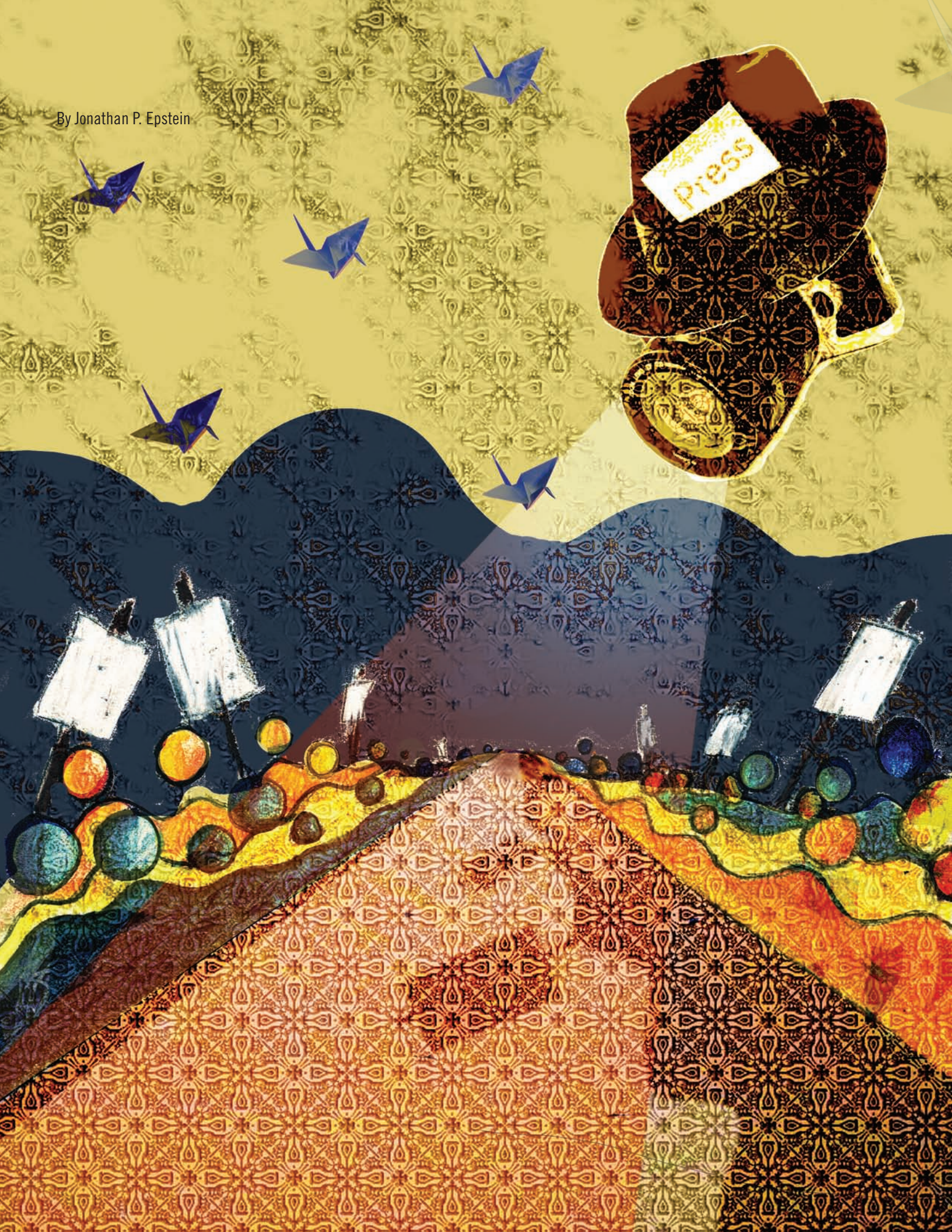
By Jonathan P. Epstein



Behind the SAT-Optional Movement:

Context and Controversy

The SAT Framework

Past

Prestige in higher education is nothing new. Before the internet, before college rankings, before guidebooks, and even before standardized admission tests, the aristocracy sent their children to the colleges and universities perceived to be "the best." Few others penetrated the hallowed walls. In 1928, the University of Chicago (IL) first introduced the notion of a college or university deliberately enhancing prestige, not through historical, social or community ties, or the success of graduates, but through the rejection of applicants, selectivity and the acquisition of "higher quality" students. Only in the latter half of the 20th century did the system shift towards exclusivity and discrimination more on ability than social status.

The advent of the modern form of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), brought to bear by the combination of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and Harvard's former president James Bryant Conant (Lemann 1999), was designed to promote the recognition of talent and intellect, wherever they may be found. Their aim was to provide greater educational access for academically gifted and accomplished students, requiring students at elite institutions to prove their worthiness by performance rather than merely by pedigree. Within a few short years, it began to clarify the distinction between social and intellectual elite.

During the 1950s, use of the SAT grew rapidly. When the University of California adopted the exam in 1968, its expansion across the nation was solidified. In 1990, from a desire to move away from the idea that the test measures innate ability, its intent mid-century, the SAT changed its acronym to the Scholastic Assessment Test. This move marked a formal break from its early 1920s precursors that were forms of IQ tests. Then, faced with challenges to the claim that it truly measured achievement, in 1994 it removed the acronym entirely, keeping only the initials SAT.

Present

In its current incarnation, the SAT1 is utilized in some capacity by nearly every selective institution in the country as a measure of a student's ability. Along with high school grades, rigor of high school curriculum, essays, recommendations, and other factors, selective institutions overlay standardized test scores to put local and individual information into a broader context, all the while assuring an anxious public that test scores are but one small consideration when rendering admission decisions.

Today more people criticize the SAT for inhibiting access to higher education than applaud it for opening doors in the first place. Listening to 21st century critics, it is impossible to deduce that a significant portion of the exam's original intent was to enhance access for those previously excluded from highly selective institutions. In this environment, a trend arose, gained momentum, and became a national movement during the past several years. Encouraged by the success of a few early pioneers including Bowdoin and Bates Colleges in Maine, which made the SAT 1 optional in 1969 and 1984 respectively, many selective liberal arts institutions are adopting SAT-optional admission policies. By late 2007, more than 25 of the *U.S. News & World Report* Top 100 Liberal Arts Colleges had some variation of an SAT-optional policy. By early 2009, that number topped 30.

Competition in higher education has been accelerating since the introduction of the SAT more than 50 years ago, but the frenzied atmosphere is a phenomenon of the past two decades. A major influence of the frenzy, the advent and rise of

[1] The term SAT is used throughout this study, aside from the direct history of the exam itself, to represent both the SAT and the ACT as the dominant standardized tests used in college admission in the United States.

U.S. News & World Report rankings, has reinforced the perception that institutions are in direct competition with one another for prestige and desirable students. And in the dominant ranking system, the SAT is at center stage.

The Importance of Scoring: Rise of the Rankings

Dawning

In late November of 1983, U.S. News & World Report released "Ranking the Colleges 1984, " the first college ranking issue. After a sputtering start, the magazine published its first quantitative rankings called "America's Best Colleges 1988" in late October of 1987, releasing annual rankings ever since. Filling the vacuum created by limited comparative information provided by the nation's colleges and universities, U.S. News provided measurements and comparisons to families and institutions. Today, college administrators and 11 million readers around the country anxiously await the annual unveiling of the latest rankings in late August (USNews.com).

While *U.S. News* was gaining its foothold in the American higher education system, broad student recruitment and marketing outreach programs grew in popularity, and the Common Application rose to prominence. Increasing selectivity, new direct marketing techniques and simpler college application methods led more students to apply to multiple institutions. With the proliferation of applications, more students were refused admission at top institutions, and the process spiraled cyclically. The college admission process became more complex, competitive and mysterious. "Selectivity" became an unavoidable and enduring metric for measuring the desirability and prestige of higher education institutions.

Dominance

With no other recognized, statistically-driven ranking system available for the average family, *U.S. News* became a fixture in their college selection process and the primary provider of comparative information about the nation's colleges and universities. Their monopoly and visibility led to a national obsession among institutions that sought to raise their status on the U.S. News lists. It's reflective of U.S. News' influence that "the Department of Education now mandates that schools report to the federal government much of the data the magazine requires for its rankings" (Confessore 2003).

In part due to *U.S. News*, institutions advanced strategies designed to help admit and enroll students with ever higher SAT scores. High student scores became the dominant sign of quality and educational excellence. Though officially accounting for less than 10 percent of the overall ranking score, a study of the rankings determined that average student SAT score is by far the greatest factor in determining institutional rank (Kuh and Pascarella 2004), with a -0.89 correlation (1 or -1 is a perfect correlation). That's as close to a perfect match as is ever seen in statistics. Since so many other components of the rankings are affected by higher performing students (including retention and graduation rates), the SAT is the de facto centerpiece.

In 1999, the release of *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*, by Nicholas Lemann, sparked the burgeoning SAT-optional movement. The book probes the test's history and usage, making a compelling argument that the exam no longer served the public good that James Bryant Conant had hoped (Lemann 1999). There was no immediate backlash against the SAT, but the book turned a small issue into a national dialogue by quantifying the test's flaws and drawbacks.

Citing a desire to assess achievement rather than aptitude and asserting that the SAT was "distorting educational priorities," Atkinson sent a shockwave through higher education, the College Board and ETS.

Interestingly, Lemann authored a defense of the rankings in the *U.S. News and World Report Best Colleges 1999* issue in August 1998, entitled "Universities Use Rankings, Too" (Lemann 1998). Lemann supported the rankings by suggesting that families can put rankings in the appropriate context, not unlike institutions' confident claims that they do the same with student test scores.

The Threat

The seminal moment of the SAT-optional movement was Richard Atkinson's speech at the annual meeting of the American Council on Education in Washington, DC on February 18, 2001. Atkinson, then president of the University of California (UC) (the world's largest and most influential SAT client), recommended "that we no longer require the SAT 1 for students applying to UC" (Atkinson 2001). Citing a desire to assess achievement rather than aptitude and asserting that the SAT was "distorting educational priorities," Atkinson sent a shockwave through higher education, the College Board and ETS.

In the following months, Atkinson was deluged by responses from "hundreds of college and university presidents, CEOs, alumni, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, students, and many others from all walks of life" (Atkinson 2001), and also by ETS

itself. General consensus was that the SAT would have been in dire straits without the University of California system fully on-board.

Lemann identified the announcement as the "most important single anti-SAT effort ever in the history of the test." Robert Schaeffer of Fair Test, the nation's preeminent advocacy group for SAT-optional admission policies added, "The key to ending the dominance of the SAT lies in California" (Gose and Selingo 2001). Kurt Landgraf, president of ETS shot back, "I hear a lot of people criticize the SAT, I've yet to hear what should be put in its place." Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, pointed out how prohibitively expensive it is to develop standardized tests with fair questions and exam security. He boldly asserted, "Nobody is going to spend their money that way." Other experts alluded to the hypocrisy of public condemnation, noting how frequently administrators publicly denounce the SAT but use them behind closed doors.

Atkinson's announcement set into motion the events that eventually resulted in the redesign of the SAT, details of which were released to the public in late 2003. The new version of the test aims to focus on what students learn as they prepare for college (Cloud 2003). An added essay section and alterations to the verbal component (renamed "critical reading") shifted the test towards testing student preparation and still further from testing aptitude. Of the new exam, Atkinson said, "The most important aspect of this test is sending a real message back to kids on how to prepare for college."

The redesign kept the University of California on board requiring the SAT 1 for admission. However, the redesign did not similarly convince everyone else that the test had improved or that it should remain an obligatory component of selective admission review. Once details of the new "SAT Reasoning Test" were released, the din of the SAT-optional movement suddenly grew louder. Claiming that the new writing test "missed the point," Sarah Lawrence College (NY) abandoned the test before it was even offered, going one giant step further, refusing to review standardized test scores for *any* applicant.

The Momentum

According to Schaeffer many schools held back decisions on SAT-optional policies during the redesign. Once they saw that the "new" test was similar to the old test with an added writing section, they began to withdraw. Seemingly a concession to the University of California, the redesign engendered no loyalty among other colleges and universities.

Beginning with the release of the new SAT in 2005, public announcements of SAT-optional policies at selective liberal arts institutions increased dramatically. In 2006, the media drew even more attention to the movement. Each new adopter of an SAT-optional policy was highlighted in industry news articles, the vast majority of which expressed general support for the movement, including quotations from enrollment managers at SAT-optional institutions. That September, standardized testing was one of the most prominent discussion topics at the NACAC national conference (Farrell 2006), at which a NACAC committee unanimously voted to ban admission or scholarships based solely on test scores.

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Between late 2005 and early 2009, more than two dozen institutions announced such policy changes, including well-known public, private and surprisingly even technical schools such as Worcester Polytechnic Institute (MA). In early 2008, Wake Forest University unveiled its SAT-optional policy with great fanfare, the first national research university to do so, even sponsoring a small conference in early 2009 called "Rethinking Admissions."

While a few dozen SAT-optional adopters may not seem, in isolation, like a dramatic national shift, the impact of competitors on one another has already changed the landscape in selective liberal arts admission. And the picture may look even more different in five years if this pace continues. Chris Lydon, associate vice president for admission and enrollment planning at Providence College (RI), said, "If, in a few years, there are 75 selective institutions that are SAT-optional instead of 35, imagine how many high school sophomores will see that list and decide they don't need to take the test at all. Imagine what that would do to the college landscape and the testing industry."

The Stories

The following case studies represent two notable examples; an SAT-optional pioneer and one highly-ranked, selective regional institution after their first admission cycle with an SAT-optional policy in place.

Bates

Bates College began internal discussions about its test requirements in 1979, before there was even a glimmer of today's active movement. After several years of self-study, concerns about the exam, including the correlation between SAT scores and income, led Bates to become one of the first selective institutions in the nation to adopt an SAT-optional policy (Bowdoin College went SAT-optional in 1969) in October 1984 (Bates.edu).

One stated reason for the switch was that Bates believed its SAT average frightened many strong students from applying (Rooney 1998). Whereas today most SAT-optional institutions are cautious about explicitly seeking competitive advantage in student recruitment through SAT-optional policies, at the movement's origins, Bates did just that. William Hiss, Bates' admission dean and vice president between 1978 and 2000 said, "If I had had to choose making tests optional and losing 1,000 applications it would have been tough. But when you gain 1,000 applications? There's no downside."

Bates implemented its policy with great care. Today, its evaluation studies (released after five, 10 and 20 years of SAT-optional) are commonly cited in support of the SAT-optional movement. Students who did not submit their scores for admission review are required to submit scores after enrollment for the purposes of this research (Bates.edu). They found that the SAT did not add much power to predict a student's cumulative GPA at Bates. Non-submitters had virtually identical GPAs at Bates as submitters, though the non-submitters scored, on average, 160 points lower than submitters. According to Hiss, "The verbal and math SAT together accounted for 9.6 percent of the variation in grades" (1990).

Results also show a spike in application volume, from around 2,500 in 1984 to nearly 3,500 by 1989. In 2008, Bates received nearly 5,300 applications. The crown jewel of the study is the nearly identical GPAs and graduation rates achieved by submitters and non-submitters from 1984-1999. The study also finds that nearly half of Hispanic and black applicants are non-submitters of scores, indicating that Bates has been far more successful recruiting minority students with the SAT-optional policy than they were before its implementation.

Fair Test's reports and Bates' studies state that "Bates' experience demonstrates clearly that even very selective schools don't need the SAT, or any test score, in order to choose their entering freshman classes" (Rooney 1998). In 1997, Hiss said that, for many of Bates' students, the SAT is "not predictive and, in some cases, is what a statistician would call a false negative. That is, in fact the test seems to suggest the student cannot do good work when in fact they can."

In a recent issue, *U.S. News* reports that in 2007, approximately 60 percent of Bates' enrolling students submitted test scores and the middle 50 percent score range was 1260-1410 for those who submit them during the application process.

Providence College

Providence College, a private, selective Catholic institution, was ranked #2 in *U.S. News & World Report's Best Colleges 2007* for Regional Universities in the North. Its 85 percent graduation rate is among the highest of ranked regional universities in the nation. In all 2006, the school enrolled around 1,000 first-year students from nearly 9,000 applications, with a 49 percent admit rate and a 1200 SAT average.

Founded to serve first-generation students, Providence's greatest challenge is its cost of attendance, which had been reflected in far lower populations of low-income (Pell eligible) and minority students than many comparable institutions. Lydon believed the institution's philosophy was a good match for an SAT-optional policy. Since Providence had long utilized holistic review, Reverend Brian Shanley, Providence's president, encouraged Lydon to study the issue in-depth and determine feasibility, both practically and for maintaining admitted students' ability to succeed.

After 14 months researching enrollment and on-campus performance data, Providence implemented the policy for applicants in Fall 2007, the first of a four-year pilot program. Results were immediate. The overall applicant pool increased by 12 percent, the acceptance rate fell to 42 percent, student of color applications rose by 17 percent, and first-generation student applications rose by 21 percent. "The applicant pool beat our expectations on several levels," said Lydon.

Providence College freed up nearly an additional $1 million for need-based financial assistance, and provided stronger need-based awards to many admitted students. The enrolling class results were even more impressive. There was a 19 percent increase in first-generation students, a 19 percent increase in students of color, and a 56 percent increase in Pell-eligible students. Student quality in terms of GPA and high school class ranking held steady from the year before. Non-submitters made up 27 percent of enrolling students and yielded at a 35 percent rate, while score submitters yielded at only 22 percent.

Students who *did* take the SAT (nearly all enrolled students) were required to submit their scores after sending their enrollment deposit. Students who never took the exam were not required to take it after the fact. "We wanted the moral high-ground in reporting a full and honest standardized test range, to counter any claims that we became test-optional to improve our rankings," says Lydon. "Our motivation was not as a competitive advantage. This was a mission opportunity, not a marketing opportunity."

With 98 percent of enrolled students' scores collected, submitters averaged approximately 1200, while non-submitters

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averaged 1100. Lydon acknowledges it is a significant difference, but "it does not reflect a chasm suggesting academic deficiency." Lydon and Reverend Shanley gladly exchange the 30 point decline in the class' SAT average for the benefits of increased diversity. Lydon said, "If a 30 point drop in our test score average turns a prospective student away from Providence College, we probably aren't the best fit for that student anyway."

The Critique

Though there are few vocal critiques within higher education of SAT-optional policies, the most notable and eloquent comes from Colin Diver, president of Reed College (OR). Prior to joining Reed in 2002, Diver was dean of the University of Pennsylvania School of Law. He is a former law professor and dean of the Boston University School of Law, in addition to serving in the Massachusetts state government and teaching at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

At the very time that the movement was gaining momentum, Diver offered the most visible critique of making the exam an optional component of selective admission review. In his *New York Times* op-ed in September 2006, his primary contention was that institutions artificially increase their applications and reported test score average by selectively allowing the SAT to be removed for students who are, on balance, lower scoring.

However, Diver is no big fan of the SAT. He believes the test is imperfect, but that all admission measures are imperfect and some are far less reliable than the SAT. While the SAT is not overwhelmingly predictive of college success, it is "carefully designed and tested to measure basic intellectual skills." He added, "Are admissions officers at SAT-optional universities saying that the test scores do not provide probative evidence of the possession of these skills? Are they saying that these skills are not relevant to success in the educational program of their colleges? Neither claim is remotely plausible."

Diver takes issue with the idea that applicants know themselves best and should be the ones to decide if their scores represent them. "We all believe that we are better than our test scores and, for that matter, our grade point averages, our writing samples, and our interview performances," he said. Referencing the reality that lower scoring students will be least likely to submit, he asserts that "It's illogical to count a test score if it is high but ignore it if it is low."

Responses, by way of letters to the editor of the *New York Times*, were printed several days after the original op-ed. In one, Michele Tolela Myers, president of Sarah Lawrence College, criticized Diver's indictment as "cynical." Ironically, her own institution's policy not to review test scores from *any* applicant is fully consistent with Diver's critique.

In a personal interview a year after the op-ed, Diver reiterated, "My views are the same now as they were then." Diver described three interlocking issues: The SAT's value to predict what an institution seeks to identify; the cost-benefit to using or not using the test in admission review; and the slippery slope of inconsistency.

Prediction

Within most higher education institutions, Diver suggests that the GPA has greater value to predict student grades than does the SAT, and occasionally even subjective reader ratings. "The r-squares are modest, but much of that is because institutions neutralize the effect by selecting from a narrow band of the score distribution. A real test would be to admit students randomly to see how they perform, but of course no one will ever do that."

For example, an institution with an average SAT score of 900 select mostly from students between 750 and 1050, a small portion of the 400 to 1600 range. Likewise, an institution with a 1200 average selects primarily between 1050 and 1350. However, the SAT almost always has positive predictive value, "especially for those students substantially above or below the institutional average." This last point is pertinent since typical non-submitters tend to be well below institutional averages.

Cost-Benefit

"The test has value, but it favors the rich. It also signals a certain kind of educational value that you may not want to emphasize; studying to the test," says Diver. "So, if the costs outweigh the benefits, I can see dropping it altogether, but not making it optional."

Pointing to Bates' evaluation studies, Diver concludes that the most plausible real reason for enacting an SAT-optional policy is that it artificially inflates institutional application numbers, selectivity and SAT averages, using a biased sample to represent the average score for the entire institution. "Accepting a biased sample and reporting it as a college-wide average, inflating the average by nearly fifty points; that's a big effect in the competitive marketplace."

When asked if an approach that required score submission post-enrollment and reporting of a full-class SAT average would address this particular concern, Diver said, "Absolutely. But, how many do that?"

Inconsistency

"I hear, 'we want to let students put their best foot forward'," Diver says. "Then why not any number of other characteristics? If that's the philosophy, why require GPA if students feel that it doesn't represent their abilities accurately? After all, there's testing included in those grades." His answer to that question is that institutions consider it important to know applicants' high school grades and wish to value them as they deem contextually appropriate for that student. "If you're interested in access, you can look at an element and give it small weight or inverse weight to income," says Diver. "That's more intellectually consistent than making one component optional. The question, 'What else does this policy trigger?' is roundly neglected."

This goes to the heart of the meaning of a holistic review. When institutions claim they have enough information without test scores, then why would they use the scores for any student? "Once you begin to measure people based on what *they* deem important for you to review rather than what *you* think is important, the process becomes fragmented; partial. If you claim your review is holistic, then you must look at the whole."

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> ...Schaeffer is willing to allow for less idealism if it leads to what he believes is a noble goal. "Of course there is a marketing issue involved at some level but regardless, every institution that makes the change makes college admissions a little bit better for the students who are applying."

While he's frustrated with what he perceives as the disingenuous nature of this SAT-optional movement, Diver acknowledges that "as long as we're in a fiercely competitive market, reinforced by *U.S. News*, and as long as quality of input is important, there will be pressure to do this kind of thing. It will certainly continue."

The Advocacy

Founded in 1985, Fair Test: The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, is the most prominent SAT-optional advocacy group. Through education and strategic assistance, the nonprofit organization works "to end the misuses and flaws of testing practices that impede the advancement of quality education and equal opportunity" (FairTest.org). In the arena of selective college admission testing policies, it has become an increasingly influential voice.

Fair Test has organized, informed and encouraged schools that consider adopting SAT-optional policies, advising them on how best to make the decision, the subsequent transition to the new policy, and connecting with institutions that already have such policies. Fair Test speaks out against SAT usage in selective admission and state-sponsored scholarship programs, claiming the test is biased against women and students of color. They also accumulate data and case studies used to advocate against the SAT as an effective tool for predicting academic success.

Schaeffer, Fair Test's public education director since its founding in 1985, is a frequently consulted source for the media regarding test-optional practices. "The movement stalled somewhat while the SAT was being redeveloped in response to the University of California complaints. But, once the new test was released in 2005, the movement accelerated." In Fall 2006, esteemed author Malcolm Gladwell (author of *The Tipping*

Point) asked Schaeffer if the SAT-optional movement had, in fact, reached a tipping point. "Maybe," Schaeffer recalls responding, "but we may not be able to know that until well after we've passed one," a sentiment he reiterated in an April 2009 *USA Today* article, suggesting that he expects many more institutions to adopt SAT-optional policies as the year progresses.

Schaeffer sees the cynicism about the SAT-optional movement largely as a canard. "The evidence is pretty weak that statistics even rise for these institutions. Many institutions collect the SAT scores after enrollment and report a real SAT average anyway." He believes that the vast majority of SAT-optional institutions' devotion to fair testing is genuine.

However, Schaeffer concedes that the SAT is not likely to disappear anytime soon. "Some have suggested that if Harvard dropped the test, the SAT would disappear," he muses. "But, that certainly didn't happen with early admissions. Colleges aren't lemmings." He does, however, notice a domino effect. "Each announcement does seem to influence one or two more." In saying so, he tacitly acknowledges that at least some part of the movement is influenced by competition, but Schaeffer is willing to allow for less idealism if it leads to what he believes is a noble goal. "Of course there is a marketing issue involved at some level, but regardless, every institution that makes the change makes college admissions a little bit better for the students who are applying."

The Experts

The Harvard Dean

One of the most influential institutions in the admission landscape, with both national media and peers, is Harvard University. The SAT was constructed in conjunction with Harvard's president and Harvard was at the forefront of utilizing the exam to broaden its pool of enrolling students. Dr. William Fitzsimmons, in his capacity as dean of undergraduate admission and financial aid at Harvard University, supports the use of standardized tests for selective admission. "While one size doesn't fit all, the truth is that some institutions are trying to make fine distinctions between very talented potential scholars from around the nation and the world. As one measure among many, standardized tests are very important in this regard."

His influence has taken on additional weight in the context of his role as the chair of NACAC's Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission, formed in late 2006 to make recommendations to NACAC's nationwide members. His steadfast support of the use of the SAT in admission did not go unnoticed by Schaeffer of Fair Test, who has bemoaned the fact that the commission's chair is not an SAT-optional sympathizer.

Fitzsimmons acknowledges that the need for tests in admission is not the same for all. "On the other end of the selectivity spectrum, the tests are far less important. But, even for those institutions, the tests are very valuable when reaching out to new high schools and recruiting students from new locations." He is loathe to criticize the motivations of institutions that elect the SAT-optional policy, saying it's "impossible to know what their motivations are," but he acknowledges critiques that some may enact policies simply to boost applications and SAT statistics in response to market competition.

> "The standards movement has serious legs. It is why Clinton and G.W. Bush were elected. It will go on without any one politician to champion it. And if in the end state high school exams show validity against college grades, they should be the tests accepted for college admission."

At the time of the interview, Fitzsimmons preferred to steer clear of that controversy, claiming that the commission instead was compiling a report for NACAC to review such issues as test preparation and the industry that offers those services to students. Despite Fair Test's perception that SAT-optional is the hottest topic in admission today, in speaking to Fitzsimmons, it's difficult to reach that conclusion. While there has been extensive media attention, he stated quite firmly that the topic is just one of many issues on the priority list of the NACAC commission and of most other selective institutions.

When the commission released its report in Fall 2008, it focused its recommendations for stakeholders in large part on the test preparation industry, education regarding appropriate use of scores, and de-emphasis of test scores as primary measures of both student and institutional quality. However, Fitzsimmons chose not to allow his personal views to dominate the output of the commission. Throughout the report is a recurring theme suggesting the potential for institutions to make standardized tests optional in the admission review process, a result that the media covered enthusiastically. One primary recommendation was to "Regularly question and re-assess the foundations and implications of standardized test requirements," which included the following brief but powerful passage:

> "The Commission believes that there may be more colleges and universities that could make appropriate admission decisions without requiring standardized admission tests such as the ACT and SAT. The Commission encourages institutions to consider dropping the admission test requirements if it is determined that the predictive utility of the test or the admission policies of the institution support that decision and if the institution believes that standardized test results would not be necessary for other reasons such as course placement, advising, or research."

The SAT Guru

Nicholas Lemann, author of *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*, and dean of the Columbia School of Journalism (NY), was also a member of the NACAC standardized testing commission. His book was an early catalyst for the current incarnation of the SAT-optional movement. For the most part, however, he is uninterested in SAT-optional policies and did not advocate for them in *The Big Test*. Lemann suggests, "By far the most important development in this time period is *not* SAT-optional policies, which are mostly restricted to liberal arts colleges, but Richard Atkinson's speech and the change in the SAT to a somewhat more achievement-based format."

As opposed to the adoption of SAT-optional admission, Lemann prefers something akin to an "SAT equivalent." He advocates a national curriculum or, secondarily, a national achievement exam for students exiting high school, and has written a position paper for the NACAC commission on this issue. He says that the standards movement in secondary education drives the entire process. "The standards movement has serious legs. It is why Clinton and G.W. Bush were elected. It will go on without any one politician to champion it. And if in the end, state high school exams show validity against college grades, they should be the tests accepted for college admission."

Lemann acknowledges the salience of the SAT-optional movement after the redesign of the exam, which he calls "the biggest change to the test since it was created." He says, "Some feel they can make good judgments without a standard measure." His own school, Columbia, is GRE-optional and he indicates that he feels confident making appropriate decisions without scores since he's identifying one distinct skill. He concedes cynical motivations for adopting such policies, but says, "I truly believe that many of these institutions genuinely want to increase their student diversity."

Part of the question for Lemann is whether college admission should be a reward to an individual or an independent institutional decision. He believes these more "cosmic" issues, as he calls them, will be more influential in the coming years than SAT-optional admission policies. He understands the relevance, but thinks institutional and media attention is somewhat misplaced. "SAT-optional isn't really the way to address what needs to be addressed."

The Possible Solution: Dual Interpretation Method

A method that addresses some major concerns about the SAT while utilizing its major strengths might benefit institutions that are undecided about their future SAT usage. It is possible to develop a solution that both acknowledges the need for a universal measurement in the selective admission process but recognizes the disparities in scores for students from differing backgrounds at differing high schools.

Not all institutions have the time or staff resources to place an SAT score in the context of a particular student's background. The College Board possesses the data to report individual SAT scores alongside the average SAT and standard variability for each graduating high school class from a given high school (or a rolling multi-year average for the high school). Here, the author proposes the strategy he calls the "Dual Interpretation Method."

Institutions could be provided a "local measure" for each score in conjunction with the national measure. A score could then be judged on its variation from the mean of *that high school or area* as well as to the nation at large. This method might allow institutions concerned about certain vagaries of the SAT to utilize the test, imperfect as it is, to compare students from diverse backgrounds by examining test performance relative to other students in their own community, under similar learning conditions. The dual focus reduces concerns of differential testing performance due to factors of income and high school resources, allowing fuller context for an individual score. In essence, a single score is placed in two separate contexts for the institution to evaluate.

It's exceedingly difficult to achieve both consistency and equity with the single interpretation method, but when *both* interpretations of a score are overlaid with high school GPA, a personal essay, teacher recommendations, and other metrics of holistic selective admission processes, the results are greatly improved. Institutions may also offer applicants the opportunity to submit a written statement to rebut the appropriateness of the standardized test score, should they find that beneficial.

Dual Interpretation Methodology won't address marketing issues or competitive issues, but these are not the stated reasons for SAT-optional policies. If indeed what SAT-optional adopters seek is a fairer process and a way to keep disadvantaged applicants from being punished in the admission process, then evaluating their scores within the context of their direct peers is a solution more equitable and rational than abdicating the opportunity to review the scores at all.

Admission Web sites, *U.S. News* profiles and direct contact with each undergraduate admission office revealed that only one of the 32 institutions asserts that they report a full and honest SAT average, requiring students who took the test to submit scores after enrolling and reporting their SAT average inclusive of those scores.

The Reality: Bright Side and Dark

The practical reality of SAT-optional policies in student recruitment is that, on most metrics, they are effective. Nearly all adopting institutions immediately attract more applicants, significantly more ethnically diverse applicants, and boost test-score statistics. Non-submitting enrolled students frequently have comparable high school GPAs and high school class ranks to their score-submitting counterparts. Where data are available, they also show that such students achieve comparable college GPAs and graduation rates, broadening the student body and doing no harm to its "quality," as measured by pre-collegiate and collegiate academic achievement.

It's easy to understand the allure of such publicity, quick results and moral high-ground. It's also easy to understand why critics rarely speak out against such policies. After all, how *does* a professional speak out, in good faith, in opposition *not* of the noble goals (increasing access, fostering diversity, removing barriers, and limiting the role of an exam believed to be unfair or biased), but of a particular tactic and its application in the selective college admission process, without risking being misunderstood or labeled?

However, the quantitative results and conclusion that SAT-optional institutions make functionally effective admission decisions beg the question, "Are those particular end results the right measuring stick for success?" Such a claim is somewhat analogous to suggesting that drivers can reach destinations in their cars safely and quickly if they ignore certain street signs and traffic lights. That may be true, but what happens to the broader goal of an ordered and equitable system of roadway travel? In the entire context of admission application review, is the safe arrival at a desired enrolling class the only marker of success? Or does it matter how you got there?

Finally, there is the great difficulty in unwrapping what's beneath the rhetoric and behind the outcomes, uncovering the unspoken reasons for such policies and unseen inconsistencies created by their implementation. Concerns about potential biases in the test, differential scoring by income and by race, and a desire to remove "SAT pandemonium" from the admission process are reflected in the language on adopters' Web sites, including: "The best predictor of success is your high school achievement;" "You can decide for yourself if your scores adequately reflect your abilities and potential for success in college;" and "Standardized tests have long been scrutinized for possible cultural, ethnic, gender, and class bias."

Accepting such impassioned marketing and advocacy messages without further analysis is insufficient to fully understand the SAT-optional movement. Public statements share noble and socially responsible messages, but are they the entire story? Many, including Colin Diver, have concerns that SAT-optional policies are, at least in part, a mere shortcut to genuine recruitment outreach.

Suspicions

How can an ethical institution that distrusts the SAT's validity or perceives it to be biased continue to evaluate *any* applicants using the test? How can scores be meaningful in evaluating a student's abilities when they are submitted, but irrelevant when they are withheld? It's inherently inconsistent. At best, the inconsistencies logically lead to a breakdown in the purpose, meaning and value of holistic admission review. At worst, they may be perceived as hypocritical.

But, what institutions *do* with scores that are submitted and how they account for the scores that are not is still an unanswered question. Do colleges use these policies to artificially inflate their SAT averages by reporting only the scores of self-selected students that choose to submit test scores? The spokesman for the nation's leading SAT-optional advocacy group said he believes that most such institutions gather scores from *all* students after enrollment, including non-submitters, and report a full and honest SAT average to ranking publications, guidebooks and on their Web sites.

Another practical implication is already occurring. SAT-optional policies currently generate more applications for admission. At SAT-optional institutions that are not expanding the size of their enrolling classes, increased application volume leads to increased competition for admission and lower acceptance rates, thereby making it more difficult for each individual student to gain admission to these desirable institutions.

Discoveries

In testing this claim, a review of all 32 institutions in *U.S. News' Top 100 Liberal Arts Colleges 2009* that are SAT-optional in some form led to an interesting discovery. Admission Web sites, *U.S. News* profiles, and direct contact with each undergraduate admission office revealed that *only one of the 32 institutions asserts that they report a full and honest SAT average*, requiring students who took the test to submit scores after enrolling and reporting their SAT average *inclusive* of those scores. Two others declined to respond to repeated inquiries, though these institutions assuredly report biased averages (both have shown marked increases in their reported score range in only two years since the introduction of their SAT-optional policies).

Publicly available and privately shared data reveal that SAT scores for non-submitters average 100-150 points lower than submitters. Eliminating those scores for 25 percent to 50 percent of enrolling students results in manufactured SAT average increases between 25 and 75 points. These results imply that 31 of the 32 SAT-optional institutions in question are the beneficiaries of SAT average boosts. In the hyper-competitive space of the *U.S. News* top 100, there is no way to believe that such an outcome is an accident.

In light of this discovery, there is little choice but to conclude that the critics' concerns are well-founded. These results suggest that despite the proud statements of some adopters, SAT-optional admission policies are more than purely a philosophical stance.

The Future

Countless questions about the SAT are unanswered. Its value is questioned. The success of its original mission is in doubt. James Bryant Conant's vision for the SAT has succeeded in some ways and fallen short in others. His dream of creating a highly skilled workforce has been realized. His goal of a classless society certainly has not (Lemann 1999). Lemann said, "I think what would disappoint him is that the system turned out to be more friendly to the preservation of inherited privilege than he dreamed."

Is it within the power of the SAT and selective college admission to reshape the social order? Is the SAT-optional movement a step in the right direction or the wrong one? And why haven't more SAT-optional institutions simply eliminated consideration of the test from their admission criteria entirely? The only prominent selective institution to do so is Sarah Lawrence College, who can no longer be ranked in *US News* without a reported standardized test average. Such an outcome is one likely reason no other proponent has taken the policy to its logical conclusion.

Even as many decry the influence of the *US News* rankings, the door to exit the party is wide open and no one is leaving. Though the public conversation is a muddled monologue, the competitive influence is clear. According to Schaeffer, many more SAT-optional institutions are "in the pipeline," and "at least one Ivy League school is considering adoption of test-optional admissions." There is little reason to believe that the movement will wane any time soon.

So what?

How much does this matter? What happens if the trend continues? What if there are 100 selective institutions with SAT-optional policies in five years instead of approximately 40 today? In the higher education marketplace, there are *always* unseen and unintended consequences of policy decisions. As yet, we don't know what might happen when more institutions feel "forced" to adopt SAT-optional policies to compete for a diverse pool of applicants. When any market shifts beyond where it has been before, some outcomes are unpredictable.

However, practical implications for students are easy to imagine. As reported SAT averages rise, students who might truly be a good fit for an institution may be discouraged from applying if their scores are *too* far below the reported average, even if the student is not required to submit those scores. They may mistakenly perceive they wouldn't fit in academically. This competitive reality has the potential to disorient prospective students and families. A disoriented customer market is not in the best interests of any institution or higher education in general.

Another practical implication is already occurring. SAT-optional policies currently generate more applications for admission. At SAT-optional institutions that are not expanding the size of their enrolling classes, increased application volume leads to increased competition for admission and lower acceptance rates, thereby making it more difficult for each individual student

to gain admission to these desirable institutions. The institutions themselves may have more opportunity to craft a desired class, but the students have less chance of being admitted, an uncomfortable twist on the goal of increasing access.

What next?

Today, nearly all SAT-optional institutions continue to display the SAT score ranges of enrolling students (usually the 25th-75th percentile range) on their Web sites, in their promotional materials and in third-party publications, despite the fact that the average represents only a non-representative part of the student body. Right now, it can be said that institutions have it both ways. But, is it really as logical, fair, ethical, and equitable as so many claim? We must question *who* it really benefits, the students or the institution.

JONATHAN P. EPSTEIN is a senior consultant at Maguire Associates with experience managing admission and scholarship selection, a wide range of student recruitment programs, and enrollment modeling strategies. At Maguire Associates, Jonathan is a lead developer and primary consultant for the EMPOWR service for student recruitment and does extensive admission and enrollment consulting, business development, and complex data analysis. Jonathan holds a bachelor's degree from Wesleyan University (CT) and a master's degree in Higher Education Administration from Harvard University (MA).

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