



what to do if your SAT/ACT scores don't reflect the real you

BY PAUL ADAMS

high school programs can vary widely. Standardized tests represent a way of evaluating all students using the same test measurement. Test scores can corroborate a stellar high school record, and they can indicate that a student is “better” than a mediocre high school record might indicate.

Conversely, it's not uncommon for students with strong grades to underperform on the SAT/ACT, and admission committees generally assume that a student's high school record is a better indicator of his or her potential success in college.

Some colleges—including some prestigious ones—have started to deemphasize standardized testing in admission and no longer require applicants to submit test scores. You can find a list of schools that are test-optional at www.fairtest.org.

Most colleges still require you to take standardized tests. Here are some hints to help you succeed:

- If you didn't score well on the PSAT/PLAN, be sure to take college prep courses during your junior or senior year, including as much math and science as possible.
- If your high school offers a test-prep course, take it. Kaplan, Inc. (www.kaptest.com) and The Princeton Review (www.princetonreview.com) offer test-prep courses around the country.
- Even if your test scores are not as high as you had hoped, don't rule out the possibility of getting into a selective college. Test scores can be offset by some other strength in your record, such as music, art, or athletic talent.

- Schedule a campus visit/interview and explain extenuating circumstances, such as a learning disability or test anxiety.

- Some students who don't do well on the SAT find that they do better on the ACT. Ask your counselor about the difference and check out the ACT (www.act.org) and SAT (www.collegeboard.com) websites.

- Retake the test. According to both ACT and the College Board, students who take the test more than once tend to do slightly better. But don't assume your scores will improve significantly when you retake the test. About one-third of seniors who retake the SAT see their scores *decline* slightly. Only about one in 100 students will see a substantial increase, so retaking the test is unlikely to get you admitted to a college whose average scores are considerably higher than yours. However, retaking the test will show that you are making an effort to improve your score.

It's important to keep testing issues in perspective. The point of the admission process is to match each student with the most appropriate college. “Our judgment is not a commentary on the student's worth and dignity as a human being,” Lind says. “It's to be sure students are admitted to the institution where they are most likely to succeed.” Standardized tests are just one of many ways to match students with colleges. Keep that in mind and you'll avoid test anxiety—and you'll shed your fear of #2 pencils. **PC&U**

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If your eyes glaze over at the sight of an answer sheet with dozens of little circles to fill in, if your palms sweat at the very idea of a #2 pencil, if you dread the thought of taking a standardized test . . . relax. You may have fallen prey to the misconception that getting into college depends on a single test score. For most students, other elements of the application—especially the high school record—influence a college's admission decision more than test scores.

Test scores are just a part of the puzzle that needs to be put together, according to John Lind, retired Vice President for Enrollment Management at Southwestern University in Texas. “The most selective institutions will look at academic performance over the four years of high school as the most important factor,” he says.

However, this doesn't mean you should snooze through the SAT or ACT. High scores will certainly make you a more attractive candidate to many schools, but the importance of standardized test scores varies from one college to another.

What's the point of standardized tests? The quality and difficulty of