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Science college first to make SAT/ACT scores optional

Applicants can choose other proof of aptitude

By Mary Beth Marklein
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Officials at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts say they will make college entrance exam scores optional in admission, making it the first nationally ranked science and engineering institute to do so.

Beginning with the entering class of 2008, WPI applicants will have the option of submitting either ACT or SAT test scores or some other indicator of academic achievement, such as a research paper, science fair project, or similar effort that demonstrates a student's organizational skills, knowledge of subject matter, motivation and initiative.

"This helps us capture a completely different side of a student, and also potential leadership ability," says Kristin Tichenor, associate vice president for enrollment management.

WPI's announcement brings to 739 the number of schools moving away from requiring a standardized test from applicants, says the National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest), a Cambridge, Mass., non-profit that is critical of testing.

Since last spring, 18 liberal arts colleges have de-emphasized scores in admissions, as has George Mason University, a large public institution in Fairfax, Va.

A University of Rhode Island panel is studying the possibility of

making standardized admission tests optional.

"Any kind of college, from extraordinarily selective liberal arts schools to very large public universities, can do it," says FairTest spokesman Robert Schaeffer. "It sounds as if WPI has developed an admissions process for the type of student they want to recruit, and that's exactly what we've been arguing."

No other tech-oriented school in *U.S. News & World Report's* top 100 national universities has gone test-optional, Schaeffer says. In fact, George Mason still requires scores for admission to most of its engineering and computer science programs.

Officials there found that math scores help predict a student's likelihood of success in those programs, so "the feeling was (that) it would be prudent to continue to have that data at our disposal," admissions dean Andrew Flagel says. He says the school will reconsider the requirement in a few years.

Tichenor says the debut of a revised SAT in 2005 led her to "carefully consider" whether test scores were of value. Studies have since confirmed her sense that SAT scores were not providing useful information about a student's chances of success. "I have seen so many students with marginal high school records but outstanding SAT scores crash and burn, and quite the reverse," she says.

She says she hopes the new policy will help WPI attract more women and minorities, who tend on average to earn lower scores, and "lower the flame" on the admissions frenzy.

She also hopes other tech-oriented schools will follow suit, but notes that most larger schools "do not have the luxury (of reading) applications from cover to cover."

This year, WPI got about 5,700 applications and expects to enroll 800 freshmen this fall. In contrast, Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh receives about 22,000 applications for 1,360 places.

Scores provide a national yardstick and a hedge against grade inflation, says Carnegie Mellon admissions director Mark Steidel. "The scores really do help us narrow down who we're going to offer admission to," he says.

Tiny Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering in Needham, Mass., which has enrolled about 75 students a year since 2002, requires test scores, too, but that could change, says admissions dean Charles Nolan.

An "eyeball review of the data" suggests test scores are "not a good predictor" of academic success, but "we don't have enough history to determine with any certainty that they aren't helpful."

Even WPI is not quite ready to make its test-optional policy change permanent. Tichenor says it will operate as an experiment for five years.

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— Kristin Tichenor,
Worcester
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