

# Standardized test scores in the college acceptance process

[Profession](#), [Student](#)



One of the most important decisions a high school senior makes is deciding which college to attend, a choice that hopefully provides a positive pathway towards a fulfilling future. Yet the choice is not up to the student alone. How that student scores on the SAT, or Scholastic Aptitude Test, and/or the ACT, or American College Test, is often the biggest factor in determining admission to college. Supporters claim standardized test scores measure a student's general intelligence, and reflect the applicant's chance of doing well in college.

Opponents feel that tests such as the SAT and ACT do not show a truly well-rounded student. Despite the traditional belief that standardized test scores such as the SAT and ACT are the best indicator of how a student will fare in college, the call to either omit these scores on college applications, or give equal consideration to high school grades and extracurricular activities, especially since standardized test scores do not take into account financial inequality, high school education quality, and the effects of testing anxiety, is hard to ignore.

The traditional use of standardized test scores as a guide for determining both a student's intelligence and how he will fare in college began soon after World War I, when Robert Yerkes and Carl Brigham modified The Army Alpha intelligence test to serve as a college admissions test. Eventually renamed the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT for short, this intelligence test supposedly measures a student's natural ability ("Secrets of the SAT"). Today, an applicant's score on the SAT is still often used to determine college acceptance and scholarship awards.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota claim, “ SAT performance is a good of a predictor of overall college grade point average as it is of freshman grade point average”. Similarly, the ACT, originally known as American College Testing, is an accepted standardized test that focuses on the Common Core curriculum used throughout the United States. The ACT measures a student’s knowledge in reading, math, English, and science.

Consequently, SAT and ACT results provide the easiest way for college selection committees to quickly narrow down applicants for admission and scholarships. Only then, from the accepted applicants, are other achievements considered, such as a student’s grade point average (also referred to as a student’s GPA) and extra-curricular activities. Though tradition has proven that those who score well on standardized tests will usually score well in college, it does not leave room for considering students who have wonderful high school grades and are well-rounded in other areas, or take into account the financial history, education quality, or testing anxiety that may affect standardized test scores, but not overall college potential. Making standardized test scores optional, or at least equally balanced, with high school grade point averages and extra-curricular activities will allow college selection committees to view each student as a whole, and not just as a number.

As a result of tradition, the use of the SAT and ACT in the college acceptance process has become standard, but how does this affect financially disadvantaged students? David Coleman, the President, and CEO of College Board, a nonprofit organization that designs and administers the SAT, claims

a student can improve his score by taking rigorous academic classes during high school. Unfortunately, advanced classes are not available in all schools, so those in poor school districts will not benefit from that experience when testing. David Coleman also admits, “ Students who could afford special classes and tutoring on the test’s tricks, programs that could cost tens of thousands of dollars in some parts of the country, had an unfair advantage”.

Further, low-income students often cannot afford multiple retakes, unlike their richer counterparts. Although financially challenged students receive two tests free, the SAT costs \$50 per try thereafter. Upper-income students frequently take the test multiple times and start as early as their freshman year. Since the highest scores count, there is a big advantage to multiple attempts. Advocates argue that free testing help is available online from sites such as Khan Academy. Yet low-income students often do not have access to computers at home to gain the hours of study time needed to compete with those in wealthier areas. Though financially challenged students may have worked hard in school and have excellent grades, their standardized test scores may not reflect this.

If standardized test scores are all the selection committee sees before the initial cut of applicants, financially disadvantaged students have no way to prove they are capable of college-level achievements.

Despite the disadvantages financially challenged students face, supporters for the use of SAT/ACT scores push the view that because school districts have different grading standards, standardized test scores are the most

effective indicator of a student's ability to succeed at the college level. This observation stems from the fact that a 4.0 GPA in one school district is not always equal to a 4.0 in another, simply because some school districts are more fortunate in their funding and quality of instruction. Sally Springer and fellow authors of *Admission Matters: What Students and Parents Need to Know about Getting into College* also claim that public universities heavily rely on standardized testing scores. The authors state, "With grades difficult to interpret, most colleges are unwilling to give up the additional information, however imperfect, that these tests provide." Though this attitude is common, unequal education levels across the county better support the use of GPA scores and extra-curricular activities as a way to predict a student's true potential. Kelsey Page, a researcher and supporter of the removal of the SAT from the college admissions process, studied data from the College Board and the National Center for Fair and Open Testing. She stated, "The belief that the standardized test is the great leveler that sets all students on an equal playing field for evaluation is a huge misconception. It has been empirically proven year after year that performance on SAT and ACT tests is positively correlated to a student's socioeconomic status. Thus, those who are already advantaged in education are given another leg up in college admissions". What should really be considered is the student's grade point average, which reflects the student's achievements over 4 years of schooling, as well as the student's ability to excel in areas outside of the classroom...all areas unsupported by the preferred use of SAT/ACT scores.

In addition to those eliminated for consideration in college admission because of test scores resulting from financial and high school inequality factors, colleges are likely missing out on potentially exceptional students who do not score well because they suffer from testing anxiety. In normal classroom situations, students have time to prepare for tests with detailed notes and study guides, creating a less stressful and more successful atmosphere for test taking. Yet, due to the importance placed on the SAT and ACT, the extreme pressure to score highly on these standardized tests can negatively impact a student's performance by triggering test anxiety. Symptoms of testing anxiety range from significant, but manageable, to extremely debilitating. In severe cases, a student can even experience a panic attack that mimics the feeling of a heart attack.

According to Matt Steiner, a tutor with over eight years of experience in test preparation with an MA in Social Sciences from the University of Chicago and a BA in Psychology from UCSC, testing anxiety can negatively impact a student's scores. "For many students, college admission tests are accompanied by unpleasant physical and emotional side effects - heart palpitations, distractibility, nervousness, self-doubt - which lead to lackluster scores". Though studies show that the average high school student who does well on the SAT will do well in college, they also reveal that success in college really depends on how hard the student works while there.

In fact, psychologist Claude Steel points out that the SAT has been proven to only measure about 18% of the requirements necessary to do well in college, and is not considered a good indicator of how a student will do in school ("

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Secrets of the SAT”). Therefore, despite the traditional belief that standardized test scores such as the SAT and ACT are the best indicator of how a student will fare in college, the call to either omit these scores on college applications, or give equal consideration to high school grades and extracurricular activities, especially since standardized test scores do not take into account financial inequality, high school education quality, and the effects of testing anxiety, is hard to ignore.

A test-optional policy in all United States colleges would allow students who do well on the SAT/ACT to submit their scores, and students who do not wish to lay their college acceptance potential on a single test to, instead, submit their high school transcripts and extra-curricular activities, providing years of information on their work quality. Despite income, educational background, or testing anxiety, all students should be considered for college acceptance and scholarships based equally on either SAT/ACT scores or high school grade point averages combined with extra-curricular activities.

Colleges, after all, should ultimately be concerned with the education our youth, supporting equally the potential of all.