

SAT for College Admission: Should it be Optional?

In the last half of the 20th century, the SAT became a prime gatekeeping instrument for college admission. In recent years, many colleges are moving away from requiring tests such as the SAT. Current estimates are that this is the case for well over 1,000 colleges and universities and the numbers seem to swell every year (see the examples appended to this document). The trend reflects findings suggesting the cons of using the test as a predictor of college success outweigh the benefits. At the same time, the exam continues to have widespread support not just for admissions purposes, but for merit scholarships and determining rankings for schools.

What is the SAT?

The current revision of the SAT, introduced in 2016, typically is taken by high school juniors and seniors. As described by the publisher, it measures the type of literacy, numeracy and writing skills and the ability to analyze and solve problems that college success requires.

The SAT has four sections: Reading, Writing and Language, Math (no calculator), and Math (with calculator allowed). The test taker may optionally write an essay which then is a fifth test section. Scores are reported in two sections (1) Evidence-Based Reading and Writing, and (2) Math. These are scaled from 200 to 800 and summed so that total scores range from 400 to 1600. In addition, three separate "test" scores (scored 10 to 40) are reported for Reading, Writing and Language, and Math. If taken, the essay is scored separately. Test taking is three hours (with an added fifty minutes if the essay section is taken). The cost in 2017 in the U.S.A. was 45 dollars (\$57 when the essay also was taken). Starting with the 2015-16 school year, the College Board began working with Khan Academy to provide free SAT preparation.

In the high school graduating class of 2018, there were a record-breaking number of SAT test takers throughout the United States and internationally. Many students sit for the SAT more than once and then submit the best set of scores achieved.

Frequently Discussed Pros and Cons

In recent years, the SAT has received increased scrutiny from students, parents, legislators, and admission officers. As noted, some public and private colleges have stopped requiring SAT scores, indicating that high school grades and the rigor of the courses taken adequately predict undergraduate success.

Those favoring the exam argue

- the SAT provides a measurable standard for comparing applicants, while grade point averages are subject to considerable variability
- the exam measures the type of skills necessary for college success
- studies indicate that the combination of GPA and test scores are the best predictors of academic success
- a high score might counter doubts about a not-so-high grade point average

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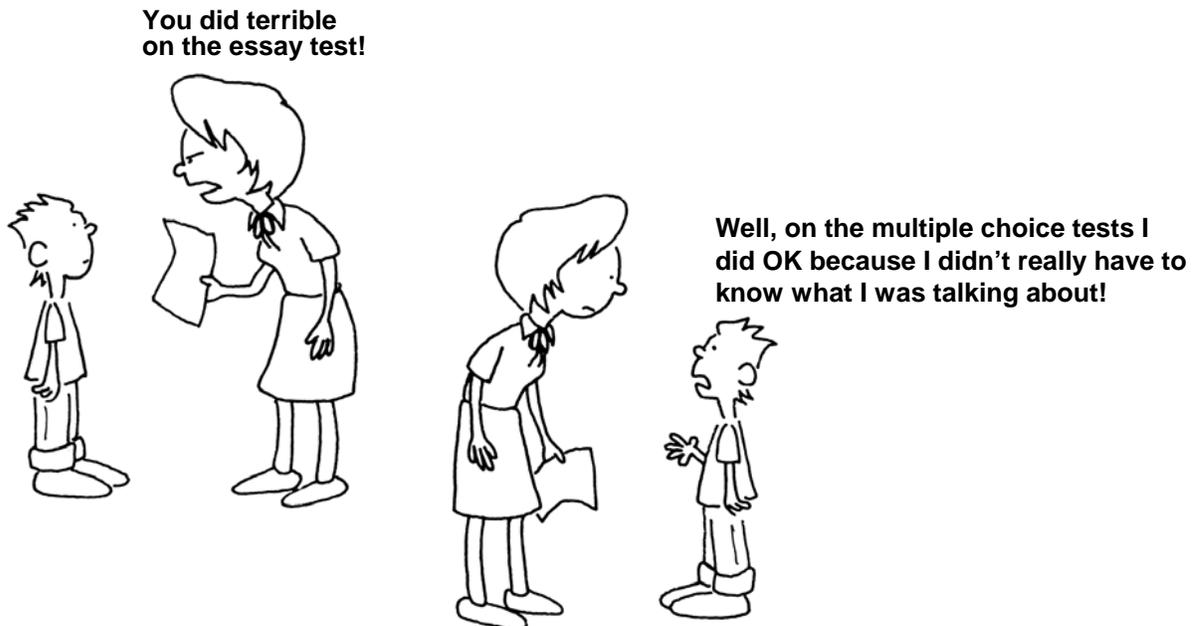
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- preparing for the exam can enhance performance on future exams
- making the test optional results in admitting less qualified students.

Those against use of the exam argue that

- research findings indicate that GPA is a better predictor of college success
- some students don't do well on high pressure exams and over-reliance on the SAT discriminates against their admission
- while good scores on the SAT suggest the likelihood of academic success, bad scores are not a good indicator that a student can't succeed at college
- all gatekeeping tests sort out students with no sensitivity to critical differences
- the narrow focus of the exam discriminates against students who may be strong in non-traditional areas, such as the arts
- making the test optional enables enrollment and graduation of a higher proportion of low-income and first generation-students, and more students from diverse backgrounds
- test prep is a time-consuming and expensive commitment, which are in themselves negative factors, but these realities also favor families with higher incomes and work against underrepresented groups
- overemphasis on test preparation pulls high school teachers and students away from pursuing valuable curricular and extracurricular opportunities.



Some Research

Not surprisingly, research has been reported on both sides of the issue (see references). And a recent study raises the question: *Should those tests be required at all?* Here are excerpts:

The number of colleges using Test Optional Policies (TOPs) in higher education admissions has dramatically expanded in recent years. And these colleges have avoided “one-size-fits-all,” finding varied ways to administer TOPs and experiencing varied outcomes. Much of the momentum around Test-Optional admission is focused on whether the use of standardized tests (specifically SAT and ACT) unnecessarily truncates the admission of otherwise well-qualified students. In particular, there is concern about whether widespread reliance on the use of these tests in the admission process tends to replicate the status quo in social class and opportunity in our American society.

In this study, we collected student-record level data from 28 institutions that illustrate the variety among institutions that have adopted a TOP. They ranged in undergraduate enrollments from 1,500 to 20,000 and 15%-90% in admission selectivity, and included long-time users of TOP as well as recent adopters of the policy. In most instances we received four cohorts of student data, in total representing a dataset of 955,774 individual applicant records. We focused on interpreting the data using practical significance rather than experimental statistical techniques.

A TOP was described by many of the admission deans of the participating institutions as a tool they employed in the hope of increasing applications from a more diverse range of students. ...

The experiences of institutions in this study provide evidence that the adoption of a well-executed test-optional admission policy can lead to an increase in overall applications as well as an increase in the representation of URM students (both numeric and proportionate) in the applicant pool and the freshman class. Roughly two-thirds of our TOP institutions experienced URM growth above that of a matched test-requiring peer institution. A similar but smaller magnitude increase was seen among Pell recipients.

Approximately one quarter of the students in this study did not submit standardized test scores with their college application (henceforth to be referred to as “Non-Submitters”). ...

As noted in earlier studies, URM, First-Generation-to-College, and Pell recipients were more strongly represented among Non-Submitters. For instance, 35% of Black or African-American students chose to be Non-Submitters (12 percentage points higher than the overall non-submitting rate), as compared to 18% of white students. Similarly, women chose to be Non-Submitters at higher rates than men.

We also found that Non-Submitters were often admitted at lower rates than Submitters, but, on average, enrolled (yielded) at substantially higher rates. Their HSGPAs were modestly lower than the Submitters, and, upon entering college, their First Year GPAs and Cumulative GPAs were comparably lower. However, they ultimately graduated at rates equivalent to, or marginally higher than, Submitters, the ultimate proof of success.

Furthermore, our data indicated that high school GPA had a stronger correlation with college success for Non-Submitters than the ACT/SAT (for the 27% of Non-Submitters for whom we had test scores) -- both in terms of college cumulative GPA and graduation rate. While test scores had a generally stronger relationship with college GPAs for the Submitters, for the Non-Submitters they tended to show a weaker relationship, essentially under-predicting the college GPA. The test scores continued to most strongly correlate with family income. ...

We cannot lay claim to definitive conclusions about the workings of a test-optional admission policy. However, our findings suggest that a TOP works well for many types of institutions. It appears to offer a less obstructed path to higher education for this population of students who feel that their scores do not match their ability. We do not argue that institutions should entirely eliminate consideration of the ACT and SAT for all their students, however, we do continue to question whether the value-add of testing is large enough to justify the price—time spent, financial cost, and emotional drain—being paid by students due to societal preoccupation with these tests. (Syverson, Franks, & Hiss, 2018).

Concluding Comments

At this time, there is wide-spread interest and experimentation with test-optional admission's policies. And there is evidence that establishing such a policy can help to improve diversity in higher education.

So, is this the beginning of the end for tests such as the SAT?

A discussion on National Public Radio concluded:

Probably not. Filtering tens of thousands of applicants without the help of these powerhouse tests is a daunting and expensive task for larger schools. And most of the ... most-selective institutions still rely on them.

In contrast, Michael Nietzel, a former university president writes in Forbes:

But the decision of an international powerhouse like the University of Chicago to drop its testing requirement gives the movement extra momentum, leading to predictions that major public universities – like the University of California – will also consider going “test-optional.”

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Appendix

Examples of Test-Optional Colleges

Many of the universities that have removed the requirement for the Scholastic Achievement Test have been vocal about the reasoning behind it. In this portion, we will look at these schools and see the results of making the SAT optional.

Hampshire College: a private liberal arts college located in Amherst, Massachusetts. Average applicant GPA is 3.47; acceptance rate is 70%. The college found that, after deciding to remove the standardized exam from the admission process, the number of applications went down; however, the quality of applicants went up. There was also an increase in class diversity and in the number of first-generation families. The admissions office focused more on the academic record over four years, letter of recommendations, essays, in-person interviews, and optional supplements. The administration indicates that this process is a good predictor of the likelihood of success at the college.

Bowdoin College: a private liberal arts college located in Brunswick, Maine. Average applicant GPA is 3.8; acceptance rate is 14.9%. Bowdoin was one of the first colleges to drop the SAT requirements (in 1969). After going test-optional, they had a greater number of applicants, a larger yield of enrollees, and no negative changes in graduation rates. Recent data indicate that nearly 30 percent of applicants do not submit SAT scores.

The University of Chicago: a private research university in Chicago, Illinois. Average applicant GPA is 4.0; acceptance rate is 8.4%. The SAT is no longer required, but applicants can still submit their SAT scores. The University hopes that the test-optional policy will end assumptions about needing outstanding test scores to be accepted and that this will encourage first-generation, low-income, and minority students to apply. The results of the change are being evaluated.

Fairfield University: a private Jesuit University located in Fairfield, Connecticut. Average applicant GPA is 3.41; acceptance rate is 65%. In adopting a test-optional admissions process, they accepted the view that high school performance is a better predictor of future success than standardized test scores. There have been increases in diversity, however, the University indicates this is mainly due to broadening where they recruit students.

For the *2019 Best Test Optional Colleges* (rankings of colleges that don't require SAT or ACT scores for admission), go to

<https://www.niche.com/colleges/search/best-test-optional-colleges/>