.

Overall reporting rates and evidence of access gaps

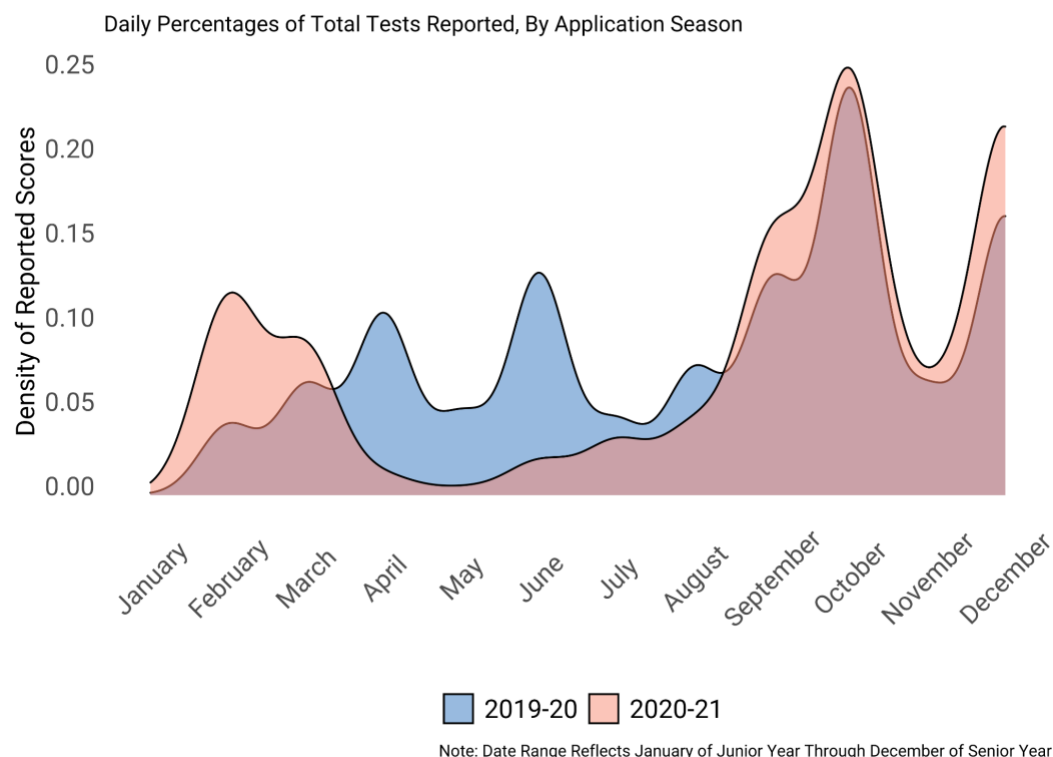
After reaching a high of 73% last season, the rate of applicants reporting a test score on at least one of their Common App applications declined to 40% in 2020–21. We present this trend in applicant reporting behavior since 2018–19 in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Fewer than half of all applicants reported test scores in 2020–21



Nearly 90% of Common App colleges and universities offered students the opportunity to apply without standardized test scores this year, so it is likely that many students felt less inclined to report their scores with such widespread adoption of test-optional policies. However, [anecdotal reports](#) have highlighted how many students have struggled to find testing sites when they wanted to take the ACT or SAT. We found some suggestive evidence in our own data that applicants lacked access to testing sites in the early months of the pandemic. In **Figure 2**, we compare the shares of applicants' reported test dates across the most frequently reported months in the 2019–20 and 2020–21 seasons. While 2019–20 applicants reported nearly one third of their test scores between April and July following their junior year, applicants in this year's class reported a far smaller share of total scores during this time period. Though it is true that members' score reporting policies likely impacted applicants' decisions to report scores, it is also unlikely that the scores applicants were choosing not to report would be so heavily concentrated within the Spring and Summer unless some students lacked access to testing during this period.

Figure 2: Fewer students this season reported tests in spring/summer of junior year

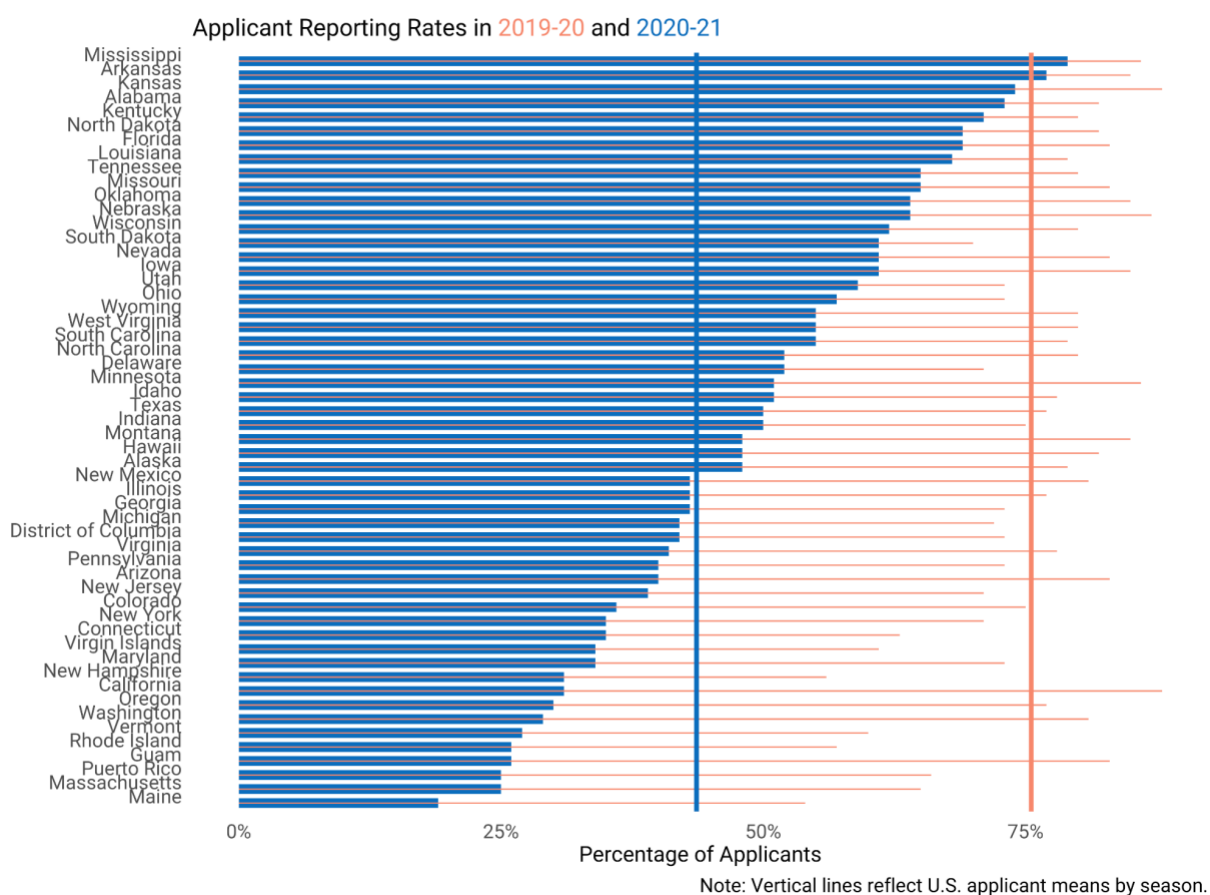


Variation in applicants' test score reporting patterns

Variation across states

Overall, the percentage of applicants reporting a test score declined by nearly half (from 73% in 2019–20 to 40% in 2020–21), but reporting rates were not uniformly low across contexts. We present in **Figure 3** a graph highlighting across-state differences in test score reporting trends among domestic applicants between 2019–20 and 2020–21. The blue lines reflect current year reporting rates, while the salmon lines reflect reporting rates from last season. Reporting rates declined across the nation, but a majority of applicants across most southeastern and several midwestern states still reported scores in 2020–21. Students in many of the northeastern and northwestern states, on the other hand, were much less likely to report test scores. These trends likely reflect variation in different admissions and aid policies in these regions, as well as variation in COVID-19-related closures and access to testing sites.

Figure 3: Reporting rates declined nationwide, varied across states



Variation across communities

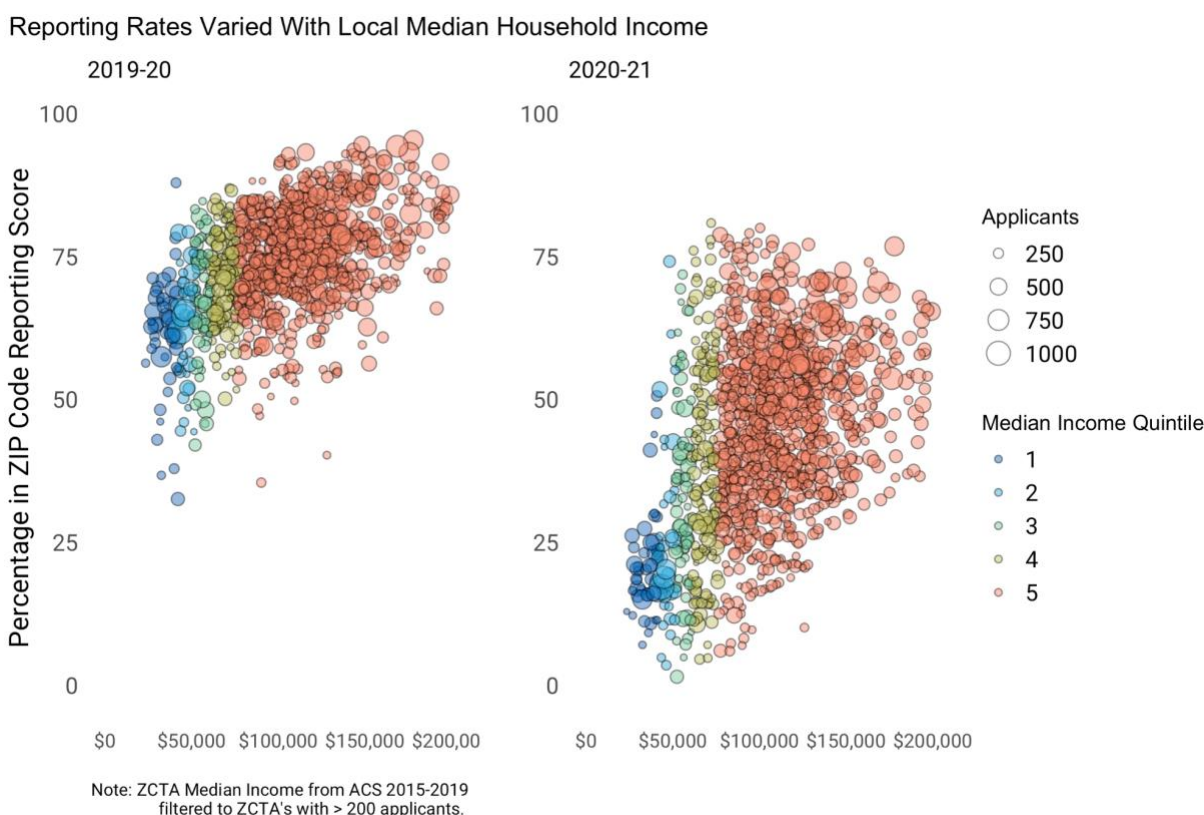
Test score reporting rates also varied within states and regions. We linked applicant data to estimates of median household income at the ZIP Code level to assess the degree to which test score reporting rates varied by relative community affluence.² As we highlight in **Figure 4**, we first observed that the majority of Common App applicants resided in the nation's highest-earning communities. Specifically, nearly 60% of applicants applied from ZIP Codes in the top 20% of the median household income distribution.

We also found that, in general, test score reporting rates declined across communities, relative to last season. The distribution of the graph on the right, reflecting reporting rates in 2020–21, clearly sits below that of the graph on the left (2019–20). Finally, we see a much clearer relationship between test score reporting rates and local median household income in 2020–21. Specifically, the lowest rates of reporting were typically in communities within the bottom

² We used ZCTA-level median household income estimates from the American Community Survey (5-year estimates, 2015–2019).

quintile of the median household income distribution. While this was also true in 2019–20, the amplification of this pattern during the pandemic may suggest that testing, or test score reporting, had imposed a greater barrier on students from lower-income communities.

Figure 4: Percentage in zip code reporting score by zip code-level median household income



Variation across applicant demographic subgroups

The previous section examined the degree to which test score reporting rates varied across communities. We also assessed the degree to which reporting rates varied based on whether or not applicants identified as either first-generation or underrepresented minority (URM). We found that, in general, these underrepresented groups both reported test scores at lower rates than their peers and experienced a sharper decline in reporting rates between 2019–20 and 2020–21.

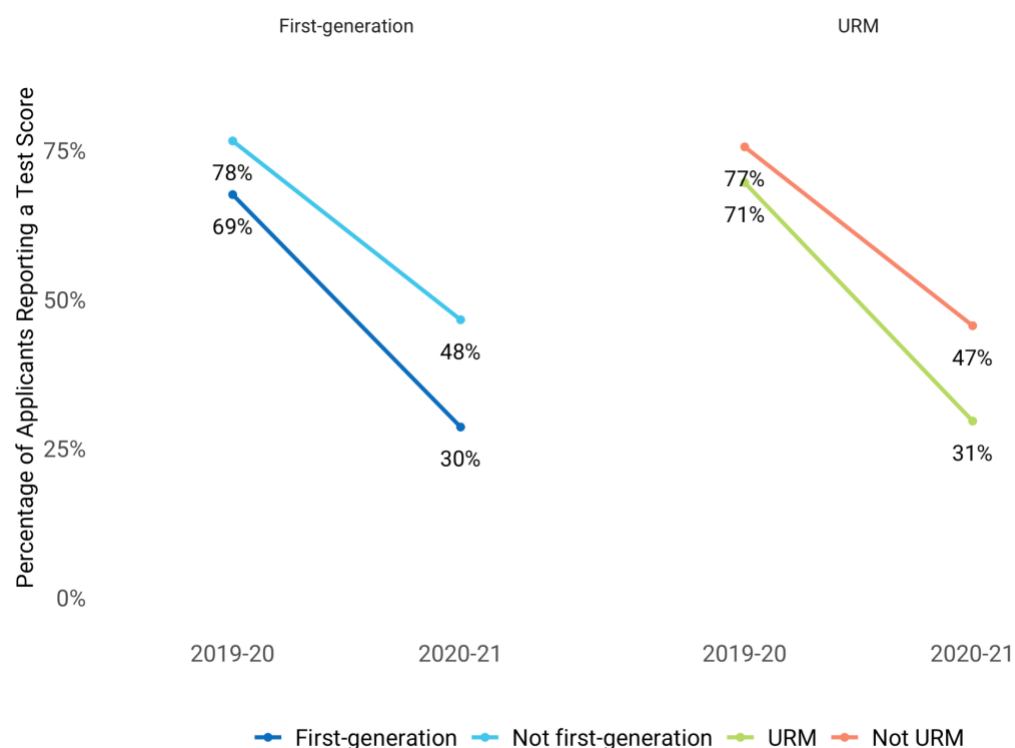
In **Figure 5**, we present comparisons of test score reporting rates by applicants' first-generation and URM status. Non-first-generation students reported test scores at a higher rate than their first-generation peers in 2019–20 (78% vs. 69%). This season, that nine-point gap doubled to 18 points (48% vs. 30%), though overall reporting rates declined for both groups. Comparisons of reporting rates by URM status followed a similar trend, as non-URM applicants were more likely

to report test scores last season (77% vs. 71%) and this six-point gap nearly tripled to 16% this season (47% to 31%).

Note: Students' decisions to report their test scores in their applications are likely related, at least in part, to the schools where they chose to apply. We conducted the above analyses using restricted samples of applicants to various types of institutions and found no substantive changes in the subgroup gaps reported in the above section.

Figure 5: Underrepresented subgroups reported less often, saw larger decreases in reporting rates

Percentage of applicants reporting a test score by year and first-generation/URM status

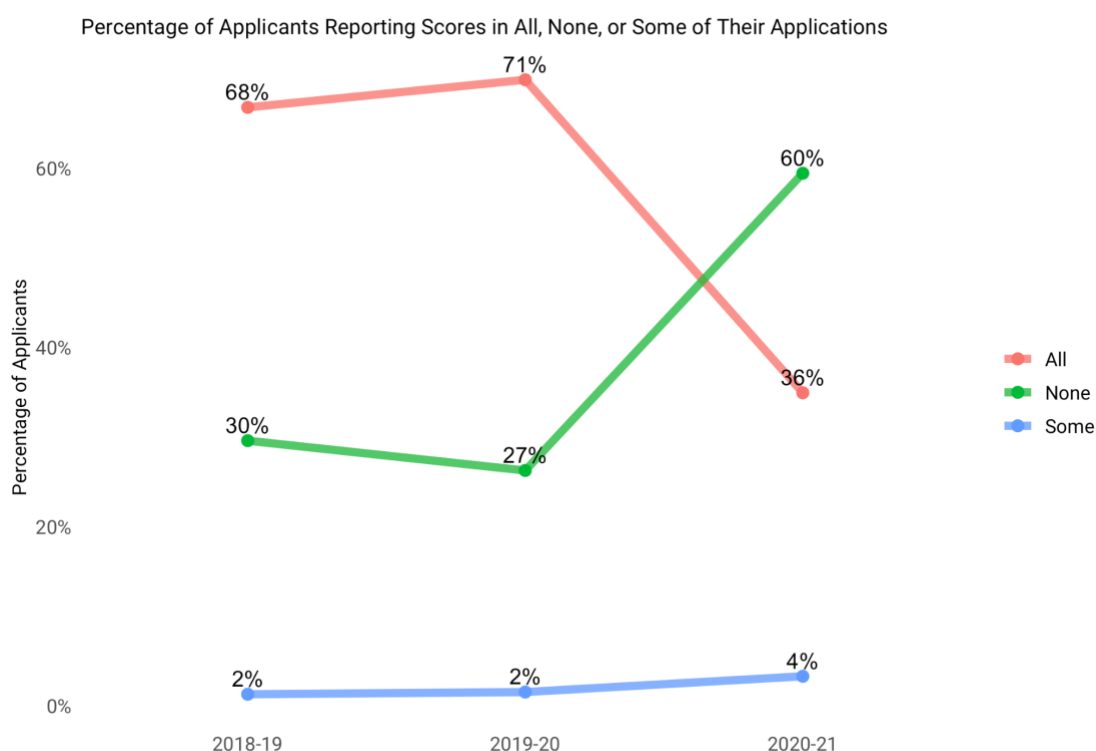


Variation within individual applicants: did applicants report in some, but not all, cases?

We then assessed the degree to which students' decisions to report scores varied across their applications during a season where students could elect whether or not to report in each of their respective applications. As we show in **Figure 6**, the largest shift was in the share of applicants reporting test scores in none of their applications. This share rose from 27% last season to 60% this season. There was also an increase in the share of applicants who chose to report their scores in some, but not all, of their applications. While only 2% of applicants demonstrated such

“strategic” test score reporting behaviors in 2019-20, 4% did so in 2020–21. Finally, we observed that 71% of applicants reported test scores in all of their applications in 2019-20, compared to 36% in 2020-21.

Figure 6: Applicant reporting trends shifted dramatically from the prior year



Variation in reporting rates by member characteristics

After exploring variation in reporting practices at the applicant level, we examined the degree to which test score reporting rates varied as a function of the member institutions to which applications were submitted. While most colleges and universities did not require test scores for admission this season, applicants to more selective colleges, for example, may have felt pressure to submit their scores in case they could provide a competitive advantage for a relatively scarce offer of admission.

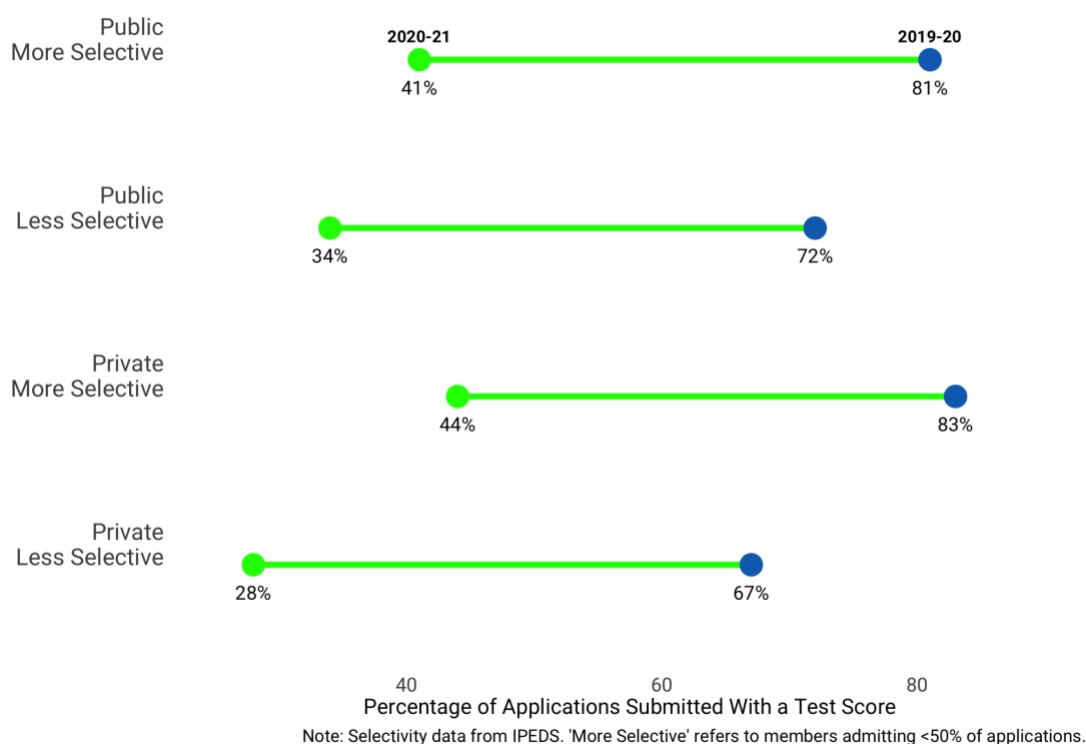
In **Figure 7**, we present a chart comparing 2019–20 to 2020–21 reporting rates by member institution institutional type and admit rate (selectivity). We used IPEDS data (2018–19, as these were most current, and most commonly referenced, in our ongoing data communications throughout the 2020–21 season) to group member institutions by their institutional type (public or private) and their undergraduate selectivity. We classified institutions as ‘more selective’ when their undergraduate admit rate fell below 50% and classified all others at or above 50% as

'less selective.' We omitted members without institutional control or selectivity data from these analyses. As a result, these analyses solely reflect members located within the United States.

We observed that more selective members, both public and private, experienced higher test score reporting rates in both 2019–20 and 2020–21 than their less selective peers. Last season, this may have been a function of the fact that less selective members were less likely to require test scores. This season, however, the vast majority of members eliminated test score requirements. Nonetheless, applicants to more selective member institutions may have felt pressure to include their test scores in their applications in order to bolster their chances for admission.

In each season, applications to private, more selective institutions were the most likely to include test scores (83% in 2019–20 and 44% in 2020–21), while applications to private, less selective institutions were the least likely to include test scores (67% and 28%).

Figure 7: Test score submission rates declined across member subgroups
Percentage of applications submitted with a test score by public/private status and selectivity



Conclusion

Standardized test scores have been a central feature of recent debates around increasing access to and diversity in higher education. The pandemic accelerated a growing trend toward test-optional admissions, as the vast majority of Common App member institutions did not

require test scores for the 2020–21 application cycle. Our results reflect that fewer students reported scores when they were not required to do so, but that access to testing and changes to member policies may have each had an influence on applicants' behaviors. We saw that applicants in lower-income communities, as well as first-generation and URM applicants, were less likely to report their scores, perhaps reflecting that score reporting requirements present greater barriers in the college admissions process for these students.

Previous studies have examined the degree to which test-optional policies increase the diversity of colleges' enrollment, with the [most recent study](#) finding modest increases in the composition of low-income and URM students at institutions that enacted test-optional policies. The pandemic created changes to virtually every facet of the lives of students and families, as well as the daily existence of colleges and universities, such that an evaluation of test-optional policies in the pandemic year is likely to be confounded by a host of influences. Therefore, we cannot isolate the specific impacts, positive or negative, of test-optional policies in this turbulent season.

As colleges and universities consider whether or not they will require test scores in the coming years, they should contemplate the degree to which: a) they perceive the information garnered from test scores as valuable; b) test score requirements are imposing barriers, perhaps disproportionate barriers, upon students who would otherwise seek entry to their academic communities; and c) the information they seek from test scores is valuable enough to justify the barriers that requirements may impose. Finally, institutions should continually monitor their admissions processes to determine whether components aside from standardized testing requirements may be undermining their stated aims to expand access and opportunity to a more diverse cohort of students.