

PCACAC Living History

Submitted by Lou Hirsh

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When I was a director of admissions, parents often excused their kid's low test scores by saying, "my child is a poor tester," to which I was often tempted to reply, "evidently!" Of course, I never actually said that. Ironically, today these parents would be very happy if I still led an admissions office because I'd probably want my university to be, not merely "test optional," but "test blind."

I won't repeat the usual (and complex) arguments about standardized testing. But I would like to share this observation: I think that the work of an admissions committee would be far more fulfilling in a test blind environment where you never got to see an applicant's SAT or ACT scores.

Test scores encourage readers to pre-judge an applicant. This is especially true if you are a rookie admissions officer. You may believe that the test score is "wrong," but it takes a lot of self-confidence to say that on a comment sheet or in committee even when everything else in the child's folder tells you that this is an extraordinary human being whose presence on your campus would enrich the lives of every professor, staff member, and classmate who is lucky enough to know this wonderful person.

The simplicity and clarity of a test score number gives it power by making it seem objective, even when another part of your brain understands the limitations of standardized testing. Essays, recommendations, and activities can't be so easily quantified. GPAs might offset test scores, but differences in grading standards and scales and grade inflation make them seem less convincing and "objective" than an internationally-normed standardized test.

And it is not just admissions rookies who are intimidated. While meeting their tuition revenue targets is a chief enrollment officer's first priority, enhancing the academic profile of the entering class is a close second. That's why the phrase, "profile-enhancing," enters into committee discussions. Theoretically, the qualitative data on a college's admissions profile should include more than average test scores. But practically speaking, test scores are the only thing that presidents and trustees look at. (No trustee has ever asked me, "so tell me, Mr. Hirsh, what percentage of our entering class wrote stunning essays?")

In short, every admissions officer is on the defensive if they advocate for a candidate whose enrollment will lower the average SATs/ACTs. But take away test scores, and you stop asking whether the candidate is "profile-enhancing" and start asking questions that are more fun to consider, especially this one: "Is this candidate an interesting human being?" Imagine an admissions world where your goal was not to enroll, say, 4,000 students with the highest SAT scores, but 4,000 of the most interesting and imaginative human beings in your applicant pool.

And how would you determine “interesting”? If yours is an institution that stopped requiring an essay, you may want to revisit that decision. You might want to change the supplemental questions that you ask on your application. You might think about conducting more online and in-person interviews, especially among students who attend under-resourced high schools. (Interviews often tell you more about a student than other sources of information.) You might also consider being open to the concept that there are different ways in which people can demonstrate their various intelligences.

Granted, reviewing applications will become more time-consuming, and you’ll need to hire more admissions application readers. Training new hires will be more complex. (It is not easy to train people to be alert to nuance, to be open-minded about what constitutes talent, to ask astute interview questions.) God only knows if your president or your institution’s financial VP will view enrolling a more “interesting” class as being worth the additional financial cost, particularly as the metrics of U.S. News and others does not include “percentage of interesting students.” But I bet your institution’s faculty and staff would surely line up to shake your hand if you could pull it off.

P.S. Retirees are free to re-imagine their profession in ways they never could while they were still employed. When I worked full time, each spring I returned from PCACAC Conferences energized and filled with ideas. What surprises me is that, even in retirement, I still turn to PCACAC to stimulate my imagination. The future of our profession still matters to me, and the future we create for students matters even more. It is to PCACAC and its members, therefore, that I still turn for thoughts, insight, and knowledge and for the friendship of people whose work fills me with the profoundest respect.

Lou Hirsh