



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Roman Liera,
Montclair State University, United States

REVIEWED BY

OiYan Poon,
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,
United States
Karina Salazar,
The University of Arizona, United States

*CORRESPONDENCE

Kelly E. Slay
✉ kelly.slay@vanderbilt.edu

RECEIVED 04 July 2025

ACCEPTED 29 September 2025

PUBLISHED 05 November 2025

CITATION

Slay KE (2025) Organizational routines and the possibilities for racial equity in test-optional admissions. *Front. Educ.* 10:1659953. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1659953

COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Slay. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](#). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Organizational routines and the possibilities for racial equity in test-optional admissions

Kelly E. Slay*

Department of Leadership, Policy and Organizations, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, United States

Test-optional admissions policies have been championed as a tool for mitigating the losses to racial diversity in the current racial and socio-political climate, but existing research suggests their impact on diversifying student enrollment is unclear. In this article, I suggest that eliminating test score requirements, while in theory may represent a critical step toward leveling the playing field in selective college admissions, this single policy change may be limited in its capacity to significantly advance racial equity and diversity if the organizational routines deeply embedded in the broader system of college admissions writ large, are left unexamined. Drawing from organizational routines and theory of racialized organizations as a conceptual lens, I review three categories of organizational routines critical to the implementation and use of test-optional admissions: (a) institutional priorities (b) admissions criteria and (c) evaluative processes. In doing so, I contribute to a small, but growing body of research that draws attention to the myriad ways race operates in the admissions process from a meso-level perspective—the first which explicitly examines undergraduate test-optional admissions. I highlight the multi-level nature of admissions and the possibilities of test-optional policies—both their promise and potential problems—for advancing racial equity.

KEYWORDS

test-optional admissions, college admissions, racial equity, racialized organizations, organizational routines

Introduction

Persistent disparities in the college enrollment of racially minoritized and historically underrepresented students suggest participation in higher education, especially selective institutions, remains deeply stratified by race (Baker et al., 2018; Bussey et al., 2021). White and Asian American students represent nearly 75 percent of enrollment at selective institutions (Strohl et al., 2024). For Black, Latinx, Native and Pacific Islander students, these disparities are the result of societal and institutional inequities (Orfield and Eaton, 1996), a legacy of racial exclusion in admissions (Bussey et al., 2021; Karabel, 2005), and significant socio-political events (Jack, 2024). In 2021, after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the enrollment of Black first-year students at four-year public colleges declined by nearly 23 percent compared to 2019, the largest drop of any racial group (McMurdock, 2021). More recently, some of the nation's top colleges reported steep declines in Black and Latinx student enrollment after the Supreme Court decision in the *Students for Fair Admissions* case prohibited race-conscious admissions (Knox, 2024).

Test-optional admissions policies, in which institutions permit applicants to choose whether to submit standardized test scores, have been endorsed as a possible “race-neutral” strategy for enhancing equity in admissions and protecting racial diversity in undergraduate student enrollment (Berhane et al., 2024; Park and Poon, 2023). To date,

nearly 2,000 four-year colleges employ some form of test-optional admissions, with 90% of selective institutions adopting these policies during the pandemic (Rosinger et al., 2024). Given longstanding racial disparities in test-scores attributable, in part, to inequalities in school resources and access to test-preparation (Buchmann et al., 2010) and the phenomenon of stereotype threat in which minoritized groups underperform on tests due to fear of confirming racial stereotypes (Steele and Aronson, 1995), proponents of test-optional practices have hoped that eliminating the requirement for standardized test scores would remove structural barriers to college and help attract a more racially and socioeconomically diverse group of students (Bastedo et al., 2023; Bennett, 2022).

In reality, however, the efficacy of these policies for advancing racial diversity and equity in student enrollment is not well understood (Bastedo et al., 2025). Simulations and descriptive institutional case studies of small liberal arts colleges—early implementers of test-optional admissions—offer evidence that these policies can, in fact, enhance racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in enrollment (Hiss and Franks, 2014). A recent quantitative analysis of pandemic adopters also shows a positive relationship between test-optional admissions at moderately selective institutions and an increase in Black student enrollment, particularly when the policy is paired with scholarship consideration (Rosinger et al., 2024). On the other hand, empirical studies utilizing quantitative methods and larger datasets suggest these policies have had modest impacts on increasing racial diversity in student enrollment (Belasco et al., 2015; Bennett, 2022; Rosinger et al., 2024; Saboe and Terrizzi, 2019; Rubin and Canché, 2019). For example, Bennett (2022) finds that while test-optional adoption at various institutions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with relative gains in racial diversity, the actual increase in the proportion of underrepresented racially minoritized students was modest—amounting to just a one-percentage-point increase in absolute terms. Although many of these quantitative studies use rigorous causal methods (such as difference-in-difference and propensity score matching) to assess the effects of test-optional admissions on racial diversity outcomes, they offer limited insight into the underlying mechanisms driving those outcomes (Rosinger et al., 2024).

In this paper, I review scholarship that illuminates organizational routines as mechanisms that may help explain the modest impacts of test-optional admissions on selective enrollment among Black, Latinx, Native, and Pacific Islander students, extending racialized organizational analyses of undergraduate and graduate admissions contexts (Poon et al., 2023; Posselt and Desir, 2022; Posselt et al., 2023). By focusing on the organization or meso-level, where attention to structural disadvantages experienced by racially minoritized students has the potential to change organizational behavior and shape policy (Liera and Desir, 2023), I answer a call from researchers to “carefully consider” how test-optional admissions have the potential to both reproduce and disrupt racial inequity in enrollment (Rosinger et al., 2024). I argue that if organizational routines embedded in admissions practices writ large are left unexamined, the elimination of test score requirements may not be enough to advance racial diversity and equity. The transformative potential of test-optional and test-free policies to level the playing field in selective college admissions

requires interrogating and rethinking deeply entrenched norms in the broader system of college admissions. I begin this piece by introducing the Theory of Racialized Organizations (TRO). I then discuss three categories of organizational routines critical for interrogating racial (in)equity in test-optional policies.

Theory of racialized organizations

The TRO describes organizations as products of and active participants within racialized meso-level processes, linked to the macro-level—the broader policy environment—as well as the micro-level—the attitudes, biases and behaviors of individual stakeholders (Ray, 2019; Poon et al., 2023). While TRO has been empirically deployed across a wide range of organizational types—from religious institutions to corporate workplaces—its use in higher education contexts is especially apropos given the sector’s racialized history of exclusionary practices and the structure of postsecondary institutions as both tightly and loosely coupled, comprised of a vast array of organizational units and functions influenced at multiple levels (Poon et al., 2023; Weick, 1976). In test-optional admissions, micro-level processes might involve how individual reviewers make sense of application files, for example, while macro-level factors include institutional policy shifts in response to, global crises, and federal and state policies on DEI and affirmative action. These influences shape how organizations carry out their practices through routines. In taking a meso-level approach to exploring the possibility of racial equity in test-optional admissions policies researchers must necessarily study their related routines—the mechanisms embedded in these policies that “routinely reproduce material inequalities across racial lines” (Poon et al., 2023, p. 7).

At the most basic level, routines structure and guide organizational behavior. They represent a collection of daily procedures for getting things done (Diamond and Gomez, 2023). According to TRO, routines are the established patterns of behavior, policies, regulations, and norms within an organization that, though often appearing “neutral” because they don’t explicitly name race, are shaped by racial meaning and can reinforce existing racial hierarchies and inequality. For example, corporate dress codes that require “professional” attire or limit certain hair styles are coded in white standards of beauty that penalize expressions of minoritized groups (e.g., natural hairstyles worn by Black women). In the mortgage industry, automated systems for assessing loan risk use credit scores, zip codes, and financial history, may appear to be objective, but actually reflect racial segregation and unequal access to wealth. The “objective” use of this algorithm as a widely accepted organizational routine unintentionally bakes in racial disadvantage and limits access to homeownership for racially minoritized groups (Barocas and Selbst, 2016). In schools that employ organizational routines such as zero-tolerance or no-excuses behavioral policies, Black students are disproportionately punished for subjective infractions like “disrespect” even when behavior is comparable across races. Although teachers and administrators may not consciously intend to discriminate, the routine application of rules reflects implicit biases that contributes to racially unequal outcomes (Golann, 2021; Welsh, 2025). These examples demonstrate how routines

are not simply administrative procedures but deeply embedded mechanisms that reproduce racial inequality in seemingly “neutral” ways without explicit discriminatory intent.

In college admissions, where evaluation of applications is a core organizational routine, racial meanings substantiated by our racially stratified society are often “baked” into how admissions officers “execute professional, subjective judgements” of information included about prospective students in their files—including background characteristics and academic performance (Posselt et al., 2023, p. 170). Predictably, these racial biases have the potential to institutionalize inequities (Posselt et al., 2020; Posselt and Desir, 2022; Bowman and Bastedo, 2018). But even when race-neutral routines may be imbued with racial meanings and practices that aren’t expressly racist, they can still lead to racially disparate outcomes (Diamond and Lewis, 2019; Ray, 2019). Routines institutionalize inequities under myriad conditions, writes Posselt et al. (2023), including when: race neutral practices are implemented in racialized ways; routines reinforce preferences that benefit already advantaged groups; everyday interactions are shaped by implicit racial bias; and when practitioners are unaware of how their tools produce racially unequal outcomes. It is the seemingly innocuous nature of routines that make them a threat to racial equity.

At the same time, organizational routines also have the potential to disrupt institutionalized racial inequities (Liera and Desir, 2023). In fact, we can look to routines for insight into meso-level racial change because as Ray (2019) explains, they have the power to “constrain or enable the individual racial attitudes and discrimination” that produces racial inequities (p. 30). Even in the face of exogenous forces like anti-DEI social movements and Supreme Court decisions which we might expect to have an unequivocally negative impact on access and opportunity for students of color, admissions organizations can adopt new routines such as expanding outreach and recruitment, developing training to foster racial literacy instead of race-evasiveness, or simplifying admissions requirements, all of which can help counter ostensibly race-neutral practices (Bastedo and Bowman, 2017; Odle and Delaney, 2022; Salazar, 2022). The possibilities of new routines may help to explain why some selective institutions experienced increases in their enrollment of racially minoritized students in the admissions cycle immediately following *SFFA* while others noted significant declines (Knox, 2024). Indeed, research highlights how STEM graduate programs have been able to establish new norms and practices for racialized organizational change amid deeply fixed disciplinary norms, legal mandates banning race-conscious affirmative action, and a historic global pandemic (Posselt et al., 2017, 2023; Rosinger et al., 2025; Slay et al., 2019). I now turn to discuss three types of organizational routines embedded in the work of college admissions.

Organizational routines in admissions work

Institutional priorities

The possibility of racial equity in admissions must necessarily involve consideration of institutional goals and aspirations. The

goals that most institutions pursue are diverse and often include imperatives like boosting enrollment in certain academic majors, moving up in the academic rankings, developing athletic programs, improving student retention and completion rates, increasing revenue, and ensuring the socioeconomic and racial diversity of their student body (Hossler and Kalsbeek, 2013). Shaped by institutional leaders and often influenced by the broader policy environment or other macro-level factors and conditions (Poon et al., 2023; Ray, 2019), this complex and sometimes competing set of goals inform the admissions process—from beginning to end—including what criteria are required, how applications are evaluated, and ultimately who is admitted (Hossler and Kalsbeek, 2013; Lucido, 2018).

However, in the work of leveraging organizational routines to manage competing priorities, Poon et al. (2023) explain that racial diversity and equity-focused efforts are “sometimes diminished.” In their analysis of interview data from 50 admissions professionals at selective institutions, the researchers found that admissions decisions were driven less by measures of student success like academic performance, leadership, and service and more by financial priorities and budget considerations, which often trumped diversity. Even when institutions espouse commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion and maintain these values as part of their mission, seemingly race-neutral priorities (e.g., geographic diversity, athletic interests, and tuition revenue, etc.) and the systematic routines of admissions offices can still work to reproduce inequalities (Hextrum, 2021; Poon et al., 2023).

In much the same way, it is plausible that the organizational logics that undergird institutional priorities in test-optional admissions contexts can work to enhance the efficacy that these organizational practices hold in contributing to racially equitable outcomes (Poon et al., 2023). As Ray (2019) explains, exogenous mechanisms such as competitive pressures (i.e., rankings), social movements (i.e., racial reckoning), and socio-economic events (i.e., global pandemic) can fundamentally change institutional behavior and what becomes a priority. Endogenous mechanisms, particularly organizational routines, can also catalyze meso-level racialized change. When DePaul University, a private institution lauded for its commitment to inclusivity and social justice launched their test-optional admissions pilot nearly 15 years ago, the chief enrollment officer, David Kalsbeek, explained how the “new approach” would reflect a critical shift in institutional priorities and enrollment outcomes:

This new approach seeks to encourage a wider range of high-achieving students to consider a four-year degree at DePaul, including very talented and promising students who may be disadvantaged by admission criteria that emphasize standardized tests...This move is not just a new admission strategy. A test-optional policy matters in broader and deeper ways. It reflects core values about what’s important in higher education and grounds these values not in rhetoric, but in actual policy and practice...Rather than focusing on metrics that have become measures of prestige for highly selective colleges and universities, our pilot will use fairer and broader indicators of students’ strengths and capabilities in admission decisions.

The equity-focused logic motivating DePaul's adoption of test-optional admissions varies considerably from that of Harvard University, which adopted test-optional policies during the COVID-19 pandemic due to logistical challenges associated with test-taking. The university has since returned to requiring standardized tests (Diep, 2024).

The mixed empirical findings on test-optional admissions are easier to understand when one considers that implementation of these policies at some institutions is driven more by practical responses to pressing circumstances than diversity and equity-focused imperatives. Accounting for how institutional priorities shape adoption of test-optional policies is also critical for understanding two related organizational practices that affect racial equity in student enrollment: (1) the importance placed on admissions criteria and (2) how this information is evaluated in the review process.

Admissions criteria

In theory, removing standardized test scores—a criteria rooted in racism and highly correlated with socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity—as an admissions requirement is a meso-level change that has the potential to “level the playing field” among applicants who enter the high stakes process with vastly different backgrounds (Bastedo et al., 2023, p. 3). As a matter of practice, test-optional policies may simply increase the likelihood that admissions professionals place greater weight on academic data like grades in advanced courses which also reflect patterns of racial inequality (Bastedo et al., 2023). That is, while high school GPA is purported to be a strong predictor of future academic success in college, raw GPA alone does not adequately capture the vastly unequal schooling conditions associated with race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Bastedo et al., 2023). Structural barriers in schools and community contexts often prevent minoritized students from accessing the type of curriculum that selective colleges value in the admissions process (Bastedo et al., 2016).

Like course grades, non-standardized portions of the application, including personal essays, extra-curricular activities, and recommendation letters are likely to increase in importance, but emerging research on navigating admissions, post-SFFA suggests indiscriminately relying on these “facially neutral admissions criteria” (Feingold, 2023, p. 280) without understanding how they often privilege the most advantaged students could undermine equity in test-optional admissions (Jayakumar and Page, 2021; Rosinger et al., 2021). In a study of extracurricular activities reported in six million college applications, researchers found systemic evidence of racial inequalities: White, Asian, high-SES, and private school students reported more activities than did Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students (Park et al., 2025). A study of high school counselor letters of recommendation utilizing the same analytic technique revealed similar inequalities (Kim et al., 2025). With the exception of Asian American applicants, nearly all racial/ethnic groups had shorter letters than their White peers. Because nearly 61 percent of colleges reported placing considerable or moderate importance on counselor letters in the application review process (Clinedinst and Koranteng, 2017), and letters offer insight into non-academic

traits that may help readers place students' achievements in the context of structural opportunity (Kim et al., 2025; Rothstein, 2022), shorter letters for Black and Latinx applicants could put them at a disadvantage in the admissions process, perpetuating racial inequity (Schwarz, 2016).

Research suggests that “routinizing consideration of new criteria” in test-optional admissions can be important for disrupting inequitable enrollment patterns (Posselt et al., 2023, p. 166). For instance, rather than using raw GPA, admissions programs may consider standardized contextual measures of high school performance which are strongly associated with success for racially minoritized students of color (Bastedo et al., 2021, 2023; Mabel et al., 2022) and can help institutions avoid penalizing students who may possess less traditional markers of academic “merit” but have notable achievements such as excelling in the only Advanced Placement course offered at their school (Barnes and Moses, 2021; Bastedo et al., 2023). Relatedly, creating new routines for admissions criteria in test-optional environments require clarity about whether and how criteria reflect shared conceptions of merit, and the extent to which metrics that measure these forms of merit may actually contribute to racially unequal outcomes (Posselt et al., 2023). Ultimately, in the absence of test scores, admissions programs that increase the weight of alternative criteria in their decision-making calculus without acknowledging the possibility of racial biases and patterns of inequality could render decisions that reinforce, rather than alleviate inequity (Bastedo et al., 2025).

Evaluative process

Routines involved in evaluating criteria in test-optional campuses center micro-level interactions and represent a critical tool for enhancing racial equity. In the work of holistic review in admissions, which involves consideration of a broad set of academic, non-cognitive, and socio-emotional qualities of applicants in alignment with institutional mission and organizational standards for quality (Bastedo and Bowman, 2017), reviewers have a great deal of discretion in how they interpret and make meaning of these data (Posselt et al., 2023). When used equitably, holistic review considers an applicant in light of their school and community environment and their available opportunities—an approach that helps to promote access to college for minoritized groups (Barceló et al., 2021; Bastedo et al., 2018; Rosinger et al., 2021). In fact, prior to the SFFA decision, race-conscious holistic review offered an essential, albeit imperfect tool, for enhancing racial diversity at selective colleges (Garces, 2014). In test-optional admissions, evaluative routines that work to systematically contextualize applicants through holistic review remain a legally permissible and necessary strategy for pursuing equitable outcomes and creating an equal learning environment for all students (Bastedo et al., 2023; Feingold, 2023).

But as other scholars have pointed out, this comprehensive approach is not without its limitations (Rosinger et al., 2021). Not only is there broad variation in how institutions conceptualize and employ holistic review (Bastedo et al., 2018), but also studies reveal that subjective appraisals of ambiguous criteria (e.g., extracurricular activities) and the use of heuristics or cognitive shortcuts to review large volumes of files can shape

admissions decisions in ways that can undermine equity (Posselt, 2016; Bastedo and Bowman, 2017). For example, in evaluating test-optional applications, a reviewer might interpret a student's test score—or absence of one—as a reflection of readiness for college, overlooking racial disparities in access to test-taking and preparation (Bastedo and Bowman, 2017). Given the significant increase in applications under test-optional admissions policies that reviewers must evaluate and the little time permitted for doing so, these mental shortcuts help reduce complexity and increase speed, but they can also lead to admissions decisions that advantage applicants whose file reflects “elite social and cultural capital as excellence” (Posselt et al., 2023, p. 163).

Other evaluative routines such as committee-based discussions also offer competing possibilities for equity. In some selective institutions, the first read of a file reflects a committee-based evaluation (CBE), a review that happens in teams of two where one reviewer focuses on academic components of the file and the other on non-academic or supplemental materials (Jaschik, 2017). Institutions report that this practice enhances efficiency, transparency, and consistency while also mitigating unconscious bias more likely to be present in a single, individual review. Later stages of the evaluative process may involve larger committees, comprised of several admissions staff and senior leaders where the discussion is meant to review the recommendations of small teams and improve the scope of information provided on an applicant before making a final decision. Such efforts can help mitigate personal biases in evaluation, but they can also give space for subjective biases to contribute to inequitable decisions (Posselt, 2016; Rivera, 2012). In his ethnographic study of an admissions office, Stevens (2007) finds that the practice of “evaluative storytelling,” wherein admissions staff present information necessary to make “fine distinctions” between similarly excellent candidates or provide support for borderline applicants, is more likely to privilege the most advantaged applicants—students from wealthy families that are well-versed in “the genre of admissions storytelling” (p. 214).

Acknowledging that the removal of standardized tests may lead to an increase in variability and ambiguity in admissions reviews, the implementation of routines that draw attention to and mitigate implicit biases is critical for supporting more equitable judgments. Julie Posselt's discussion of equity-checks in admissions is useful here, as it describes the intentional practices that routinize decision-makers' attention to bias in their work (Posselt, 2016; Posselt et al., 2020). For example, Posselt and Desir (2022) note how admissions offices can integrate deliberate moments into their evaluative routines that allow reviewers to take breaks to manage fatigue or hunger (physical conditions that can activate bias) or build in pauses to assess the racial/ethnic composition of applicants who have been admitted, ensuring particular groups aren't being disproportionately overlooked in the admissions process. These small and seemingly unassuming interventions are important building blocks for large, sustained organizational change. They remain legally viable and necessary in admissions work, post-SFFA.

Rubrics that emphasize shared expectations for acceptable practice in evaluative work also hold promise for organizational change. Researchers studying the use of rubrics in graduate admissions contexts have consistently highlighted their utility

for advancing diversity and creating more equitable evaluative practice (Posselt et al., 2020). In their recent analysis of 13 STEM doctoral programs transitioning to holistic admissions, Posselt et al. (2023) described how the adoption of rubrics helped to change what reviewers focused on, it structured systematic efforts to triangulate information, and ultimately “reduced the likelihood that racial disproportionality in any one factor would undermine an overall equitable process” (p. 179). The evaluative rubric used by the University of Michigan represents another example of equity-minded change (Liera and Desir, 2023). Following the *Bakke* case, admissions leaders created a “single page selection device” that essentially “standardized race-conscious admissions without an explicit quota” by developing a points system that incorporated key organizational priorities (i.e., building a racially and gender diverse class was one) and explicitly considered applicants' race separate from other racialized variables like SAT scores (Hirschman and Bosk, 2020, p. 352). While the Supreme Court later decided the points system was “not narrowly tailored” enough to achieve diversity in *Gratz vs. Bollinger* (2003), nonetheless, Hirschman and Bosk (2020) contend that its use in the university's admissions program standardized attention to longstanding structural inequalities (that previously had a disproportionately negative impact on students of color in their admissions process), resulting in significant increases in racial diversity. These examples suggest important possibilities for evaluative routines in test-optional contexts. With proper training and consistent practice, well-designed routines can provide clear, structured guidance for handling non-standardized information and other data points in the file, reducing racial bias in interpretations, enhancing consistency among reviewers, and contributing to a process that has the potential to improve racial equity in admissions and enrollment outcomes.

Discussion and implications

Test-optional admissions policies have been championed as a tool for mitigating the losses to racial diversity in the current racial and socio-political climate. But research suggests the impact of these policies on student enrollment is mixed at best. In this article, I suggest that eliminating test score requirements, while in theory represents a critical step toward leveling the playing field in highly competitive admissions process (Bastedo et al., 2023), may be limited in its potential to significantly catalyze racial equity change if key organizational routines embedded in admissions policy writ large, are left unexamined: (a) institutional priorities (b) admissions criteria and (c) evaluative processes. By interrogating admissions through the conceptual lens of the theory of racialized organizations and organizational routines (Ray, 2019), I contribute to a small, but growing body of research (Poon et al., 2023; Posselt and Desir, 2022) that draws attention to the myriad ways race operates in the admissions process at different levels. In doing so, I highlight the multi-level nature of admissions and the possibilities of test-optional policies for interrupting inequitable enrollment patterns for racially minoritized students. Next, I discuss implications for equity-minded practices connected to admissions routines.

Implications for equity-minded practice

Achieving equity-minded change through test-optional admissions must begin with taking stock of the institutional priorities that are primarily driving admissions decisions and practices. Through a strategic planning process, campus administrators in collaboration with senior admissions leaders, can work to identify equity gaps in institutional practice. Questions they should consider include: What are our primary priorities as an institution? What taken for granted norms or practices (i.e., organizational routines) do we currently leverage in order to manage these priorities? Do these priorities reflect our espoused values and commitments for enhancing diversity and equity in enrollment (often mentioned as the rationale for test-optional adoption)? And finally, how and if do these priorities and their related routines undermine or help facilitate organizational change toward equity? This strategic auditing process can help reveal key opportunities for equity-focused organizational change.

Institutions that remove standardized test scores as an admissions requirement take an important step in “delegitimizing criteria that privileges already advantaged groups” (Posselt et al., 2023, p. 177). However, discourse should also prioritize deeper, philosophical questions about what institutions believe constitutes merit as well as practical questions about how merit can be equitably measured using myriad criteria other than standardized tests? As emerging research suggests (Kim et al., 2025; Park et al., 2025; Posselt et al., 2023), tracking racialized patterns and disproportionalities in outcomes tied to standardized and non-standardized criteria shine a light on organizational routines that may or may support equity.

At the same time, admissions staff must explore the personal meanings that they attach to these myriad criteria and monitor how they might contribute to potentially disproportionate influences on admissions decisions (Posselt et al., 2023). Developing structures that allow admissions organization to gather, review, and respond to racialized patterns helps to institutionalize equity checks and promotes organizational learning (Posselt et al., 2020). These efforts, together with adopting equity-based evaluative rubrics, are essential for promoting fair and inclusive test-optional programs.

A final word of caution for admissions programs interested in adopting or maintaining test-optional policies concerns two important realities. First, the ability to disrupt old organizational routines and develop new ones in service to racial equity requires grappling with race and racism. While the *SFFA* decision constrains how race is considered in the evaluative process, programs using test-optional policies still have an opportunity to develop creative, resourceful, and legal strategies for mitigating the extent to which manifestations of race (racism and race-neutrality)

negatively influence who is admitted, how and why. Developing legal and racial literacies can motivate creativity and feelings of empowerment rather than fear and race-evasiveness (Feingold, 2023; Posselt and Desir, 2022). Second, the removal of standardized tests is an important step for expanding access and equity in admissions, but as a single policy, it is likely incapable of ridding higher education of entrenched, longstanding inequities in admissions. Research suggests that systematic, multi-level changes to admissions practice, and the norms that belie them, represent the most significant possibility for promoting racial equity change through test-optional policies.

Author contributions

KS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

- Baker, R., Klasik, D., and Reardon, S. F. (2018). Race and stratification in college enrollment over time. *AERA Open* 4:2332858417751896. doi: 10.1177/2332858417751896
- Barceló, N. E., Shadravan, S., Wells, C. R., Goodsmith, N., Tarrant, B., Shaddox, T., et al. (2021). Reimagining merit and representation: promoting equity and reducing bias in GME through holistic review. *Acad. Psychiatry* 45, 34–42. doi: 10.1007/s40596-020-01327-5
- Barnes, M. B., and Moses, M. S. (2021). Racial misdirection: how anti-affirmative action crusaders use distraction and spectacle to promote incomplete conceptions of merit and perpetuate racial inequality. *Educ. Policy* 35, 323–346. doi: 10.1177/0895904820984465

- Barocas, S., and Selbst, A. D. (2016). Big data's disparate impact. *California Law Rev.* 104, 671–732. doi: 10.2139/ssrn.2477899
- Bastedo, M., Kapp, R., Bai, Y., and Carroll, S. (2025). Dodging the competency trap? How admissions and financial aid offices adapted to test-optional policies after COVID-19. *J. High. Educ.* 96, 1–25. doi: 10.1080/00221546.2024.2446014
- Bastedo, M. N., Bell, D., Howell, J. S., Hsu, J., Hurwitz, M., Peretto, G., et al. (2021). Admitting students in context: field experiments on information dashboards in college admissions. *J. High. Educ.* 93, 327–374. doi: 10.1080/00221546.2021.1971488
- Bastedo, M. N., and Bowman, N. A. (2017). Improving admission of low-SES students at selective colleges: results from an experimental simulation. *Educ. Res.* 46, 67–77. doi: 10.3102/0013189X17699373
- Bastedo, M. N., Bowman, N. A., Glasener, K. M., and Kelly, J. L. (2018). What are we talking about when we talk about holistic review? Selective college admissions and its effects on low-SES students. *J. High. Educ.* 89, 782–805. doi: 10.1080/00221546.2018.1442633
- Bastedo, M. N., Howard, J. E., and Flaster, A. (2016). Holistic admissions after affirmative action: does “maximizing” the high school curriculum matter? *Educ. Eval. Policy Anal.* 38, 389–409. doi: 10.3102/0162373716642407
- Bastedo, M. N., Umbricht, M., Bausch, E., Byun, B. K., and Bai, Y. (2023). Contextualized high school performance: evidence to inform equitable holistic, test-optional, and test-free admissions policies. *AERA Open* 9:23328584231197413. doi: 10.1177/23328584231197413
- Belasco, A. S., Rosinger, K. O., and Hearn, J. C. (2015). The test-optional movement at America's selective liberal arts colleges: a boon for equity or something else? *Educ. Eval. Policy Anal.* 37, 206–223. doi: 10.3102/0162373714537350
- Bennett, C. T. (2022). Untested admissions: Examining changes in application behaviors and student demographics under test-optional policies. *Am. Educ. Res. J.* 59, 180–216. doi: 10.3102/00028312211003526
- Berhane, B., Slay, K. E., and Smith, P. (2024). Where do we go from here? Strategies for expanding access to undergraduate engineering in a Post-SFFA environment. *Adv. Eng. Educ.* 12:12. doi: 10.18260/3-1-1153-36064
- Bowman, N. A., and Bastedo, M. N. (2018). What role may admissions office diversity and practices play in equitable decisions? *Res. High. Educ.* 59, 430–447. doi: 10.1007/s11162-017-9468-9
- Buchmann, C., Condrón, D. J., and Roscigno, V. J. (2010). Shadow education, American style: test preparation, the SAT and college enrollment. *Soc. Forces* 89, 435–461. doi: 10.1353/sof.2010.0105
- Bussey, K., Dancy, K., Gray Parker, A., Peters, E. E., and Voight, M. (2021). “The Most Important Door That Will Ever Open”: Realizing the Mission of Higher Education Through Equitable Admissions Policies. Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy.
- Clinedinst, M., and Koranteng, A. (2017). *2017 State of College Admission*. National Association for College Admission Counseling.
- Diamond, J. B., and Gomez, L. M. (2023). Disrupting white supremacy and anti-Black racism in educational organizations. *Educ. Res.* 52, 223–236. doi: 10.3102/0013189X231161054
- Diamond, J. B., and Lewis, A. E. (2019). Race and discipline at a racially mixed high school: status, capital, and the practice of organizational routines. *Urban Educ.* 54, 831–859. doi: 10.1177/0042085918814581
- Diep, F. (2024). “Following Yale and Brown, Harvard returns to requiring standardized tests,” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Available online at: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/following-yale-and-brown-harvard-returns-to-requiring-standardized-tests> (Accessed April 11, 2024).
- Feingold, J. (2023). Affirmative Action After SFFA. *J. College Univ. Law* 48:239.
- Garces, L. M. (2014). Aligning diversity, quality, and equity: the implications of legal and public policy developments for promoting racial diversity in graduate studies. *Am. J. Educ.* 120, 457–480. doi: 10.1086/676909
- Golann, J. W. (2021). *Scripting the Moves: Culture and Control in a “No-Excuses” Charter School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hextrum, K. (2021). *Special Admission: How College Sports Recruitment Favors White Suburban Athletes*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hirschman, D., and Bosk, E. A. (2020). Standardizing biases: selection devices and the quantification of race. *Sociol. Race Ethn.* 6, 348–364. doi: 10.1177/2332649219844797
- Hiss, W. C., and Franks, V. W. (2014). *Defining Promise: Optional Standardized Testing Policies in American College and University Admissions*. Arlington, VA: National Association for College Admissions Counseling.
- Hossler, D., and Kalsbeek, D. (2013). Enrollment management and managing enrollments: revisiting the context for institutional strategy. *Strateg. Enroll. Manag. Q.* 1, 5–25. doi: 10.1002/sem3.20002
- Jack, A. A. (2024). *Class dismissed: When colleges ignore inequality and students pay the price*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Jaschik (2017). “Some colleges adopt new committee-based system for doing first review,” *Inside Higher Ed*. Available online at: <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2017/06/12/some-colleges-adopt-new-committee-based-system-doing-first-review> (Accessed October 2, 2025).
- Jayakumar, U. M., and Page, S. E. (2021). Cultural capital and opportunities for exceptionalism: bias in university admissions. *J. High. Educ.* 92, 1109–1139. doi: 10.1080/00221546.2021.1912554
- Karabel, J. (2005). *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Kim, B. H., Park, J. J., Lo, P., Baker, D., Wong, N., Breen, S., et al. (2025). Letters of recommendation by high school counselors in selective college admissions: differences by race and socioeconomic status in letter length and topics discussed. *Res. High. Educ.* 66:30. doi: 10.1007/s11162-025-09847-5
- Knox, L. (2024). *An Early Look at Diversity Post-Affirmative Action*. Washington, D.C.: Inside Higher Ed.
- Liera, R., and Desir, S. (2023). Taking equity-mindedness to the next level: the equity-minded organization. *Front. Educ.* 8:1199174. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2023.1199174
- Lucido, J. A. (2018). “Understanding the test-optional movement,” in *Measuring Success: Testing, Grades, and the Future of College Admissions*, eds. J. Buckley, L. Letukas, and B. Wildavsky (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), 145–170.
- Mabel, Z., Hurwitz, M. D., Howell, J., and Peretto, G. (2022). Can standardizing applicant high school and neighborhood information help to diversify selective colleges? *Educ. Eval. Policy Anal.* 44, 505–531. doi: 10.3102/01623737221078849
- McMurdock, M. (2021). “No signs of recovery” 5 alarming new undergraduate enrollment numbers. [Web log post]. *The 74*. Available online at: <https://www.the74million.org/no-signs-of-recovery-5-alarming-new-undergraduate-enrollment-numbers/> (Accessed October 2, 2025).
- Odle, T. K., and Delaney, J. A. (2022). You are admitted! Early evidence on enrollment from Idaho's direct admissions system. *Res. High. Educ.* 63, 899–932. doi: 10.1007/s11162-022-09675-x
- Orfield, G., and Eaton, S. E. (1996). *Dismantling Desegregation: The Quiet Reversal of Brown v. Board of Education*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Park, J. J., Kim, B. H., Wong, N., Zheng, J., Breen, S., Lo, P., et al. (2025). Inequality beyond standardized tests: trends in extracurricular activity reporting in college applications across race and class. *Am. Educ. Res. J.* 62, 336–377. doi: 10.3102/00028312241292309
- Park, J. J., and Poon, O. (2023). *Test-Free Admissions: Why What?* Washington, DC: Inside Higher Ed.
- Poon, O., Lee, D. H., Galvez, E., Song Engler, J., Sérrano, B., Raza, A., et al. (2023). A Möbius model of racialized organizations: durability of racial inequalities in admissions. *J. Higher Educ.* 95, 399–424. doi: 10.1080/00221546.2023.2203630
- Posselt, J., Hernandez, T. E., Villarreal, C. D., Rodgers, A. J., and Irwin, L. N. (2020). Evaluation and decision making in higher education: toward equitable repertoires of faculty practice. *High. Educ. Handbook Theor. Res.* 35, 1–63. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-11743-6_8-1
- Posselt, J., Reyes, K. A., Slay, K. E., Kamimura, A., and Porter, K. B. (2017). Equity efforts as boundary work: how symbolic and social boundaries shape access and inclusion in graduate education. *Teach. Coll. Rec.* 119, 1–38. doi: 10.1177/016146811711901003
- Posselt, J., Southern, D., Hernandez, T., Desir, S., Alleyne, F., Miller, C. W., et al. (2023). Redefining merit through new routines: holistic admissions policy implementation in graduate education. *Educ. Eval. Policy Anal.* 47, 159–184. doi: 10.3102/01623737231201612
- Posselt, J. R. (2016). *Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Posselt, J. R., and Desir, S. (2022). “How are admissions decisions racialized?” in *Rethinking College Admissions: Research-Based Practice and Policy*, eds. O. A. Poon and M. N. Bastedo (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press), 83–100.
- Ray, V. (2019). A theory of racialized organizations. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 84, 26–53. doi: 10.1177/0003122418822335
- Rivera, L. A. (2012). Hiring as cultural matching: the case of elite professional service firms. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 77, 999–1022. doi: 10.1177/0003122412463213
- Rosinger, K., Baker, D. J., Sturm, J., Yu, W., Park, J. J., Poon, O., et al. (2024). *Exploring the Relationship Between Test-Optional Admissions, Selectivity, and Enrollment Outcomes During the Pandemic*. Brooklyn: College Admissions Futures Co-Laborative.
- Rosinger, K., Ford, K., and Choi, J. (2021). The role of selective college admissions criteria in interrupting or reproducing racial and economic inequities. *J. Higher Educ.* 92, 31–55. doi: 10.1080/00221546.2020.1795504
- Rosinger, K., Posselt, J., and Miller, C. W. (2025). Reconstructing PhD admissions through organizational learning. *J. Higher Educ.* 96, 1–36. doi: 10.1080/00221546.2025.2451609
- Rothstein, J. (2022). Qualitative information in undergraduate admissions: a pilot study of letters of recommendation. *Econ. Educ. Rev.* 89:102285. doi: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2022.102285

- Rubin, P. G., and Canché, M. S. G. (2019). Test-flexible admissions policies and student enrollment demographics: examining a public research university. *Rev. High. Educ.* 42, 1337–1371. doi: 10.1353/rhe.2019.0068
- Saboe, M., and Terrizzi, S. (2019). SAT optional policies: do they influence graduate quality, selectivity or diversity? *Econ. Lett.* 174, 13–17. doi: 10.1016/j.econlet.2018.10.017
- Salazar, K. G. (2022). Recruitment redlining by public research universities in the Los Angeles and Dallas metropolitan areas. *J. Higher Educ.* 93, 585–621. doi: 10.1080/00221546.2021.2004811
- Schwarz, J. D. (2016). *Lost in translation: Elite college admission and high school differences in letters of recommendation* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana.
- Slay, K. E., Reyes, K. A., and Posselt, J. R. (2019). Bait and switch: Representation, climate, and tensions of diversity work in graduate education. *Rev. High. Educ.* 42, 255–286. doi: 10.1353/rhe.2019.0052
- Steele, C. M., and Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 69, 797–811. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.797
- Stevens, M. (2007). *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Strohl, J., Nyhof, E., and Morris, C. (2024). *Progress Interrupted: Evaluating a Decade of Demographic Change at Selective and Open-Access Institutions Prior to the End of Race-Conscious Affirmative Action*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
- Weick, K. E. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. *Adm. Sci. Q.* 21, 1–19. doi: 10.2307/2391875
- Welsh, R. O. (2025). *Suspended Futures: Transforming Racial Inequities in School Discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.