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10-28-18

Test Optional Policies

The University Faculty Senate of the State University of New York, through a recently passed resolution, has asked Chancellor Kristina Johnson to join a long list of colleges and universities that have made standardized tests (i.e. SAT, ACT, GRE) optional for admissions. If adopted, SUNY would become the first system of higher education to make such a move.

While UFS resolutions do not create policy, they do advocate for positions that the body believes will benefit SUNY. The UFS resolution supports the 2015 SUNY Board of Trustees Diversity Resolution and recent guidance from Governor Andrew Cuomo, which directed the board to “reexamine” its “existing plans to ensure these plans are furthering New York’s goals of diversity and inclusion.”

This resolution addresses our concern that the tests are not accurate measures of student potential, therefore, hindering the goal of creating a more inclusive system.

While their original use in college admissions suggested that the tests would serve as a tool for meritocracy, today the test is a tool for measuring inequality. Wealthier students do better on the tests than less wealthy students. Access to test preparation services and private tutors increase scores. Men do better than women on the math section. Decades of analysis of final scores show a bias towards white students.

Currently, almost of all of the bachelor degree-granting and university centers require the submission of standardized test scores, while community colleges generally recommend the submission of scores. Only about one third of the community colleges and only two of SUNY’s state operated bachelor degree-granting campuses—Potsdam and Purchase—do not require the submission of standardized test scores for admission.

The 2017 SUNY Diversity Data Brief shows that Potsdam and Purchase have some of the largest numbers of historically under represented students. One reason for this increase, especially at Potsdam, a campus almost 350 miles from New York City, seems to be the change in its admissions policy. In 2006 5.3 percent of Potsdam’s students were Under Represented Minorities (URM, a term used in SUNY documents). In 2009 Potsdam eliminated the test score requirements and today almost 28 percent of the students are classified as URM’s.

Minoritized students make up almost 38 percent of New York’s high school graduates, yet they are only 25 percent of SUNY’s student population. More troubling is that their numbers are the smallest at our most selective colleges and university centers. Experience at campuses across the country and within SUNY suggests that there will be increases in both applications and selection of minoritized students at campuses that adopt test-optional policies. Experience also suggests that eliminating these tests has not led to a decrease in student retention rates.

As the leading system of higher education in the United States, we must enact policies that equalize educational attainment. Our hope at the UFS is that Chancellor Johnson will enact this policy, which will help diversify our campuses, eliminate an expensive and time-consuming hurdle to college admissions, and encourage campuses to develop more holistic admissions procedures. We believe these changes will benefit all students and follow through on SUNY’s goal to be “the most inclusive system of higher education in the country.”