



your SAT/ACT scores don't reflect the "real" you

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/ACT. High scores will certainly make you an attractive candidate, but the importance of standardized test scores varies from one college to another.

What's the point of such tests? The quality and difficulty of 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. It's not uncommon for students with strong grades to underperform on the SAT/ACT, and typically admissions committees assume that the high school record is a better

indicator of a student's success in college.

Some colleges—including some prestigious ones—have made standardized tests optional, but most colleges still require you to take them, so here are some helpful hints:

- If you didn't score well on the PSAT, take college prep courses during your 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 Princeton Review (www.princetonreview.com) offer test-prep courses around the country. By the way, average national SAT scores for 2003 college-bound seniors were 519 (math) and 507 (verbal). The composite average ACT score was 20.8.
- 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 I 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 1 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.

This spring (2005), the SAT will change. A new section on grammar and usage, a student-written essay, and short reading passages will be added to the verbal portion of the test. The infamous analogies will be eliminated. Content will be expanded on the math portion to include topics covered in third-year college prep math courses. The section on qualitative comparisons will be eliminated.

It's important to keep testing issues in perspective. The point of the admissions 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. ■

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