

College Planning Tips From Peter Van Buskirk: Standardized Testing

Few college admission requirements generate more angst than standardized testing. When considered along with a student's academic record, such tests are intended to help admission officers determine whether students can do the work academically in the first year of college. In fact that is their sole purpose by design. (They should certainly not be confused with intelligence tests!)

Unfortunately, test results add very little to the equation, a fact that is borne out by validity tests conducted on college campuses across the country each year. Admission officers know they can make good decisions about whom to admit without test scores. Moreover, more than 850 college and universities have publicly stated that conviction by making the submission of test results optional. You can learn more about the requirements at these schools at www.FairTest.org

The odds are, however, that you will need to address a testing requirement somewhere along the line as you apply to colleges. At some institutions, test results are embedded in formulas that determine who will be admitted—or, at the very least, be given further consideration. At others, they simply serve as competitive credentials—the bigger the scores the better. The following are a few tips to consider as you factor testing and test prep into your plans for applying to college.

1. You have options! Every school in the country now receives the SAT and the ACT interchangeably. The tests themselves are different. Whereas the ACT is a subject-based test designed to measure what you have learned in the classroom, the SAT is a deductive reasoning test. Try one of each. Which one suits you best? Focus on preparing for and taking that test.

2. Colleges strongly prefer to receive test results (SAT, ACT) directly from the testing services. Make arrangements with the appropriate testing service to have your results sent directly to the colleges to which you are applying. **However**, if you are taking tests in the coming months, you may want to wait until you have seen the results before deciding to have official score reports sent to colleges. This is an option afforded you by "Score Choice" by both testing agencies (College Board, ACT) in acknowledgement of the fact that you own the results and can control where they are sent.

3. Admission officers tend to "superscore" your test results by compiling the best combination of subscores from the tests (ACT or SAT) you have taken. For example, if you have taken the SAT several times, they will record your best Critical Reading score that might have come on your third test and your best Math result that might have come on your second test. You can't do the "superscoring" for them, though. They'll need to see all of your relevant results in order to find the best subscores.

4. Make note of schools that require SAT Subject Tests. Some will tell you which tests to take. Others will allow you to choose. In either case, the Subject Test results are essentially another set of filters that can be used to sort through candidates for degree programs that can be highly selective. When given the option, go with your strengths. It is best to time your testing to coincide with the completion of that subject in school.

5. Consider the "test optional" opportunities that might exist among the colleges to which you are applying. Compare your results with the range of scores reported for each test optional college. If your scores fall in the bottom 50% of the score ranges, logic would suggest that you elect not to submit your scores, as they will do nothing to enhance your application. A complete list of test optional colleges can be found at www.FairTest.org

6. Choose colleges at which your testing profile is a good fit. Remember, colleges are fond of reporting high scores for their entering classes. The further your scores fall below the mid-point of the reported range of scores at a college, the less likely you will be admitted at that college.

Create a spreadsheet on which you can keep track of the testing profiles for each of the colleges that interests you. Note both the averages as well as the range of scores reported for admitted students. Be careful not to interpret the "average" or mean score as the minimum requirement as half of the admitted students will have scores that fall at or below the average. On the other hand, you are likely to be more competitive at a given school if your results fall in the top half if not the top quartile of the testing profile.

7. Both testing agencies now concede that the tests can be coached. As a result, test prep may be a viable option for you. In considering test prep, be discriminating about the provider. Make sure you are comfortable with the style of instruction and, frankly, the instructor. A bad match can negate the potential good that can come from the exercise. Time your test prep so the instruction ends no more than two weeks prior to the test you plan to take.

Proven—and less expensive—test prep alternatives include reviewing practice tests (available in bookstores) and personal reading in various genres.

Finally, while acknowledging the inevitability of testing in the college admission process, it is important that you not obsess on testing. While test results can be pivotal in many *objective* selection processes (where "numbers" carry the day), they are merely part of the selection processes at other places that are more holistic in their assessments. Finding the best "fit," then, is vital to your eventual success. Places that value you for what you have to offer will be more inclined to look beyond your test results out of respect for what they might gain by admitting you.

To learn more about "Standardized Testing," check out these resources from Peter Van Buskirk:

- ***The College Planning Workbook***, Part II, Chapter Six, #5. "Get Your Testing in Order" (Available in the [TAG Bookstore](#); \$20)
- **Best College Fit™ Videos:** "[September-The Role of Testing & the Value of Test Prep](#)" Not a subscriber? Visit "[Introduction to BCF.](#)"