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When senior Isabel Clark discovered that she didn't have to submit an SAT or ACT test score to a college she was applying to, she had no hesitation in taking the opportunity.

"My test scores were average, so it wasn't like I hated them," Clark said, "but for me, the school that I was applying to, American University in Washington D.C., seemed to be getting a lot of test scores in a higher average range than mine. And the school said that not submitting my scores wouldn't have any effect on my application, so I said, 'OK! Less for me to worry about!'"

For many years, the number of colleges with test-optional policies, meaning that they no longer require SAT and ACT test scores for applications, has swelled to more than 815 as of January 2015. Yet as the number of schools adopting test-optional application policies, the number of students taking the SAT exam continues to increase; this year 1.7 million seniors took it. A recent graduate from McCallum and freshman at Austin Community College, Xanthe Hammer, is sending an application to a test-optional university this year but decided to submit her scores anyway.

"I'm sending an application to Earlham, which is test-optional," Hammer said. "I think it's great that so many universities are moving towards test-optional policies. It's making the application process more subjective and shows that schools are starting to look at students more as humans and less as numbers. For my case, I have good test scores and an am really smart but have terrible grades. I can't motivate myself to waste my time doing work I don't care about, so I spent the latter half of my high school career taking computer science courses at ACC, so now I could drop out of school and get a job as a programmer if I wanted to. But I want to learn more, and the issue is that there's not a place on most applications to offer an explanation as to what I spend most of my time doing if it's not homework."

The policies vary from university to university; some require applicants who don't supply test scores to submit other materials, such as scores

from AP or IB exams; others limit their test-optional alternative applications to students with specific GPA scores; some schools are even completely "test-blind."

"I applied to 12 colleges, and American University was the only one where I didn't have to submit my test scores," Clark said. "There was nothing supplemental that I had to submit instead. I just had to click a button. You had to select that if you weren't submitting your test score, and that was it."

Though each university has a different reason for turning to test-optional policies, the major argument for instituting them is to give potential applicants with poor scores, especially minorities and those in poor socioeconomic circumstances, a better chance for acceptance.

According to its website, American University in Washington D.C.'s decision to institute a test-optional admission policy came down to what they believe matters most on a college application, "While tests help to predict your potential for success in college, your academic performance

in the classroom is the most important factor in our review of your application. We also consider qualitative factors, such as your essay, letters of recommendation and extracurricular activities."

The influence of standardized test scores such as the SAT and ACT has been a topic of fierce debate for decades. Supporters argue that test scores accurately reflect a student's college-readiness, test-taking ability and drive to succeed academically. Critics, meanwhile say the test only reveals which students have the advantage over others due to socioeconomic and geographical privilege. The testing gap discourages a large number of potential college applicants from taking the exam or submitting their scores.

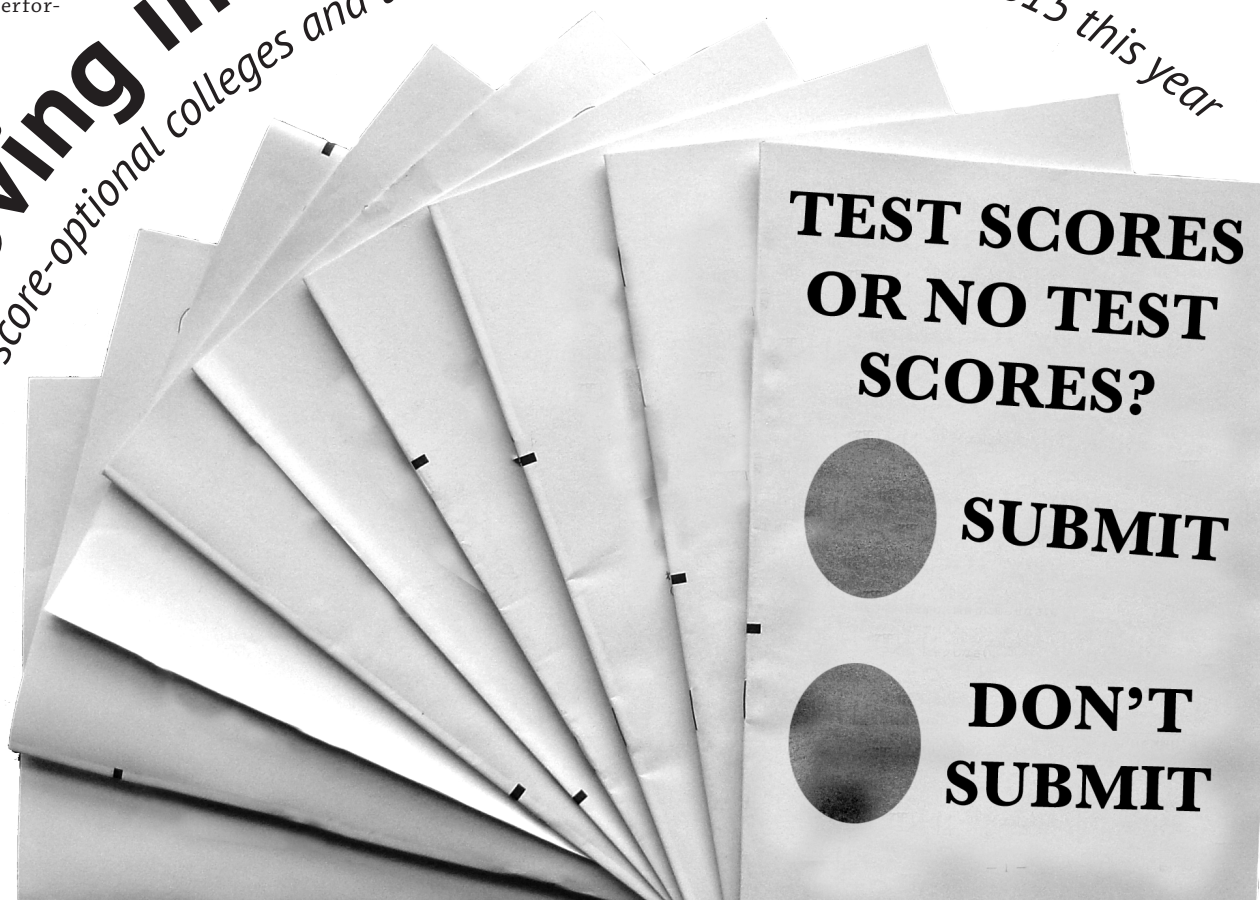
"I think the tests are important," Hammer said. "The issue isn't the testing, I guess,

but rather how colleges interpret the scores. Grades don't say a lot about a person. Test scores don't say a lot either. But I think combined they can give someone viewing them a better idea of the student as a whole."

Though Clark says her college-application process has been stressful and long, she said that ultimately the schools' admissions policies are not a primary factor in deciding where she wants to go.

"I don't see any problems with the current overall application processes to colleges and universities - everything we have to do is necessary," Clark said. "Really I think that finding what you want to do and what kind of college you want to go to is important, not what's in the application. You need to think of things like what state you would like to go to school in, the school's atmosphere, the types of students who go there, and even whether or not the school is affiliated with a religion. Most college applications are similar in structure too, so I wouldn't focus on them when looking."

Moving in a new direction
Number of test-score-optional colleges and universities in U.S. swells to over 815 this year



*Illustration by
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