

Graduate Admissions Testing Perceptions: Results from the ETS/NAGAP February 2025 Survey

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Abstract

Higher education admissions have been undergoing significant disruption, with a variety of social forces impacting it including the rise of generative AI and the decline of race-based affirmative action. In this report, we reflect upon the current state of change in graduate admissions, drawing upon insights from ETS's February 2025 pulse survey of members of NAGAP, The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management (GEM). We also present survey data on factors influencing graduate application requirements across institutions, including the role of the U.S. Supreme Court's Students for Fair Admissions affirmative action decisions. We conclude with a discussion on the implications of these findings for GEM policies and practice.

Keywords: graduate enrollment management, GEM, graduate admissions, Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, NAGAP, Students for Fair Admissions, SFFA, higher education admissions, admissions testing, test optional

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Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the field of higher education admissions has been searching for a new equilibrium of accepted practice, with new developments each year. In 2024–2025, high-profile institutions began to reinstitute admissions testing requirements, and institutions continued to grapple with the consequences of the Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) U.S. Supreme Court rulings restricting race-based affirmative action in admissions. Especially in light of the U.S. Department of Education (DoE)'s 2025 pivot to adopt a far-reaching interpretation of the SFFA ruling and the launch of subsequent investigations by the

DoE and other government bodies into medical and law schools' admissions practices (e.g., Kennedy & McMahon, 2025; Office for Civil Rights, 2026; Office of Public Affairs, 2026), this is a crucial time to closely track these events in higher education, and in graduate admissions in particular.

Graduate admissions affect a smaller number of students than undergraduate admissions and tend to be far less centralized, with admissions decisions often being made at more local levels and with greater faculty involvement. Comparatively, they also tend to be less well studied and understood. To fill this gap in research knowledge, ETS has partnered with NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, since 2021 to implement yearly surveys of admissions professionals to better understand their frontline experiences in this rapidly evolving field (Haviland et al., 2022; Haviland et al., 2023; Gooch & Haviland, 2025). In this report, we explore results from a February 2025 survey, which provides a snapshot of GEM professionals' experiences and attitudes towards testing policies and diversity in a changing landscape.

Methods

Survey

This report presents results from the February 2025 administration of the ETS/NAGAP survey of graduate enrollment management professionals. This was an online survey was distributed to members of NAGAP via email and was advertised in the association's weekly newsletter. The survey was distributed to all NAGAP members (N = 1,207) in February 2025. A total of 206 (approximately 17.1% of membership) respondents completed at least part of the survey, and 124 (10.1%) completed the full survey.

For this survey, we were interested in tracking both graduate admissions testing policies themselves and the contexts around those policies. We asked respondents to categorize testing policies where they work in order to understand the current picture of various levels of test requirement across graduate institutions, departments, and programs. To understand movement in these numbers, we also asked respondents whose workplaces reduced or eliminated admissions testing during COVID to identify the main factors they perceived as

driving those policy changes. In cases where some or all testing requirements have been reinstituted since COVID, we also tracked the perceived reasons behind reinstatement.

We also asked about two new developments since 2024 to find out if they had affected graduate schools' testing policies. In the year leading up to this survey, a number of high-profile institutions had reinstated testing requirements (see Blake, 2024) and we asked respondents to weigh in on whether they saw the decisions made at those institutions as influential on their own graduate program's practices. The second development we tracked was responses to the SFFA Supreme Court ruling. Notably, at the beginning of the survey administration period, the DoE had not yet issued its new guidance on implications of the SFFA ruling for higher education, though that guidance did come out during the survey administration.¹

Participants

Respondents to the survey were members of NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management. Respondents worked across several types of organizational units. These included offices for institution-wide admissions or enrollment management divisions (42.7%), academic schools or colleges (26.6%), institution-wide graduate schools (19.4%), and academic departments or programs (11.3%). For some questions, respondents were asked for their professional opinions, and for others, to describe practices at their organizational unit (e.g., at their institution-wide graduate school or academic department or program within the institution) or at their institution as a whole. Admissions-related job responsibilities for respondents² included overseeing the admissions process as an administrator (83.9%), recruiting prospective graduate students (83.1%), reviewing and recommending applications to be considered by another individual or office (41.1%), reviewing and selecting applications to recommend for scholarships, fellowships, assistantships, or other institutionally funded graduate student support (40.3%), and reviewing and making final decisions on applications (35.5%). See Appendix A for additional demographic details.

Data Analysis

For this report, we present raw counts and percentages of respondents who selected survey responses. For items where not all participants were asked to respond, the total number

of respondents who saw the item is also provided. Open-ended survey items referenced in this report were on whether respondents felt the SFFA ruling or the return of high-profile institutions to testing would affect their own schools' testing policies (for question text see Appendix A4). Responses to these items were categorized into broad groupings to provide examples of the variety of reasons why these events were or were not seen as being likely to influence testing policies at respondents' own schools.³

Results

Tracking the Evolution of Testing Policies

Respondents were asked to describe testing policies at their institution. The largest group (41.6%) indicated that test scores were not required nor recommended in most or all programs at their institution. About a third (32.8%) of respondents indicated test scores were considered but not required in most or all programs, while tests were recommended and considered in most or all programs at 7.2% of respondents' institutions and required for some (14.4%) or all (4.0%) applicants in most or all programs at other respondents' institutions. Many respondents indicated that their own organizational unit (the specific school, department, etc. at which they work) had reduced or eliminated testing during the COVID-19 pandemic (74%) and of those, 29% have since reinstated all or some testing requirements.

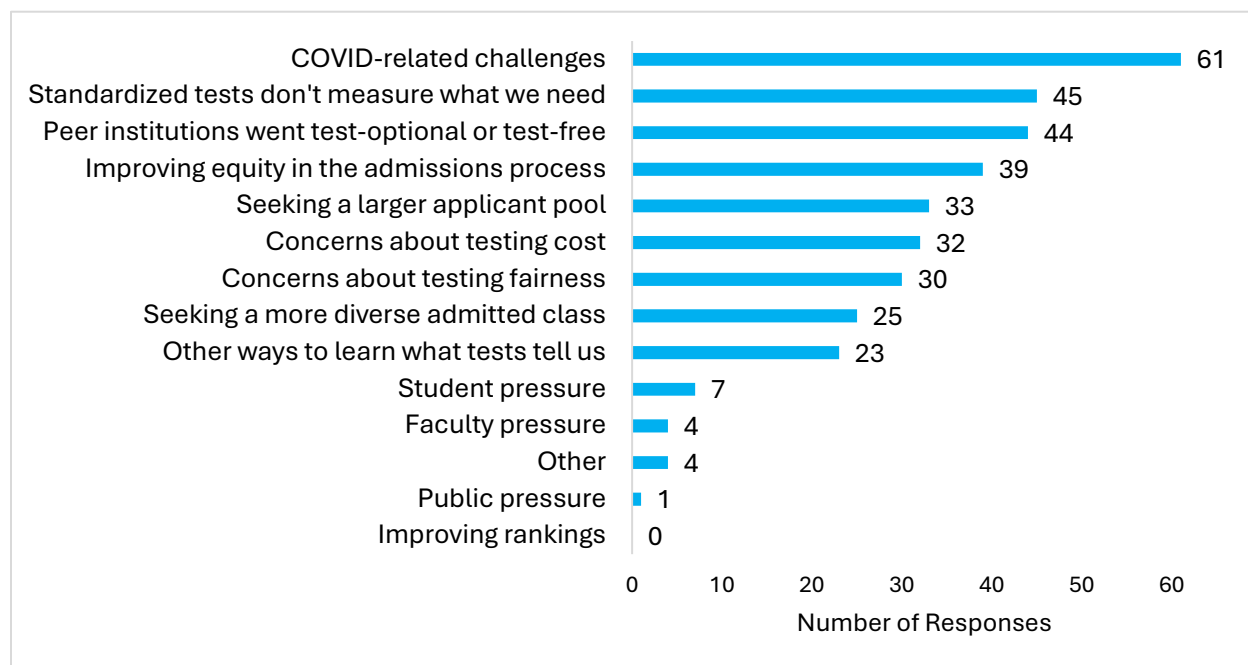
To understand GEM professionals' perceptions of why testing requirements were removed and reinstated, we asked respondents whose organizational units removed testing requirements ($n = 92$) to identify up to 5 reasons they believe drove their organizational unit's decision. For the subset whose organizations have since reinstated testing requirements ($n = 27$), we also asked for up to 5 reasons that they believe drove the reinstatement of testing requirements.

Reasons for Reducing or Removing Test Requirements During COVID

For respondents whose organizational unit reduced or removed testing requirements in 2020 or 2021 during the COVID pandemic ($n = 92$), the top reasons they identified are shown in Figure 1. *COVID-related challenges* was the most selected response, by 66.3% of respondents. Other top responses included *standardized tests don't measure what we need to know* (48.9%)

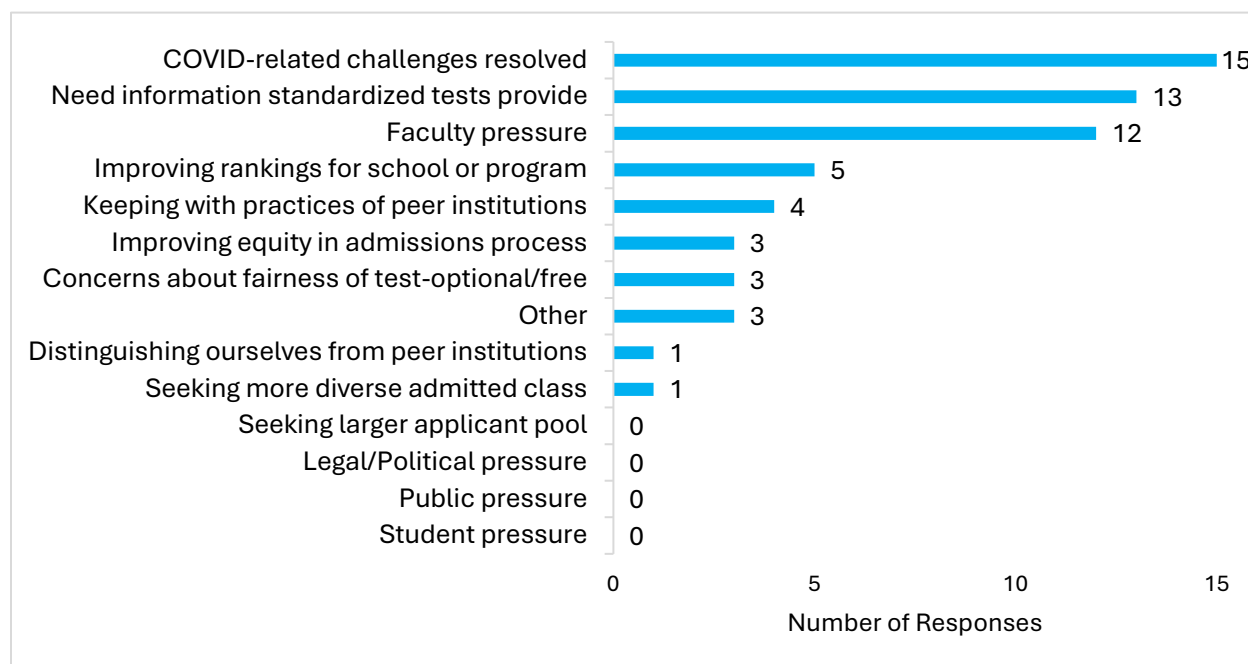
and *our peer institutions went test-optional or test-free* (47.8%). Least-selected responses included *student pressure* (7.6%), *faculty pressure* (4.3%), and *public pressure* (1.1%). The option *improving rankings for school or program* was not selected by any respondents.

Figure 1. Perceived Reasons Testing Requirements Reduced/Removed ($n = 92$)⁴



Reasons for Reinstating Test Requirements After COVID

We polled those respondents whose organizational units removed testing requirements during COVID and have since fully or partially reinstated those requirements ($n = 27$) about their perceptions on why those requirements had been reinstated. Participants were asked to identify up to 5 reasons they see as motivating such changes at their own workplaces (see Figure 2). The top reason, selected by 55.6% of respondents, was that COVID-related challenges had been resolved. Other top responses included that their organizational unit *needs information provided by standardized tests* (48.1%) and *faculty pressure* (44.4%). Least-selected options included *distinguishing ourselves from peer institutions* (3.7%) and *seeking a more diverse admitted class* (3.7%). Several options were not selected by any respondents – including *seeking a larger applicant pool*; *legal or political pressure*; *public pressure*; and *student pressure*.

Figure 2. Perceived Reasons Test Requirements Reinstated ($n = 27$)⁵

The Influence of the SFFA Ruling and High-Profile Institution Behavior on Testing Policy

We asked respondents at institutions that do not currently require admissions tests ($n = 101$) to comment on the degree to which they see two current events impacting their institution's testing policy. The first question was on the influence of high-profile institutions' return to testing, and the second was on the influence of the SFFA ruling on testing policy. For each question, respondents were also given the option to explain their rating (for question text, see Appendix A4). According to respondents, neither of these were perceived as likely to influence admissions testing policy at their institutions. In both cases, 82.2% of respondents indicated that their institutions were *no more or less likely* to return to testing based on those current events.

Discussion

Limitations

Overall, these survey results provide a valuable snapshot of perspectives and practices in graduate enrollment management amid a period of rapid technological, social, political, and legal changes affecting the field. It is critical to note that this survey was deployed in February 2025 and reflects GEM professionals' views at a particular point in time working within a

system actively in flux. Indeed, it was during the administration of this survey that the DoE signaled a major change in stance on its interpretation of the SFFA ruling through its “Dear Colleague” letter on Valentines Day 2025 (Trainor, 2025). In the time since, new changes have unfolded, including the April 23, 2025, Executive Order targeting accrediting bodies, which set the standards graduate institutions must abide by (Exec. Order No. 14,279, 2025). Results presented here may be affected by self-selection response bias, as this was a voluntary survey opted into by NAGAP members. NAGAP does not keep a detailed database on its members with demographic or other information, so we cannot determine if this sample is representative of the NAGAP membership or GEM professionals in general.

With that caveat, in this section, we highlight several key findings which emerged through the survey and discuss their implications.

Factors Impacting Testing Policy

In this report, we reviewed reasons that motivated the reduction or elimination of admissions testing requirements during COVID and identified that in around 29% of cases those requirements have since been reinstated in full or in part. The most highly cited reason for either reducing or removing testing and for reinstating was the onset or diminution of challenges tied directly to the COVID pandemic.

Beyond that, we observed some interesting contrasts. First, the perceived usefulness of admissions tests was seen as an important factor for respondents whose organizational units had changed testing policies, both in the reduction and in the reinstatement of requirements, indicating split or changing opinions. A major factor for reducing or removing admissions testing requirements was peer influence – the fact that peer institutions went test-optional or test-free (cited by 47.8% of respondents). In contrast, only 14.8% of those whose organizational units have since reinstated testing requirements indicated that they have done so to keep in line with practices at peer institutions. This contrast indicates that, through COVID, some organizational units may have been able to circumvent a first-mover dilemma that could have otherwise prevented them from reducing or removing testing requirements. Conversely, others may now hesitate to reinstate testing requirements unless more of their peers do so.

Another interesting contrast is the role of faculty pressure. Relatively few respondents (4.3%) considered faculty pressure an important consideration in the dropping or reducing of testing requirements at their organizational unit, yet it is perceived to have played a major role in decisions to reinstate requirements by 44.4% of respondents. This result indicates that from the perspective of GEM professionals, when faculty do exert influence on testing policy, it tends to be in the direction of asking for more requirements – as has since also been demonstrated though public pushes at the undergraduate level such as one by the University of California faculty (UC Non-STEM Faculty, 2026; UC STEM Faculty, 2026).

Recent events we polled respondents on, however, were not perceived as likely to influence testing policy one way or another. The trend of elite institutions reinstating testing requirements at the undergraduate level was seen as irrelevant by some respondents who either didn't see those institutions as peers or who simply felt that there is a difference in the needs of graduate programs. Respondents perceived the SFFA affirmative action decision as similarly unlikely to influence testing policies. As illustrated in the ETS/NAGAP survey administered in 2024 (Gooch & Haviland, 2025), many institutions represented here did not consider race as a factor in admissions even prior to the SFFA ruling. In open-ended responses on the current survey, some respondents pointed out that their institutions are in states which already disallow race-based affirmative action (e.g., California, Washington), or that they work at open access institutions.

Yet, the effects of the affirmative action decision may not yet have fully played out – particularly as federal agencies have taken legal action toward higher education institutions based on the SFFA ruling since the administration of this survey. Below, we look at recent developments and how they may affect testing policies going forward.

Future Factors Influencing Testing Policies

As mentioned in the introduction of this report, the DoE's "Dear Colleague" letter was sent during the administration of this survey after many GEM professionals had already completed their responses. This new guidance from the DoE specifically called out some admissions policies as being in violation of the department's interpretation of the SFFA case (Trainor, 2025). Although the "Dear Colleague" letter itself has since been vacated by a federal

court (*American Federation of Teachers v. U.S. DoE*, 2025), pressure from the federal government has continued in the form of investigations into institutions' admissions practices (e.g., Columbia and Harvard). Federal pressure could potentially influence policy both at institutions specifically targeted for investigation and at other institutions wishing to comply with federal guidance. Although respondents to this survey did not report legal or political pressure as a factor impacting testing policy, this remains an area to track for potential future impact as state or federal policies come into effect on areas such as accreditation (e.g., Exec. Order No. 14,279, 2025). Any change to accreditation practices will directly affect institutions which are required to abide by such requirements to maintain accreditation.

Lastly, the impact of AI is still playing out on graduate admissions – in particular on GEM professionals' confidence in the evidence provided by traditional application components such as the essay (see Gooch & Haviland, 2026) and could play a major role in how standardized assessments, along with many other application components, are used and interpreted.

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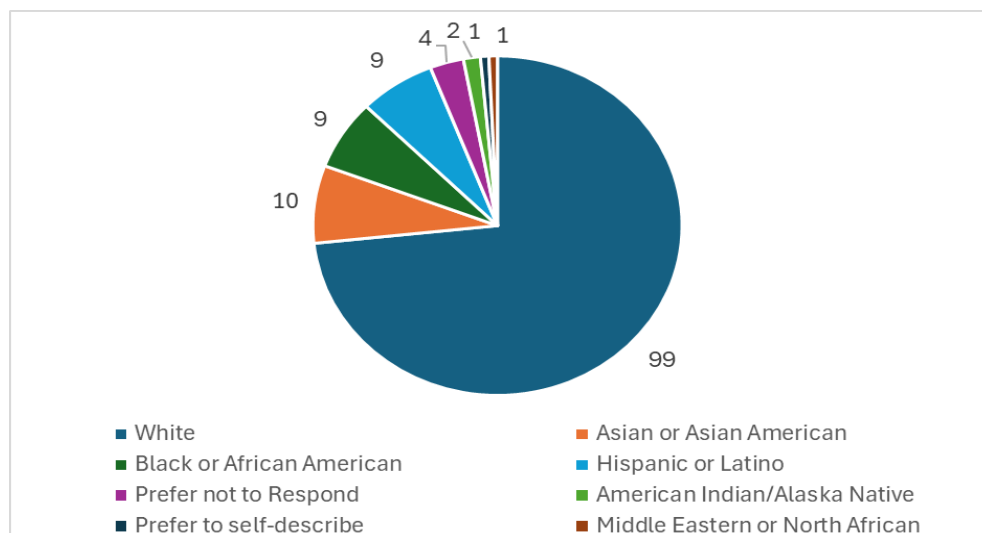
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Appendix A. Figures**Figure A1. Race/Ethnicity of Respondents ($n = 124$)**

Note: Respondents could select multiple categories, so totals do not add to 124.

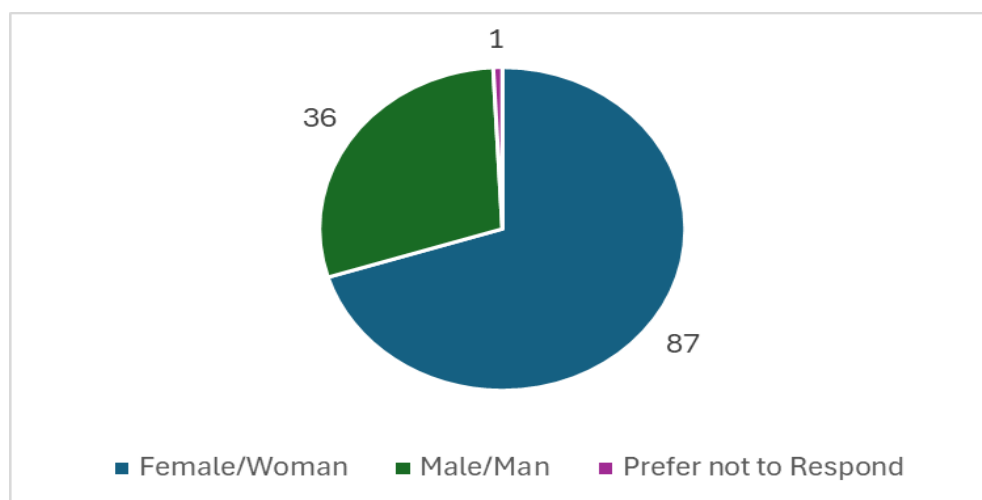
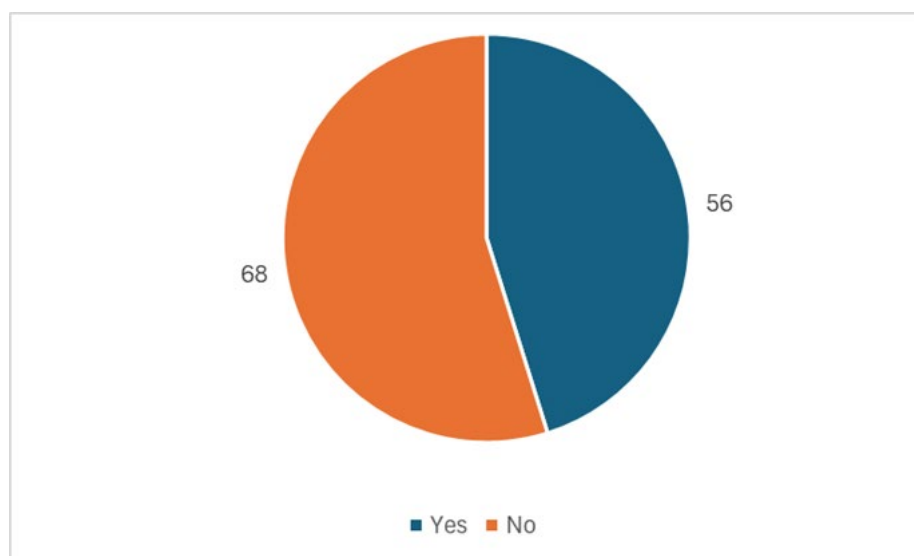
Figure A2. Gender of Respondents ($n = 124$)

Figure A3. First-Generation Student Status of Respondents ($n = 124$)**Appendix B. Survey Question Text: Impact of Current Evens on Return to Testing**

1. Does the return of [high profile institutions such as MIT and Dartmouth] to required admissions testing make it any more or less likely that your school will return to testing?

- a. Much less likely
- b. Less likely
- c. No more or less likely
- d. More likely
- e. Much more likely

1b. Please explain why the return of high-profile institutions to required testing will make it [much less/less/no more or less/more/much more likely] that your school will return to testing.

2. Does the U. S. Supreme Court ruling eliminating Affirmative Action in higher education make it any more or less likely that your school will return to testing?

- a. Much less likely
- b. Less likely
- c. No more or less likely
- d. More likely
- e. Much more likely

2b. Please explain why the return of high-profile institutions to required testing will make it [much less/less/no more or less/more/much more likely] that your school will return to testing.

Notes

¹ Survey administration began Feb. 3, 2025. The Dear Colleague letter was sent February 14, 2025. The final survey response was received February 26, 2025.

² Respondents could select more than one admissions-related job responsibility.

³ A formal coding of each response by multiple raters was not conducted, so exact breakdowns of response categories are not provided. Open-ended responses are included only for illustrative purposes.

⁴ Because respondents were allowed to select up to 5 responses, responses do not total to 92.

⁵ Sample size is small for this question because of survey routing – only respondents who indicated that their organizational unit had both reduced/removed testing requirements and subsequently reinstated some or all requirements were asked this question. Responses do not sum to 27 because respondents were allowed to select up to five responses.

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