



BROWN

**Recommendations of the**  
**AD HOC COMMITTEE ON**  
**ADMISSIONS POLICIES**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

February 2024

## INTRODUCTION

In September 2023, President Christina H. Paxson appointed a committee comprising members of the Corporation of Brown University and Brown senior faculty and asked us to evaluate the University’s undergraduate admissions policies “to ensure that the University is fully realizing its educational mission and upholding its commitments to academic excellence, equity, access and diversity.” The backdrop to the committee’s work was the June 29 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* and *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina*, which prohibited the consideration of race in admissions decisions. The University has taken all necessary steps to comply with the law, while also remaining dedicated to advancing the diversity that is central to achieving its standards of academic excellence and preparing Brown students to grow and lead in today’s world.

To this end, Brown remains committed to enrolling a class that is diverse by many measures through rigorous and holistic policies that consider the whole person when making undergraduate admissions decisions.

The committee was charged to:

- review data on applicants admitted through the Early Decision and regular admissions cycles, and make a recommendation on whether Brown should alter its current policy on Early Decision;
- assess the impact of standardized test score requirements on the applicant pool, the composition of the student body and successful student outcomes, and make a recommendation on whether Brown should continue to be “test optional;” and
- evaluate admissions data on students with family connections to Brown (alumni or employees), and make a recommendation on whether preferences for such applicants should be modified.

This executive summary of the committee’s full confidential report to the president captures its recommendations and the core rationale driving them. Given the sensitive nature of the data the committee examined in developing its recommendations, this summary offers a public overview of the factors and considerations underlying them without compromising the confidentiality of the demographic, performance and other data analyzed for applicants and current undergraduate students.

The committee held regular meetings beginning in September, convening more than a dozen times. Its deliberations have been informed by evidence, including detailed analyses of Brown undergraduate admissions data and comparative information from peer institutions in the Ivy+ group and the Consortium on Financing Higher Education. The committee met with colleagues who provided valuable expertise and with student leaders who shared their own experiences. It has also benefited from the data and comments from students from surveys conducted by the *Brown Daily Herald* independent student newspaper and from input provided by student organizations and the Brown alumni community.

Throughout this process, the committee’s work has been guided by Brown’s mission and values, and by the principles of access, affordability and academic excellence. Discussions were open, candid and collegial — and while members sometimes had divergent views about specific issues, those values and

principles were the touchstones to which we were able to return in order to frame the recommendations that follow.

- Committee Co-Chairs* Francis J. Doyle III, Provost  
Preetha Basaviah '91 MD '95, Brown University Trustee
- Corporation Members* Earl E. Hunt II '03, Brown University Trustee  
Carlos Lejnieks '00, Brown University Trustee and Past-President of  
the Brown Alumni Association  
Alison Ressler '80, Brown University Fellow  
William Zhou '20, Brown University Trustee and former President of the  
Undergraduate Council of Students
- Faculty Representatives* John Friedman, Briger Family Distinguished Professor of Economics  
Kimberly Mowry, Robin Chemers Neustein Professor of Biomedicine  
Noliwe Rooks, L. Herbert Ballou University Professor of Africana Studies  
Bjorn Sandstede, Alumni-Alumnae University Professor of Applied  
Mathematics
- Staff to the Committee* Elizabeth Doherty, Deputy Provost for Academic Affairs

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUMMARY RATIONALE

### I. **Early Decision vs. Regular Decision**

*Review data on applicants admitted through the Early Decision and regular admissions cycles, and make a recommendation on whether Brown should alter its current policy on Early Decision.*

#### **Recommendations**

- Continue to offer an Early Decision (ED) option to applicants. This policy is attractive to students, consistent with peer practices, and contributes to efforts to enroll a class that is diverse and highly qualified.
- Monitor data about the Early Decision applicant pool and about the population of admitted students to ensure that the composition of the ED pool contributes to the excellence and diversity of the student population and that Regular Decision (RD) remains a viable option for applicants who are not prepared to commit to Brown on the ED timetable.
- Expand efforts to communicate Brown’s financial aid policies to potential applicants and their families so that they are aware that admission is need-blind and that financial aid awards meet 100% of demonstrated need.
- Ensure that applicants, families and school counselors are educated about the effectiveness and accuracy of online financial aid calculators in order to remove the uncertainty about aid awards that may deter some potential ED applicants from applying.

Through Brown’s Early Decision admissions policy, prospective students express a commitment to attend Brown if accepted. ED has advantages both for students and for the institution: Applicants enjoy the benefit of knowing where they will attend college without the stress and uncertainty of preparing multiple applications over many months, and Brown determines the composition of roughly half of the incoming class at a relatively early date. The committee considered whether a non-binding Early Action program would be preferable for any reason and concluded that there was some risk that this could place Brown at a slight disadvantage in enrolling very highly qualified students who are subsequently admitted to other institutions through Regular Decision. At a minimum, it would introduce a degree of unnecessary uncertainty for the University. The committee therefore did not endorse exploring this question in any additional detail.

***What the data show.*** The committee reviewed data about the composition of the pool of ED applicants and admitted students in comparison to the RD pool. In general, ED applicants have stronger academic records and are more likely to have one or more parents with an undergraduate degree from Brown (“legacies”). The pool is less diverse than the RD pool in terms of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status; students who apply ED are less likely to be from historically underrepresented groups or be low-income, first-generation or international applicants. However, the overall size and strength of the applicant pool means that the Office of College Admission is able to identify and admit a strongly diverse cohort of highly qualified students in a manner that reflects the University’s commitments to excellence, access and diversity. Early Decision has proven to be a powerful tool for shaping the composition of Brown’s student body, including (for example) through the use of the QuestBridge process that matches highly talented applicants from low-income backgrounds to colleges.

***The question of financial aid.*** One concern about Early Decision — sometimes expressed by applicants and their families and frequently cited in the news media — is that binding ED programs make it impossible to compare financial aid offers and secure the most competitive award; this may therefore discourage low-income applicants from applying. At Brown, however, the generous aid awards that students receive in the ED round are the same as the corresponding awards in Regular Decision. Among recent cohorts of admitted ED students, more than 60% expressed an intent to apply for financial aid, and 15% to 19% are the first in their families to attend college. The Office of Financial Aid provides a number of online tools and calculators to help students and families estimate the cost of attendance at Brown. These tools have proven to be accurate predictors and may serve to reassure applicants who may be deterred by the “sticker price” that a Brown education is affordable to them. We encourage Brown’s admissions and financial aid offices to continue to highlight the utility of these tools and to continue to monitor the composition of the Early Decision applicant pool with respect to diversity, including of students applying for financial aid.

## **II. “Test-optional” admissions policy**

*Assess the impact of standardized test score requirements on the applicant pool, the composition of the student body and successful student outcomes, and make a recommendation on whether Brown should continue to be “test optional.”*

### **Recommendations**

- Reinstating the requirement that applicants for first-year admission to Brown submit scores from standardized tests while continuing to explain that tests are interpreted in the context of an applicant’s overall record, background and opportunities through a holistic admissions process that considers the whole person.
- Adopt a “testing in context” outreach and engagement strategy to improve communication with students and school counselors about the reasons for requiring test scores, emphasizing the commitment to interpreting them in the context of a student’s background, experiences and educational opportunities, and in relation to the range of scores at the student’s secondary school.
- Permit exceptions to requiring standardized test scores in rare cases in which a student applying for first-year admission is unable to take the test (when the International Baccalaureate or a national exam may be substituted), and continue to be test-optional for student veterans, transfer applicants and Resumed Undergraduate Education (RUE) students.

In the spring of 2020, as high schools and ACT/SAT testing centers closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many colleges and universities suspended the requirement that candidates applying for undergraduate admission in the 2020-21 cycle submit standardized test scores. Brown was among these institutions and has extended the policy on an annual basis since then.

The absence of test scores makes it more difficult to differentiate among the many applicants with strong high school records, or to contextualize the performance of a student from a school that has sent relatively few students to Brown and with which the Office of College Admission is less acquainted. For example, a student with scores that fall below the Brown median but which are at the very top of the range for their particular school may be a promising candidate for admission; therefore, the lack of test scores removes a piece of evidence that could make a positive difference in the admissions decision. As the University

works to expand outreach to a wider range of schools within the U.S. and implements the policy of need-blind admission for international students (beginning with the Class of 2029), we anticipate an increase in applicants from schools with which the admissions office is unfamiliar and who present transcripts that are more difficult to interpret. Standardized tests provide an important piece of information about the applicant's performance in the context of the opportunities that were available to them.

***What the data show.*** Over the past three years, the number of applications has soared (with about 25% more applicants by 2022-23 than would have been predicted based on the prior baseline trend), and approximately 40% of applicants to Brown have chosen not to submit scores from standardized tests. Data from the Class of 2025 and Class of 2026 indicate that academic outcomes — whether measured by the fraction of grades that are high or by the fraction of students who struggle academically— are strongly correlated with test scores. An applicant's test scores are a strong predictor of a student's performance once enrolled, and of their capacity to succeed in a rigorous academic environment.

This relationship holds across all subgroups, including within groups from less-advantaged vs. more-advantaged high schools, and for HUG vs. non-HUG students.<sup>1</sup> The weaker academic performance of students who do not submit scores is, on average, on par with students who submit lower test scores, suggesting that applicants (and their guidance counselors) think strategically about whether submitting test scores will help or harm their applications.

Further, the data suggest unintended adverse outcomes of test-optional policies in the admissions process itself, potentially undermining the goal of increasing access. The committee was concerned that some students from less-advantaged backgrounds are choosing not to submit scores under the test-optional policy, when doing so would actually increase their chances of being admitted. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that median test scores have risen under the test-optional policy, as students with weaker testing have chosen not to submit their scores. Published information on high median test scores may be intimidating to applicants who are not aware that scores are only one element of the application, and that scores are interpreted in the context of their background and experiences.

***Testing in context.*** There is ample evidence that test scores are correlated with socioeconomic factors, and the committee was cognizant of the fact that applicants from less-advantaged backgrounds and under-resourced schools may present with scores that are lower than the typical range — and that more privileged applicants who have high scores may have benefited from test preparation, tutoring and other strategies to boost their performance. Moreover, applicants from more privileged backgrounds whose scores are low may be in a better position to make well-informed and strategic decisions about whether to submit them. They are also more likely to have application files that include a rich range of opportunities and experiences along with support from teachers and counselors that make them attractive candidates for admission.

The result is that applicants from underserved schools and communities who lack both test scores and similar advantages may appear less competitive in the very large and highly selective pool. However, strong testing, interpreted in context, may actually serve to demonstrate their ability to succeed at Brown — and the lack of scores may mean that admissions officers hesitate to admit them.

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<sup>1</sup> HUG refers to students from historically underrepresented groups, defined as American Indian, Alaska Native, African American or Black, Hispanic or Latinx, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.

The issues at the core of the committee’s deliberations concerned the manner in which testing requirements intersect with the principles of academic excellence, equity, access and diversity. The majority of the committee concluded that reinstating the requirement that first-year undergraduate applicants submit test scores is consistent with Brown’s commitments to excellence and equity and will serve to expand access and diversity. In supporting a return to the testing requirement, committee members emphasized the importance of careful communication about “testing in context,” including outreach to applicants and school counselors about the ways that test results are interpreted as one piece of information in a whole-person review of an applicant.

The committee recommends remaining test-optional for transfer students (a group that includes many student veterans and community college students) and students applying to the Resumed Undergraduate Education (RUE) program. Test scores are less valuable for transfer students, who have an academic record that includes college-level work, which can demonstrate their ability to succeed at Brown. They may also be less valuable for assessing applicants to the RUE program, who have not been enrolled as full-time students for some time and may be deterred from applying to Brown if test scores are required.

### **III. Family Connections**

*Evaluate admissions data on students with family connections to Brown, and make a recommendation on whether preferences for such applicants should be modified.*

#### **Recommendations**

- Continue to evaluate the data on applicants with family connections to Brown and consider the broad range of questions and principles raised by the committee, with attention to the policies and practices that will best serve to advance the institutional goals of academic excellence, equity, access and diversity.
- Provide opportunities for members of the community — including faculty, staff, alumni and students — to provide input on Brown’s current practice of preferences for applicants with family connections.

Applicants for admission who have one or more parents who have a Brown undergraduate degree (“legacies”) and those who are the children of faculty and staff benefit from advantages in the admissions process. Both of these populations are relatively small, and in fact the portion of applicants and matriculants who are legacies has declined over time. The share of applicants with legacy connections has decreased by about one-quarter over the last six years, and the share of legacy students in the actual class has declined by slightly more than that, about 30%, due primarily to the large increase in the number of applications and correspondingly higher degree of selectivity. Only 8% of students enrolled in the Class of 2027 were legacies. The numbers of children of faculty and staff vary slightly from year to year, but are quite small overall — on the order of 1% to 2% of students.

The committee discussed the advantages and disadvantages of Brown’s admissions practices on legacy students. On one hand, students whose parents attended Brown tend to be exceptionally well-qualified, with academic records that are stronger than that of average matriculants. They are also more likely than others to accept offers of admission. In addition, legacy preferences create a sense of community and loyalty among Brown graduates.

On the other hand, removing legacy preferences could lead to somewhat more diversity in the group of admitted students. An analysis of the effect of removing preferences suggests that admitting fewer legacy students could potentially increase the numbers of low-income and first-generation students, and students from underrepresented groups, by a modest amount. Whether this in fact happens would depend on admissions policies and practices.

Another salient concern is based on considerations of equity and diversity, and whether it is fair to end legacy preferences at the moment when the applicant pool is beginning to reflect the more diverse population of Brown alumni and alumnae, many of whom attended the University at a time when it was less inclusive and welcoming. Those supporting continued preferences for applicants with family connections cited a commitment to the values of strengthening multi-generational loyalty, fostering alumni engagement and enhancing community ties. They also stressed the importance of fairness to the more recent, and more diverse, graduates whose children might benefit.

The question of preferences for children of faculty and staff also elicited mixed views. On the one hand, these applicants tend to be highly qualified, and the admissions advantage might be regarded as an important tool for recruitment and retention, as well as building community loyalty. On the other hand, these applicants are relatively privileged, on average — although children of employees who did not attend college also are regularly admitted to Brown. On balance, the committee concluded that it has too little information about how knowledgeable faculty and staff are about the preferences for their children in admissions, and how strongly they feel about its potential elimination, to come to a recommendation.

In general, the issue of admissions preferences raises complicated questions about equity and access, about merit and unearned advantage, about the tangible and intangible impact of affinity, loyalty and community — and about how to weigh compelling but competing values. The committee's deliberations led down expanding paths of inquiry about how these imperatives can best be balanced. While the committee's recommendations regarding Early Decision and the test-optional policy were firmly rooted in Brown's commitment to excellence, equity and diversity, it has been more difficult for the committee to arrive at a consensus on preferences for family connections in the absence of further information and input from members of the larger Brown community, which would help determine how to weigh and balance the principles that are potentially at stake.

Developing a recommendation about family connections that reflects Brown's values and honors its commitments requires further deliberation and reflection, and the committee will benefit from opportunities to learn more about the perspectives of faculty, staff, alumni and students to inform its ongoing consideration of these issues. The committee will develop plans to gain further insights from these constituencies to inform a path toward a recommendation.