

*Test-Optional Admission
at a Liberal Arts College:
A Founding Mission Affirmed*

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Test-Optional Admission at a Liberal Arts College: A Founding Mission Affirmed

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In this essay, Father Brian J. Shanley discusses Providence College's pilot program to eliminate standardized test scores from the required components of an admission application. Building on the college's ninety-year history of opening the doors of higher education to underrepresented populations, Providence College's test-optional policy is designed to ensure that students with strong academic preparation are not excluded from matriculating because of poor test performance. Shanley provides insight into the college's process of holistic application review and the institution's plan to study the impact of its new policy on the makeup and success of its student body.

Providence College is the only college or university in the United States administered by the Dominican Friars, a Catholic religious order established in 1216 and dedicated to the pursuit of truth. Established in 1917, the college today has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 3,800 students and offers degrees in forty-nine academic majors. Over the last decade, Providence College has been recognized in numerous college guides as a prominent and selective private liberal arts college.

Providence College's founding mission as a Catholic and Dominican college was to provide a comprehensive liberal arts education to first-generation immigrant and multicultural students who might otherwise be unable to obtain a college degree. At the time of the college's founding, a majority of residents in the state of Rhode Island were Catholics from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, including Irish, Italian, French, Polish, and other immi-

grant groups. The Diocese of Providence, which had oversight of all Catholic parishes and charitable agencies throughout the state, also sponsored a well-developed system of Catholic elementary and secondary schools. However, no Catholic higher education institution existed. Discrimination against Catholics and immigrants as well as a lack of resources prevented many capable young men from pursuing higher education at existing private and public colleges in the state. Providence College was founded to meet this pressing need and, with a clear intention to battle prejudice and promote human dignity, offered admission to students of any faith or background.

Continuing to reflect that original mission, Providence College today remains committed to inviting and enrolling applicants from underrepresented populations, including economically disadvantaged students from urban schools and first-generation college students. To do so, the college has launched two initiatives to address the perception of a “student accessibility gap” that has emerged in the last decade.

First, Providence College shifted a greater portion of its resources away from exclusively merit-based scholarships and toward need-based financial aid. We found that offering merit-based scholarships — which often benefit students from wealthier communities with better school systems — resulted in fewer resources for the college to distribute to lower-income students with greater financial need. Due to this shift of resources, Providence College now offers merit-based scholarships only to students invited into its highly selective Liberal Arts Honors Program, which offers students of high academic ability and initiative the opportunity to pursue a more in-depth and rigorous version of the college’s core curriculum. This offer is extended to graduating seniors who have completed the most challenging program of study possible during their high school careers. For the classes of 2010 and 2011, fewer than 15 percent of each entering class received a merit-based award, compared to nearly 25 percent in previous years. This shift in resources allowed the financial aid staff to reduce the percentage of unmet need for students with significant eligibility and to increase the percentage of students whose need was fully met. Approximately 35 percent of the entering class received more Providence College need-based grants than they would have before the reduction in merit scholarships. Continuing to increase the college’s endowment in order to eventually meet 100 percent of each student’s need is a top priority for the current administration.

In today’s highly competitive higher education environment, Providence College has grown increasingly concerned about prospective students, especially those from historically underrepresented populations, who are not gaining access to a private liberal arts education. While the college has always emphasized a holistic review of students’ credentials for admission, there is mounting evidence that students and their parents, more than ever before, have become overly focused on improving standardized test scores. Furthermore, economically disadvantaged students are less likely to have the

resources necessary to participate in test-preparation programs. This reality has created an inequity that reveals itself in the correlation between family income and standardized test scores. This is inconsistent with the values of an institution founded to increase opportunities for first-generation immigrants. This inequity is caused by cultural and language barriers that often impact test performance and by socioeconomic factors that reduce the possibility of students paying for test preparation and/or taking the tests multiple times.

With these factors in mind, beginning in July 2006, Providence College introduced a second initiative: a four-year pilot program to stop requiring undergraduate applicants to submit SAT or ACT scores as part of the admission application. Under this new policy, prospective students who choose not to submit standardized test scores receive full consideration, without penalty, for both admission and merit-based scholarships. Providence College was the second Catholic institution among over two hundred four-year Catholic colleges and universities in the nation to adopt a test-optional policy.

After more than a year of study, the test-optional policy was approved for two primary reasons. A key finding from a 2006 analysis conducted by the college's Office of Institutional Research confirmed that, among a number of incoming student variables collected on entering classes from fall 2002 to fall 2005, high school grade point average was the strongest single predictor of Providence College students' academic success, retention from first to second year, and graduation after four years. The new test-optional policy thus reinforces the college's long-standing position that a student's high school career is the most important academic component in the review for admission.

Second, despite efforts to communicate the importance of high school performance over standardized test scores, students often believe a low test score rules out their chances for admission. These students are often mistakenly choosing not to apply to private liberal arts colleges like Providence College that weigh other academic criteria far more heavily than SAT and ACT test scores. For example, according to Providence College's own literature and published college guidebooks, the SAT scores of the middle 50 percent of the class of 2010 ranged from 1120 to 1290. This is information that may discourage applications from students with strong high school records but lower test scores.

As part of a holistic review of students' credentials, the college's Committee on Admission weighs each student's high school academic record (evidenced by the strength of the curriculum and the grades received), an extracurricular profile, a required essay, two letters of recommendation, and any other information that a candidate chooses to share. Providence College offers no remedial coursework and so must ensure that each student offered admission is academically prepared to succeed in the college's curriculum. The consideration of academic preparation and the personal fit to Providence College is essential in efforts to shape each entering class.

For the past nine years, the admissions staff at Providence College has “recalculated” the high school GPA of each candidate on an unweighted 4.0 scale, and then assigned a rating to the student’s curriculum based on courses offered by his or her high school and the student’s choices. The rating includes all classes taken in the five major subject areas (English, mathematics, science, social science/history, and foreign language), as well as religion/philosophy classes at Catholic or other private schools. Each high school’s grading scale (whether 90–100, A-B-C, or some other approach) is converted to a 4.0 scale based on information available on the transcript or the school profile. For example, if the profile indicates that an “88” is a B+, that would convert to a 3.33 on our scale. Through this process, we establish a standardized benchmark of classroom performance.

This GPA history — applied uniformly to the applicant pool — provides assurance that measuring student aptitudes and accomplishments can be achieved without a standardized test score while offering important historical context for predicting success in the Providence College classroom. It also confirms that a high grade point average alone cannot guarantee admission; students must take a selection of the most challenging courses available to be competitive within the applicant pool and to assure preparation for Providence College’s rigorous curriculum. While other institutions and national agencies may use standardized tests as a valuable measure for predicting academic success, we are confident that this recalculated GPA method provides a similar and appropriate measurement for predicting the academic success of Providence College’s applicant pool.

When evaluating applicants’ high school curriculum, the questions asked include: What is the depth of honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate offerings? What percentage of each graduating class continues on to four-year colleges? Does the school have a history of grade inflation or are the highest grades more difficult to come by? By looking at the history of any high school from which we consistently receive applications, we can detect patterns that answer these and other questions. For example, if a student with a 3.67 (A–) on our scale ranked in the top 10 percent of his or her high school class five years ago, what does it mean that a student with that GPA is now in the top third of the class? This evaluation may require a call to the college counselor at that high school to understand whether the current class is more academically advanced than in previous years, or whether there are other new factors that should be considered.

Since we consider every Providence College applicant in the context of what academic opportunities are available at his or her high school, our expectations for each candidate are based on the opportunities he or she has been offered. The limitations on honors and Advanced Placement classes at urban or rural high schools should not unfairly disadvantage those who have no choice regarding which school they attend. Utilizing historical data that the Providence College admission staff has gathered and maintained on class-

room performance from several thousand high schools nationwide, we can evaluate academic performance within the context of the applicant's high school without standardized test results.

For the class of 2011, the admissions staff reviewed applications from slightly more than two thousand high schools. Because the vast majority of these high schools have been represented in our applicant pool over the past several years, the admissions staff member responsible for the area is able to document the curriculum that the high school offers. While no rank order of all high schools exists, this established history helps to define the context in which students from a given high school are considered.

Maintaining accurate information on the thousands of high schools represented in the Providence College applicant pool requires the diligence of a committed admissions staff. Every admissions staff counselor is assigned a specific geographic territory; it is the responsibility of those staff members to learn about high schools in their assigned territories — particularly those secondary schools without an established history — and to understand the academic context of each school through published profiles and personal interaction with the secondary school counselor. Over time, this background — coupled with our knowledge of how well past students from that high school have succeeded at Providence College — helps the Committee on Admission understand the academic environment in “feeder” schools from which there is a regular stream of applicants, as well as those with which the college does not have a long association.

With more than ten applications for every class space, final deliberations for the selection of a class do not simply come down to “ability to succeed” as defined by the traditional academic measures of classroom performance and standardized test scores. In reality, the vast majority of our applicants are prepared to succeed in the classroom; therefore, the focal point of the holistic review emphasizes consideration of each candidate's nonquantifiable credentials in the context of his or her academic performance and compatibility with Providence College's mission.

This individualized consideration is at the heart of selective college admission: identifying students who are good academic and personal fits to the institution. Whether or not standardized test scores are required, selective colleges and universities often differentiate candidates in their pools by means that go far beyond GPAs and test scores. Thousands of candidates have similar numbers, but in shaping a class for Providence College that populates forty-nine academic majors, supports more than eighty clubs and organizations, balances gender, creates socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic diversity, and supports our fine arts activities and Division I athletics, the review must go “beyond the numbers.”

While making standardized tests scores optional is a new policy, the holistic review described above is not. Over the past decade, even while significantly improving the academic profile of its classes, Providence College has

emphasized classroom performance over standardized test scores. It is also notable that freshman-sophomore retention rates (93% average) and four-year graduation rates (84% average) are among the highest rates nationally — an indication that the long-standing review process has yielded committed and capable students.

Although standardized tests are no longer required for admission, we do require students who have taken a standardized test and who choose to enroll at Providence College to submit their test scores upon enrollment. We included this requirement to help us evaluate the test-optional policy and to support entering students. Throughout the four-year pilot program, the college will evaluate the academic performance and retention of test submitters versus nonsubmitters; obtaining the test scores of students who choose to enroll will provide clear data to inform a decision about permanent implementation of the test-optional policy. In addition, these scores will continue to be used for academic advisement purposes. For example, SAT scores are used to determine program requirements for English proficiency and education programs, as well as appropriate placement in math courses. Scores also are used to help identify incoming at-risk students.

The success of the test-optional initiative will be measured from two perspectives. We will first ask, Has Providence College achieved increased enrollments from students from multicultural and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds? And second, Have nonsubmitters performed at a level similar to test submitters? Do they have a similar retention rate, and are they on track to graduate at the same rate? Success in enrolling a more diverse student body is only a real victory if classroom performance and student retention are consistent for all students.

The class of 2011 — which entered Providence College in September 2007 — is the first class to be evaluated under the test-optional policy. An initial assessment of the new financial aid and admission policies is encouraging. Providence College received just over 9,800 applications for 960 class spaces. The pool included a 20.8 percent increase in applications from students from African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, or Native American (AHANA) backgrounds (increases of 8%, 34%, 13%, and no change, respectively), and a 21 percent increase in applications from candidates who are first-generation college bound. As the Fall 2007 semester began, the college had enrolled a class that included 31.1 percent more students from AHANA backgrounds (27% increase among African Americans; 67% among Hispanic/Latino students; 10% among Asian Americans; and no change in the percentage of Native Americans), and 18.8 percent more first-generation students. The percentage of the class that was Pell Grant eligible increased from 7.3 percent of the class of 2010 to 11.8 percent of the class of 2011.

Providence College changed its SAT and ACT requirements because doing so fit clearly with the college's mission and commitment to remain true to its roots even as it seeks to adapt to a changing marketplace. It remains to

be seen whether more institutions will choose to embrace the test-optional philosophy and whether such initiatives will expand opportunity to more applicants with culturally diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. This decision was the right one at the right time for Providence College. Other institutions considering this initiative should do so in the context of their missions rather than simply joining the current trend.

One of the riches of the American higher education system is that we have such a wide variety of institutions: public and private, secular and religious. Yet there is a present danger that access to private colleges and universities is moving further away from the reach of students coming from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. This trend is especially troubling for Catholic colleges, such as Providence College, that were founded specifically to meet the needs of first-generation and culturally diverse students.

For Providence College, adopting a test-optional policy has reinforced a long-standing commitment to examine and value all aspects of each student's high school career. This refinement in both admission policies and financial aid strategies reflects the college's concerted efforts to close the student accessibility gap, particularly for first-generation college students. We have chosen to do so in a way that reflects our unique Catholic and Dominican heritage, fulfilling the Church's mission to care for the disadvantaged and to respect the dignity of every person.

There is obviously much at stake in this issue, since access to higher education changes the destinies of individuals and their families. I know this from personal experience. My father, the son of two Irish immigrants, used the GI Bill of Rights to earn a degree from Providence College in 1949. I probably would not occupy the office I am in were it not for the opportunity that he and many members of his generation received to access private higher education. We, their heirs, must never forget that.

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