

UT MARTIN ASSESSMENT NEWSLETTER

APRIL 2022

Our most important job is to help our students succeed!

From Data to Decisions – Special Edition

During the height of the pandemic, UT Martin was one of many, many institutions across the country to temporarily adopt “test-flexible” admissions. At the time, ACT testing centers throughout the United States were cancelling (sometimes with little or no notice) their administration of the ACT exam, and many students were either unable to take the ACT at all before the admission due date or were unable to re-take the ACT in the hopes of improving their scores. In response, institutions opted to forgo the submission of an ACT score as part of their admission materials. Thus, “test-flexible” admissions became one of many adaptations made in response to pandemic conditions.

Now, many institutions are looking at their data to determine whether they should continue the test-flexible option for admissions. Most institutions who are leaning towards permanently adopting the test-flexible option are still planning to use ACT scores for awarding scholarships and, in conjunction with other measures, for placement purposes. Individual accredited programs may still require ACT scores for program-level admission. UT Martin and the UT System in general are among those institutions who are investigating the pros and cons of test-flexible admissions. Destin Tucker and her Admissions Team and Rion McDonald and his Institutional Research Team have done some investigating to help us determine whether test-flexible admissions will be a viable option in the long run.

To set the stage for discussion, here are UT Martin’s traditional admissions requirements:

- 3.0 GPA and 19 ACT OR 2.7 GPA and 21 ACT (or SAT equivalent);
- ACT/SAT Superscore (i.e., using the highest subscores across all attempts)

- Conditional admission by director review.

UT Martin’s Test-Flexible admissions requirements (Fall 21 and Fall 22) include:

- ACT/SAT scores are not required for admission for students with 3.0 high school GPA
- ACT/SAT scores strongly encouraged for merit scholarships and class placement.

So, at this point we are almost finished with our first year of students admitted using test-flexible admissions. What have we learned from this first year? Keep in mind that there are many other factors affecting this data and that one year of data is not sufficient to draw any concrete conclusions. But what we have learned is promising:

- We had a record number of admitted students (11.7% increase).
- 44% were first admitted without test scores.
- 84% of all admitted students had submitted scores by the start of the term.

So, it appears that the test-flexible admissions policy allowed students to move through the admissions process more quickly, and for the most part they still were able to submit ACT test scores by the start of the term.

The pandemic continued to take a toll on students who were admitted. We, like most institutions across the country, experienced an enrollment “melt”—meaning that admitted students did not actually enroll by the start of term due to the general uncertainty caused by the pandemic conditions. So, among the students who actually enrolled:

- 38% were first admitted without test scores.
- 97% of those enrolled had submitted test scores by the start of the term.
- The Fall 2021 freshman class posted an average ACT score of 22.2

(compared to the Fall 2020 freshman class average ACT score of 23.3). Keep in mind that the Fall 2021 freshman cohort did not generally have the same access to ACT re-takes that the Fall 2020 cohort did, so it is reasonable to conclude that average ACT superscores would likely be lower as a result.

Once we got these students on campus, how well did they perform? Comparing the general fall-to-spring retention rate for the 2021 freshman cohort to the 2019 and 2020 cohorts, we see that in general, the retention rate was similar to that of earlier cohorts:

| FALL TO SPRING RETENTION | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| Cohort | Fall to Spring Full-Time Cohort | # Spring Retained | Fall-to-Spring Retention Rate |
| 2019 | 1,155 | 1,045 | 90.50% |
| 2020 | 1,102 | 944 | 85.70% |
| 2021 | 1,036 | 895 | 86.40% |

What happens if we disaggregate the retention data for the 2021 cohort by those who met the regular admissions requirements and those who were admitted under the test-flexible requirements?

| FALL 21 TO SPRING 21 RETENTION BY ADMISSIONS STATUS | | | | | |
|---|--------------|----------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Admissions Status | Not Retained | % Not Retained | Retained | % Retained | Grand Total |
| Regular | 82 | 12.6% | 568 | 87.4% | 650 |
| Test-Flexible | 59 | 15.1% | 333 | 84.9% | 392 |
| Grand Total | 141 | | 901 | | 1042 |

We see that, based on this data, there seems to be little difference in the retention status between these two groups of students.

Should this data surprise us? It turns out, based on some data examined by Institutional Research, that the answer is likely “no.” Rion McDonald built models to compare the predictive ability of students’ high school GPA and ACT composite scores with regard to three outcomes:

- First-year, fall-to-fall retention
- Graduation within four years of beginning at UTM
- Graduation within six years of beginning at UTM.

He used long-term data to model the outcomes:

- Fall 2011-2019 for retention (approximately 10,000 students)
- Fall 2011-2016 for four-year graduation (approximately 6,700 students)
- Fall 2011-2014 for six-year graduation (approximately 4,800 students).

Once the models were created, he then used additional, new data to validate the models:

- Fall 2020 cohort data for retention
- Fall 2017 cohort data for four-year graduation rates
- Fall 2015 cohort data for six-year graduation rates.

Rion’s models found that:

- For the retention model, HS GPA had 10.5% more predictive power than ACT results.
- For the four-year graduation model, HS GPA was 8.5% more accurate than ACT results.
- For the six-year graduation model, HS GPA had 8.9% more predictive power than the ACT results.

He then factored in other variables such as PELL grant eligibility status, first generation status, and whether the student had earned any college credit before entering UTM. Even including these factors, the bottom line remained the same: ***the HS GPA is a better predictor of retention and graduation rates for UTM students than the ACT results.***

Based on the limited amount of data we have available, it looks like test-flexible (or test-optional, as it is becoming known) admissions may be a viable option for UT Martin. One final question might be whether adoption the test-optional model would make UT Martin’s admission standards substantially different from other institutions like ours. Destin Tucker and her team contacted several institutions around us to find out what they were planning to do with their admissions standards for the Fall 2023 cohort. Their findings are in the table on the last page of this newsletter.

Based on the Admission Team’s findings, it looks like UT Martin will be in line with

other institutions in our region if we ultimately decide to adopt test-optional admissions. Further investigation, including the collection of additional years of data, is needed to sufficiently determine whether test-optional admissions provides enough advantages for

students without negatively affecting retention and graduation rates. This is a promising start, and if subsequent data continues to support the adoption of test-optional admissions, this might be one of the good things to come out of the pandemic.

Test-Optional Admissions for LGIs, Aspirations and Comparable Peers

| Institution | Fall 2023 Requirements | Fall 2024 and Beyond | Peer Group |
|--|--|---|-------------------|
| Austin Peay State University | Test-optional with 2.85 GPA <u>or</u> ACT of 19 and GPA of 2.75; test-optional currently in the approval process for Fall 23 but should pass | Most likely staying test-optional, but no long term decision has been made | LGI |
| Middle Tennessee State University | Test-optional with 3.0 GPA <u>or</u> 2.7 GPA and 19 ACT | Staying test-optional long term | LGI |
| Tennessee Technological University | Test-optional with 3.0 GPA; 2.5 high school GPA and 17 ACT; <u>or</u> 15 ACT with completion of college-prep high school program | Staying test-optional long term | LGI |
| University of Memphis | Test-optional with 2.6 GPA (self-reported); currently evaluating for fall 2023 but believe it is here to stay | Believe it is here to stay but no long-term decision made yet | LGI |
| Murray State University | Test-optional with 3.0 GPA; <u>or</u> require 2.0 GPA and 18 ACT for admission | Staying test-optional long term | Aspirational Peer |
| Southeast Missouri State University | test-optional with 2.75 GPA | Staying test-optional long term | Aspirational Peer |
| Arkansas Tech University | Test-optional with 2.0 GPA | Staying test-optional long term | Comparable Peer |
| Arkansas State University | Test-optional with 3.0 GPA, <u>or</u> 19 ACT, <u>or</u> top 20% of class rank | Staying test-optional long term; Note: ACT test required by state so it is used for class placement but not admissions if 3.0 GPA | Comparable Peer |

We would like to thank Destin Tucker, the Admissions Team, Rion McDonald, and the Institutional Research Team for sharing this information with us. Tables were used courtesy of Admissions.

Skyhawk Retention Summit Reminder!

The Skyhawk Retention Summit is May 25.
 To register (free for UTM faculty and staff!), please visit
<https://www.utm.edu/retentionsummit/>.