

Some Believe the SAT and ACT Do Matter

Is this the beginning of a new trend? Currently, six of the U.S. News top 25 schools have reverted to requiring applicants to submit either SAT or ACT scores. The discussion around this trend gained momentum in January 2024, when David Leonhardt's *The Misguided War on the SAT* critiqued the widespread shift away from standardized testing in college admissions.

While colleges increasingly adopt test-optional policies under the banner of promoting equity, Leonhardt argues that this approach may inadvertently harm the very students it seeks to help. The article explores the predictive power of the SAT and ACT, their role in identifying talent across socioeconomic and racial divides, and the unintended consequences of sidelining these tests.

Leonhardt begins by contextualizing the shift toward test-optional admissions, which accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic when logistical challenges prevented many students from taking standardized tests. What began as a temporary measure has become a permanent policy at numerous institutions. This change is rooted in the longstanding critique that standardized tests exacerbate inequities due to racial and socioeconomic score gaps. Critics argue that these gaps reflect systemic inequities in education and access to resources like test preparation services. Leonhardt acknowledges these disparities but suggests that the focus on the tests themselves is misplaced. He contends that the SAT and ACT are not the source of inequality but rather tools that reveal it.

The article highlights the unique strengths of standardized tests in college admissions. Unlike high school GPAs, which are influenced by grade inflation and variations in curriculum rigor, the SAT and ACT provide a consistent benchmark to compare students from diverse educational backgrounds. Leonhardt cites research showing that test scores are better predictors of college success than high school grades. For instance, a study by Opportunity Insights examining Ivy Plus colleges (including Ivy League institutions and other top universities) found a strong correlation between SAT scores and positive outcomes such as earning graduate degrees or securing prestigious jobs.

Leonhardt underscores the utility of standardized tests in identifying high-potential students from underprivileged backgrounds. He explains that a strong test score from a student at an underfunded school can signal exceptional talent and readiness for rigorous academic work. Without standardized tests, admissions officers must rely more heavily on subjective factors like extracurricular activities, essays, and recommendations. These elements, while valuable, are often influenced by access to resources and adult guidance, which wealthier students are more likely to have. As a result, Leonhardt argues, eliminating standardized tests risks making the admissions process even more opaque and biased toward affluence.

The article is also critical of the narrative that test-optional policies promote diversity. While some studies suggest that these policies lead to modest increases in applications from underrepresented groups, Leonhardt questions their broader impact. He points to research indicating that test-optional policies primarily benefit colleges by increasing application volumes and, consequently, their selectivity rankings. For students, the removal of standardized test

requirements can create confusion about whether to submit scores and what constitutes a competitive application. Additionally, some colleges continue to implicitly value test scores, admitting students with strong scores at higher rates even when submission is optional. This dynamic undermines the equity rationale for test-optional policies.

Leonhardt's critique extends to the political and cultural factors driving the shift away from standardized testing. He notes that opposition to the SAT and ACT has become a progressive cause, rooted in legitimate concerns about systemic inequality. However, he argues that this opposition sometimes overlooks empirical evidence of the tests' value. For example, he cites the University of California's 2020 decision to eliminate standardized testing requirements, despite internal studies showing that test scores were better predictors of student success than high school grades. Leonhardt suggests that such decisions are often influenced by political considerations rather than a balanced assessment of the data.

Leonhardt highlights the example of MIT, which reinstated its standardized testing requirement after a brief suspension during the pandemic. The university's analysis of 15 years of admissions data revealed that test scores provided critical information about applicants' readiness for MIT's demanding curriculum. Without test scores, admissions officers struggled to differentiate between students who would thrive and those who might falter. By reintroducing the SAT and ACT, MIT aimed to balance diversity with academic rigor. Leonhardt contrasts this approach with the test-optional policies of many other elite institutions, suggesting that MIT's decision reflects a commitment to evidence-based admissions practices.

The article also addresses misconceptions about the racial and socioeconomic gaps in standardized test scores. Critics often interpret these gaps as evidence of bias within the tests themselves. Leonhardt, however, argues that the disparities are symptomatic of broader societal inequities rather than flaws in the tests. He cites Raj Chetty, a Harvard economist, who describes the SAT as a "fixed benchmark" that captures fundamental differences in educational opportunity. Leonhardt warns that eliminating standardized tests will not erase these disparities but could obscure them, making it harder to address the root causes of inequality.

Leonhardt concludes by emphasizing the importance of using standardized tests as one factor among many in a holistic admissions process. He argues that the tests' predictive power and ability to identify talent across diverse contexts make them valuable tools for advancing both excellence and equity in higher education. He partially attributes the growing opposition to standardized tests to today's polarized political climate, stating: "In today's politically polarized country, however, the notion that standardized tests are worthless or counterproductive has become a tenet of liberalism." In essence, he observes that some critics are turning the SAT and ACT into scapegoats for inequities in college admissions, whereas he views these tests as "an opportunity to change their lives – and change society – for the better."