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Study of Standardized Admissions Tests Is Big Draw at College Conference

By [SARA RIMER](#)

SEATTLE — For the 5,500 college admissions officials and high school guidance counselors who gathered here over the weekend, there were discussions, debates and analyses of things like the ethics of tracking student applicants on [Facebook](#) and “Why Good Students Write Bad College Essays — and How to Stop It.”

But for this crowd, at the Seattle convention center for the annual conference of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, the main event was William R. Fitzsimmons’s first public presentation of the findings of the Study of the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission.

Mr. Fitzsimmons, the dean of admissions at [Harvard](#), led a commission of college admissions officials who drafted the study, which challenges colleges and universities to examine their use of the SAT and ACT and to consider whether the benefits outweigh the disadvantages or whether they can make the tests optional for admissions.

The line formed early for Mr. Fitzsimmons’s panel, and with more than 1,000 people jockeying for a limited number of seats — a scene that brought to mind the college admissions process — the event was moved to the ballroom.

“It’s electrifying to both sides of the desk,” said Louis L. Hirsh, admissions director at the [University of Delaware](#), “to counselors who are worried about the stresses that the SAT places on the kids, and from the college end, the people whom all of us respect are looking at a test that all of us use and asking all of us to be more thoughtful about how they use it and what role it plays in our admissions.”

Mr. Fitzsimmons, who took center stage along with the other members of the commission, tried to ease the fears of the ardent supporters of the standardized admissions tests, taking pains to say that the SAT had many advantages.

But he also affirmed what many of those present had been saying for years: that the SAT and other standardized admissions tests are “incredibly imprecise” when it comes to measuring academic ability and how well students will perform in college. He said colleges and universities needed to do much more research into how well the tests predict success at their individual institutions.

Test prep can work, Mr. Fitzsimmons said, but he noted — and the audience applauded — that there was a difference between test prep that consists of studying on your own and \$400-an-hour one-on-one tutoring that starts in the seventh grade.

“There is no evidence on what the latter test prep does,” he said. “We know it’s an advantage, but we don’t have enough information.”

There has been longstanding debate and concern about the impact of standardized testing on socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and the ballroom erupted in applause when Mr. Fitzsimmons called for an end to the use of “cut scores” to determine who qualifies for National Merit and other

scholarships. The practice means that one student is rewarded while excluding another whose SAT score may be only a single point lower, Mr. Fitzsimmons said.

What that single point differential fails to take into account, he said, is the context: The two students may have “lived entirely different lives, had entirely different educational opportunities and entirely different access to test prep.”

The audience also applauded Mr. Fitzsimmons’s call for U.S. News & World Report to stop using SAT scores as part of its college rankings.

“At Harvard we get terrific students, and we turn out terrific students later on,” Mr. Fitzsimmons said. “Is that due to Harvard or is that due to the students to begin with? Who knows? There are fabulous institutions with relatively low test-score averages that are absolutely first rate, that take students from point A to point Z.”

He continued, “Educational quality has nothing to do, or very little to do, with actual average SAT scores.”

Mr. Fitzsimmons called on colleges and universities to be more transparent about how they use standardized admissions scores, and more collaborative in terms of sharing research on the scores. He suggested that the National Association for College Admission Counseling assume more of a “watchdog role,” fighting against the misuse of standardized test scores. He said that what may be more helpful going forward are more tests based on high-school curriculum.

Many college admissions officials who were in the audience praised the study.

Jeffrey Brenzel, the dean of admissions at [Yale](#), said the report raised key questions for every college and university: “Are you using the tests in a responsible manner and in the way they were intended? Is your use of the test relevant to your particular institution’s mission? Are there alternatives?”

The comment session that followed was lively, with audience members praising the study group’s efforts, but also underscoring what they viewed as the deficiencies of standardized admissions tests.

A high school counselor from Chicago talked at length about the “huge economic disparities” that play out in standardized admission testing. She pointed out that while fee waivers are available, many low-income students do not know how the waivers work. Nor, she said, do low-income students know about the [College Board](#)’s new “score choice,” which will begin in the spring, and will allow students who take the SAT multiple times to choose which combined scores to submit to colleges, without the colleges’ knowing how many times they have taken the test.

“There are kids who walk into the test who don’t have calculators,” she said. “Forget about things we can’t control — like having to take two buses to the test, and it’s cold. I’ve got kids in the Chicago projects who go to some free test prep place, and their scores might go up a point.”

An audience member asked Mr. Fitzsimmons and the other college admissions officials on stage if any of them had changed their minds about the SAT and decided to go test-optional as a result of their participation in the study.

Steve Syverson, the dean of admissions at Lawrence University in Wisconsin, said dryly, “We’re test optional, and we weren’t persuaded to change.”

One by one, the other admissions officers gave variations of the same answer: We’re concerned about the inequities and possible misuses of the test. We’re going to keep studying it and talking about it, but the tests

are useful for us, and we're not going test-optional.

Only Jeff Rickey, the dean of admissions at Earlham College in Indiana, gave an answer that implied that change might be possible in his office. The report had given renewed energy to Earlham's planned comprehensive review of the use of standardized admissions tests, he said. "Stay tuned," he told the audience. "A year from now we'll be able to inform you as to whether we're going test-optional or not."

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