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Students' Paths to Small Colleges Can Bypass SAT

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#)

It is still far too early to sound the death knell, but for many small liberal arts colleges, the SAT may have outlived its usefulness.

Since Bowdoin and Bates dropped their testing requirements decades ago, more than a fourth of U.S. News & World Report's Top 100 liberal arts colleges have made admissions exams optional, and new ones are joining the list at a quickening pace.

The new colleges include Mount Holyoke, Middlebury, Hamilton, Union and Dickinson. In recent months, George Mason, Providence College and Hobart and William Smith Colleges have also become test-optional.

Admissions officers said eliminating the testing requirement had increased both the size and diversity of their applicant pools, and bolstered their reputation as places personal enough to consider each applicant individually.

At the same time, the revamped, longer SAT, the drop in average scores announced Tuesday and recent problems with scoring have created growing disenchantment. College officials also say that tests —whether the SAT, or in the Midwest, the ACT—are not the best predictors of performance.

“Test scores are a much weaker predictor of how students will do in college than their high school transcript,” said Mark Gearan, the president of Hobart and William Smith. “We really know our applicants, because we have an admissions staff that can read every essay, have a personal interview and review the high school transcript in depth.”

Half a century ago, the SAT was a tool for opening college access to students who did not come from elite schools, a steppingstone to academic meritocracy. But many admissions officers now see the test as a barrier to low-income students and those who do not speak English at home.

Test scores, college officials say, present a skewed picture both of poor students who have had little formal preparation, and wealthy ones who spend thousands of dollars –not to mention evenings, weekends and summers—on tutoring.

“We felt the system had gotten out of whack,” said Steve Syverson, dean of admissions at Lawrence University, which admitted its first test-optional freshmen this year. “Back when kids just got a good night’s sleep and took the SAT, it was a leveler that helped you find the diamond in the rough. Now that most of the great scores are affluent kids with lots of preparation, it just increases the gap between the haves and the have-nots.”

Test-optional admissions also allow colleges to admit interesting students with low scores, without pulling down rankings by U.S. News & World Report and others who use SAT scores to rate colleges. In fact, test-optional admissions may raise rankings because low scores are unlikely to be submitted.

More than 700 colleges and universities are test-optional, but most accept nearly all their applicants. For now, the SAT and ACT remain a rite of passage for students applying to colleges that are more selective in their admissions. There is also no evidence that guidance counselors are advising students to skip testing, and most applicants still submit scores to test-optional colleges.

But that could change.

“We are now at a point where, if you’re interested in a liberal arts education at the best schools in the country, you can put together a good portfolio of colleges to apply to and not take the test,” said Robert Schaeffer, the public education director of FairTest, a group critical of standardized testing.

The [College Board](#), which administers the SAT, sees the trend as wrong-headed, but no real threat. “Even if half of the best small schools in America go test-optional,” said Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, “it’s a minimal number of students.”

Of the nation’s 17 million college students, fewer than 250,000 attend the top 100 liberal arts colleges.

“At a time when the United States is vying internationally for excellence,” Mr. Caperton said, “it’s very contrary to any decision-making process, in business or education, not to use the data that’s available. If I were a parent, applying to a selective school, I would prefer them to use all the data they possibly can.”

But many families visiting test-optional colleges have a different preference. “I think SAT-optional is great, it’s wonderful,” said Lynne Brandes, of Hanover, Mass., who took her daughter, Jacqueline, on a New England college tour this summer. “Some families have the money to pay for tutoring, but some don’t. I’d love to see the SAT’s abolished.”

At test-optional colleges, admissions officers say they look forward to students’ liberation from testing.

“We hope that now that there are more test-optional schools, students will think about not taking it, and putting their time and money into other activities, like music or writing or community service,” said Jane B. Brown, vice president for enrollment at Mount Holyoke, which dropped the SAT requirement in 2001. “We hope they will have more interesting lives.”

But most admissions officials at selective colleges continue to rely on standardized test scores. “They’re especially useful for evaluating the rural Midwestern kid who’s No. 1 in a graduating class of nine at a high school you don’t know,” said Paul Thiboutot, dean of admissions at Carleton College.

William Shain, the dean of admissions at Bowdoin, has seen the pros and cons. Last year, he was at Vanderbilt, where tests are required. At Bowdoin, the first and most selective college to become test-optional—admitting fewer than a quarter of its applicants—Mr. Shain is mindful that each student admitted without scores displaces one with stellar scores and grades. He also said test scores become more helpful as high school transcripts provide fewer clear indicators of students’ abilities.

“Many schools won’t do rankings, there’s enormous grade inflation, and parents help write some of the essays,” he said. “It’s not so easy to disentangle from SAT’s. Even the bond-rating people, when a college borrows money, look at SAT scores.”

True, neither the Ivy League nor most large universities are about to drop their testing requirements. At the Ivies, anything that helps differentiate among hordes of highly qualified applicants is useful. And many large public universities do admissions by the numbers. But some state universities have minimized their use of SAT scores. For example, Texas students in the top 10 percent of their high school classes are automatically admitted to the University of Texas or Texas A&M.

Growth in test-optional admissions would be bad news for test-preparation companies like Kaplan, which this month issued a news release playing down the trend and warning that students who plan to apply only to test-optional colleges are “limiting their options.”

Admissions requirements vary widely, even among test-optional colleges. Middlebury, for example, is not entirely test-optional, but it allows students to substitute three subject exams – Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate or SAT II's –for the SAT or ACT. Like several others, it also asks students for a graded high school paper.

At Bates College, William Hiss, the vice president for external affairs, said the policy helps attract exceptional students who might not otherwise apply. Lien Le, a Vietnamese refugee with an SAT verbal score of 400, who applied to Bates without submitting her scores, earned a biology degree magna cum laude and then got a medical degree at Brown.

“Sure, all the kids who get SAT's over 700 have real academic strengths,” he said. “But can you say that all the kids who get under 600 don't, that they won't do well?”

No, according to Bates' 20-year study of test-optional admissions, finding that the graduation rate of those who submitted scores differed by only one-tenth of a percent from that of students who did not, about a third of Bates' students.

“Human intelligence and ambition is more complex, more multifaceted, than any standardized testing system can capture,” Mr. Hiss said.
