

College keeps test-free admissions

St. Mary's first in Texas with permanent policy

By Danya Perez
STAFF WRITER

Students applying to St. Mary's University will no longer need to show any type of standardized test score. The university has opted to become the first Texas institution to permanently adopt test-free admissions.

It has collected data on the possible effects of the switch for the past two years, an unexpected tri-

al period that started when the coronavirus pandemic halted much of the state's standardized testing and caused continuous problems with testing sites, said Rosalind Alderman, vice president for enrollment management at St. Mary's.

Lots of U.S. higher education institutions did the same, and nearly 2,000 of them extended their test-optional or test-free admissions process for the upcoming school year in light of the pandemic-relat-

ed testing halts.

But St. Mary's is one of about 20 in the country that have made the test-free option permanent, according to the National Center for Fair and Open Testing.

"Our data has really shown that the SAT or ACT score does not really help us predict any more the first-year success of our students," Alderman said. "We really had to think to ourselves, 'If the high school GPA is so much more pre-

dictive than other factors, how do we make this the most equitable process?'"

The change was not an overnight decision, officials said. There were many things to keep in mind, including how to jettison the test requirement without creating the impression that academic expectations had changed.

For the 2020-21 school year, the university admitted a freshman class of 514 students with an average GPA of 3.59. Most had applied under the test-free option. In fall 2021, the incoming freshman class

of 606 students had an average GPA of 3.61. About 75 percent of them were admitted without submitting test scores.

"We had the largest number of completed applications ever for the 2019 cycle. Once the 2020 cycle came around, things got a bit wonky," Alderman said. "But when we started planning for the 2021 year, looking to go test-optional, what we wanted to see is if we would continue to see a similar number of applications. ... We also wanted to closely monitor the aca-

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Photos by Jerry Lara / Staff photographer

Dr. Ashwini Kumar, a surgeon at Texas Vista Medical Center, performs laparoscopic single-site surgery Wednesday on Frances Cooper, 37, to remove her appendix. Single-site laparoscopy involves only one incision and facilitates faster recovery.

Surgery with fast recovery among hospital's upgrades

South Side's Texas Vista hires 10 new doctors, invests \$10M in renovations

By Laura Garcia
STAFF WRITER

It's a few days before Christmas, and "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" plays softly from a speaker in the operating room where Dr. Ashwini Kumar intently watches a TV screen. His hands guide a camera and a long instrument designed to snip away a swollen organ from inside a patient through a single incision.

The patient, Frances Cooper, arrived at the ER early that morning in incredible pain. She hadn't been able to eat for two days. Her appendix, a thin tube that joins to the large intestine, needed to be removed right away.

Less than 20 minutes later, the emergency surgery is over. There's no visible scar, and within a couple of hours, Cooper would be recovering at home in



Kumar was recruited to Texas Vista Medical Center in June and calls it a "hidden gem" in an underserved community.

time for the holidays.

Texas Vista Medical Center, formerly Southwest General Hospital, is now one of few facilities across the U.S. to offer single-site surgery. While most lapa-

roscopic gastrointestinal surgery involves at least three cuts to the abdomen, Kumar uses a technique and instrument that require only one point of entry — a 1- to 2-centimeter incision near

the bellybutton.

This new service is among several upgrades, which include the hiring of 10 new medical providers and more than \$10 million in capital investments, underway at the South Side hospital.

There's new lighting in the parking lot, a total remodel of the main hospital lobby, and medical equipment upgrades in the catheter lab and operating rooms. Texas Vista recently received state certifications for advanced maternal care and neonatal intensive care, and it opened a 24-hour obstetric emergency department with OB-GYNs and access to maternal fetal medicine specialists for complicated or high-risk pregnancies.

New staff additions include two general surgeons, an interventional cardiologist, two family medicine providers, an OB-

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Mental health is tested by omicron

Calls to hotline spike amid holidays, surge

By Eleanor Klibanoff
TEXAS TRIBUNE

Earlier this week, someone called the state's COVID-19 mental health support line to talk through their family's decision to cancel Christmas celebrations amid the rapid spread of the omicron variant.

Rather than disappointment, the hotline director said, the caller felt relief: They'd lost several family members to COVID-19 over the last year and had been dreading trying to replicate family traditions without those loved ones.

"It's very complicated to talk about those types of emotions," said Jennifer Battle, director of access for the Harris Center for Mental Health, which operates the hotline. "Being able to provide a safe place where people can say things like that and not be judged ... is really powerful."

The support line has seen a 20 percent increase in calls since early December, as a new COVID-19 variant began to emerge just in time for the holiday season. Battle said a quarter of callers last week dialed in to talk about holidays, Christmas, vaccines or boosters, according to her analysis.

"Almost every call has to do with anxiety in some way, which is not surprising and has been throughout the whole pandemic," she said. "The main key for anxiety is uncertainty, and the whole pandemic process is just a whole big bag of uncertainty."

That uncertainty has ratcheted up in recent weeks as the highly contagious omicron variant has spread rapidly around the country. At a time when many were hoping for a holiday season more like pre-pandemic times, the country is once again dealing with quarantines, closures and canceled travel plans.

Battle said the line is currently receiving about the same number of calls as this time last year — before vaccines were widely available — with callers expressing many of the same feelings of fear, anxiety and isolation. The main difference that the support

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Many cite poverty as main migration trigger

By Elizabeth Trovall
STAFF WRITER

Surveyed Central Americans named economic factors, such as poor wages and unemployment, as the most common triggers of migration to the U.S. and other countries, according to a new report by the Migration Policy Institute.

Natural disasters and violence were also listed as motivations to migrate, according to 2021 survey data from the U.N. World Food Programme in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, though they were less likely to be listed as the most important factors. Nearly 5,000 households participated in the survey.

The report notes how violence, poverty, hunger and climate di-

sasters are often interconnected, creating overall conditions that cause people to migrate to another country.

Among the surveyed Central American household members who said they had migrated within the last five years, 85 percent said they left mainly because of poverty.

"That does not mean that there are not underlying reasons that tie together economics with insecurity and violence," said Ariel Ruiz Soto, Migration Policy Institute analyst, "When you ask somebody in person about the reason why they want to migrate, they'll respond usually with the most triggering factor."

But he said that in follow-up conversations, there was often more to the story.

"When we talked to people in El Salvador, they told us that they didn't feel like they could open up their own job or their own business, because they didn't want to pay the rents to the gang members and these quotas for gangs' protection," he said.

In the survey, violence and insecurity accounted for 8 percent of respondents' main reasons to migrate.

Nearly half of all surveyed Central Americans said violence either increased or remained the same when asked.

Honduran migrant Douglas Mendez, 21, cited violence as a main reason he left his home country.

"They (gang members) told me they were going to kill me," Men-

Poverty continues on A4



Jerry Lara / Staff file photo

Migrants are smuggled across the Rio Grande near Roma in August. In a survey of Central American migrants, most say poverty pushed them to leave for the United States.