

Jasmin Bella

Mrs. Small

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The Use of Standardized Testing as a False Metric for College Admissions

Each year, millions of students submit college applications to colleges around the world. As a part of this process, students often submit standardized test scores, such as the SAT or ACT. Unlike the public education system, these tests are controlled by private companies, such as The College Board. Students are required to pay around \$60 per test, and this does not include the cost of any test preparation materials they may have had access to (Claybourn). Proponents of standardized tests argue that they are necessary in differentiating between the thousands of applicants per institution. The goal of tests like the SAT is to measure standard math and reading knowledge through a series of multiple-choice questions; however, they have been riddled with flaws from the very beginning, including inequitable access to resources and a lack of application to the real-world. When the Covid-19 pandemic impacted many students' ability to take such tests, colleges became test-optional. Post pandemic, around 80% of colleges in the United States still do not require standardized test scores to be submitted on their applications, but some colleges have recently reinstated their submission requirement (Neitzel). The use of standardized tests as a metric for college admissions is often a greater reflection of a student's privilege and access to resources rather than a true measure of their ability to be successful in the real world.

Differing access and information surrounding test preparation resources eliminates the standard that these types of tests are trying to establish. The increased number of students applying to competitive colleges has made it more challenging to differentiate between applications. According to a statement from UT Austin, “An SAT or ACT score is a proven differentiator that is in each student’s and the University’s best interest,” demonstrating that standardized test scores can determine whether one applicant is admitted over another (Corcoran). However, this view does not take into account the cost of standardized tests as a whole, such as costly test prep classes that only the wealthy can afford. Based on data from the *New York Times*, household income is strongly positively correlated with SAT scores (Rampell). On average, increasing the range of a household’s income by \$20,000 can increase a student’s score on a particular section by 12 points (Rampell). Additionally, there is more than a 100-point difference between the lowest income category of less than \$20,000 per household and the highest income category of greater than \$200,000 per household. Because of these discrepancies, standardized test scores cannot be taken at face value on college applications.

Some colleges do state that they take a student’s individual situation into account when looking at standardized test scores; however, the current system is not perfect. After reinstating their submission requirement post-pandemic, MIT explained that standardized tests help their admissions committee “better assess the academic preparedness of all applicants” and “identify socioeconomically disadvantaged students” that may not have had access to other enrichment opportunities (Schmill). Many other schools, such as Dartmouth, consider an applicant’s test score in relation to the other students at their high school (Cocoran). However, the fact that a student goes to the same high school as another student does not mean that their access to test preparation resources will be the same. Additionally, GPA has often been a metric that college

admissions officers use to understand a student's performance and readiness for a particular university, but grades can vary from school to school. Because of this variation, standardized tests like the SAT and ACT were introduced to provide some common metric for colleges to assess. However, the SAT and ACT now face a similar problem to GPA due to the differing access to resources among students.

Many colleges believe that standardized test scores can predict a student's future success; however, this belief is not complete because the tests are not accurate reflections of real-world situations. Many schools, such as MIT and UT Austin, have looked at data from students that chose to submit standardized test scores in comparison to those who did not. Based on data from UT Austin's freshman class in 2023, "Those who opted in had an estimated average GPA of 0.86 grade points higher during their first fall semester," (Cocoran). The use of standardized tests in this context may be helpful to both colleges and students; however, it is more important to understand how a student can apply their knowledge. The application of knowledge and a student's ability to adapt to new situations is something that a standardized test cannot possibly measure. The ability to adapt to dynamic, real-world situations is an important skill because these types of problems "require extended answers; there is no perfect answer, and sometimes, not even a very good one," (Sternberg). Instead of learning this important skill, students only memorize the methods to solve a specific set of problems by taking practice test after practice test. This fatal flaw makes standardized tests unable to fully predict a student's success beyond a multiple-choice test.

Additionally, every student that applies to college is unique. Regardless of the types of classes taken, GPA, or a standardized test score if a student chooses to take one, students all possess different strengths. The diversity in strengths and interests is what makes teams of people

in the world outside of the classroom successful because each member brings something different to the table. When colleges place an emphasis on standardized tests, they are asking students to become extremely good at selecting the best answer out of four options, which limits how they think when approaching problems. This concept can be applied to the emphasis on testing in the education system as a whole. If everyone on a project team came from the same testing background and expected there to be a clear-cut solution when there is not one, they would not be able to solve the problem effectively.

The overall intent of the use of standardized tests is to help both students and colleges better understand their educational background and how they can be successful in the future. However, the flaws that come with the current testing system, including cost, lack of access to resources for some students, and too great of an emphasis on scores, do not allow for this understanding to happen. Continuing the use of these tests as a determining metric for admissions will only cause further harm and reduce the possibilities of what both colleges and students can achieve.

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