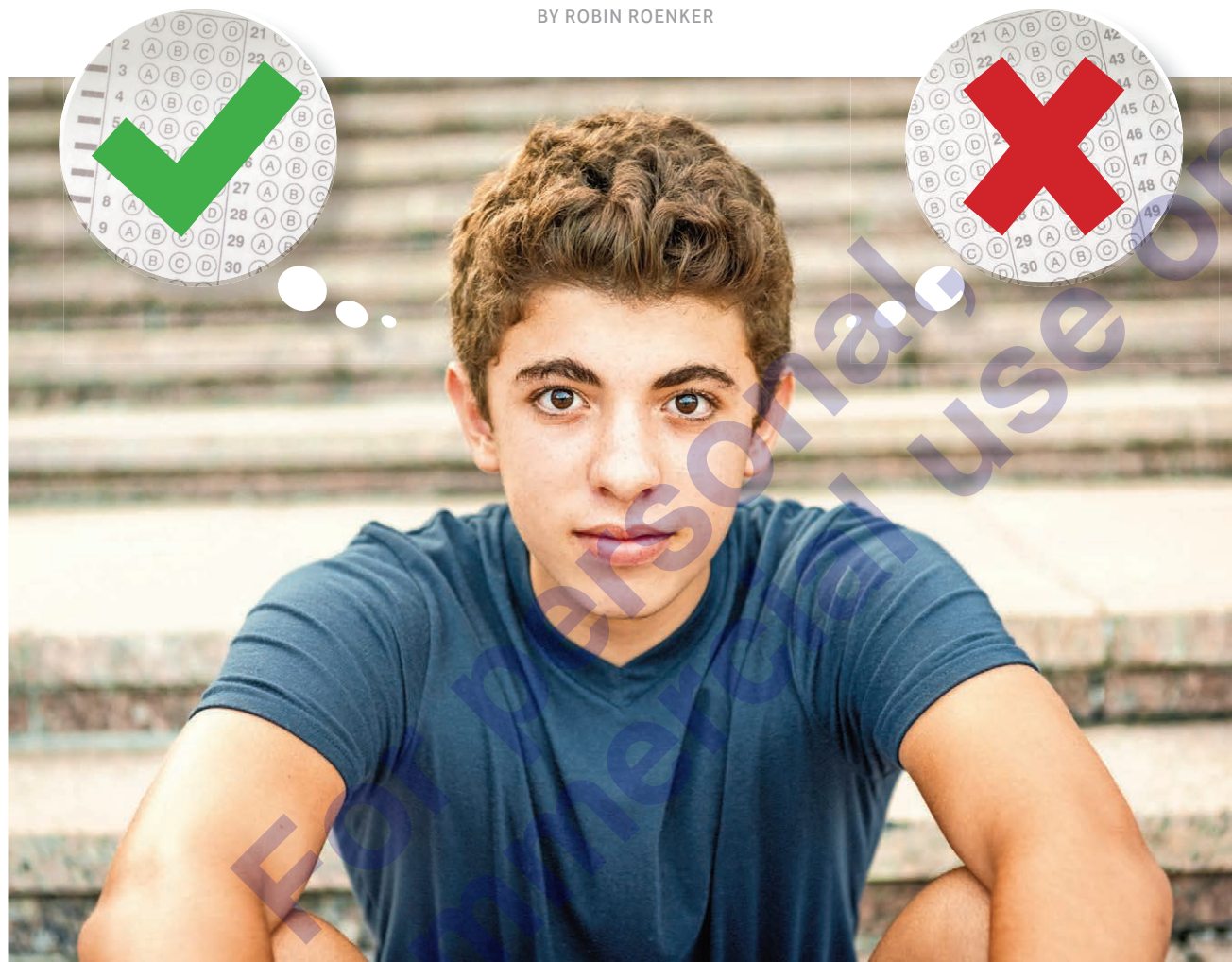


More Than a Score

Make your college application shine with or without a test

BY ROBIN ROENKER



If you're a high school senior applying for college admission in fall 2022, there's a very good chance you'll have your choice of submitting an ACT or SAT score — or not.

In acknowledgment of the challenges many students have faced in scheduling ACT or SAT exams during the pandemic, at least 1,300 American colleges and universities have announced test-optional admissions status through 2022.

Many schools, citing test access and fairness issues, have made the decision to go permanently test-optional, joining a growing higher-education trend that began even before COVID-19 hit.

But what does this new, test-optional landscape actually mean for students?

Here's what admissions representatives want you to know:

1 TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES LET YOU PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD — ON YOUR OWN TERMS.

Many schools that are now **test-optional** — including Indiana University, which has permanently adopted such a policy — will accept ACT or SAT scores. "Students now get to choose how they

represent their academic readiness," says Sacha Thieme, Indiana University's assistant vice provost and executive director of admissions.

"We want students to feel confident, under this policy, that a test score will never be used against them," Thieme says. But if you have a score you're confident about, don't hesitate to send it in. >



2 TEST-OPTIONAL COLLEGES WON'T PENALIZE YOU IF YOU CHOOSE NOT TO SUBMIT A SCORE. REALLY.

You may be worried that failing to submit a standardized test score could signal that you actually took, but bombed, the test.

But at schools like Vanderbilt University, which was one of more than 560 American colleges and universities to sign a “Test-Optional Means Test-Optional” pledge put forth by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, there’s truly **no penalty for not submitting a score.**

“We believe in a very contextually based, holistic admissions process. Testing is just one factor we consider, among many others,” explains Douglas Christiansen, vice provost for university enrollment affairs and dean of admissions and financial aid at Vanderbilt, which went test-optional for fall 2021 and 2022 because of COVID-19.

Students who applied for fall 2021 admission at Vanderbilt without submitting a score “were not thought of negatively at all,” Christiansen says. “If they didn’t turn it in, it wasn’t as though we thought, ‘Oh, they probably have a low score.’ It was simply one data point that was not in their files.”

3 IF YOU CHOOSE NOT TO SUBMIT A TEST SCORE, MAKE SURE YOUR GRADES ARE SOLID.

Factors like GPA and class rigor — Did you challenge yourself with several AP or dual-credit classes? Did you resist the urge to slack off senior year? — have always been essential components of a college admission application, but in a test-optional world, their importance grows. Without an ACT or SAT score as a reference point, your GPA and education history become the key indicators of your academic readiness for college.

“All students — whether or not they choose to submit test scores — should know that their **high school transcript is still the most important part of the admission decision** at just about every college and university in the country,” says Ronné Patrick Turner, vice provost of admissions and financial aid



for Washington University in St. Louis, which is test-optional through 2022. “That always has been true, and it’s still true now.”

Christopher Gruber, vice president and dean of admission and financial aid at Davidson College in North Carolina, which is in the midst of a three-year test-optional pilot program, agrees.

“Test scores — whether students submit them or not — don’t tell an applicant’s story. We want to know which courses students have chosen and, of course, the grades they earned in those classes. We want to see that students have appropriately challenged themselves,” Gruber says. “Recommendation letters from teachers and counselors can also help highlight some of the unique contributions applicants make in the classroom, in their high school and in their community.”



4 PRIORITIZE OTHER WAYS TO SHOWCASE YOUR PERSONALITY.

At Washington University, students were able — for the first time in 2021 — to **submit a 90-second video** about themselves as part of their application package. Similarly, many schools offer optional essay prompts or supplemental, open-ended questions on their applications. These options allow students to let their voices shine through.

“I always advise students to be self-reflective (in their applications),” says Turner. “Tell us your story. Tell us what you’re interested in. Tell us about the different aspects of who you are.” ■