

SAT-Optional Admissions: Reasons to Take Another Look

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SAT-optional policy announcements often cite potential biases in the test, differential scoring by income and by race, and a desire to remove "SAT pandemonium" from the admissions process. Many announcements include statements such as, "The best predictor of success is your high school achievement," or "You can decide for yourself if your scores adequately reflect your abilities and potential for success in college," and "Standardized tests have long been scrutinized for possible cultural, ethnic, gender, and class bias."

Nearly all adopting institutions immediately attract more applicants—and significantly more ethnically diverse applicants—in addition to boosting test-score statistics and the institution's overall reputation. Non-submitting enrolled students frequently have comparable high school GPAs and high school class ranks

to their score-submitting counterparts.

Where data are available, they show that such students achieve comparable college GPAs and graduation rates. For all institutions that share the data, SAT-optional policies broaden the student body and do no harm to the quality of the student body, as measured by precollegiate and collegiate academic achievement.

Reasons to dig deeper

Public statements share noble and socially responsible messages. But, do they tell the entire story?

Shortcut: Many, including Reed College president Colin Diver, who penned an op-ed on the topic in the *New York Times* in fall 2006, have concerns that SAT-optional policies are, at least in part, a mere shortcut to genuine outreach and effective student recruitment.

Inconsistency: SAT-optional policies

allow the students—not the institution—to determine if the assessment "represents their abilities accurately." Is there any other academic measure that colleges relinquish to the student's discretion? No. Institutions do not allow students to pick and choose among course grades, submitting a graded writing sample from a particular class for which they believe a course grade is not representative of their ability.

So, why would an institution that distrusts the SAT's validity continue to evaluate any applicants using the test? How could it be justified that scores are meaningful in evaluating a student's abilities when those scores are submitted but irrelevant when they are withheld? There is inherent inconsistency. At best, the inconsistencies logically lead to a breakdown in the purpose and value of holistic admissions review. At worst,

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they risk being perceived as hypocritical.

Accuracy of reported SAT averages: Perhaps the greatest concern is how the absences of some scores affect the institution's reported SAT average. Do most institutions report the scores of only the students who choose to submit them, or do they gather scores from all students, including non-submitters, after enrollment, and report an inclusive SAT average to ranking publications and guidebooks and on their Web sites?

We decided to find out. We reviewed all 28 institutions that are SAT-optional in some form that are included in *U.S. News' Top 100 Liberal Arts Colleges 2007*. Admissions Web sites, U.S. News profiles, and direct contact with each undergraduate admissions office revealed that only one of the 28 asserted that it reported a full SAT average. Only one institution required all students who took the test to submit scores after enrolling and used those scores when calculating their institution's average.

Four institutions declined to respond to multiple inquiries, although available information suggests these four also report biased averages. In our research of publicly available studies and confidential internal assessments, we conclude

that SAT scores for non-submitters are 100–150 points lower than submitters; therefore, eliminating those scores for 25 percent to 50 percent of enrolling students increases the institution's average SAT score between 25 and 75 points.

It appears that 27 of the 28 SAT-optional institutions are the beneficiaries of these SAT-average boosts. In light of this discovery, there is little choice but to conclude that the critics' concerns are well founded.

Implications

What happens if the trend continues? What if there are 100 selective institutions with SAT-optional policies in five years instead of about 40 today? Will more institutions be "forced" to adopt SAT-optional policies simply to compete for a diverse pool of applicants? When a market shifts, some outcomes are unpredictable.

However, a few practical implications for students are easy to imagine. While SAT-optional policies currently encourage more applications as reported SAT averages rise, students who might previously have been a good fit for the institution may be discouraged from applying if their scores are too far below the reported average.

Or, over time, fewer and fewer students may submit scores, further distorting the reported SAT average and further confusing prospective students.

Unless SAT-optional institutions forego those policies by making the exam a requirement or removing it from consideration entirely or being more forthright about the fact that their SAT averages represent only a self-selected portion of their students, this marketplace competition may completely disorient prospective students and families. A disoriented customer market is not in the best interests of any institution or higher education in general.

Today, all SAT-optional institutions continue to display their SAT averages on their Web sites, in their publications, and in third-party publications despite the fact that the average represents only a part of the student body. Right now, they have it both ways. But, we must ask who benefits? And is it truly helpful to students?

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