

# College applications soar because of optional test scores

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USA TODAY  
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Melanie Urgiles considered Johns Hopkins University a “reach” school.

The first-generation Latina student from Sleepy Hollow High, 25 miles outside Manhattan, wasn’t sure she’d get in, considering John Hopkins accepts just 11% of applicants. But when the selective university announced it was going “test-optional” and wouldn’t require SAT or ACT scores for applicants, Urgiles decided she’d take a chance. And she was far from the only one.

College applications soared for the 2021-22 school year as thousands of students took advantage of relaxed test score policies during COVID-19. America’s colleges, on average, experienced a jump in applications of at least 11% – including public, private and selective universities, plus historically Black colleges. That’s according to Common App, which provides a one-size-fits-all application to more than 900 colleges and universities.

At selective schools – where the acceptance rate is typically less than 50% – the spike was largest: Applications increased by an average of 21%.

“The silver lining of COVID is that many of these selective institutions had historically diverse application pools,” said Jenny Rickard, CEO of Common App. “The pandemic underscored the importance and value of higher education. People who were able to work from home or keep their jobs, for the most part, had college educations.”

Urgiles was elated when she got her Johns Hopkins acceptance letter. The 17-year-old, who hopes to work in health care, applied to 15 schools with the help of her college coach, getting into eight. For her, optional test scores weren’t just a pleasant surprise but a necessity as the pandemic led to the cancellation of every SAT test within driving distance.

“I would be curious to see my SAT score if I could have taken it,” Urgiles said. “But at the same time, I don’t think students should be confined to what a standardized test says about you.”

Like other schools across the nation, the University of Oregon is seeing a “positive trend” in students applying and interest in attending this coming school year, although the official enrollment numbers won’t be known until after the fourth week of fall term, said UO spokesperson Saul Hubbard.

This fall is the first year UO made the SAT and ACT optional for students to submit as part of their application, and it’s the first term since winter 2020 that students will be able to attend their classes fully in-person on campus.

“We believe there are a number of reasons for this, including our return to primarily in-person instruction and activities for fall term, as well as our SAT/ACT test optional policy,” Hubbard said. “But the pandemic adds a number of variables on where our enrollment may be this fall.”

## Navigating the application process

For some students, navigating the application process was a little more simplified because of the option of not including ACT or SAT test scores.

In Houston, Nathaly Martinez said she didn’t think college was an option. After giving birth in February to a baby girl and opting to spend the entirety of her senior year of high school in virtual learning, Martinez figured she’d have to go into the workforce immediately.

A conversation with her guidance counselor convinced her that it couldn’t hurt to apply. Once acceptance letters started rolling in, “it motivated me and gave me more faith in myself,” Martinez said.

“Having a daughter, she pushes me even more,” she said. “I want her to see, ‘I had you, and I still went to school. I made it.’ I want more for her. Yes, it’s going to be hard, but in the end, it’s worth it.”

Martinez will enroll at Houston Community College in August. She got into a handful of four-year state schools, but HCC made the most financial sense. She plans to study nursing.

In Portland, Evelyn Minjares-Carrillo spent all of her senior year in distance learning. There was no school counselor to stop in the hallway and ask for help with applications. She often turned to Google. Minjares-Carrillo applied to 26 colleges, including Harvard, taking advantage of the test-optional movement. She wasn’t upset to miss the SAT.

“I couldn’t take it, then I was advised to skip it because it wasn’t needed, and it wasn’t necessary to spend the time studying,” said Minjares-Carrillo, who will start at Oregon State University in the fall and plans to major in public health.

“It’s not built for people of color or low-income students,” she said about the SAT, “so why even try?”

That’s a common attitude about standardized testing. Rickard said one-third of Common App’s 1.2 million students sought to be the first in their family to attend college, and many of them applied to schools that might have previously seemed out of reach.

“We need a revolution,” she said. “This is our moment to do it. The college admissions process has been so entrenched and immovable for decades. But COVID showed us things can change.”

“This is an opportunity for us to look at ourselves and ask, ‘What are we doing to prevent access to college, and how can we change it?’”

## Increased exposure, increased applications

Khari Davis said he was “stalking” the University of California system, waiting to see whether its colleges would go test-optional.

Davis, 18, is from Tallahassee, Florida, but always dreamed of attending school in the Golden State. He had his

tim/offender relationships, of the 1,101 reports made, 343 incidents involved the government.

Of these, 149 were perpetrated by law enforcement (14%).

City officials were reported as perpetrators in 93 reports, or 8% of all reported incidents. The other reported perpetrators included neighbors (9%), employers (2%), landlords (2%), service providers (1%) and acquaintances (1%).

Perpetrators were categorized as “other” in 204 reports (19%), unknown in 71 reports (6%) or were not reported in 236 (21%) reports.

Strangers made up 22% of the perpetrators of the 1,101 reported bias incidents.

Procedure outlined in the report explains that advocates provide various services and support to victims, including providing information about the criminal and civil justice systems, referrals to victim service programs and other community and government programs that can provide further resources and support.

“Advocates may also follow-up with systems such as law enforcement to address concerns and issues if the victim requests,” the report explained.

Even if a witness or victim is reporting a law enforcement officer or government employee, hotline officials said the report would not be treated any differently than any other report.

“If somebody is calling about law enforcement or government, the response would still be victim-centered,” explained Kristina Edmunson, the communications director for the Oregon DOJ, in an email.

“We talk about options available depending on the type of bias and who the perpetrator is. Does the victim want to report it to law enforcement? Does the agency have processes for reporting this (they often have specific forms online),” Edmunson added.

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Melanie Urgiles was pleasantly surprised to find out she was accepted at Johns Hopkins University. COURTESY MELANIE URGILES

eye on UCLA. His college adviser, a family friend, told him he should send in his scores, because schools “would be thinking about it subconsciously.”

“She said if it came down to two students, and one sent in a test score and one didn’t, they were going to pick the one who did,” Davis said. “I sent them in because I want to make myself competitive.”

Davis got into 15 of 16 schools he applied for, including UCLA. After conversations with family and friends, he decided instead to attend Howard University, a historically Black college in Washington.

Howard, which accepts 32% of applicants, is one of the selective schools experiencing a spike in applications. According to Common App data, applications at HBCUs jumped 13%, but Common App works with just 13 of the nation’s more than 100 HBCUs.

At Hampton University in Virginia, another selective HBCU, application numbers were up 39% – a surge Angela Nixon Boyd, the dean of admissions, didn’t see coming.

“It was crazy,” Nixon Boyd said. “I thought we would see fewer applications because of the pandemic creating a lot of economic issues for families. The predictions were that a lot of students would perhaps not go to college because they felt they’d need to go into the workforce right away. But we saw something different.”

Nixon Boyd, a Hampton graduate, attributes the barrage of applications to a number of factors. From Beyoncé’s Coachella performance in 2018 that celebrated traditional HBCU drum lines to Vice President Kamala Harris’ status as a Howard graduate, from philanthropists giving HBCUs life- and endowment-changing

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## Hate

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ing 2020. These events included the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd, the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 presidential election.

Reports about events of bias against Black people spiked in the summer of 2020, corresponding to the Black Lives Matter movement. The frequency of anti-Asian bias spiked in spring 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic in the country.

Events related to extremism also grew in September and October, right before the presidential election.

The latter half of 2020 saw a 134% surge in reported incidents compared to the first six months of reporting in 2020, said the report.

Ken Sanchagrin, executive director of the CJC, notes that the surge is “almost certainly a combination” of reflecting national spikes of bias-motivated crimes and the increased awareness that the hotline existed.

“We know that when there is a lot of publicity around the hotlines themselves or as we bring more community organizations on board certainly we expect to see an increase,” Sanchagrin said.

Without a baseline, Sanchagrin said, it is impossible to know for sure if the increase in reports was due to publicity or a true increase in bias crimes.

### Government cited as perpetrators

More than 30% of the reporters mentioned that the government was involved in the perpetration of reported incidents.

According to a table describing vic-

If an individual decides to report an allegation against a police officer to their department and doesn’t feel the department addressed it properly, there are additional resources.

Salem’s Community Police Review Board conducts external reviews of complaints against Salem Police Department employees. If a person is unsatisfied with the results of an internal police investigation, they may initiate a Community Police Review Board review.

The Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training is another option in these cases, Edmunson said.

### 38% increase in reports to law enforcement

The report also detailed the bias crimes reported by state police. This data is part of the Oregon Uniform Crime Reporting Program housed at Oregon State Police. The UCR Program receives crime information that law enforcement agencies statewide are required to report.

In 2020, a total of 377 bias crimes were reported to law enforcement, an increase of 38% compared to the 273 crimes reported in 2019.

Like data from the hotline, race and color was the most frequent motivation in the crimes. Of the 377 crimes reported, 207 were motivated by the victim’s race.

Lane County had the highest number of reports at 71. Multnomah had 47 reports and Marion County had 40. Polk County received eight reports.

Of the 377 incidents reported to law enforcement, at least 78 resulted in arrests. Most of the arrests (33) were for assault bias crimes. Intimidation led to 17 arrests and aggravated assault led to 14.

Data from state police reveals an ongoing gap in the state’s official data. Data from the Bias Reporting Hotline showed “very few” counties with zero reports of bias incidents. State police data, however, showed “large numbers” of counties with no reported activity of bias.

While the number of cases with bias crime charges has risen steadily since 2017, advocates know that there are many victims who do not report for “any number of reasons.”

The report points to the establishment of trust within communities as a potential reason why victims turn more frequently to the hotline.

“Many bias victims have endured and been scarred by repeated bias victimization throughout their lifetimes and perhaps have never had a safe place to receive support for their experiences,” stated the report.

“Moving forward, it may be beneficial to focus some of the state’s efforts into exploring this apparent gap, and assessing how it might be narrowed,” the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission wrote in its report. “In addition, even reports to the BRH may fail to uncover bias crimes against individuals who are victimized but do not report for any number of reasons.”

### Looking towards the future

In addition to continuing to train law enforcement to properly document, investigate and prosecute bias crimes, the hotline will also focus on minimizing the lag in response to hotline reports.

While a majority of the reports were made via the DOJ’s website (40%), 343 reports were made via telephone. Half of those calls went to voicemail.

“Sometimes people do not call us

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