

See Ya, SAT

by Lauren Geldzahler
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The dreaded SAT: How can we forget that fearsome Saturday back in high school ... that moment when we were prompted to take out our No. 2 pencils, say one last prayer from our spot in that infinite grid of cramped school desks and prepare for the one test on which the rest of our lives relied?

Some colleges are moving away from using the standardized admission test.

Believe it or not, the SAT Reasoning Test and all the baggage that comes with it could soon become a thing of the past.

As of June 2008, there were 760 four-year colleges that do not use the SAT (mainly administered in Eastern states, Western states and Texas) or the ACT (more popular in the central U.S.) to admit substantial numbers of bachelor's degree applicants. The people at the non-profit test reform advocacy group FairTest illustrate these numbers with an ever-growing list of liberal arts colleges, state schools and specialty institutions like art and science schools and Jewish *yeshivot*, on their Web site, fairtest.com.

Some schools accept other tests in place of the SAT/ACT, such as SAT Subject Tests, Advanced Placement (AP) tests and International Baccalaureate exams. For some schools, the SAT/ACT is only required from out-of-state applicants. Some schools only require the tests if a student applies for a certain program, and some schools have a minimum GPA or class rank that grants students exemption from

submitting test scores.

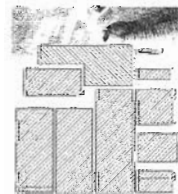
Included on the FairTest list are the nearby test-optional Goucher College in Towson and George Mason in Virginia, both liberal arts schools.

George Mason Dean of Admissions Andrew Flagel, who writes a blog about the college application process, said that George Mason's decision to go test-optional in 2007 was "not nearly as revolutionary as evolutionary." The school still requires SAT/ACT test scores for applicants below the 20th percentile of their class with a GPA below 3.5, or for those seeking entrance to programs such as engineering.

"The SAT is intended to determine the predictive value of a freshman class, but we found that for students with strong GPAs, the SATs were not making a difference on performance. ... Each university should take a strong look at how they're valuing their application process," Mr. Flagel says.

Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, made its applications test-optional in 1984, and conducted a 20-year study on the predictive value of test submitters versus non-submitters, presenting its findings in 2004.

The data from the Bates study show that there is little difference in the long-term predictive value of standardized



test submitters versus non-submitters. The difference in graduation rates between the two groups is just one-tenth of 1 percent. The difference in overall GPAs was 0.05 of a GPA point, both insignificant numbers.

Goucher College just went test-optional for the incoming class of fall 2008. "Why now? Why not now?" says Goucher President Sandy Ungar, who added that the school had been considering the change for two years. "Sometimes you catch a trend. We caught it right in the middle," he says. "We just hadn't reviewed the issue sooner."

Goucher officials simply discussed the issue over a faculty committee, distributed some materials on statistics and compared the issue with other colleges who had made the move. "We rely more on GPA, essays, recommendations and other evidence of intellectual merit," Ungar says. To be considered for merit-based aid, Goucher students must still submit test scores.

Positive results for schools that have gone test-optional show up in the form of increased applicant pools and higher ratings by *U.S. News & World Report*, a popular source for comparing colleges.

Craig Meister of Tactical College Consulting LLC cites the test-optional trend as "a mixed bag for colleges because they lose a very valuable tool — a standardized assessment like the SAT or ACT — that makes up for large fluctuations in school quality and course curriculum ... of different high schools around the country and around the world."

The trend is positive for students because some may not test well even though they may have otherwise impressive portfolios. And when it comes to applying to top choice schools, students want to put their best foot forward.

When asked if high school students should consider forgetting about taking the SAT altogether, Mr. Meister responds, "Absolutely ... but it can have consequences, not just in terms of acceptance to your dream schools, but also because many schools will

not consider students for merit-based aid unless they submit test scores."

The College Board, according to its Web site, claims that the SAT tests the critical thinking skills necessary to succeed in college. Mr. Fligel of George Mason expresses a concern in this department: "We don't find this to be true. For instance on the writing section, speed doesn't have a lot of bearing on a student's ability to write comprehensively, not for the classes our school offers."

Another claim by the College Board is that the SAT serves to level the playing field for students from different economic backgrounds, but today that's difficult to ascertain. It costs students \$43 to take the test, for which the College Board may provide a one-time waiver for low-income students. But there is no waiver available for additional tests taken.

Students may choose to take the test again if they are dissatisfied with their scores, and there is no limit to the possible number of tests taken, save for one SAT I maximum and three SAT II subject tests maximum per day for each of the seven times per year they are offered.

There are also no waivers available for the expensive nightly, weekend or summer test preparation courses such as The Princeton Review or Kaplan, which guarantee students higher scores.

In March 2005, a new SAT was released to the United States, the 10th change since its inception in 1926. There is an added essay-writing section and a new selection of math questions. The quantitative comparisons section has been removed, and a new scoring system has been added. Still, the SATs have not been saved by this revamping. The test-optional college list still continues to grow.

We may soon be able to say goodbye to the daunting footsteps of the SAT proctor, so reminiscent of the prison warden, watching over our shoulders as we speed to pencil in multiple-choice answers, sweating



over vocabulary and word problems, algebra and statistics.

If you or someone you know is going to be applying to colleges, check www.fairtest.com for the ever-growing list of schools that are dropping the SAT and ACT. Visit Mr. Fligel of George Mason's blog about the college admissions process at www.notjustadmissions.com.

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– Andrew Fligel, George Mason
Dean of Admissions

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