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Dramatic Challenge to SAT and ACT

Calling on colleges to “take back the conversation,” a special panel convened by the National Association for College Admission Counseling will this week encourage colleges to consider dropping the SAT or ACT as admissions requirements.

The panel, [in a report to be formally released this week](#), calls on all colleges to consider more systematically whether they really need testing to admit their students. If there is not clear evidence of the need for testing, the commission urges the colleges to drop the requirement and it expresses the view that there are likely more colleges and universities that could make such a change.

While stressing that there is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach to admissions and testing, and not ruling out that testing may be needed at some institutions, the commission generally takes a very critical look at testing — in a significant shift from past NACAC statements. A 1995 statement from the association, while cautioning against the use of tests for purposes for which they were not intended, said that “when used properly ... tests have the potential of helping admission professionals make sound admissions decisions and of helping students choose where to apply and enroll.”

This year’s NACAC commission — led by William Fitzsimmons, dean of admission and financial aid at Harvard University — uses very different language. It talks about how the discussion of standardized testing has come to be “dominated by the media, commercial interests, and organizations outside of the college admission office.” In addition, the panel cites research suggesting that colleges have been placing more emphasis on testing despite evidence that they should be moving in the opposite direction. Generally, the commission supports the position that high school grades in pre-college courses are the best way to predict college success — and that is the tool most relied upon by colleges that have ended testing requirements.

In addition, the commission says that colleges must seriously consider the possibility that standardized tests are not equally valid for all groups of people. Because Asian and white students, on average, receive higher scores than black and Latino students, many educators have worried that testing limits minority enrollments. Testing companies have said that the gaps reflect inequities in the quality of education in the United States, but have defended their validity.

The NACAC commission report says that while this debate “may never be conclusively resolved,” the issue “can be acknowledged and appropriately factored into admission decisions.” On a related issue of fairness, the commission finds that coaching (of the sort wealthier students receive) does have a real impact on test scores, even if less than is commonly believed.

The new NACAC report is also striking for directly challenging the argument put forward by testing supporters all the time: that more information is inherently good for admissions. The report says that many colleges that have dropped the SAT or ACT have done so without any adverse impact. Further, it questions the logic of using the SAT just to gather more information.

“The question, we believe, is not of more versus less evidence,” the report says. “This argument begs the question of why colleges don’t simply require every test score available, including both SAT and ACT, College Board Subject Tests, graduation exams and Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams. Rather, the question is about the utility of the means by which institutions achieve their mission-driven enrollment ends.”

The report acknowledges a correlation between test scores and college grades, but — echoing the argument used by colleges that have dropped testing requirements — says that there are real questions about the additional information gained by test scores beyond what colleges can determine with high school grades. For this reason, it suggests that all colleges conduct “institution-specific validity studies,” to make sure there is a reason to keep the tests.

Colleges that have conducted in-depth analyses of the value of standardized tests have frequently ended up questioning the tests’ use. For example, the University of California recently studied whether SAT subject tests helped admissions decisions and found — generally — that [they do not](#). Hamilton College, prior to abandoning an SAT requirement in 2006, conducted a five-year experiment being SAT-optional. During that time, the 40 percent of [students who didn’t submit SAT scores performed slightly better](#) at Hamilton — a highly competitive liberal arts college — than did those who did submit scores. And in a finding consistent with studies at other colleges, Hamilton found that when it went test-optional, it received more applications from students at the top of their high school classes and many more applications from minority students.

The NACAC report will be formally released later this week at the association’s annual meeting, in Seattle, and comes at a pivotal time for the debate over testing. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing maintains [a list of more than 770 colleges](#) that do not require the SAT or ACT. While many of those colleges are not competitive in admissions, a growing number are.

Generally, the push for going SAT-optional among competitive colleges has been strongest among liberal arts colleges, whose small size and educational values mesh well with the idea of a highly personalized look at applications. But more recently, the SAT-optional has seen some significant firsts among other kinds of institutions. Last year, [Worcester Polytechnic Institute](#) became the first competitive science and engineering oriented university to go SAT-optional. In its first year with the new policy, WPI saw increases in the high school grades of applicants, as well as applications from female and minority students. And in May, [Wake Forest University](#) announced it would go SAT-optional. Wake is No. 30 on the *U.S. News & World Report* list of top national universities and however much most educators may dispute the meaning of that list, it is influential with many prospective students, and this marks the first time that an institution that high on the list for universities has ever dropped its standardized testing requirement.

An undercurrent of the new NACAC report is that colleges have been facing pressure — from *U.S. News*

rankings, which it criticizes for using scores as a criterion in its rankings — to pay more attention to test scores at a time that a growing body of evidence suggests test scores aren't needed.

The report cites NACAC surveys of colleges on factors that are given “considerable importance” in admissions decisions. Over the last decade, more colleges are reporting test scores in that category, while the importance of grades in college preparatory courses has dropped slightly.

Colleges Attributing ‘Considerable Importance’ to Admissions Factors

Factor	1995	2000	2005
Grades in college-prep courses/strength of curriculum	80%	78%	74%
Admission test scores	47%	58%	59%
Essay	21%	20%	23%
Class rank	39%	34%	31%
Extracurricular activities	7%	7%	8%

Testing officials haven't been able to respond to the NACAC report, which still hasn't been officially released. But the College Board has repeatedly released reports that it says show the value of the SAT. The [most recent studies](#) — focused on recent changes in the SAT — came out in June and were hailed by the College Board as evidence of great success. But the reports found [no real change](#) in the SAT's predictive value after all the changes were made to the test.

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/09/22/testing>.

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