NEPC
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Newsletter

To Test or Not to Test? What Research Has to Say About the SAT and ACT

During the pandemic, many colleges and universities stopped requiring students to submit SAT or ACT scores, as lockdowns made it challenging to access testing centers.

The decisions were applauded by those who view the exams as unfair barriers to college access, especially for students from low-income families, English learners, and other groups of students who earn, on average, lower scores.

“What do the tests tell us?” FairTest director Harry Feder said last year. “They tell us how wealthy your parents are. To near perfect correlation.”

A 2024 survey by FairTest, which aims to promote “equitable and reasonable assessment,” found that 80 percent of four-year institutions do not require either exam for admissions. However, there is evidence that the pendulum may swing back in the opposite direction, as officials at some highly selective colleges have expressed concerns that, rather than making their processes fairer and more equitable, the elimination of exam requirements has actually disadvantaged applicants from low-income families.

“We found that applicants without scores from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to be admitted than others, because they were less likely to have that evidence in other parts of their applications,” Yale’s dean of undergraduate admissions told the Christian Science Monitor. The inequitable opportunities to learn that result in lower test scores also

result in other unequal outcomes relevant to applications.

But on the question of whether use of these tests in the admissions process is useful and equitable, there may not be a clear answer. A recent research review led by NEPC Fellow Audrey Amrein-Beardsley of Arizona State University offers evidence that supports both maintaining and eliminating use of the exams.

Published in April in the peer-reviewed journal, Education Policy Analysis Archives, the piece incorporates 72 peer-reviewed articles published between 1969 and 2019. Amrein-Beardsley initiated the study as a result of being asked to serve as a witness for the plaintiffs in *Smith et al. (Plaintiffs) v. Regents of the University of California, Janet Napolitano,* a 2020 case that was settled in 2021 after the system agreed to halt the use of the ACT and SAT in admissions decisions at least through 2025.

Plaintiffs in that suit alleged that the use of the exams in admissions decisions:

- Could be eliminated because high school grade point averages—which the plaintiffs described as having "less adverse impact on disadvantaged groups"—predict college outcomes, including first-year grades, just as well as if not better;
- Gave a leg up to applicants who could afford test coaching;
- Used a normative score distribution that "artificially compare[d] students to one another" rather than "measuring individual merit" and "tended to iteratively discard test items on which 'underrepresented minority students perform[ed] well,' creating bias;" and
- Led to a "starkly disparate [set] of student outcomes."

Amrein-Beardsley and her coauthors did find evidence to support these contentions. For instance, they note that the scores' ability to predict individual students' college outcomes "is smaller than often assumed, and often smaller than that of high school GPAs." The scores are best at predicting college outcomes when considered alongside high school GPA and class rank, they suggest.

They also found that the tests "can yield unfair measures of academic abilities and merit, especially when considering the potential impacts of coaching or training by different groups of students." And they described as "troubling" their finding that:

> [B]oth the SAT and ACT yield differential predictions for sets of dissimilar students. These differential predictions were most often negatively biased against racial minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, with varying effects also observed by gender identity, age, and ELL status. Such differential predictions seemingly yield discriminatory effects when using SAT and ACT scores for admissions, especially when capable students from racial minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are competing for admission spots, especially at selective institutions. That the differential score disparities observed exist between test-taker demographics and characteristics that are unrelated to that which both tests are to measure (e.g.,

aptitude or future success in college) is also problematic.

However, the researchers also found evidence that supported the exams' use: Both the SAT and ACT, they write, are "psychometrically strong; that is, they have strong technical and statistical properties. Both are reliable and yield consistent results over time, which is a hallmark of good tests . . . Further, both tests' subcomponents (e.g., sub-scales, sub-tests, various components of their testing procedures) are strong, yielding accurate inferences about what students know and can do, by subdomain and overall."

In the end, Amrein-Beardsley and her co-authors suggest that higher education leaders charged with deciding whether to use the results of standardized exams for admissions purposes should make sure they understand what these tests "can and cannot do," weighing "intended versus unintended consequences."

NEPC Resources on Assessment

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