

The Temple Option: New Pathways for Student Success

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

A confluence of factors prompted Temple University to use its student-level data to re-envision its admissions process beginning in 2012. A new president and a new provost publicly reaffirmed access, affordability, and excellence as a part of Temple's goals moving forward. As part of this commitment, Temple developed Fly In 4, a program to reduce student debt by aligning the university's curriculum and advising practices to guarantee students could graduate in four years. Simultaneously, senior leaders within the admissions office began to question if standardized testing was a reliable indicator for students' college potential. During this same period, Temple received a Transformational Planning Grant from the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities to consider new approaches to increase college accessibility, improve affordability, and bolster student success

As a result, these factors and commitments inspired the admissions and institutional research (IR) offices to explore and leverage the institution's student-level data to transform its admissions process to be more equitable and accessible to more students.

USING DATA TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

GATHERING THE DATA. Temple examined how its enrolled students with a strong high school GPA (3.4 or

higher) but low standardized testing scores were faring in college. The IR team discovered that students with strong high school GPAs (3.4 and above) but low standardized test scores were performing with GPAs roughly equivalent to their high school GPA. Similarly, Temple students with lower high school GPAs (2.7 or higher) but strong standardized test scores often earned a college GPA roughly equivalent to their lower high school GPA. Thus, the latter group's strong test performance was not necessarily indicative of better academic performance in college. To further support their findings, the Temple team turned to the research of Bill Hiss, the former dean of admissions at Bates College and a pioneer in test-optional environments. Hiss published "Defining Promise: Optional Standardized Testing Policies in American College and University Admissions¹," the findings of a two-year study of 33 different colleges and universities and 123,000 student records. Temple's results fell in line with the study's findings: standardized test scores did not necessarily make a difference for college success but high school GPAs did. While there were slight differences in GPA between those who submitted test scores and those who did not, those differences were not significant enough to require standardized tests for admission or to suggest poor performance in college. Encouraged by the Hiss study, Temple also found that other institutions had set a precedent: about 800 US colleges and universities have some form of test-optional admissions alternatives, with new converts joining each year.

¹ Hiss, W. & Franks, V. 2014, February. "Defining Promise: Optional Standardized Testing Policies in American College and University Admissions." National Association of College Admission Counselors.

Upon reviewing the data and a proposal for test-optional admissions at Temple, upper-level administrative and academic leadership approved the new alternative, citing its connections to the heart of Temple's mission of access and inclusion.

THE TEMPLE OPTION (TO). Currently, Temple applicants can choose whether or not to submit their test scores. If an applicant declines, thus choosing the Temple Option, the online application directs them to answer four brief essay questions. Their responses to these questions are included in the application along with standard materials such as transcripts and the traditional college essay. Developed by a committee made up of admissions leadership and Temple School of Education faculty and administrators, each of the four TO questions address at least four of seven total attitudinal and behavioral dimensions that Temple established would be markers of a strong candidate for admission (e.g., self-awareness, self-set goals, response to success and failure). Readers, trained by TO committee faculty, review and score applicant responses. The TO committee and readers gather regularly to debrief on the process and consider necessary refinements. The team also reviews the scoring statistics weekly to ensure inter-reader reliability and to recalibrate rubrics as needed.

RESULTS

Since Temple Option's launch, Temple has admitted two classes of students. Eighteen percent of the first-year students admitted in fall 2015 chose the TO, and African American and Latino enrollment surged to 19.9 percent and 25.8 percent, respectively. The average high school GPA for both 2015 and 2016 entering classes also increased with the introduction of TO. Prior to TO, the average HSGPA for enrolled students was 3.47. In 2015 that increased to 3.51, and again in 2016 to 3.56. The 2015 average GPA for students who chose to submit their test scores was 3.54; the test-optional student average was 3.41. In 2016, the average GPA for admitted students who chose the traditional route was 3.57; the TO admitted students' HSGPA climbed a notable .11 points to 3.52.

Temple is now working to quantify and better understand the various attitudinal and behavioral dimensions that entering students exhibit with the goal of developing a method to embed the dimensions into the curriculum and

co-curriculum to improve the educational experience for all Temple students.

LESSONS LEARNED

Temple's experience offers several key insights for other institutions seeking to do similar work.

► **Leverage institutional leadership support and connect change efforts to institutional mission.**

Temple's president and provost made clear that access was vital to the university's mission, and the institution had a longtime commitment to and culture of inclusion, so the IR data gathered supported these values and helped to garner buy-in on campus.

► **Implement methods for evaluating and revising program elements.** Temple committed to monitoring the Temple Option program and scheduled regular evaluations to ensure effectiveness and to make changes as needed.

► **Think ahead to future possibilities.** Temple plans to evaluate the data from the TO application process, including the students' backgrounds and scores on the seven dimensions, to better understand how the dimensions may benefit all students' development and predict future college success.

► **Advocate for electronic data sharing.** Temple receives most of its students' high school transcripts in PDF form, and they must then transmit manually the data they need into their own template. It would benefit all stakeholders—students, guidance counselors, college admissions staff, and researchers—if high schools, community colleges, and other institutions had a uniform, digital system to share transcript data easily and securely. Students could retrieve their data at the push of a button instead of requesting print copies be mailed to them. High school guidance counselors could help students figure out their best path during high school, because with the same system as colleges they could identify, for example, which classes admissions offices exclude or include when reconfiguring GPAs or counting future credits.