

Is There a Need to Prep for the SAT and ACT?

One thing that both proponents and critics of the SAT and ACT can agree on is that these tests have played vital roles in the college admissions process in the modern United States. These standardized tests aim to provide a uniform metric for evaluating students from diverse educational and geographic backgrounds. Despite the growing shift toward test-optional policies, SAT and ACT scores remain influential—not only in crucial admission decisions but also in shaping college rankings, which directly influence the prestige of elite institutions.

The SAT, introduced in 1926, was designed to measure intellectual aptitude rather than knowledge of specific subjects, serving as a tool to identify gifted students irrespective of socioeconomic background. Although not strictly an IQ test, the SAT aimed to assess a test taker's cognitive ability to achieve academic success in college, particularly in critical reading and mathematical reasoning. By the 1940s, it had become entrenched in college admissions at selective institutions. Over time, the SAT evolved into a symbol of meritocracy, though critics began questioning its fairness, particularly as disparities in access to test preparation became evident.

The ACT emerged in 1959 as a curriculum-based alternative to the SAT. Developed by Everett Franklin Lindquist, the ACT aimed to measure students' mastery of high school subjects, aligning more closely with classroom curricula. Its practical approach gained traction, particularly in the Midwest and South, where educators favored its emphasis on coursework over abstract reasoning. By the 1990s, nearly all U.S. colleges accepted both the SAT and ACT interchangeably, with the ACT steadily increasing in popularity. The ACT's rise was further bolstered by statewide testing mandates in the 2000s, requiring all high school juniors in several states.

From the 1980s onward, the use of SAT and ACT scores became somewhat distorted, as they evolved into a critical factor in college rankings, particularly those published by *U.S. News & World Report*, which heavily weighted SAT and ACT averages to assess institutional quality and selectivity. Higher test scores among incoming students signaled academic rigor and exclusivity, enhancing a school's prestige and attracting competitive applicants. Colleges leveraged these scores to improve rankings, influencing funding, alumni donations, and application numbers.

During this period, SAT and ACT scores were also crucial in admissions decisions and scholarship allocations. At selective colleges, test scores often accounted for 20–50% of the admissions decision. A 100-point increase in SAT scores could raise an applicant's acceptance chances by 10–30%, while public universities frequently used minimum score thresholds to manage large applicant pools. Standardized tests also acted as gateways to financial aid, with many merit-based scholarships requiring minimum scores. For instance, students scoring 1300+

on the SAT or 30+ on the ACT often qualified for significant tuition discounts or full scholarships.

It is also undeniable that average SAT scores vary significantly among racial and ethnic groups due to disparities in school funding, access to resources, and socioeconomic factors. Data from 2023 underscores these trends: Asian American students averaged a total score of 1219, White students averaged 1082, Hispanic/Latino students averaged 943, and Black students averaged 908. These disparities highlight how standardized tests can act as gatekeepers for both high and low scorers. While higher scores by Asian American students often become a negligible factor compared to more "important" aspects like character in holistic admission practices, lower scores by disadvantaged underrepresented groups become a detrimental factor in determining their academic ability within the same process.

The shift toward test-optional policies has also complicated the college admissions process. Some argue that these policies help balance an uneven playing field, while others believe that SAT and ACT scores remain the best indicators of an applicant's potential for success in college. Both perspectives have merit: privileged students tend to perform better on standardized tests due to access to resources, putting underprivileged students at a disadvantage when test scores are heavily weighted in admissions. However, strong performance on the SAT and ACT requires certain cognitive skills that are valuable in gauging students' ability to handle college coursework.

The reality is that performing well on the SAT and ACT requires specific skills and abilities. Some students may achieve extremely high scores within a few months, while for many others, it may take years to reach the same level. Those who can attain their desired scores quickly should take advantage of their natural aptitude. A simple way to determine whether one should aim for the highest possible SAT or ACT scores is by taking the PSAT or ACT during sophomore or junior year—something that almost all highly capable students do, as it is typically part of their curriculum. If a student scores in the top 2–3% of test-takers nationally, they should strongly consider maximizing their potential and investing significant time in test preparation.

The reality is that SAT and ACT scores will never again be as prominent in college admissions as they were during their heyday. However, their importance is likely to increase as more schools revert to requiring standardized test scores. Unfortunately, in efforts to make the SAT and ACT more "equitable," these tests have evolved and will continue to change, leading to an ever-growing number of high scorers, which may render near-perfect scores less impactful. The true losers in this process will be those without competitive scores to submit. As debates over standardized testing continue, students will spend more time preparing for these exams, and parents will increasingly invest in expensive test preparation courses to ensure their children remain competitive. Meanwhile, some will inevitably be left behind in this arms race, while critics will continue to highlight the inherent unfairness of it all.