

Task Force Report

Recommendation regarding use of standardized test scores
in admissions to the University of Oregon

Scope of Work

The task force was asked to make recommendations to university administration and senate leadership regarding the use of the SAT and ACT as a part of the domestic undergraduate admissions process. While standardized tests have long been part of the admissions process of most colleges and universities, a growing body of research raises some questions about their efficacy in measuring student readiness. Additionally, there is research that shows there may be issues of inequity when it comes to using standardized tests for admissions.

The task force met 3 times. The co-chairs and several members also met with a standing Counselor Advisory Board, a group UO Admissions regularly convenes, to discuss their experiences with test-optional admissions practices and the pros and cons of UO moving to such a model. The co-chairs briefed the Senate and are scheduled to meet with the Undergraduate Council and the Dean's Council. The Senate was also asked to complete a Qualtrics survey on their views, concerns, and recommendations regarding test-optional admissions for the UO.

Background

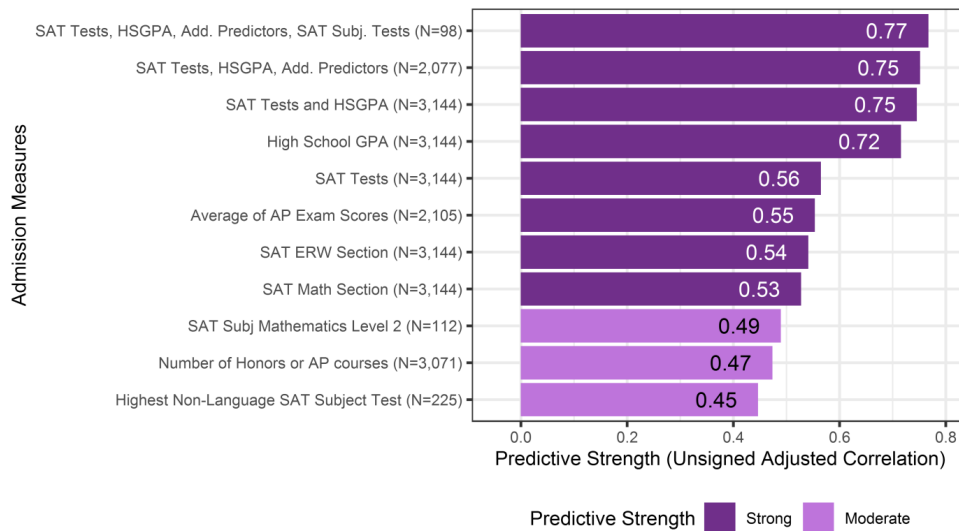
Test scores have long been used as a standardized measure in undergraduate admissions. They provide a significant level of prediction of student outcomes in college, including first-year and cumulative grade point averages (Higdem et al., 2016). Correlations between SAT scores and first year GPA average in the .40-.50 range (Berry & Sackett, 2009; Sackett et al., 2012). This relationship also continues with fourth year GPA (Mattern & Patterson, 2011) and when using the ACT rather than the SAT (Westrick et al., 2015).

However, research has shown that scores from the SAT and ACT vary not just as a function of academic ability, but also in ways that reflect differences beyond a student's control, including family income, parental education level, and race/ethnicity (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; Higdem et al., 2016). While the tests are considered reliable, significant concerns about validity for some populations of students lead UO and other institutions across the country to reconsider their use.

UO Validity Study

The ACES Admission Validity Study for the University of Oregon (ACES; College Board, October, 2019) examined admissions predictor variables as they relate to outcome for an entering cohort of first-time freshman students (Fall 2018). The key question in making a recommendation regarding a test-optional approach to admissions is whether and to what extent test scores predict student success in college. Data suggest that, for UO, SAT scores add to predictive power, but only by a small amount. These findings are generally consistent across subgroups, although there are some minor variations in incremental prediction. These findings are generally consistent with results from the research literature and also with results from prior UO ACES studies, completed in 2014 and 2015. As shown below, when examining the entire sample, the best predictor tends to be high school GPA, with a correlation of .72 between high school GPA and first year college GPA. Correlations above .50 are generally considered strong. Note there is only a slight increase in prediction when including test scores into the regression equation, and SAT scores alone provide less predictive strength than high school GPA alone.

Predictive strength of admission measures for UO (overall)



Detailed in the Appendix of this report is an examination of the predictive strength of admissions measures across demographic categories. Of note, the relationships are relatively invariant, with high school GPA being a better predictor than SAT scores alone, regardless of demographic groupings.

Our current guidelines for admission:

Current UO admissions requirements are posted on the Admissions webpage and in printed material. Most relevant to the current recommendation, test scores do not currently play a rigid or powerful role in freshman admission decisions. Oftentimes, they barely play a role at all. In that light, UO Admissions is confident that we can still reach good decisions for applicants who might choose to not submit those scores. Our admission’s materials inform applicants that we currently consider these factors in our decisions:

- strength of academic course work
- grades earned
- grade trend
- standardized test scores
- senior-year course load
- motivation as demonstrated in the application essay
- extracurricular activities including community service and the need to work to assist your family
- ability to enhance the diversity of the university
- academic potential
- special talents

In describing ourselves as having a holistic review process, one key foundation to making that statement is the acknowledgement that different factors are of more use to us with some applicants than they are with others. Especially when contrasting our approach to review with other institutions that might be

considered comparators, it is important to note that Oregon is an institution that offers admission to a high percentage of our applicants, and that this institution is in a growth mindset for enrollment at the present time. While the institution seeks to bring in the most talented class possible, we also benefit from an overall approach to freshman admission that is:

- efficient when possible given an increasing application volume – up nearly 40% from four years ago;
- careful in ensuring that we are admitting students for whom we have the right supports to foster success; and
- adaptable enough to identify a variety of ways students can show readiness and the ability to contribute to the campus community.

Many of our admissions decisions are easy to make. Historically, students who submit all required materials, have strong grades and test scores, and who have met or exceeded our minimum course pattern, can be offered admission on a fairly rapid timeline. For those applicants whose initial review shows that we cannot be as sure of their readiness for success, the holistic process takes longer, but ensures we reach a more thorough decision. Simply put, when we invest extra time in the decision process on these students, we are more focused on finding reasons to offer admission than to deny it.

It is also important to address more selective admissions processes within the freshman pool, for the Freshman Direct Admit program in the Lundquist College of Business since 2017 and for the Clark Honors College beginning with the 2020 applicant pool. The same concepts detailed below are used in these more selective programs to ensure those two groups are chosen with the same care.

The holistic components

Following the practices of many of our peers, Oregon's current process is built on the idea that we should be able to distinguish a student's academic factors from their non-academic ones. This allows us to consider these applicants from a two-dimensional perspective.

Academic factors that are considered address largely what happens in the classroom. Central to this is that a student's record should be assessed beyond the overall GPA for factors including grade trends over time, the rigor/difficulty of courses, and the projected senior year schedule in particular. Test scores from the ACT or SAT can still be considered, but are used only sparingly. Without giving holistic reviewers any cut scores, the rough concepts of unusually high or unusually low scores might sometimes play a contributing role in understanding a student's record. The UO, then, lets standardized test scores contribute to an impression of the applicant, but they can just as possibly be determined to not offer additional insights gained elsewhere in the file.

Underpinning the entire academic component, though, is the concept of "local context," and the need for a reviewer to know the difference between what a student chooses vs what is available to them. For example, before judging whether a student chose a rigorous schedule filled with Advanced Placement (AP) courses, a reader needs to first know how much AP was available at that high school, and in what subjects. In consideration of local context, the Office of Admissions maintains data on over 17,000 high schools throughout the US and beyond, capturing data from a variety of sources to usually allow readers to know International Baccalaureate or Cambridge curriculum schools, how much AP curriculum is available, whether the school is public/charter/private, and in some cases, the percentage of students on free/reduced lunch, how many of the students have attended UO, or how they have done upon arrival.

Non-academic factors are used in providing a Personal Qualities Assessment, or PQA, in addition to the Academic score. Completely independent of those academic factors, the PQA is equally concerned with identifying ways in which the student has: (a) accomplishments in regard to activities, community service, work, or leadership; (b) a strong understanding of diverse perspectives or cultural difference, either by their own background or their awareness of how it could relate to their experiences as a member of the UO community; or (c) been impacted by hardship or adversity.

Taking action on a holistically reviewed file stems from the ability to not only see where an applicant lands in the context of the overall application pool, and comparison to others, but how that applicant stands more singularly. On each of the two axes, a score of 1 to 9 (low to high) sorts out applicants in a way that moves beyond grades and test scores, even if each remains available in support of a final decision. Readers are carefully trained at the beginning of each season with sample applications, informed about the broad and narrow implications of local context, and the need to be both efficient and consistent in planning out their reading pace and volume. Whenever possible, the staff assigned to read each file are those who recruit in those same states or areas, to give them the best likelihood of knowing subtleties and patterns for the files they read. The readers themselves do not make decisions, but rather provide these two assessments in a way that facilitates admissions leadership reaching overall conclusions.

To review files holistically when test scores are not available would be a minimal transition since, for many students, those scores do not form a sizeable portion of our academic assessment. Considering that the academic assessment consists of multiple factors, such as trends, curriculum strength, and local context, we have high confidence that thoughtful academic assessments can still be made in the service of the review process.

Since the initial decision to have certain files receive holistic review is based on the three traditional factors of overall GPA, test scores, and curriculum/course pattern, a student missing one of these three would be more likely to be assigned for a more thorough read than students for whom strong scores are a part of that initial sorting mechanism. Admissions has assessed our reader volume, workload, and pace, and are confident that we can complete what would be a likely increase in holistically reviewed files across general admissions decisions, the Freshman Direct process for LCB, and the Clark Honors College.

What goals does the University of Oregon have that test-optional admissions could help achieve?

The two fundamental possibilities that a university can expect from adopting a test-optional policy are changes to who applies and who is offered admission. Much public discussion around the topic of inequity in standardized tests builds from the question of whether these scores provide an equal or significant predictor of student success across all groups, especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and/or minority racial/ethnic groups. The University of Oregon is, unlike the flagships in many other states, relatively successful at enrolling a freshman class whose in-state cohort is fairly representative of the group of graduating, college-bound students from which it is drawn. This does not mean, though, that we could not increase our diversity in these regards, particularly in light of our status as a national research university. Becoming a test-optional institution has great potential to not only remove a perceived barrier from deciding whether to apply, but positively impact how those applicants see themselves belonging to, and being welcomed into, an incoming class.

Additionally, students of all backgrounds, both in Oregon and beyond, are becoming aware of which schools are test-optional. Students prone to test anxiety and many other students who do well in school but simply do not do well in standardized test settings are attracted to campuses willing to consider this broadened perspective. From around the state and across the country, especially if we communicate our approach well, this policy change could lead to an increase in applications consistent with our goals to grow the enrollment of the university.

The holistic review process at UO already does much to level the playing field for diverse applicants. As illustrated above, applicants are already considered in a way that looks for the positive and supports our goal of increased access for students with potential. However, the bigger hurdle this policy change would help clear is that of students who are interested enough to apply, but for one or more reasons, never complete their files enough to be truly considered for admission. For outcome purposes, being incomplete is currently comparable to being denied admission. In the 2020 applicant pool, these incomplete files show variations across some of the same categories for which we seek to increase applications. For example, among Oregon residents, an African American student is twice as likely as a white student to apply but never submit test scores. The difference is even more pronounced among non-resident applicants. While we should not assume all applicants who fail to submit test scores would be admissible if reviewed, or that all would choose UO if offered admission, it would have at least some potential to increase enrollment.

Beyond these two factors, one other key question is whether certain highly accomplished students who have applied to UO in past years are the types who would now be less interested in applying if this policy gave them a lower impression of our institution. However, the many colleges and universities moving to a test-optional approach in just the last few years can largely set that topic to rest. One key to ensuring this positive outcome would be ensuring that applicants with strong scores feel valued for their accomplishment.

Comparative Institutions

Within the state of Oregon, thirteen different institutions in Oregon are listed on FairTest.org as of this writing as having some fashion of a test-optional policy in place. That includes five of the state's public universities (EOU, OSU-Cascades, Oregon Tech, PSU, and WOU), three well-regarded independent institutions (Lewis & Clark, Linfield, and Willamette), and five other lesser-known schools (Mount Angel Seminary, Multnomah University, New Hope Christian College, Pacific Northwest College of Art, and Pioneer Pacific College).

Across the Pac-12, most schools are not on this list yet, but three are, Washington State University, Arizona State University, and the University of Arizona. Besides the UO, at least four other members of this group are confirmed to be looking at this same topic right now.

Less is known about the possibilities at other public or private members of the AAU. However, easily the most high-profile to join the list in the last year is the University of Chicago. AAU or otherwise, several other public flagships, such as Indiana University and University of Texas-Austin, have now joined the list. Other notable privates on the list include Colorado College, University of Denver, Connecticut College, Trinity (CT), American University, George Washington University, DePaul, Brandeis, Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Wake Forest, NYU, and Rochester.

Of particular note, the University of California system recently decided to retain standardized tests as part of their admissions process, even while acknowledging a desire to continue a longer-term goal of

changing their assessment process to move beyond these scores at a future time. The differences between their system and UO are important to consider in understanding how the two institutions can reach different decisions in consideration of their different landscapes. First, the UC system is a highly competitive system of campuses with extremely high selectivity and extremely low admission rates for applicants from their own state. In that sense, much more of their review process is concerned with the entire applicant pool, and for careful selection among students who are seen as clearly admissible (vs Oregon's review process, which helps determine whether an applicant is admissible and is used with only a small segment of the pool). Second, the UC system is unable to consider race/ethnicity among their factors in reaching decisions (vs Oregon, where our state has no such legislative restrictions). Last, while the UC system and UO each seek to enroll classes that reflect their state, the UC system falls short of its goals of enrolling classes that reflect the diversity of its state.

Test-optional approaches:

The term "test-optional" is broad and implemented somewhat differently across the growing number of campuses that pursue it. A wide array of universities and colleges have been adding their names to the rolls of test-optional institutions on [FairTest.org](https://www.fairtest.org/), including many colleges that UO would not consider our peers. However, that landscape is changing rapidly, and conversations among admissions professionals and in the media give the impression that the list is about to grow fairly significantly.

Below are links to illustrate how policies around test-optional approaches are communicated:

[University of Denver](#) (test-optional as of the 2020 applicant pool)

[Indiana University](#) (test-optional as of the 2021 applicant pool)

[University of Chicago](#) (test-optional as of the 2020 applicant pool – go to "Application Materials" list)

[Bowdoin College](#) (test-optional for fifty years)

[Northern Illinois University](#) ("test blind" beginning with the 2021 pool)

[New York University](#) ("test flexible" for the last several years)

[University of Arizona](#) (test-optional for general admission for many years, but required for scholarships and several specific colleges/majors/programs – some argue they are barely test-optional at all)

A review of these links will show details as to how each institution carries out its policy. A traditional approach is for an institution to allow students to opt to be considered without test scores for both admission and scholarship. Some will require the student to do additional things (such as submit a portfolio of other information), but the core possibility is that applications can be considered complete or reviewable without scores. Examples include Indiana, Chicago, and Denver. Variations on this core approach include:

- Test-optional with a GPA threshold: test scores are not needed unless a student's GPA is below a certain threshold, such as a 3.0.
- Test-optional except for scholarships: no-score students can be offered admission, but will not be considered for any merit-based funding.
- Test-optional except for certain programs: students applying to certain programs, such as Honors, or a competitive major, are required to submit scores.
- Test-flexible: an institution may still require some sort of score-based component to be submitted for the student to be considered, but looking more broadly at their available options, might also consider results from the International Baccalaureate or Cambridge-related exams, a certain combination of AP score results, or other possibilities on a predetermined list.
- Test-blind: no scores will be considered, even if submitted.

Task Force Recommendation:

After review of relevant data, test-optional models, and potential benefits to UO, we recommend the University of Oregon move, effective with applicants for Fall 2021 freshman admission, to a traditional test-optional policy in which most applicants can ask to be considered for admission or scholarships without test scores. This would include the ability to be considered for admission to the university overall, as well as to the Clark Honors College, and to the Lundquist College of Business Direct Admit program. A box would be added to all three forms of the application (the Common Application, the Coalition Application, and the university's own "Oregon Application") that a student could check asking for this type of consideration.

We also recommend that students have the ability to reverse this decision after submitting the application. Students would also be eligible for the Pathway Oregon program; however, the ability to guarantee scholarships based on a certain GPA/score combination could not be extended to these students, if for no other reason than we cannot sufficiently predict the impact on our scholarship budget.

Exceptions to this policy for applicants who would still be required to submit scores include:

- Applicants whose high school curriculum includes study at an unaccredited school, or in the homeschool setting;
- Applicants whose high school record is ungraded (versus pass-fail or portfolio-based);
- NCAA-recruited athletes;
- Other students who, on a case-by-case basis, were determined to need to submit scores as additional evidence of college readiness.

Implementation of this new approach would require several practical steps, many of which are driving the tight timeline that has been established for this discussion. For example,

- All three websites from which we receive applications require lead time for our annual update to application content and requirements.
- Banner systems need to be updated to store the student request; on a related note, workflows, and Banner definitions of complete vs incomplete files, will need to be updated to allow for this possibility; and the calculation of a no-score index proxy will need to be considered to help with efficient initial review and routing of our increasing pool.
- Holistic reviewers in Admissions, faculty readers in the Clark Honors College, and other scholarship/admissions committees around campus, will need to be trained on how to ensure decisions continue to be effective in cases where scores are not offered.

Last, communication about this change must be thorough in regards to both internal and external audiences and constituencies of the University of Oregon. To offer a few specific examples:

- The university community needs to be informed of the change in regards to faculty understanding this altered approach to selection of incoming freshmen.
- Print publications, the university catalog, and all online resources must be updated to clearly reflect the change, and admissions staff properly trained on how to explain and discuss this approach with prospective students/families and school counselors.
- Communication to state legislative constituencies should be clear as to the benefits of this approach.

- The general public should be informed.

The task force feels that such changes to communication and internal review processes would be a valuable exchange for the possibility of an increased applicant pool and alignment with national equity goals and trends among comparator institutions.

Resources

Following is a list of some of the recent conversations on test-optional approaches that informed the task force's review.

Media stories:

[US News – Applying to Test-Optional Colleges: What to Know \(Sept 2019\)](#)

[Inside Higher Education – Making the Case for Test Optional \(April 2018\)](#)

[Wall Street Journal – Is It Fair to Award Scholarships Based on the SAT? \(Feb 2020\)](#)

<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2020/02/florida-house-panel-oks-testing-plan-other-school-standards-1874745> (Feb 4 2020)

University of California:

[Lawsuit being filed in California over use of scores \(Oct 2019\)](#)

[University of California senate task force recommendations \(Feb 3 2020\)](#)

<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-02-03/uc-should-keep-sat-and-act-as-admission-requirements-faculty-report-says> (Feb 3 2020)

Other university announcements/stories:

[Indiana University Board allows campuses to choose policy \(Dec 2019\)](#)

[University of Chicago announces its policy and rationale \(June 2018\)](#)

Works Cited

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Task Force Membership

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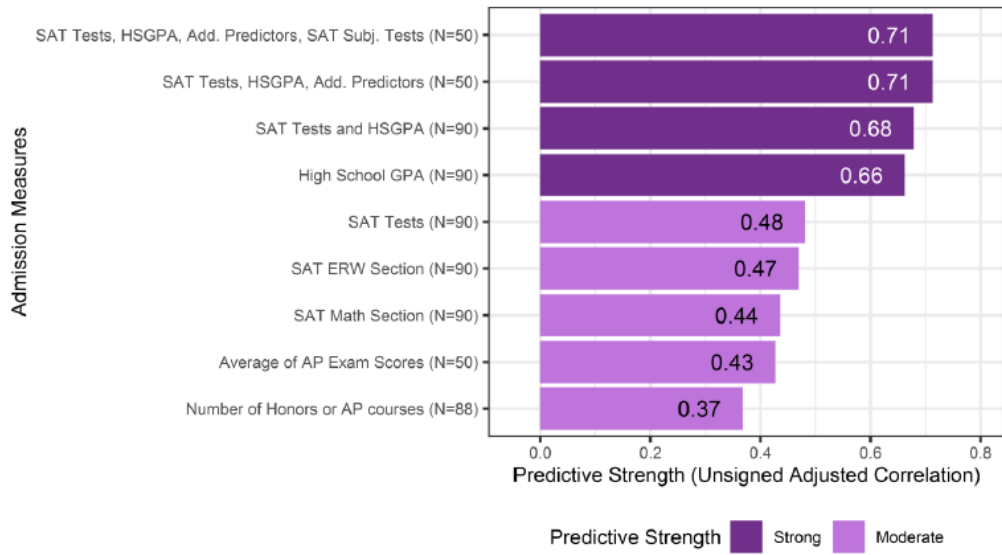
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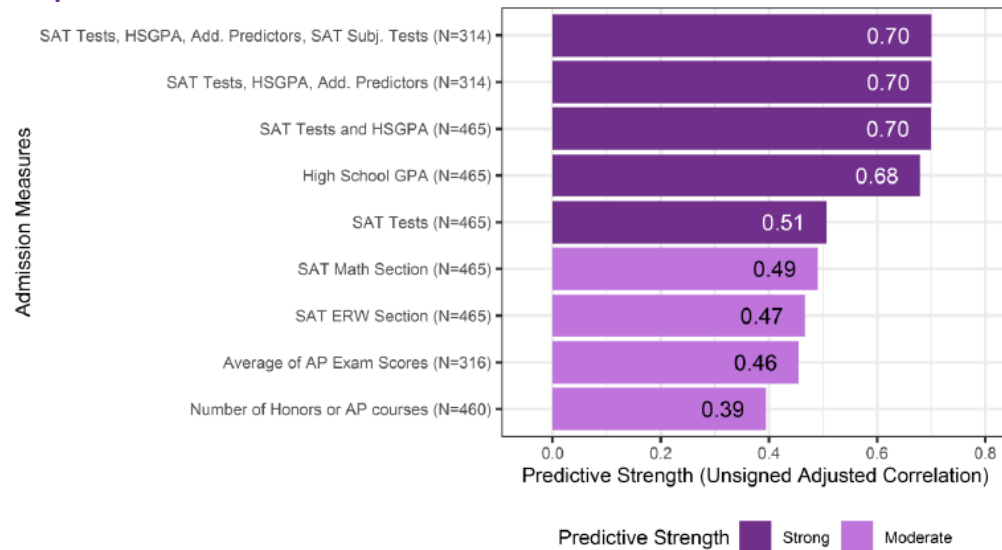
Appendix

Predictive strength of admissions measures across demographic categories (ACES; College Board, October, 2019)

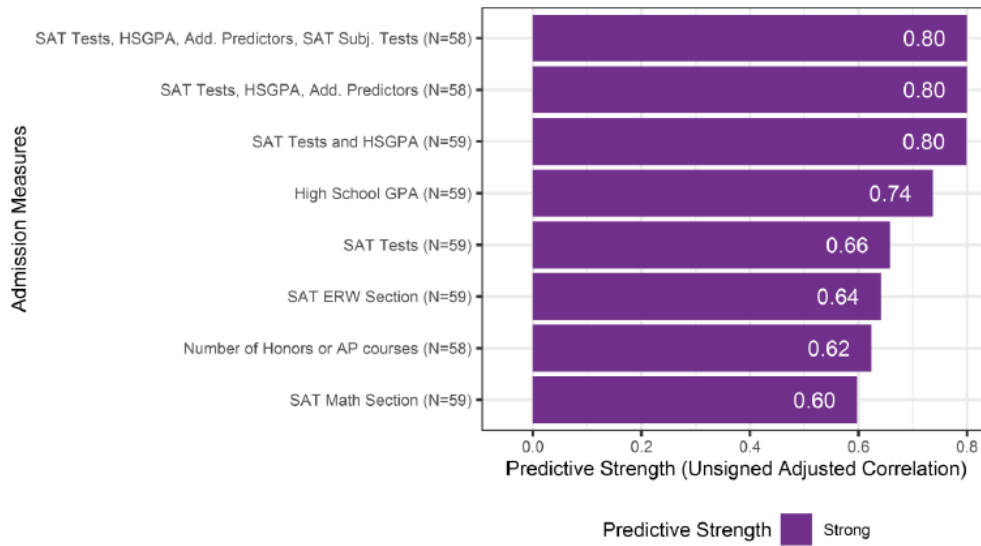
Black or African American students



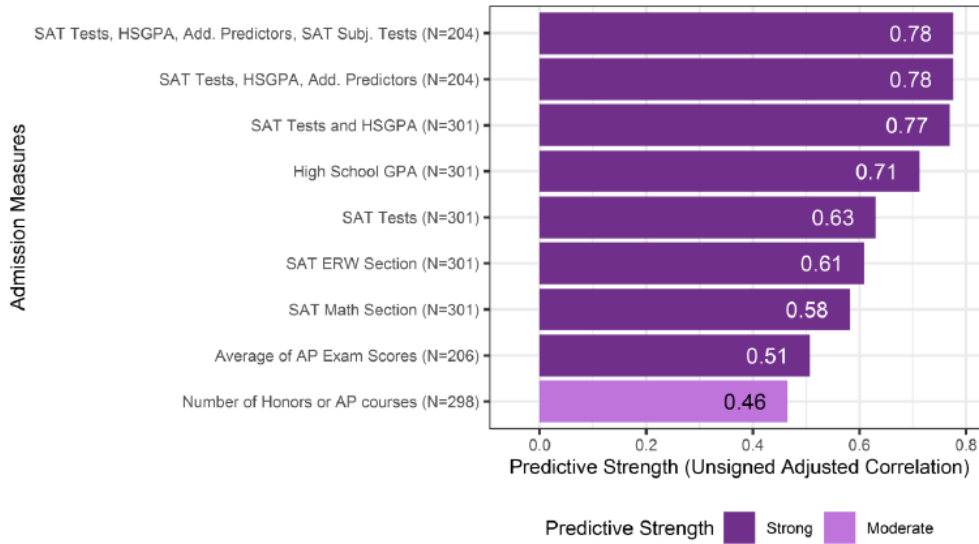
Hispanic or Latino students



Students not reporting Race and Ethnicity



Students endorsing 2 or more Races



White students:

