



RETHINKING THE ROLE OF STANDARDIZED TESTS

Although proponents of the SAT and ACT argue that these tests help identify high-achieving students from underserved backgrounds, they actually serve as a gatekeeper to the opportunities higher education offers. Further, this notion of finding a "diamond in the rough," which is itself a problematic idea, runs counter to the notion that all students can be successful.¹ On their face, test scores appear to be a neutral judge, but in practice, they perpetuate racial and socioeconomic disparities.

Indeed, David Hawkins, Chief Education and Policy Officer of the National Association for College Admission Counseling characterized the use of these scores as grounded in "layer upon layer of privilege."²

Standardized testing policies advantage students who already have the most resources and support through:



RACIAL BIAS EMBEDDED IN TESTS

Racial funding disparities within the K-12 system³ limit access to rigorous academic courses that influence test performance.⁴ And while the SAT and ACT have since been revised, they were adapted from undeniably racist standardized intelligence, or IQ, tests⁵ and remain racially and culturally biased.⁶



OPPORTUNITIES TO TAKE THE TEST MULTIPLE TIMES

Taking the SAT or ACT multiple times tends to increase students' scores, a practice that is much more common among wealthy and White applicants who benefit from greater access to college counselors and are not deterred by the financial or time burden of re-taking the tests.⁸ Applicants cannot use fee waivers for more than two SAT registrations or four ACT registrations.⁹



EXPENSIVE TEST PREP COURSES OR TUTORING

The Varsity Blues scandal revealed just how much money some wealthy parents are willing to spend for their children to have the test scores necessary to gain acceptance to well-resourced institutions. Even without breaking any laws, preparing for standardized tests can cost thousands of dollars. Working with a private tutor, the most effective way to improve an applicant's retest score, is also the costliest form of test preparation, at anywhere from approximately \$160 to upwards of \$225 an hour.⁷



MISALIGNMENT BETWEEN ADMISSIONS AND FINANCIAL AID REQUIREMENTS

Even when test scores are not factored into admissions decisions, some institutions require students to submit scores to be eligible for some institutional grants and scholarships.¹⁰ Institutions that implement test-optional policies may still offer more of their institutional aid to students who submit standardized test scores.¹¹

Just under 2.2 million students took the SAT in 2020 in the wake of widespread testing closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, about 22,000 students fewer than the year before.¹² The number of test takers using fee waivers fell even more dramatically (by more than 50,000 from 2019 to 2020), indicating that students from low-income backgrounds were especially impacted by the pandemic.¹³

OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: RETHINKING THE ROLE OF STANDARDIZED TEST SCORES

Creating a more equitable and just higher education system starts with implementing equitable admissions practices.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS SHOULD:

NO LONGER REQUIRE TEST SCORES IN ADMISSIONS DECISIONS

Privileged students who are better positioned to receive high test scores will continue to benefit from the use of standardized test scores in admissions and financial aid decisions, even when tests are optional. Therefore, institutions should remove test score requirements altogether (go test free) and adopt more holistic admissions approaches.

IF TEST SCORES MUST BE USED, INSTITUTIONS SHOULD:

MAKE TEST-OPTIONAL POLICIES PERMANENT

If institutions are not willing to eliminate the use of standardized test scores in admissions and financial aid decisions, they should consider making permanent any temporary policies that deemphasize the role of test scores in admissions decisions. Due to hardships imposed by the coronavirus pandemic, many institutions temporarily waived test score requirements.¹⁴ The reality is that underserved students face limited access to the tests and test prep services even when not facing a global health crisis.

ENSURE TEST-FREE AND TEST-OPTIONAL ADMISSIONS POLICIES ALIGN WITH INSTITUTIONAL FINANCIAL AID POLICIES

Admissions and financial aid policies must work together for institutions to reach access and diversity goals. The practice of differing test score requirements between admissions and financial aid disproportionately harms students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation students, who are more likely to be applicants who do not submit scores.¹⁵

Defining Standardized Test Policies

Test-flexible: Students are allowed to submit scores from exams other than the SAT or ACT, such as the Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams.

Test-optional: Students are allowed, but not required, to submit test scores. If submitted, institutions may consider scores in admissions decisions.

Test-free: Students are not required to submit test scores and institutions will not consider scores when deciding whether or not to admit any applicant.

For full citations, please visit: www.ihep.org/mostimportantdoor/sources

1. NACAC, 2020.
2. IHEP interview with David Hawkins, 2020.
3. EdBuild, 2019.
4. U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2019.
5. Rosales, 2018.
6. Santelices & Wilson, 2012.

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8. Moore, Sanchez, & San Pedro, 2018.
9. College Board, 2020a; The ACT, 2020.
10. NACAC, 2020.
11. Hiss & Franks, 2014.
12. College Board, 2020b.
13. College Board, 2020b.

14. Jaschik, 2020.
15. Hiss & Franks, 2014.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT WWW.IHEP.ORG