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THW require standardized tests for college admissions.

Why US Colleges Are Reviving Standardized Tests

Bloomberg News, by Janet Lorin, April 11, 2024

US colleges relied on standardized testing to help with admissions decisions for decades. Then the Covid pandemic hit and test centers closed, making administering the ACT and SAT exams difficult. That prompted many schools, including all eight in the Ivy League, to make the tests optional. Critics of standardized testing had expressed hope that the pause would lead to a permanent rethinking of the exams, whose results have demonstrated disparities between white and nonwhite students. But this year, Ivy schools Yale University, Dartmouth College and Brown University said they were making the tests mandatory again. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology announced the same move in 2022.

In April, Harvard also said it would reinstate the requirement for high school seniors applying in the fall of 2025. “Fundamentally, we know that talent is universal, but opportunity is not,” Hopi Hoekstra, dean of Harvard’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences, said in the written statement. “With this change, we hope to strengthen our ability to identify these promising students, and to give Harvard the opportunity to support their development as thinkers and leaders who will contribute to shaping our world.”

These reversals come as the exams themselves are undergoing significant changes.

1. What are the SAT and ACT?

The SAT, administered by the New York-based College Board, and the Iowa City-based ACT are screening tools for US college admission. Both are multiple-choice, written exams heavy on math and reading, taken by high school students typically in their junior year, sometimes senior. The SAT was created in the 1920s. Harvard University, in the early 1930s, was the first school to use the SAT as an instrument in admissions decisions, initially to determine recipients of one small scholarship program, according to Nicholas Lemann, author of *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*. The College Board, an association of educational institutions, adopted the SAT to replace a battery of essay tests during World War II, a change billed as temporary that instead proved lasting, Lemann said. College Board membership expanded greatly after the war, and the SAT became a mass-administered exam. The ACT emerged in the late 1950s as a competitor.

2. How are the tests changing?

In March, the SAT switched to a digital format that adapts to each test taker — based on how the student performs on the first module of questions, the second will either be more or less difficult. In addition, the duration of the SAT is being reduced to two hours and 14 minutes from three hours. Meanwhile, the ACT is expanding the number of computer-based testing sites while maintaining the exam’s almost three-hour length.

3. How important are they?

Well before the pandemic, nearly half of US colleges and universities said in 2018 that they gave “considerable importance” to ACT and SAT test scores in deciding which applicants to accept, down from 60% in 2004, according to a survey by the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The scores are also considered for scholarships, an important means of tuition support for many students. Some large public systems such as the University of Georgia and the University of Florida still require them. “A high score on the SAT or ACT will not compensate for a non-competitive” grade point average in high school, the University of Georgia says on its website. “Your record of three to three-and-a-half years’ worth of rigorous academic work in the classroom will be the primary focus of any admission decision.”

4. Who has moved away from the tests?

The Common Application, the nonprofit that allows students to apply to any of more than 1,000 colleges with a single form, said that only 5% of 1,083 member schools requested scores in the 2023-2024 season, compared with 55% in 2019. The University of Chicago and Brandeis University were among schools that had stopped requiring testing even before Covid-19. The University of California system also abolished testing requirements. “Decades of data and various studies demonstrate that the best predictor of college performance is high school grades,” said Harry Feder, executive director of FairTest, a nonprofit that has led the “test-optional” movement for 30 years. At

the height of the pandemic in 2021, the College Board also eliminated the essay section from the SAT and subject tests.

5. Why are some schools making test scores mandatory again?

After the Supreme Court ruling last June that said schools can no longer use race in admissions, colleges are looking for students in new places. They may include rural areas and high schools that haven't traditionally sent students to their colleges. Admissions officers at Yale, Dartmouth and Brown cited studies showing how important standardized tests are in providing context to student performance and said that requiring testing is beneficial in recruiting diverse and low-income students. In other words, they are seeking a metric to show these applicants could succeed. "When we open up an application, the first question that our readers ask is can the student do the work at Yale?" said Yale's dean of admissions and financial aid, Jeremiah Quinlan. Most colleges so far don't plan to follow Yale and the others in reinstating mandatory test scores. According to a survey of about 200 colleges taken by test-prep company Kaplan in the second half of 2023, only 1% of test-optional colleges plan to reinstate testing requirements while 14% are considering it. The other 85% plan to keep testing optional. (The University of Michigan, for its part, announced in February that it wouldn't require testing.)

6. What explains the racial disparity in test scores?

In the most recent report for the class of 2023, the mean SAT score was 1,082 for White students and 908 for Black students. (The overall mean score was 1,028. A perfect score is 1,600.) The reasons are varied, according to experts. For one thing, White and Asian families have more wealth than Black families, on average. Critics say standardized tests favor wealthy students who can pay for expensive preparation programs that teach strategies for excelling on written exams. Wealth also influences the quality of schooling a given child receives. The late economist William Spriggs of Howard University in Washington said in a 2021 interview that Black students were "less likely to be in schools where there are advanced math courses," such as calculus. Priscilla Rodriguez, a vice president at the College Board, said the SAT is not a racist instrument. "Every question is rigorously reviewed for evidence of bias and any question that could favor one group over another is discarded," she said. "Further, changes made to the test over its 100-year history have removed all vestiges of an aptitude or 'IQ' test."

7. What alternatives are there?

Bowdoin College, which led the way by making admission tests optional starting in 1969, considers what courses were available at an applicant's high school, whether the student chose the most or least challenging, and how the person performed relative to peers. James Nondorf, vice president for enrollment at the University of Chicago, said students can show their strengths in competitions such as chess, debate or math. (About 70% of applicants to Chicago chose to apply with test scores in 2023, down from 75% in 2022.) "I love entrepreneurship competitions, hack-a-thons, coding competitions," Nondorf said. "In some ways it's better than testing. It showcases a particular skill as opposed to testing, where you're seeing a whole set of things measured."

US universities are reinstating SAT scores. Experts say it will exacerbate racial inequality

The Guardian, by Melissa Hellmann, 20 Jun 2024

After offering test-free admissions, some US schools are reversing course, claiming it will help under-resourced students – but critics say it will do the opposite

When SAT and ACT testing sites closed at the start of the pandemic in 2020, about 2,000 higher education institutions in the US had no choice but to offer prospective students test-optional or test-free admissions. It was a sweeping decision that by many accounts increased the applicant pool and enrollment of underrepresented communities.

But as the public health crisis waned in recent years, some Ivy League and state schools have changed course by reinstating SAT and ACT score requirements in their admissions. In just the past few months, schools such as Brown University, Dartmouth College, the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Tennessee announced reinstatements, citing the tests as strong indicators of potential college success. Brown and Dartmouth, in particular, said high test scores could help under-resourced students stand out to admissions officers and therefore increase school diversity.

Critics of the reinstatements, however, say that standardized testing will do just the opposite. Studies have long shown that SATs mostly benefit white, wealthy students who can afford to pay for preparation courses and to take the tests multiple times. And a number of experts believe that the increase in applications and enrollment from Black and brown students may be seen as risky for some institutions.

"We saw this expansion of DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] after the murder of George Floyd and the campus responses to that, and then I think right now we're really seeing a backlash against that," said Kelly Ochs Rosinger,

an associate professor at Penn State who focuses on racial and economic disparities in education. “Institutions are taking a step back and saying [reinstating test scores] is in the name of equity, but that remains to be seen.” According to some academics, the wholesale return to pre-pandemic SAT testing, coupled with last year’s ban on affirmative action, will only exacerbate racial inequality.

The real reason schools are reinstating SATs

Private institutions with large endowments and small undergraduate sizes, and public state institutions in red states, dominate the small list of schools requiring SAT and ACT scores again, said Dominique J Baker, an associate professor of education and public policy at the University of Delaware. For Ivy League schools, she said, their decision to return to standardized testing requirements comes from ideas about meritocracy and how to measure intelligence, “which are all bundled up with race in the United States”. On the other hand, public schools in states such as Tennessee and Texas have faced political pressure from legislatures to reinstate standardized testing. “A lot of financial aid across the United States that’s in any way tied to academics,” Baker said, “frequently requires test scores.”

And even though there’s only a small set of schools that are requiring tests again, Rosinger said they play a powerful role in setting the standard of college admissions at higher education institutions throughout the nation.

College admissions counselors saw more applications from first generation Black and brown students when schools forwent test scores, said John Hollemon, the director of DEI at the National Association for College Admission Counseling. “Some of [the institutions] probably saw a lot of changes in their student demographic from those individuals who were applying based off of the new changes,” Hollemon said. “And for some, that may have been eye-opening” because it showed that the tests were an admission barrier for some underrepresented students.

Schools that had increased enrollment from Black and Latino students when they went test-optional and test-free may be concerned that conservative activists could lodge reverse discrimination suits, said Harry Feder, executive director of the non-profit FairTest. “I find it hard to believe that reverting to [requiring standardized tests] will produce better results on race than using other more holistic factors,” Feder said, “particularly when the option of doing affirmative action based on race has been taken off the table by the supreme court.”

‘The route does not travel through Harvard’

Created in 1926 by the psychologist and eugenicist Carl Brigham, the SAT is known to have racist origins. Brigham believed that testing could reveal that “the Nordic race group” was superior to all others, and developed multiple-choice questions designed to limit admissions from non-white test takers. A 2020 study from the University of California system that looked at pre-pandemic data indicated that this legacy persists by showing that, compared with high school grades, standardized tests correspond more to family income and race. “To the extent that test scores are emphasized as a selection criterion,” wrote the study author Saul Geiser, “they are a deterrent to admission of low-income, first-generation college, and underrepresented minority applicants.”

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), though, are keeping with the pandemic results and moving forward with test-optional admissions, as an alternate model for schools beyond the Ivy Leagues. HBCUs, according to Hollemon from the NACAC, were aware that standardized tests didn’t favor Black and brown students even before the pandemic. Forgoing tests in 2020 convinced many HBCUs in the NACAC network that test-optional admissions is the best course of action for their students moving forward.

A growing number of researchers and academics recommend that institutions take a more holistic review of a student’s performance, with an emphasis on grade point averages, to create greater diversity in university admissions. Before deciding their test policies this year, education organizations recommend that schools take stock of their mission, and analyze their own application and enrollment data to ensure that the most diverse student bodies have access to their institutions.

Even though the public debate around admissions has mostly focused on elite schools, Baker believes that more resources and money toward historically underfunded institutions would create a more diverse academic landscape. “When we talk about an equitable way forward ... the route does not travel through Harvard,” said Baker. “That route travels through open access public institutions, community colleges, HBCUs, tribal colleges and universities. Those types of institutions are how we create a fairer system.”

Colleges have fled standardized tests, on the theory that they hurt diversity. That’s not what the research shows.

David Leonhardt, The New York Times, Jan. 7, 2024 (Abridged for Concision)

David Leonhardt has been reporting on opportunity in higher education for more than two decades.

After the Covid pandemic made it difficult for high school students to take the SAT and ACT, dozens of selective colleges dropped their requirement that applicants do so. Colleges described the move as temporary, but nearly all

have since stuck to a test-optional policy. It reflects a backlash against standardized tests that began long before the pandemic, and many people have hailed the change as a victory for equity in higher education. Now, though, a growing number of experts and university administrators wonder whether the switch has been a mistake. Research has increasingly shown that standardized test scores contain real information, helping to predict college grades, chances of graduation and post-college success. Test scores are more reliable than high school grades, partly because of grade inflation in recent years.

Without test scores, admissions officers sometimes have a hard time distinguishing between applicants who are likely to do well at elite colleges and those who are likely to struggle. Researchers who have studied the issue say that test scores can be particularly helpful in identifying lower-income students and underrepresented minorities who will thrive. These students do not score as high on average as students from affluent communities or white and Asian students. But a solid score for a student from a less privileged background is often a sign of enormous potential.

“Standardized test scores are a much better predictor of academic success than high school grades,” Christina Paxson, the president of Brown University, recently wrote. Stuart Schmill — the dean of admissions at M.I.T., one of the few schools to have reinstated its test requirement — told me, “Just getting straight A’s is not enough information for us to know whether the students are going to succeed or not.”

An academic study released last summer by the group Opportunity Insights, covering the so-called Ivy Plus colleges (the eight in the Ivy League, along with Duke, M.I.T., Stanford and the University of Chicago), showed little relationship between high school grade point average and success in college. The researchers found a strong relationship between test scores and later success.

Likewise, a faculty committee at the University of California system — led by Dr. Henry Sánchez, a pathologist, and Eddie Comeaux, a professor of education — concluded in 2020 that test scores were better than high school grades at predicting student success in the system’s nine colleges, where more than 230,000 undergraduates are enrolled. The relative advantage of test scores has grown over time, the committee found.

“Test scores have vastly more predictive power than is commonly understood in the popular debate,” said John Friedman, an economics professor at Brown and one of the authors of the Ivy Plus admissions study.

With the Supreme Court’s restriction of affirmative action last year, emotions around college admissions are running high. The debate over standardized testing has become caught up in deeper questions about inequality in America and what purpose, ultimately, the nation’s universities should serve...

‘Picking Up Fundamentals’

Given the data, why haven’t colleges reinstated their test requirements?

For one thing, standardized tests are easy to dislike. They create stress for millions of teenagers. The tests seem to reduce the talent and potential of a human being to a single number. The SAT’s original name, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, implied a rigor that even its current defenders would not claim. Covid, in short, created an opportunity for American society to cast off a tradition that few people enjoyed.

But another part of the explanation involves politics. Standardized tests have become especially unpopular among political progressives, and university campuses are dominated by progressives.

Many consider the tests to be unfair because there are score gaps by race and class. Average scores for modest-income, Black and Hispanic students are lower than those for white, Asian and upper-income students. The tests’ critics worry that reinstating test requirements will reduce diversity. The Supreme Court’s affirmative action decision has heightened these concerns.

If selective colleges made admissions decisions based solely on test scores, racial and economic diversity would indeed plummet. Yet almost nobody in higher education favors using tests as the main factor for admissions. The question instead is whether the scores should be one of the criteria used to identify qualified students from every demographic group.

The SAT’s history offers some complex perspective. As the test’s critics sometimes point out, one designer of the original standardized tests in the early 20th century, Carl Brigham, also wrote a book promoting racist theories of intelligence (which he later disavowed). But a larger rationale for tests was connected to an expansion of opportunity. Administrators at Harvard, who pushed for the creation of the tests, saw them as a way to identify talented students from any background. The administrators believed that these students would go on to strengthen the country’s elite institutions, which were dominated by a narrow group of white Protestants, as Nicholas Lemann explained in “The Big Test,” his history of the SAT.

Today, perhaps the strongest argument in favor of the tests is that other parts of the admissions process have even larger racial and economic biases. Affluent students can participate in expensive activities, like music lessons and travel sports teams, that strengthen their applications. These same students often receive extensive editing on their

essays from their well-educated parents. Many affluent students attend private schools where counselors polish each student's application.

The tests are not entirely objective, of course. Well-off students can pay for test prep classes and can pay to take the tests multiple times. Yet the evidence suggests that these advantages cause a very small part of the gaps...

A Fixed Benchmark

The data documenting the predictive power of standardized tests is extensive and growing. In the study of Ivy Plus colleges, Chetty, Deming and Friedman looked at several measures of college success, such as whether students did well enough to earn admission to a top graduate school or be hired by a desirable company. Standardized test scores were a good predictor. High school grades were much less so:

Last week, three scholars — Bruce Sacerdote and Michele Tine of Dartmouth, along with Friedman — released additional research about some unnamed Ivy Plus colleges. It showed only a modest relationship between high school grades and college grades, partly because so many high school students now receive A's. The relationship between test scores and college grades, by contrast, was strong.

Some people have worried that SAT scores are merely a proxy for income or race, Sacerdote noted, but the data should alleviate this concern. Within every racial group, students with higher scores do better in college. The same is true among poor students and among richer students

Amid all the subjectivity in the admissions process, the SAT and ACT — even with their flaws — offer meaningful information about an applicant's readiness to do high-level academic work. The tests create a fixed benchmark that can be more reliable than high school grades, teacher recommendations or extracurricular activities. "The SAT just tells you a lot about how well prepared students are for college," Sacerdote said.

When I have asked university administrators whether they were aware of the research showing the value of test scores, they have generally said they were. But several told me, not for quotation, that they feared the political reaction on their campuses and in the media if they reinstated tests. "It's not politically correct," Charles Deacon, the longtime admissions dean at Georgetown University, which does require test scores, has told the journalist Jeffrey Selingo.

A Question of Values

The strongest case against the tests comes from educational reformers who want to rethink elite higher education in fundamental ways. To them, the country's top colleges should not be trying to identify the very best high school students; instead, these colleges should use their resources to educate a diverse mix of good students and, in the process, lift social mobility.

Comeaux — a professor of higher education at the University of California, Riverside, and co-chair of the state's review of standardized tests — favors this approach. He agrees that the SAT and ACT predict later success. But he prefers a stripped-down admissions system in which colleges set minimum requirements, based largely on high school grades, and then admit students by lottery. "Having a lottery," Comeaux said, "would make us radically rethink what it means to gain access and also to learn, rather than accepting the status quo."

That's not so different from what many colleges already do. The average acceptance rate nationwide is close to 70 percent. Even many selective colleges admit more than 25 percent of applicants, and high school grades can be sufficient for that purpose. "Test scores become relatively more important as the academic level of students increases," Friedman, the Brown economist, said.

The SAT debate really comes down to dozens of elite colleges, like Harvard, M.I.T., Williams, Carleton, U.C.L.A. and the University of Michigan. The people who run these institutions agree that social mobility should be core to their mission, which is why they give applicants credit for having overcome adversity. But the colleges have another mission, as well: excellence.

They want to identify and educate the students most likely to excel. These students, in turn, can produce cutting-edge scientific research that will cure diseases and accelerate the world's transition to clean energy. The students can found nonprofit groups and companies that benefit all of society.

Administrators at elite colleges have justified their decision to stop requiring test scores by claiming that the tests do not help them identify such promising students — a claim that is inconsistent with the evidence. The evidence instead suggests that standardized tests can contribute to both excellence and diversity so long as they are used as only one factor in admissions.

As it happens, most Americans support using standardized test scores in precisely this way. The Pew Research Center has asked Americans whether colleges should consider standardized tests when making admissions decisions. A large majority of people, across racial groups, support doing so.

The Misguided War on Test Optional

Inside Higher Ed, By Akil Bello, 02/05/2024

Akil Bello argues defenders of test requirements attack student choice and institutional priority setting. There is an informed debate taking place in living rooms, courtrooms and newsrooms about the value of a college education, the utility of standardized tests and higher education’s mission to serve the public good. Unfortunately, in his article “The Misguided War on the SAT,” New York Times columnist David Leonhardt opted not to participate in this discussion. Instead, drawing on research from Harvard University’s Opportunity Insights group, Leonhardt published a loving ode to elitism and the SAT disguised as informed reporting.

Myriad technical, logical and practical problems in Leonhardt’s article have been addressed by experts, including Jake Vigdor, a professor of public policy and governance at the University of Washington; Jon Boeckenstedt, vice provost of enrollment management at Oregon State University; and Jesse Rothstein, a professor of public policy and economics at the University of California, Berkeley. But it’s still worth addressing a few of the larger issues the article brings to light.

What Is Optional?

Leonhardt’s argument against test-optional policies suggests that these policies prevent students from benefiting from a strong score, but this isn’t true. The only colleges that refuse to consider test scores are those with test-free policies, but the 3 to 4 percent of colleges with test-free policies have not been the target of ire from advocates for standardized testing.

The attention of those decrying the “war on the SAT” has squarely been put on test-optional colleges. Yet, paradoxically, their arguments frame test optional as restricting a student’s ability to capitalize on a good score. This is either logically dishonest or a gross misinterpretation.

Test optional is exactly what it says—optional. A test-optional policy means the college has chosen to allow applicants the choice of whether to submit a score or not. They provide an applicant the option of whether to participate in test prep, whether to take a standardized test and whether to submit a score. At each step along the way, test-optional policies empower students to make informed choices about how to spend their time and how to display their abilities. If a student is a strong test taker or particularly proud of their test performance, they can submit that score.

At Bowdoin College, which has been test optional since 1969, 36 percent of students who enrolled in 2022 submitted a SAT score, and another 21 percent submitted an ACT (a combined total of 57 percent); the combined figure was 62 percent at Williams College, 76 percent at Rice University, 19 percent at Trinity College in Connecticut and 44 percent at Northeastern University. Clearly, none of those institutions stopped students from taking advantage of a score they were proud of. Suggesting otherwise is suggesting that universities are lying about either their practices or the data they have submitted to the federal government.

A Narrow Definition of Success

Does creating winners and losers serve the country? Or does it merely perpetuate inequality and exclusion?

A core assumption that seems to undergird many of the arguments against test-optional policies—and against diversity, equity and inclusion; race-conscious admissions; and affirmative action—is that the purpose of college is to rank and sort members of society. And the tools for ranking and sorting should exist unquestioned in perpetuity.

A Propaganda Battle

Unfortunately, debates over the value of standardized tests are frequently characterized by cherry-picking of data, misquoting and hyperbolizing of the opposing position, and generalizing based on anecdotes.

For example, claiming that colleges are remaining test optional “for diversity” ignores that almost every university that has changed its testing policy has cited multiple reasons for the change.

Leonhardt goes further, to question the motives and understanding of data by admissions professionals. To make his arguments, he conveniently ignores data and statements from colleges he ostensibly deems unimportant.

When the University of Denver announced its test-optional policy in 2019, Todd Rinehart, vice chancellor for enrollment, wrote, “We want to place our focus on curriculum and performance in school and provide students the choice as to how their academic record is presented.”

Similarly, Scott Friedhoff, then the vice president for enrollment at the College of Wooster, wrote, in 2020, “Tests only provide a very small amount of additional information on student readiness for Wooster. For nearly all students, high school grades and coursework provide our admissions team all we need on academic preparedness. A team of our own students from Wooster’s Applied Methods and Research Experience (AMRE) confirmed this in a recent validity study.”

A 2022 report from University of Tennessee concluded, in part, that the “ACT only adds predictive value in the top few [high school GPA] deciles, which is largely unhelpful for admissions decisions.” Data from some other public colleges also provides further evidence that testing offers them little value: for example, the Iowa Board of Regents concluded in 2022 that “the likelihood of graduating in four years was fairly consistent based on GPA, irrespective of the ACT score level.”

But test advocates tend to be uninterested in considering data from the colleges that serve the most students. The research report that Leonhardt relies heavily on even cautions “that our analysis applies only to Ivy-plus applicants, and the predictive power of test scores and GPAs may differ in other settings.” Despite this caution, Leonhardt implies that policies from these colleges should be applied broadly, writing, “Given the data, why haven’t colleges reinstated their test requirements?” A chart illustrating the article, citing the Opportunity Insights research, proclaims, “Test scores are strong predictors of student outcomes after college.” It’s only in the 37th paragraph that Leonhardt acknowledges the research caution, writing, “The SAT debate really comes down to dozens of elite colleges, like Harvard, M.I.T., Williams, Carleton, U.C.L.A. and the University of Michigan.”

Any full conversation about test scores and admissions policies should not only mention the Massachusetts Institute of Technology reinstating a test requirement (as Leonhardt does), but also the California Institute of Technology remaining test free (as Leonhardt doesn’t). It should mention Georgetown University, which not only requires standardized tests but requires applicants to submit all test scores, as well as New York University, which was test flexible prior to the pandemic and has been test optional since.

And if you’re going to write about Opportunity Insights’ research, why not mention the research group’s important findings on the influence of wealth on admission at selective colleges, which have been covered extensively in the Times?

Ignoring this context seems intentional and prejudicial.

The issue with standardized tests isn’t whether they measure some academic skills or provide a distinction between two candidates, but whether the skills and differences are statistically meaningful and worth the cost of the testing regime.

Addressing complex educational problems and questions requires recognition that numbers are not data, data is not understanding and understanding is not knowledge.

Those arguing for reinstatement of narrow definitions of merit, readiness and ability seem dedicated to stripping higher education of its variety and restricting student choice.

In this moment of educational and political turmoil, we’re best served by raising the level of discourse, not repeating talking points and putting more power in the hands of nontransparent, unelected, unregulated test publishing corporations and colleges with billion-dollar-plus endowments.

New SAT Data Highlights the Deep Inequality at the Heart of American Education

The New York Times, By Claire Cain Miller Oct. 23, 2023 (Abridged for Concision)

New data shows, for the first time at this level of detail, how much students’ standardized test scores rise with their parents’ incomes — and how disparities start years before students sit for tests.

One-third of the children of the very richest families scored a 1300 or higher on the SAT, while less than 5 percent of middle-class students did, according to the data, from economists at Opportunity Insights, based at Harvard.

Relatively few children in the poorest families scored that high; just one in five took the test at all.

The researchers matched all students’ SAT and ACT scores for 2011, 2013 and 2015 with their parents’ federal income tax records for the prior six years. Their analysis, which also included admissions and attendance records, found that children from very rich families are overrepresented at elite colleges for many reasons, including that admissions offices give them preference. But the test score data highlights a more fundamental reason: When it comes to the types of achievement colleges assess, the children of the rich are simply better prepared.

The disparity highlights the inequality at the heart of American education: Starting very early, children from rich and poor families receive vastly different educations, in and out of school, driven by differences in the amount of money and time their parents are able to invest. And in the last five decades, as the country has become more unequal by income, the gap in children’s academic achievement, as measured by test scores throughout schooling, has widened.

“Kids in disadvantaged neighborhoods end up behind the starting line even when they get to kindergarten,” said Sean Reardon, the professor of poverty and inequality in education at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. “On average,” he added, “our schools aren’t very good at undoing that damage.”

In the wake of the Supreme Court decision ending race-based affirmative action, there has been revived political momentum to address the ways in which many colleges favor the children of rich and white families, such as legacy admissions, preferences for private school students, athletic recruitment in certain sports and standardized tests.

Yet these things reflect the difference in children’s opportunities long before they apply for college, Professor Reardon said. To address the deeper inequality in education, he said, “it’s 18 years too late.”

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Segregated neighborhoods

Research shows that the more funding schools get, the better students do. Instead of schools being financed with varying amounts of money based on property taxes, most states now spend the same amount per student, or more for students in low-income schools. The bigger disparities are now among states.

But as differences in school funding have shrunk, differences in other resources in children's lives have grown. Children are increasingly likely to live and attend schools in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty or affluence. Since the mid-1990s, neighborhoods have become more segregated by income — but only for families raising children, Professor Owens found. As school districts become more segregated, achievement gaps grow larger, she found.

Schools in poor neighborhoods have been shown to have a harder time attracting and retaining the best teachers. Also, these schools' financial needs are greater — they may need to spend money on getting students to grade level or repairing buildings, while richer schools can spend it on things like arts teachers or field trips...

Shadow education

The differences among schools are less important than what happens outside of school, a variety of research suggests — what children do in the evenings and on summer breaks, their parents' vocabularies, and the level of stress in their home lives. Although the heritability of cognitive ability appears to play some role on an individual level, there is also a lot of evidence that environment matters.

"K-12 schools only manage 10 percent of children's time, and they do it pretty equitably," said Nate G. Hilger, author of "The Parent Trap: How to Stop Overloading Parents and Fix Our Inequality Crisis" and an economist. "The other 90 percent of nonschool time — early childhood, after school, summer, private extracurriculars, counseling, tutoring, coaching, therapy, health management — masks all the most important inequality of opportunity."

It starts early: High-income children are more likely to have attended preschool. Before kindergarten, the average cognitive scores for the children of the highest-earning families are 60 percent above the scores of the lowest earners. The early advantage continues: Children who attend high-quality preschools have been shown to have higher chances of taking the SAT and going to college...

The share of money rich parents spend on their children is also increasing — especially in places where inequality is worse. Test prep for the SATs is just one example of what researchers call "shadow education." Throughout children's lives, parents who can afford it pay for extracurricular and cultural activities to enrich their children's education outside school...

Poor families have more stressors, like food insecurity and frequent moves, that have been shown to have long-term effects on children's academic performance. They also affect parents.

"Parents, regardless of race, nationality, income, they have big dreams for their kids, they want them to do well in school," Professor Reardon said. "But if you're worried about whether there's food on the table and the heat's on in winter, it's very hard to make sure you set aside an hour before bedtime to read to your kids."

Closing the gap

By the time rich children take the SAT, researchers speculate, experiences like bedtime reading, museum visits and science summer camps may contribute to their scores: "They've gone to better schools, they've read more novels, they've learned more math," said Jesse Rothstein, a professor of public policy and economics at the University of California, Berkeley.

If the SAT is, in a sense, a wealth test, education research suggests that is a symptom of the problem, not the cause. Other parts of college applications, like essays and letters of recommendation, are also influenced by socioeconomic background. And data suggests that children with high SAT scores are more prepared for demanding college coursework, and more likely to have high earnings or prestigious jobs in adulthood.

The solution, researchers say, is addressing achievement gaps much earlier, through things like universal pre-K, increased funding for schools in low-income neighborhoods, and reduced residential segregation.

It could benefit all parents and students, even wealthier ones. Parenting in highly unequal societies is intense and competitive, driven by fear of the increasing risk that children will be worse off than their parents. Parenting in places with less income inequality and more public investment in families is more playful and relaxed, research shows. When the risk of falling is smaller, a college admissions test becomes less fraught.

Opinion- Why Colleges Should Ditch the SAT—Permanently

Politico by Sheryll Cashin 06/28/2021 04:30 AM EDT (Abridged for Concision)

Colleges today face relentless legal challenges to affirmative action, pressuring them to keep refining policies to achieve diversity, equity and inclusion on their campuses. The norm-shattering Covid-19 pandemic did something unexpected: It turned higher education, for a year or more, into a national experiment in admissions reform.

At a time when many college aspirants could not travel to testing sites, nearly three-quarters of colleges and universities, including Harvard and many other top-ranked schools, made the SAT or ACT optional in 2020. Several institutions have extended these policies for another year or more. The chancellor of Vanderbilt University, Daniel Diermeier, told me in a public question-and-answer session that Vanderbilt, for example, is extending its test-optional policy for two years and plans to study the results.

This could represent a major turning point for American higher education. Before the pandemic, numerous colleges, including Bryn Mawr, Bucknell University, Smith College, the University of Rochester and Wesleyan University, had made standardized test scores optional. The University of Chicago was the highest-ranked school to do so, with the goal of removing barriers to applying and increasing representation of first-generation and low-income students. The pandemic put many more schools, at least temporarily, into this camp, and experts are watching to see the real-world impact...

What have we learned so far from the pandemic? More than a million students apply to college annually through the Common Application, which enables students to submit a single application to multiple schools. In the 2020-21 admissions cycle, less than half of students who applied through the Common Application submitted an SAT or ACT score, down from nearly 80 percent the year before. Underrepresented minority students in particular took advantage of test-optional policies: Only 40 percent of Black or African American, Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students submitted test scores to large, selective private schools, compared with 61 percent of white and Asian students.

Not surprisingly, selective schools garnered a more diverse set of applicants. According to data from the administrators of the Common App, more selective private schools received substantially more applications from first-generation students (up 20 percent from the year before), students who received an application fee waiver (up 22 percent) and underrepresented minorities (up 24 percent), while less-selective institutions saw fewer applications from these groups. This expansion is consistent with prior research in which Bates College, Mount Holyoke, Providence College and a host of other institutions noted a substantial increase in and diversification of applicants after they made standardized test scores optional.

Among the motivations cited by some early adopters of permanent test-optional policies was a desire to recruit underserved populations to their campuses, and indeed test-optional policies seem to result in more diversity among students not only who apply but who enroll. A recently published study that looked at 100 test-optional colleges' matriculation results before the pandemic found a 10 to 12 percent increase in enrollment by underrepresented minorities, a 6 to 8 percent increase by women and a 3 to 4 percent increase by Pell Grant recipients when the schools enacted test-optional policies.

But do bigger and more diverse applicant pools translate to student success? It is too soon to evaluate the impact of the great pandemic experiment on college performance, to say nothing of how admission shapes students' future lives. Yet a recent comprehensive investigation suggests there is no meaningful difference in academic performance among students admitted with and without test scores. One researcher analyzed data from 2008-2016 across nearly 1,700 campuses, comparing schools that switched to test-optional policies with those that did not. She found slightly higher first-year retention rates among the "switchers," meaning students admitted to test-optional institutions were more likely to return as sophomores, though switcher schools also experienced a slight decrease in six-year graduation rates.

The study of Bates, Mount Holyoke and Providence College also reported no significant difference in the academic quality, college performance or graduation rates of students admitted with SAT scores versus without them. Other research has shown that cumulative high school grade point average is a far better predictor of college success than test scores.

These findings, and the experience of the past year, raise critical questions for colleges and universities going forward: What should count as merit in admissions? What is a fair way to evaluate high school students in a country where advantage and disadvantage are often distributed along lines of race and ethnicity, economic status and zip code? ...

The mythology of tests scores as merit also can undermine institutions in their professed mission to cultivate citizen-leaders who serve others. In an article advocating for dramatic admissions reform, law professor Lani Guinier cites a study that followed three classes of Harvard College graduates over 30 years and measured their success in terms of financial and career satisfaction, as well as contributions to the community. The study found that the most successful alumni had low SAT scores and came from blue-collar backgrounds. Guinier also points to a study of three generations of graduates of the University of Michigan Law School finding that graduates with higher LSAT scores tended to provide fewer free legal services and devote less time to serving as community leaders. The study also found that a test-centered approach to admissions at the University of Michigan did not predict future success in the legal profession any better than the whole-person approach used to evaluate affirmative action candidates...
