

SATs Make a Come Back

By Ana Brewster

SAT tests have been a longtime staple of the college application process—or at least they were, until around 2019. But the test-optional pendulum is swinging back the other way: Recently, the University of Miami has started requiring standardized test scores, starting with the class of 2026. They are far from the only school to do so.

Why test-optional in the first place?

The SAT is a two-hour-and-14-minute test that once rigidly determined where students could apply to college and their chances of acceptance. Spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of colleges changed their test policies between 2019 and 2021 and decided to maintain them even when the pandemic ended.

Instead, schools have opted for a “holistic evaluation” of students, instead considering “all measures of academic achievement, as well as curricular and extracurricular achievement... community engagement, and leadership qualities,” as per Fairfield University, who have been test-optional for over a decade.

As a result, colleges experienced a sharp increase in applications: this was especially true for top schools such as Cornell. They found that applicants with low test scores were “self-rejecting” from more prestigious schools, choosing simply not to apply—although, according to Cornell’s vice provost for enrollment, Jon Burdick, “low test scores were never singularly disqualifying.”

These new applicants came from more diverse backgrounds. Diversity is a significant aspect of the argument for test-optional. Not all students have access to the same resources (whether financial or educational), and as such test scores tend to correspond with socioeconomic status and disadvantage students who lack these resources. Upon going test-optional, Cornell enrolled 50% more first-generation college students, and some schools have seen an increase in Black and Hispanic enrollment. And yet, colleges have begun reinstating test requirements.

What gives?

In the midst of extensive reasoning against requiring test scores, the sudden reversion of these test-optional policies seems confusing. Colleges ranging from Ivy League (and Ivy Plus) schools—including Yale, Harvard, Stanford, Brown, and Cornell—to other public and private institutions are already requiring or planning to require test scores from their applicants. Yale explained their decision to require scores again, stating, “Students from well-resourced high schools can find several substitutes for standardized tests such as advanced courses, highly enthusiastic teacher recommendations, and outside activities... But students from less



enriched high schools have fewer opportunities to demonstrate their potential.” For Yale, requiring test scores increases the diversity of their student body.

As for the University of Miami, they believe the test provides “an additional data point” to applications and “can be a predictor of academic success.” In fact, findings from colleges such as the University of California, Duke, and MIT reveal that test scores are actually far better

indicators of readiness than high school grades.

However, both schools will remain committed to the holistic review process. Yale asserts they “will never rely on testing alone to assess student preparedness.” For Miami, the test will only be one data point within a “wide array of information” they will consider.

“The Ohio State University today announced the reinstatement of the ACT/SAT test requirement for all new first-year undergraduate applicants to the Columbus campus in the 2026 admissions cycle and beyond. “



—The Ohio State University

What does this mean for us?

Well, first, it means our senior class got lucky. When asked about her SAT experience, senior Brianna Conway responded, “I took it three times and didn’t submit [them] to my top schools,” continuing, “I wasn’t stressed about it [because] I knew I could go test-optional.” Fellow senior Mia Cerny was “a little stressed because a few schools in the South required it,” and Avery Schoenberg didn’t have to submit her scores.

However, many of these schools will be requiring scores from the class of 2026, or our juniors. Needless to say, they are less happy with this development. Junior Sophia Aqeel’s first reaction when asked about the SAT was calling it “the worst thing ever.” The test is a source of stress for her, and with the increased likelihood of colleges requiring her scores, she feels that “they are basically deciding [her] future now,” rather than “the actual grades [she] spent so much time studying for.” This is a valid criticism—she certainly isn’t putting herself through AP Bio for nothing!

Meanwhile, classmate Cora Kennedy’s frustration lies with the “false hope” of test-optional applications that colleges had given high school students when the schools had no intention of keeping them.

Nevertheless, the SAT is here to stay. With its renewed importance, the preparation process will likely be more rigorous. The juniors also shared with me how they are studying this exam season: Sophia Aqeel is using SAT prep workbooks to study and is currently on the lookout for a tutor (tutors are a popular way of studying for the SATs, though they can get pricey), and Cora Kennedy is using Blue Book’s practice SAT exams and Khan Academy’s digital SAT preparation course (an actual godsend). Spring SATs are fast approaching. Good luck to everybody who plans on taking them!

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