



THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE  
BOARD OF TRUSTEES

MINUTES OF THE EDUCATION, RESEARCH, AND SERVICE COMMITTEE  
(SPECIAL SESSION - STANDARDIZED TESTING IN ADMISSIONS)

October 20, 2021  
Knoxville, Tennessee

The Education, Research, and Service Committee of The University of Tennessee Board of Trustees met at 1:00 p.m. (EDT) on Wednesday October 20, 2021, in the Student Union Ballroom, located on the campus of The University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

**I. Call to Order and Roll Call**

Committee Chair Donnie Smith called the meeting to order. Board Secretary Cynthia Moore called the roll, and the following members of the Committee were present: Donald J. Smith, Committee Chair; John C. Compton, Board Chair; Lane Gutridge, Student Trustee; Charles Hatcher, Commissioner, Tennessee Department of Agriculture; Phyllis Richey, Faculty Representative; and Jamie R. Woodson. In addition, Trustees William (Bill) C. Rhodes III, Christopher L. Patterson, and Kim H. White were in attendance.

Others present included: President Randy Boyd; Linda Martin, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Student Success; Stacey Patterson, Vice President for Research, Outreach and Economic Development; Chancellor Keith Carver (UT Martin); Chancellor Mark La Branche (UT Southern); Chancellor Donde Plowman (UT Knoxville); Chancellor Steve Schwab (UTHSC); Kari Alldredge, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management (UT Knoxville); Judy Cheatham, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (UT Southern); Yancy Freeman, Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs (UT Chattanooga); Destin Tucker, Director of Admissions (UT Martin); Li Cai, Professor, UCLA School of Education and Information Studies; and other members of the UT senior leadership and administrative staff.

Ms. Moore announced the presence of a quorum. The meeting was webcast for the convenience of the University community, the general public, and the media.

**II. Opening Remarks of the Committee Chair**

Committee Chair Donnie Smith welcomed everyone to the meeting and began his remarks by indicating that the session is intended to be informational in nature and that no decisions will be made. He indicated that the session has been designed so that the Committee



members may learn more about this important topic, and he would like for the session to be an open dialogue where all views and perspectives are considered.

Committee Chair Smith cautioned the presenters that their role in the meeting is not to advocate for a particular outcome, but to provide the Committee with what has been learned. In addition, he invited the Chancellors to share their concerns and let the Committee know what issues they are dealing with in this current landscape. Committee Chair Smith stated that a great outcome from this session would be for the Committee members to identify the questions that need to be answered and additional data that needs to be gathered in order for the Committee to be in a position to make a recommendation to the Board about the use of standardized testing in admissions moving forward, starting with the Fall 2023 admissions cycle.

### **III. Overview**

Linda C. Martin, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Student Success, stated that the program is intended to share more information regarding: (i) how standardized tests have historically been utilized in admission and scholarship decisions; (ii) pre-COVID admission practices; (iii) the impacts of the pandemic and changes in testing/admissions practices at UT and nationally; and (iv) the many facets and complexities associated with admissions across the UT System.

Dr. Martin shared a brief history of the use of standardized testing in admissions and noted that test scores are just one of many factors considered as part of the admissions process. She highlighted recent articles that discuss the benefits and potential disadvantages of standardized tests. In addition, Dr. Martin provided an overview of the State of Tennessee's current requirements regarding standardized tests, which require a post-secondary assessment (SAT or ACT) as a condition for graduation from a public high school. Dr. Martin advised that the State of Tennessee pays for a preparation class and for the opportunity for public high school students to sit for the exam twice (both of which have been shown to generally improve test scores). The state has set a goal of a composite score of 21 on the ACT as an indicator of a student's readiness for college.

Dr. Martin also presented information as to the actions that were taken by other universities in terms of test optional admission policies during the pandemic and what actions may be anticipated in the future. During the pandemic, more-selective institutions have seen a dramatic increase in applications, while less-selective institutions have seen a decline in applications. She explained that there are other disruptions and unknowns regarding college admissions practices, including the impact of test optional policies on national rankings/reputation. Recently, a National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) task force has recommended that the use of standardized testing in college admissions be discontinued.



She closed her remarks by sharing some potential questions that the Committee members may wish to consider, including the following:

- Whether a one size fits all the best approach for the UT System?
- What can we do better in our admissions practices?
- What might be lost if standardized tests were not required?
- What does the campus data tell us?
- How do we identify certain deficiencies and provide appropriate subject matter assistance or course placement?
- How will COVID-related grade inflation affect our ability to rely on high school grade point averages (GPA) in a post-COVID environment?
- How might a decision at one UT campus influence students' behavior and potentially impact other UT campuses?

#### **IV. Campus Perspectives**

Dr. Martin introduced the panelists representing the UT's predominately undergraduate campuses: Yancy Freeman, Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs (UT Chattanooga); Kari Alldredge, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management (UT Knoxville); Destin Tucker, Director of Admissions (UT Martin); and Judy Cheatham, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (UT Southern).

*Definitions.* The campus presentation began with a review of the following definitions:

- Test Mandatory: required of all applicants for admission decision;
- Test Optional: students can choose whether to submit SAT/ACT scores;
- Test Flexible: students have the option to submit other test scores (e.g., AP/IB)
- Test Blind: tests not factored into admissions even if submitted.

*Admissions Overview.* Each campus then provided an overview of their traditional and current admission requirements, along with 2021 data pertaining to (i) first-year Enrollment, (ii) average grade point average (GPA); (iii) average ACT score; (iv) first-year retention rate; and (v) 4- and 6-year graduation rates.

*Test-Optional/Test-Flexible Considerations.* The presenters discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited access to standardized testing. Approximately 700,000 and 400,000 fewer students took the SAT and ACT exams, respectively. From a competitive landscape perspective, 75% of U.S. colleges and universities remained test optional for Fall 2022; 47 of 52 Top Colleges (as reported by *U.S. News & World Report*) were test optional for Fall 2022. It was also noted that the analysis of institutional data shows GPA to be the best predictor of student success.



*Measuring Success/Annual Evaluation.* An annual evaluation based on certain metrics, along with an associated timeline for each was presented.

*Preliminary Outcomes/Key Takeaways.* In addition, each campus provided a snapshot of their recent experience.

*Questions.* Each of the campus representatives responded to the following questions:

- 1) What are the benefits and/or advantages of test optional/flexible admissions practices for the UT campuses? Students? State of Tennessee?
- 2) What are the challenges associated with test optional/flexible admission policies?

(A full copy of the presentation is included with these minutes.)

Committee Chair Smith opened the floor for discussion and invited everyone present to participate in the conversation. The Committee members engaged in a robust and lengthy discussion with members of the panel and other members of the senior leadership team during which a number of questions were raised by Committee members and other members of the Board of Trustees, which included (among others) the following:

- How have standardized tests been used previously and currently as part of the admission process and for other purposes (e.g., placement, scholarships, etc.)?
- How much time is spent on evaluating individual student applications?
- What are the strongest predictors for student success?
- What are the main factors that adversely impact student success?
- How much do standardized scores add to the admission analysis? Does the combination provide a fuller picture?
- How can admissions officers identify and assess grade inflation and comparability of students' grade point averages?
- In light of the pandemic and its adverse impact on the learning progress of students in K-12, how can the University without a standardized element understand (i) who is ready and capable of college-level work, and (ii) what student supports may be needed to ensure success?
- Is the ACT test readily available in Tennessee/nationally?
- What is the status of other applicable state requirements (e.g., to graduate from a Tennessee public high school, to be eligible for the Tennessee HOPE Scholarship, to be admitted into certain programs and for licensure, etc.)?
- With regard to the bias concerns, it has been reported that household income influences success on ACT scores. Is this causal or correlational? Is the same true for GPA?



- Do students from higher income households have more opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities? Does this have an adverse impact in the admissions analysis for those applicants who may not have had these types of opportunities?
- How much is the performance on standardized tests of the incoming freshman class considered in national rankings (i.e., *U.S. News and World Report*)? What would be the potential reputation/perception impact be if standardized test scores were not required?
- Are standardized test scores considered as part of the evaluation process for the awarding research grants?
- How do the admissions policies align with the University's mission and goals?
- Is it possible to adopt an admission policy that could place the University in a competitive disadvantage based on what peers/aspirational peers may be requiring in terms of standardized tests?
- What information will be available and when for evaluating the recent test-optional admission practice? Is there a risk of making a premature decision without supporting data?

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Following a short recess of approximately 15 minutes the meeting resumed.

**V. Keynote Speaker**

Dr. Martin introduced Li Cai, a Professor in the School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA. His presentation included:

- A Brief History of Standardized Testing
- Key Criticisms
- Counter-arguments to the Criticisms
- The University of California (UC System) Standardized Testing Task Force (STTF)

Dr. Cai presented an overview of certain results from the STTF report, which looked at the correlations between freshman GPA and SAT scores (reading and math). This information was further broken down by income, race and ethnicity, and parental education. He also shared data that presented student performance (freshman GPA, 1-year non-retention rates, non-completion rate (at 7 years) and graduation GPA) broken down by family income level and GPA/SAT scores. The data was based on students admitted to the UC System.

Dr. Cai reviewed the recommendations brought forward by STTF, which included further analysis of factors contributing to disproportionate representation, the development of a new assessment tool that would assess a broader array of student learning than any currently available tests. The STTF recommended that UC not go test optional.

(A full copy of the presentation is filed with these minutes.)



Committee Chair Smith opened the floor for questions. Dr. Cai responded to a number of questions from members of the Committee. Among the topics discussed, he addressed the rationale behind STTF's recommendation that the UC System not adopt a test optional approach (i.e., statistical, ethical and legal concerns). With respect to the UC System, Dr. Cai stated that the STTF's analysis showed that the largest single barrier to entry was not standardized test scores, but the lack of high-level K-12 coursework. Dr. Cai confirmed that the UC Board of Regents adopted a test blind approach to admissions for the UC System.

With respect to the data and the question of bias, he does believe that family household income may show a correlation to test scores, but that he does not believe it to be causal. In this regard, he noted that there are other factors, which may show similar correlations. Dr. Cai also addressed questions regarding analysis performed on other factors beyond GPA and test scores. He cited a recent study performed by Stanford, which highlights that household income may greatly impact the quality of application essays and adversely impact certain prospective students (those who do not have access to good guidance counselors, may not have parents who have attended college, etc.).

Dr. Cai answered questions regarding the data set used and how a similar approach may be useful to others.

## **VI. Next Steps**

Committee Chair Smith solicited feedback from the members of the Committee as to what questions they have and what data/additional information they would like to receive in follow-up to the session and prior to the next meeting of the Committee.

In addition to the questions identified, it was emphasized that, pursuant to the University's Bylaws, the Board of Trustees has oversight responsibility for the approval of general admission, retention, and graduation requirements for each campus. This specific responsibility falls within the scope of the Education, Research, and Service Committee Charter.

Committee Chair Smith asked that the Committee members and other members of the Board of Trustees share their questions with Dr. Martin, who will compile a comprehensive list.

## **VII. Adjournment**

The Committee Chair adjourned the meeting.



Respectfully Submitted,

*Cynthia C. Moore*

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Cynthia C. Moore  
Secretary and Special Counsel

Attachments. Copies of the following presentation materials are filed with the official minutes of this meeting.

- Campus Perspectives
- Reflections on the Fading Standardized Testing Requirement in College Admissions