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Fact Sheet Updated August 2007

The SAT: Questions and Answers

What Is the SAT? The SAT Reasoning Test is this nation's oldest, most widely used -- and misused -- college entrance exam. The SAT is composed of three sections, "Critical Reading," "Mathematics," and "Writing," each scored on a 200-800 point scale. The 171 questions are nearly all multiple-choice; the exam now includes one brief essay, and ten math questions require students to "grid in" the answer. By design, the test is "speeded" which means that many test takers are unable to finish all the questions. The SAT Subject Tests, formerly "Achievement Tests", are one-hour subject exams, entirely in a multiple-choice format. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), under contract to the College Board, is the primary producer and administrator of the SAT. Pearson Educational Measurement is responsible for scoring multiple-choice items and the essay.

What Does SAT Stand For? Nothing. Initially titled the Scholastic Aptitude Test and then the Scholastic Assessment Test, it is now officially named just SAT because of uneasiness at ETS and the College Board about defining just what the test measures. "SATs not an initialism; it does not stand for anything," say the test-makers.

What Is on the SAT? A direct descendant of the racist anti-immigrant Army Mental Tests of the 1920s, the SAT was first administered in 1926 but did not become a largely multiple-choice exam until after World War II. The test is designed to be independent of high school curricula (unlike the SAT's main competitor, the ACT). It includes questions attempting to measure reading comprehension, vocabulary, basic writing techniques, algebra, geometry, statistics and probability. The SAT does not include advanced mathematics topics nor does it attempt to assess higher-order thinking or reasoning skills.

What Is the SAT Used For?

The SAT is validated for just one purpose: predicting first-year college grades. It does not do even this very well. Test-makers acknowledge that high school grade-point average (GPA) is the best predictors of first-year grades, despite the huge variation among high schools and courses. The SAT predicts more important academic outcomes, such as graduation rates, even more poorly.

What Is the SAT Worth?

A lot. The College Board, which administers the SAT series, collects more than \$150 million each year in revenue from the exams. Estimates on the amount of money students spend on SAT prep materials each year reach well over \$350 million. This money keeps the College Board and ETS very invested in the continued use of their test.

SAT Myths

The Test Is a Common Yardstick

After years of describing the SAT as a "common yardstick," the test-makers have now flip-flopped, claiming "it is a myth that a test will provide a unitary, unequivocal yardstick for ranking on merit." The SAT has always favored students who can afford coaching over those who cannot, students from wealthy suburban schools over those from poor urban school systems, and males over females.

Coaching Does Not Work

The test-makers have backed away from their original claim that performance on the SAT could not be improved through coaching. The College Board now sells its own test prep materials. A number of studies indicate that good coaching courses can raise a student's scores by 150 points or more on the test's 2400 point scale. These courses, which often cost \$900 or more, further skew scores in favor of higher-income test takers. Because college admissions officers do not know who has been coached and who has not, they cannot fairly compare two applicants' scores.

Colleges Need the SAT to Compare Students From Different Schools

One careful academic study compared admissions decisions made considering just the high school record with using the high school record and SAT scores. More than 90% of the admissions decisions were the same under both approaches. However, for the 10% of the applicant pool in which the two strategies led to different decisions, use of the SAT led to many more rejections of otherwise qualified minority and low-income applicants. Most 4-year colleges accept more than 75% of their applicants and have no real need for the SAT as an admissions tool. Even very "selective" schools which reject more than half their

applicants, could drop the SAT without paying an academic price.

Admissions Cannot Operate Without the SAT or ACT

Concerned about problems with these tests, [more than 740 accredited, bachelor-degree granting colleges do not use the SAT \(or ACT\) to make admissions decisions about a substantial number of their applicants.](#) These range from small, selective liberal arts colleges such as Bates, Bowdoin and Muhlenberg (which report increased diversity but no drop-off in the academic quality of their applicants) to public universities in Oregon and California. Since 1998, applicants to public universities in Texas have been admitted without regard to test scores if they finish in the top 10 percent of their high school classes. That policy change came after state researchers concluded that "the use of standardized tests unduly limits admissions" and that, "except at the extremes, SAT/ACT scores do not adequately predict grades in core freshman courses or the probability of college graduation."

SAT Misuse

How is the SAT Misused?

According to the testing profession's own standards, no exam should be used as the sole factor in making any decision. Nor should any test be used for a purpose for which it has not been "validated." Cutoff scores should not be used, especially for high-stakes decisions. Guidelines like these are frequently ignored, with no sanctions from ETS or the College Board. Any uses of the SAT that treat scores as precise measures are seriously flawed: the test-makers admit two students' scores must differ by at least 125 points (Critical Reading plus Math) before they can reliably be said to be different due to measurement error in the test.

Examples of Misuse:

Scholarships: Several states impose SAT minimum score requirements on students hoping to qualify for taxpayer-funded scholarships. Using cut-off scores for such high-stakes decisions is a clear violation of the test-makers' guidelines. This practice disproportionately impacts minority students who as a group tend to score lower than white students on the SAT. The result is these students lose out on millions of dollars in financial assistance.

[National Merit Scholarships](#) use Preliminary SAT (nearly identical to the SAT) scores as the sole criterion to select semifinalists. The resultant pool has historically been predominantly male because boys score higher on the PSAT even though girls earn higher grades in high school (and college). In 1993, FairTest filed a complaint with the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) charging the test-makers with illegally assisting gender bias. [As part of a settlement with OCR](#), ETS and the College Board agreed to add a new multiple-choice "writing" component to the

PSAT. This simple change in test format significantly increased the percentage of National Merit semifinalists who are female, but girls are still cheated out of a fair share of awards by bias in the unreformed portions of the exam.

Gifted and Talented Programs: Many special programs for the "gifted and talented," such as the Johns Hopkins Center for the Advancement of Academically Talented Youth, use the SAT or similar tests to select participants. Not surprisingly, girls and minorities are often underrepresented in these accelerated programs.

SAT Bias

The Gender Gap	The SAT consistently underpredicts the performance of females in college and overpredicts the performance of males. Although females earn higher grades in high school and college, their SAT scores were 26 points lower in 2006. College Board research has shown that both the Critical Reading and Math portions of the test underpredict girls' college performance. A 1994 ETS study found that, on average, males scored 33 points higher on the SAT-Math than females who earn the same grades in the same college math courses. Analyses of SAT gender bias cite several causes including the test's emphasis on speed over sustained reasoning and its multiple-choice format. Mathematics tests in other countries that require solutions to long problems appeared unbiased with respect to gender.
Bilingual Students	The speeded nature of the SAT imposes an unfair burden on students for whom English is not the first language. Research suggests that the SAT does not predict Hispanic students' first-year college grades as accurately as it does white students' grades. One study found that even for bilingual students whose best language was English the SAT underpredicted college performance.
Impact of SAT Use on Minorities	African American, Latino, new Asian immigrant and many other minority test-takers score significantly lower than white students. Rigid use of SATs for admissions will produce freshman classes with very few minorities and with no appreciable gain in academic quality. The SATs are very effective at eliminating academically promising minority (and low-income) students who apply with strong academic records but relatively low SAT scores. Colleges that have made the SAT optional report that their applicant pools are more diverse and that there has been no drop off in academic quality.
Stereotype Vulnerability	Several studies show that female and minority students who are aware of racial and gender stereotypes score lower on tests such as the SAT that purport to measure academic aptitude. One study defined this extra burden borne by some test-takers as "stereotype vulnerability" and warned that these findings

"underscore the danger of relying too heavily on standardized test results in college admissions or otherwise."

**What's the
Alternative?**

The more than 740 colleges and universities that already admit substantial numbers of freshman applicants without using any test scores have shown that class rank, high school grades, and rigor of classes taken are better tools for predicting college success than any standardized test. The ACT and SAT Subject Tests are often viewed as alternatives to the SAT. While they are more closely aligned with high school curricula, they are not necessarily better tests.

[Click here](#) for 2006 SAT scores by gender, race and family income

Read FairTest's other SAT Fact sheets [The SAT: A Faulty Instrument For Predicting College Success](#) and [The "New" SAT: A Better Test or Just a Marketing Tool?](#)

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