

YOUR VIEW

SAT remains key factor in college admissions

Recently, the value of the SAT, administered by the College Board, has been called into question by some commentators. Some studies have been equivocal about the correlation between SAT scores and success in college. Some have asked whether colleges should use grade point average as the sole criterion for acceptance and ignore SAT scores.



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Suppose that a school district's reputation is judged by the number of its students who were accepted at prestigious colleges. Logically, it would make its grading system less rigorous so that transcripts reflected higher grades, leading to higher college acceptance rates. Grade inflation is a fact of life in many school districts, yet others adhere to more challenging standards.

How is a college admissions department to assess the grading standards among 13,000-plus school districts in the United States without the benefit of a standardized test?

Even colleges that claim to be SAT

optional (SAT scores need not be submitted to be considered for acceptance) use SAT scores as one of the main criteria for the majority of their applications.

Bowdoin College in Maine is a highly selective college with a 16 percent acceptance rate. (To put acceptance rate into a context, Penn State's main campus at University Park has a 55 percent acceptance rate.) Since 1969, Bowdoin has promulgated that SAT scores are optional, yet 85 percent of its students who were granted admission submitted SAT scores. The average SAT score of the applicants accepted at Bowdoin was 2,145 out of a possible 2,400. Impressive. That score ranks among the most selective of liberal arts colleges and universities in the nation. In addition, colleges that are SAT optional release their SAT scores to all the magazines that publish annual rankings, as well as to renowned college catalogs such as the "Fiske Guide to Colleges."

Students who are accepted at a highly selective, SAT-optional college and have not submitted standardized test scores are the exception. They have achieved high grades in every challenging course available at their schools, excelled in leadership, and have volunteered consistently over the years.

Other students who may not submit SAT scores are coveted athletes, the senator's child or the progeny of a generous alumnus.

Not so obvious to most people is that purporting to be SAT optional encourages greater numbers of students to apply, many of whom are rejected, thereby making the college appear more selective.

The vast majority of college admissions staffs judge students' applications by the rigor of their courses and the standardized test scores. If a student has a high SAT (or ACT) score but no honors or advanced placement courses, an assumption is made that she has not challenged herself. More importantly, most colleges award merit aid (not need-based aid) on a particular SAT threshold as well as GPA.

A particular score should not be thought of as good or bad, but rather as a way to refine the list of colleges for which the student is qualified.

Keep in mind that standardized tests will be mandated throughout college and graduate school and for professional certification. Rigorous academics will always be highly regarded and ultimately provide a strong foundation for success in higher education and in life.

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