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College Admissions: The Big Tests

By Elizabeth A. LaScala, Ph.D.

There are few topics that flood my Inbox more than questions about standardized testing. If you plan to apply to one or more selective colleges and universities in the United States, you already know-or will shortly discover-that most require applicants to submit scores from one or more standardized tests. The big tests are the SAT and the ACT.

The latest version of the SAT has 3 sections-critical reading, math and the newest section, writing, which requires students to compose a short essay in response to a prompt as well as answer multiple choice questions. Generally, scores on the SAT are tied to critical thinking and problem solving skills. The SAT is "coachable" so students who put in the time and effort (and parents who write checks) can often improve their scores.

The other big test is the ACT. It has its origins in the American College Testing Program which began in 1959 at the University of Iowa. The ACT was once used exclusively in the Midwest and South, but it is now popular throughout the country. The ACT is more content oriented than the SAT, and ACT questions are more directly tied to what a student learns in grades 7 through 12. The ACT focuses on 4 areas-English, math, reading and science reasoning. There is an optional writing component, and I recommend students take it. It is required by many colleges, and the scores can help determine the student's placement in college coursework. Virtually all schools that require a student to take standardized admission tests will accept scores from the SAT or the ACT, and many students submit both.

So now you are probably wondering "What test should I take and how much do these scores really matter in the actual admissions process?" Students often take the ACT and the SAT and then decide which test they prefer. There is a high correlation between performance on the SAT and ACT, but once in a while a student performs much better on one of them. If so, this is the test on which to focus your attention.

Students often ask how much test scores matter. Frequent mailings, popular press, college rankings and the general hype surrounding college admissions can vastly distort the importance students place on standardized tests. The most recent report by NACAC (National Association for College Admission Counseling) states that although test scores count significantly in the evaluation of a student's academic strengths, the overall GPA and rigor of coursework take precedence.

Another common concern is when to test and how to prepare. Most experts recommend students take one round of standardized tests by the end of the junior year. Although test preparation can be helpful, it important not to crowd your school schedule with excessive test preparation at the expense of your grades. Many of my clients take their first SAT and/or ACT with minimal preparation in the spring of their junior year. Some wait until summer. After they get their score reports, they have more information about where to focus further preparation. I also recommend that students take free practice tests. Several reputable companies offer proctored practice tests which are scored and sent back, often with valuable feedback. This strategy can be helpful because the scores do not become part of the permanent record, and the student benefits from the practice and analysis of results. Of course there are always students who want to prepare more extensively. The kind of preparation you choose depends on what kind of learner you are and what you can afford in terms of time and money. If you benefit

from structure and assignments to stay on track, a group seminar approach can do the trick. If you are a more independent and self directed learner, you can study on your own. If cost is a factor, there are several good study guides and software programs available. My guiding philosophy is that the best preparation for both tests is doing the best academic work possible. Then you can focus test prep on test-taking strategies rather than subject matter.

A Word on Score Choice

The College Board announced Score Choice in June 2008. As announced to the public, Score Choice is intended to reduce student stress by allowing students to decide which scores to send to colleges. In the past, students had to submit all scores. Since this announcement the college admissions world has pondered, debated, and criticized the policy from every imaginable angle. One common view is that the policy favors wealthier students who can afford extensive preparation and multiple testing attempts. Whether the focus is on issues of equity or how the test prep industry benefits from a business perspective, the facts that students should know are very simple:

Students now have a choice of which SAT scores to provide admissions officers. Colleges have always determined their own admissions requirements and that has not changed one iota because of Score Choice. Since Score Choice was announced, institutions across the nation are announcing their policies with respect to it. For example, Yale University recently announced that it will require applicants to send all scores from all test sittings.

My concern as a college advisor is that the already complex admissions process may become more stressful than ever. Some colleges may want to see all scores, others may permit students to choose; meanwhile, a student must pay strict attention to each college's policy in order to know what to send and when. This could potentially lead to gaps in applications and missed deadlines while a student waits for the most recent round of test scores. My advice to students is to prepare well for whatever test(s) you choose to take, and use practice tests to gain confidence and improve chances for better scores. Then take the test and send the scores. And put standardized testing behind you, relax, and move on to the next step in the college admissions process.

Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D. is a certified college advisor who lives and works in Lafayette. Dr. LaScala draws on 20 years of higher education experience to help guide and support the college admissions process for students and their families. She has 3 children—one a graduate of Cal Poly (San Luis Obispo), one a sophomore at MIT and the youngest, a junior in high school. Contact Dr. LaScala at (925) 891-4491 or elizabeth@doingcollege.com.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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