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Assessing the SAT

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Assessing the SAT

Parents encourage their children to be themselves and do what's best for them, regardless of what their children's friends do, leading to the familiar rhetorical question: "If your friend jumped off a bridge, would you?" For years, Colby has been one of the selective liberal arts colleges in the Northeast to require SAT reasoning test scores. As some others have dropped the requirement, Colby has stood atop the bridge, looking down, contemplating the pros and cons. Now, even as the new SAT has been rolled out, Colby continues to assess the test's importance in the admissions process.

The general consensus is that the new SAT improves on the old mainly because it provides more information to admissions offices. However, colleges have not stopped wondering if the SAT is useful enough to make up for its drawbacks. Colby is no exception.

Colby has held onto its SAT I (reasoning) requirement while some peer schools—Bates, Bowdoin, and Middlebury—have made it optional and others—Williams, Wesleyan, and Amherst—have not. The Colby administration is not currently considering removing the SAT requirement, but, according to President William Adams, the question of whether it's the best thing for Colby is always in the air, if not on the table. "It's certainly constantly in my mind," he said.

By Ruth Jacobs

Adams is not the only person who continues to reflect on the SAT. Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid Parker Beverage, who supports the use of the test, explains his loyalty. "I cannot imagine doing this process with any sense of fairness and good judgment without having those measurements to look toward," he said.

Meanwhile, Mark Freeman, Colby's director of institutional research, believes the College's SAT requirement is putting Colby at a disadvantage compared to peer schools that don't require the scores. Freeman's job is to compile and analyze institutional data to support decision making. Other colleges' experiences show that making the SAT optional increased their applicant pools. "If you've got more kids to choose from, and the score's not part of the mix," Freeman said, "you're going to be looking at other things more closely."

Some of those things, according to Freeman, might be specific talents, the contribution the student might make to campus life, or a student's desire to attend Colby—resulting in happier students and more loyal alumni. These qualities, of course, are carefully weighed in the current admissions pro-



Unlike some of their counterparts at peer colleges, Colby students, like those seen here with Assistant Professor of English Daniel Contreras, must submit SAT I or ACT scores with their application.

cess. Freeman believes the College could weigh these factors more heavily if SAT scores were not part of the mix.

Adams does not ignore any element of the equation. "There are broad institutional considerations that we're always thinking about as to whether or not it serves the com-

petitive and strategic interests of the College," he said.

Beverage stands by the SAT as a useful—albeit imperfect—tool to be used in conjunction with many other factors. Director of Admissions Steve Thomas concurs. "I think it's a very good gauge of a student's academic

What's New in the 'New' SAT

If there's any consensus about the new SAT, it's that people don't yet know what to make of it. But, while most agree it's too early to tell how it will change things, many are willing to speculate.

Depending on who's talking, the changes are an improvement, make the test easier, make the test harder, make an already stressful test too long, or don't change things much at all. Whatever the outcome, the changes affect college applicants and admissions offices and, in some cases, high school teachers. And, like the old SAT, each college will use it differently.

The new test, rolled out in March to much fanfare, has one new element and makes changes to the old. The College Board asserts that scores on the old math and verbal sections are directly comparable to scores on the new math and critical reading sections.

The writing section, however, cannot be compared to the other sections of the test, says Caren Scoropanos, a spokeswoman for the College Board: "They're scaled differently because there are different elements of the test." Colby economics professor Michael Donihue, who has conducted two studies of the SAT at Colby, goes further. "I think it's so different as to be non-comparable to previous results," he said. "It's just a whole different beast."

For the first time, students are graded subjectively on writing.

Though it's a handwritten test, students are not scored on handwriting or even spelling. Instead, they are judged on structure, grammar, and the ability to support an argument.

Certainly the essay may benefit some students and not others. Gayle Giguere, an English teacher at Waterville Senior High School, sees it as a good opportunity. "It's something they can get their minds around," she said. Students are asked to incorporate lessons from literature, science, history, and other disciplines to support their points of view. High school junior Katy Eaton, who took the new test in March, agrees. "The essay was easy. I thought the timing—everything—was fine," she said. Others think that 25 minutes isn't enough time.

While high school teachers and students can contemplate how the new test affects their work, the ultimate question is whether it improves a college's ability to choose the most suitable students. Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid Parker Beverage looks forward to using the added information. "All these things, when you go through an application, are threads," he explained. The actual essays will be scanned and available to admissions.

In this age of professional writing coaches and college admissions consultants, admissions officers sometimes wonder who actually wrote a student's essay. Kristin Winkler '93, who teaches

potential when you look at it in line with the other pieces,” he said. If anything speaks to their point, it’s Colby’s talented and motivated student body.

But some administrators at the College continue to ask privately whether the trade-off is too great. “The most compelling reasons to consider not requiring the SAT have to do with arguments about the effects of the requirement on the diversity and size of the applicant pool,” said Adams. “Does requiring the test narrow the types and number of students that might apply to Colby? And does that consideration outweigh the value of the test in demonstrating academic preparation and performance? These are the key questions we are more or less steadily asking ourselves.” And there are no easy answers.

When admissions compares students from public and private schools, some without class ranks and many who benefit from grade inflation that is impossible to measure, the SAT (and its competitor, the ACT) provides the only piece of standardized data. “They [the

SATs] help us in terms of evaluating students along a common yardstick applying from thousands of different schools around the world,” Beverage explained. That said, admission or denial rarely results from any one factor, including the SAT. While it’s a valuable tool, Beverage explained, the SAT’s success is

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COLBY PRESIDENT WILLIAM ADAMS

measured by its ability to predict one thing: grade point average.

“The tests help to predict not only first-year performance but, believe it or not, performance over the four years at Colby,” said Beverage, noting that the four-year prediction is not in absolute but general terms.

“We believe that the tests provide useful information in order to make fine distinctions in a highly selective process.”

Beyond predicting future GPA, the SAT may also signal inconsistencies in a student’s application. When reading a file, admissions officers weigh various elements of a student’s profile. In doing this, red flags sometimes fly—and the SAT is often what sends them up. For example, if a student has a B average in high school but earns close to 800 on all sections of the SAT, an admissions officer may conclude that this talented student sailed through high school without studying. If a student consistently earned high grades in English courses but scored low on the critical reading (previously verbal) section of the SAT, admissions might see this as an indication of grade inflation or less-than-challenging high school classes. And now, the new essay portion allows admissions to compare a raw writing sample to the application essay, which is often carefully edited and sometimes coached.

English—and an SAT prep course—at Nashoba Regional High School in Bolton, Mass., thinks the SAT essay will offer a truer assessment of a student’s abilities. “College application essays go through so many rounds of revisions with so many advisors that they lose the integrity of the student writing,” she said. Knowing this, Beverage envisions looking at the SAT essays in cases of inconsistency. If a student has a stellar application essay and low grades in English classes, for example, he may pull up the SAT essay for comparison. “These things which appear to be inconsistent may be cause for pause,” he said.

Beyond helping admissions officers, the College Board says the added writing section was intended to reflect better what students learn in high school. “One of the motivating factors for changing the SAT and adding a writing section was in order to make a strong statement that writing was critical to success in college and beyond,” said Scoropanos.

For schools not focusing adequately on writing and grammar, perhaps the new test will serve as a wake-up call. According to Giguere, “It gets the teachers teaching the fundamentals again, if they’re not.” Eaton, who sailed through the essay, struggled with the grammar. “The grammar—I don’t know how to say this—we don’t do much grammar in high school,” she explained. “That was the hardest part.

That was harder than all the math sections for me, and I’m very English oriented.”

Once the scores are in, admissions officers have to figure out how to use them. This year Colby is accepting scores from the old and the new tests. That means some students will have scores up to 2,400 while others are capped at 1,600. Beverage emphasizes the necessity of examining the scores section by section instead of adding them up. “It’s going to be important to just break it down,” he said. And, to maintain consistency, Colby plans to focus on the math and critical reading sections this year, since not everyone will have writing scores. But, said Beverage, “We certainly are not going to ignore the writing component.”

If there’s one certainty about the new SAT, it’s that it makes this year unique. It will be another year, according to Scoropanos, before the numbers on the writing section will be put into context. Even *U.S. News & World Report*, publisher of the oft-consulted “America’s Best Colleges” rankings, isn’t sure how it will use the new data. “I think there’s going to be sort of an information gap in terms of real practical effect,” said Robert Morse, director of data research at *U.S. News*.

Beverage admits that selecting an incoming class is not an exact science and says that now is probably a good time to be applying to college. This year, he said, “We’re going to be feeling our way.” ●

From the art of reading applications to the science of predicting grade point averages, Colby has found that in some respects the SAT works as advertised. Economics professors Michael Donihue and Randy Nelson have collaborated on two studies of the SAT at Colby specifically to assess it as a predictor of performance. Both studies concluded that the SAT does what it's supposed to do. "What we've found historically is that [the tests are] incredibly valuable for predicting first semester performance, for sure," said Donihue. Specifically, controlling for other characteristics, in 2002, for every 100-point increase on the math section, a student's first-semester GPA increased .1 point and for every 100-point increase on the verbal section, a student's first-semester GPA increased to .2 points.

Stories about people who bombed the SAT and excelled in college abound, and many think that means the test doesn't work. But Freeman, who uses statistics to analyze the SAT, explains that the exceptions don't mean that the test is flawed. "It's designed to predict groups and, on average, it does a good job," he said.

But the SAT doesn't incorporate other factors, like how happy a student is, how involved she or he is on campus, whether the student is in the most appropriate major, or

The New SAT, at a Glance

New writing section is worth an additional 800 points

Writing section includes a 25-minute essay

Writing section includes grammar questions

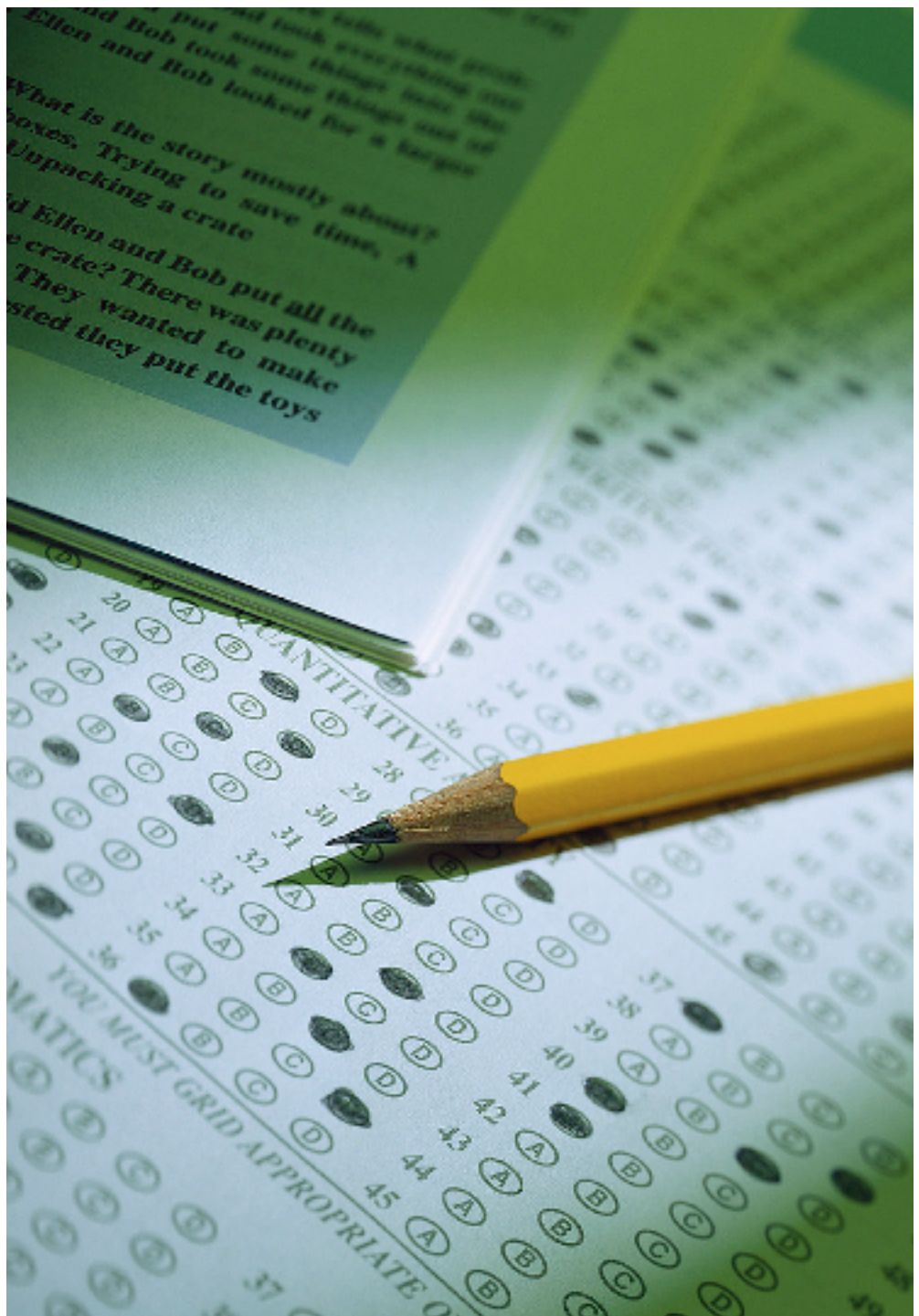
Verbal section is now called "critical reading"

No more analogies

Math section includes some higher-level math

Total possible score is now 2,400, up from 1,600

New SAT is 3 hours, 45 minutes, up from 3 hours



other pieces of a complicated puzzle that results in a student's overall achievement. It also does not predict what kind of impact a student will make on campus life—a piece that's critically important in a small community like Colby's.

Many of the roughly 400 colleges with SAT-optional policies are liberal arts colleges similar to Colby. Since making the SAT op-

tional, some of those colleges have reported dramatic increases in their applicant pools. A recent Bates study found that the college almost doubled its applicant pool since dropping the SAT requirement 20 years ago. Colby's applicant pool increased by 32 percent during that period, and both schools now receive about 4,000 applications a year.

National studies have shown that students

Colby's student body continually boasts mean SAT scores rivaling its peer schools. And, unlike at SAT-optional schools, Colby's mean scores are based on the inclusion of every incoming student's score. Peer schools that don't require SATs are able to compile mean test scores based solely upon those scores they received—i.e., generally the higher ones.

of color traditionally score lower than white students on the SAT and use the optional testing policy at higher than average rates. Bates reports that it increased its enrollment of students of color by 148 percent and international students by 1,125 percent (from eight to 98 students) in that 20-year period. (Colby increased enrollment of students of color by 250 percent and international students by 448 percent—25 to 137 students—in the same period.) Mount Holyoke, which dropped the requirement in 2001, found that students of color were less likely to submit test scores when given the option.

While students of color and students from lower socioeconomic status, on average, score lower on the SAT, Beverage also sees the individual cases. As someone who reads every folder every year, he said, "There are plenty of students who are from lower socioeconomic strata . . . who can score and do score high on the SATs. There may be some bias [in the tests], and I can't deny that. I think we use them prudently."

National studies continue to show that the SAT does not accurately predict male versus female performance in college. According to The National Center for Fair & Open Testing, known as FairTest, females earn higher grades in high school and college yet score lower on the SAT. The College Board, which owns the test, does not dispute the figures but maintains that the point spread between males and females (39 points in 2002, which is typical) is not significant. Even at Colby, incoming women's SAT scores are lower than men's, while graduating women's GPAs are higher than men's. Donihue points out that there are other factors that could help predict GPA. He mentions, for example, that women

acclimatize faster to college life and that they gravitate to fields that better suit them. Others who have studied this issue have found various reasons for women's scores being less accurate at predicting first-year GPA.

These discrepancies are among the reasons Colby doesn't use cutoffs (automatic denial of admission to students below a certain score or guaranteed admission to students above a certain score) and weighs many factors on a case-by-case basis. Even so, Colby's student body continually boasts mean SAT scores rivaling its peer schools. And, unlike at SAT-optional schools, Colby's mean scores are based on the inclusion of every incoming student's score. Peer schools that don't require SATs are able to compile mean test scores based solely upon those scores they received—i.e., generally the higher ones.

Mean SAT scores are used in many outside sources—guidebooks and rankings—to rate schools. If Colby made the SAT optional, "the publicly reported average would increase at Colby probably less than 100 points but more than 10 points," Freeman said. This boost in mean scores could result in a jump (or a hop, anyway) in the rankings. "It is likely that we would go up," said Freeman. "There's certainly no guarantee, since it only comprises one part of the *U.S. News* ranking."

To abolish the SAT requirement for the purpose of affecting rankings would mean a divergence from Colby's core mission, which includes doing everything possible to maintain excellence in education and student life without changing policies based on extraneous factors like rankings. If Colby were to drop the SAT requirement, it would have to be for one reason: to make the College stronger. ●

How does Colby's policy compare to those of its peer schools?

SAT requirements for students applying to the Class of 2010. SAT II subject tests measure academic achievement in specific disciplines.

Amherst College

New SAT I and two SAT II subject tests **or** old SAT I and three SAT II subject tests **or** ACT required

Bates College

Standardized tests optional

Bowdoin College

Standardized tests optional

Colby College

SAT I **or** ACT required, SAT II subject tests optional

Connecticut College

SAT I optional, two SAT II subject tests **or** ACT required

Hamilton College

SAT I **or** three SAT II subject tests **or** ACT required

Middlebury

New SAT I **or** three SAT II subject tests **or** ACT required

Trinity College

New SAT I **or** old SAT I and SAT II writing subject test **or** three SAT II subject tests **or** ACT required

Tufts University

New SAT I and two SAT II subject tests **or** old SAT I and three SAT II subject tests (one being writing) **or** ACT with writing required

Wesleyan University

New SAT I and two SAT II subject tests **or** old SAT I and three SAT II (one being writing) **or** ACT required

Williams College

SAT I and two SAT II subject tests **or** ACT with writing and two SAT II subject tests required

Sources: Official college or university Web sites