

September 22, 2008

College Panel Calls for Less Focus on SATs

By [SARA RIMER](#)

A commission convened by some of the country's most influential college admissions officials is recommending that colleges and universities move away from their reliance on SAT and ACT scores and shift toward admissions exams more closely tied to the high school curriculum and achievement.

The commission's report, the culmination of a yearlong study led by William R. Fitzsimmons, the dean of admissions and financial aid at [Harvard](#), comes amid growing concerns that the frenzy over standardized college admissions tests is misshaping secondary education and feeding a billion-dollar test-prep industry that encourages students to try to game the tests.

A growing number of colleges and universities, like Bates College in Maine, Lawrence University in Wisconsin, [Wake Forest University](#) in North Carolina and [Smith College](#) in Massachusetts, have made the SAT and ACT optional. And the report concludes that more institutions could make admissions decisions without requiring the SAT and ACT.

It encourages institutions to consider dropping admission test requirements unless they can prove that the benefits of such tests outweigh the negatives.

"It would be much better for the country," Mr. Fitzsimmons said in an interview, "to have students focusing on high school courses that, based on evidence, will prepare them well for college and also prepare them well for the real world beyond college, instead of their spending enormous amounts of time trying to game the SAT."

Mr. Fitzsimmons's group, which was convened by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, also expresses concerns "that test scores appear to calcify differences based on class, race/ethnicity and parental educational attainment." The report calls on admissions officials to be aware of such differences and to ensure that differences not related to a student's ability to succeed academically be "mitigated in the admission process."

"Society likes to think that the SAT measures people's ability or merit," Mr. Fitzsimmons said. "But no one in college admissions who visits the range of secondary schools we visit, and goes to the communities we visit — where you see the contrast between opportunities and fancy suburbs and some of the high schools that aren't so fancy — can come away thinking that standardized tests can be a measure of someone's true worth or ability."

Mr. Fitzsimmons said that at Harvard high school grades and the [College Board](#)'s individual subject tests are considered better predictors of college success than the SAT, also administered by the College Board, or ACT, and that the university is studying the use of standardized tests in its admissions. He added that it was possible that the university might eventually make such tests optional.

The admission counseling association gave the report to The New York Times in advance of its official release at its annual meeting in Seattle this week. The report emphasizes academic research that suggests that test preparation and coaching results in an increase of 20 to 30 points on the SAT, which it calls "a

modest gain (on the old 1600 scale)” that “is considerably less than the 100 point or more gains that are often accepted as conventional wisdom.” Even so, the report acknowledges that test preparation can raise scores, however modestly, and that students without the financial resources to get such help may be “penalized for lower test scores” in some admission and scholarship cases.

The report calls for an end to the practice of using minimum-admissions-test scores to determine students’ eligibility for merit aid. And it specifically urges the National Merit Scholarship Corporation to stop using PSAT scores as the initial screen for eligibility for recognition or scholarships. The National Merit Scholarship competition “contributes to the misperception of test scores as sole measures of ‘merit’ in a pervasive and highly visible manner,” the report says.

More than 280 four-year colleges do not require standardized test scores for admission, according to the study. The report says that the College Board’s Advanced Placement exams and Subject Tests and the International Baccalaureate exams are more closely linked to the high school curriculum than the SAT and ACT, and have little expensive test preparation associated with them.

The report suggests that what is needed is a new achievement test, pitched to a broad group of students, that would predict college grades as well as or better than available tests.

Using such an achievement test in admissions would “encourage high schools to broaden and improve curricula,” according to the report, and would also send a message to students to focus on their high school course material instead of on test preparation courses.

David Hawkins, the director of public policy and research for the association, pulled together the commission’s findings into the report. He said its value was “in the nearly explicit sentiment that the current admission tests are not optimal tools for admission in 2008.”

Robert Schaeffer, public education director for [The National Center for Fair and Open Testing](#), a group critical of standardized admissions testing, called the report “a strong condemnation of the overreliance on test scores,” and said he expected it to carry much weight with association members, who include thousands of college admissions officials and high school guidance counselors.

One commission member, Steve Syverson, is vice president for enrollment at Lawrence University, which made the SAT and ACT optional several years ago. Mr. Syverson said he hoped the report would encourage more college admissions officials to question their use of standardized admissions tests.

“We’re all just making assumptions about these tests,” Mr. Syverson said, referring to the SAT and the ACT. “We’ve all grown up with it. It’s embedded in the culture. If you really ask around the country, how many admissions officers can tell you at their institution what the predictive validity of the test is? What does it add to our understanding? What do tests help you predict? You’d find a lot of them equate these tests with intelligence. It’s not an intelligence test.”

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