

Student Perceptions of the Benefits of Taking the ACT in a Test-Optional Environment

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As part of a larger research study entitled *Where Do Test Scores Fit in a Test-Optional Environment*, we surveyed students who took the ACT on June 11, 2022, in order to better understand why high school students would take a standardized test like the ACT when they knew they were applying to test-optional institutions. Among other questions, we asked students the following open-ended question: “Given your choice to apply to a test-optional institution, what factors contributed to your decision to take the ACT?” We received responses from 81 students, and we found six themes within these responses. In this brief, we highlight what we learned from our ACT-tested respondents.

These six themes are presented in order from the most to the least mentioned: school/state role, student benefits, test-required, test my skills, stand out, and just in case. We also include an *other* theme for responses that do not fit into the six main themes (see Table 1 for details about each theme).

Table 1. Open-Ended Themes and Topics

Theme	Topics
School/state role	The ACT was required by the student’s school or state, advised by a counselor or teacher, or required for graduation.
Student benefits	Students took the ACT to apply for scholarships, placement, or awards, or to get into a specific postsecondary program.
Test-required	Students took the ACT because they wanted to apply to test-required schools or they thought the test was required by the institution they were interested in.
Test my skills	Students desired to compare their ACT scores to their SAT scores or to test their knowledge.
Stand out	Students took the ACT to show their skills through their scores and help their admissions application stand out relative to those of other applicants.
Just in case	Students took the exam “just in case” they needed it in the future or decided to apply to another school later.
Other	This theme includes responses that could not be categorized elsewhere, such as culture or parental/guardian pressure to test.

School and State Role

This theme includes responses about school or state actions or requirements that influenced students' decision to take the ACT. This includes responses related to a state or school requiring the ACT as a prerequisite for graduation. In some cases, students mentioned that teachers or counselors had advised them to take the exam. Other students reported that the school or state paid for the test. The following are some quotes from participants about this theme. (Note that all quotes in this paper are reproduced as written and without editing.)

"My high-school required every student to take the ACT."

"My high school teacher said that it would be a good idea to take, and I thought it was."

"My high School required us to take it . . . , but even if there was a choice, I would have still taken it, as it is very helpful in applying for test-optional schools as well."

Student Benefits

This theme reflects the intentions of students to apply for scholarships or financial aid, enter an honors program, obtain course waivers, receive awards, or be placed in a specific program, such as nursing. We observed that many students cited specific scholarships offered in their states or at an institution that required standardized test scores, such as the Bright Futures, HOPE, and Zell Miller scholarships. The following are some students' responses.

"I knew my high ACT score was incredibly helpful in both getting into the institution and receiving a tremendous scholarship."

"I saw interest in the nursing program at my institution. Since most nursing programs require test scores it is a necessity on my behalf."

"My scores helped me to test out of certain entry-level classes at my test-optional institution that I had already taken in high school."

Test-Required

The theme *test-required* reflects students' interest in test-required institutions. Some respondents wanted to apply to both test-optional and test-required institutions. In this theme, we also included responses related to the desire to apply to a more competitive school. Below are some of the students' responses.

"Wanted a score under my name in case I applied to a test-required school."

"I didn't only apply to test-optional schools. I also applied to test-required."

"I knew I would perform well, and I wanted to get into a competitive engineering program."

Test My Skills

In the theme *test my skills*, we included students' responses related to their desire to improve previous ACT scores, compare their ACT and SAT scores, learn how to take the ACT, and test their knowledge. Some students also answered that they wanted to take the exam to see their scores and decide later whether they would use them. We also included the responses of students who said they had prepared to take the ACT and wanted to see their scores. The following are some examples of students' responses.

"I prepared a lot for standardized tests and knew I would be able to get a score that reflected my abilities."

"To see where I'm at an educational level."

"I wanted to see how I compared to other students. I also felt the ACT was a much more accurate way of showing my capabilities compared to GPA."

"The way the test is made, I felt it was better to try it after I got my SAT scores in. I never retook the SAT, as my ACT scores were much higher than SAT."

Stand Out

In the *stand out* theme, we included students' desire to improve their postsecondary application, overcome low high school GPA, show their skills in a specific area, get an edge over nonsubmitters, improve their chances of acceptance, and show that they would perform well at an institution. We also included the responses of homeschooled students who wanted to have ACT scores to fill the gap in their high school grades. The following are some students' responses.

"I also knew that the test-optional policies would increase applicants to institutions, making it even harder to get in. Thus, I needed a good ACT score to differentiate myself further."

"If I scored high, I could standout from other applicants. I was homeschooled, so I wanted something to back up my high GPA."

"I did feel like presenting my score would help show my abilities better than my AP scores."

"I believed that I would do well enough on the ACT for it to be a valuable addition to my application."

"Using the score to counter my low GPA."

Just in Case

In the *just in case* theme, we included all responses students gave about having the score just in case they needed it.

"It is a great option to have an option of whether or not to submit. I did great, but others may not be great at testing but will still be successful in college."

"In case I didn't get accepted and had to apply the following year."

"I changed my mind a lot, so I took the ACT in case I end up wanting to go to an institution where they require your ACT scores."

Other

In the *other* theme, we included students who took the test because everybody was taking it, because their parents wanted them to take the test, or because of other reasons. We also included responses about COVID-19, in which many students reported that things changed because of the pandemic. In addition, some students took the test because it was more accessible than the SAT. Below are some examples of students' responses.

"It was the main standardized institution admission test in my area, so it was the main one I took."

"It was free, I had already taken it/studied for it, and I thought it would be helpful."

"I thought that the test-optional policy would not last after the pandemic."

"I was uncertain about covid requirements and there were available centers nearby."



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