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# Another College Expense: Preparing for the SAT and ACT

By ANN CARRNS OCT. 28, 2014

With all the hand-wringing over the price of higher education and the growing burden of student debt, it's easy to overlook the substantial cost of simply preparing to apply to college.

The expenses start piling up well before students ever set foot on campus, in the form of commercial test preparation classes and tutoring for the SAT and the ACT, the two main admissions tests colleges use to evaluate applicants. Some in-person or one-on-one online tutoring packages can cost thousands of dollars.

The higher cost is in part because of the demand for individual tutoring. Group classes, offered by companies like Princeton Review and Kaplan Test Prep, are still popular and relatively affordable. Thirty hours of group preparation with Princeton Review, for example, costs \$1,000 to \$1,600, depending on the size of the class.

Individual tutoring, however — whether online, in person or a combination — is all the rage, and it usually comes with a steep price tag. One New York-based tutor, Anthony-James Green, recently gained attention with his fee of \$1,000 an hour; he claims to increase his students' SAT scores by more than 400 points, on average.

ArborBridge, which provides online tutoring via videoconferencing, offers a 60-hour test preparation package for about \$9,000. That's more than the average cost of in-state tuition and fees at a four-year public university, which reached about \$8,700 last year, according to the College Board. Andrew Finn, co-founder of ArborBridge, said that the service also offered lower-cost options, like a 12-hour program for about \$2,500, and expects to revise its fees early next year to make its

services affordable for more students. After 17 years of preparing a child for college, he said, “You want the best outcome.”

Still, the prices are clear indicators that students and families are engaged in a college admissions “arms race,” said Robert A. Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest, a nonprofit that advocates against the “overuse and misuse” of standardized tests.

“They think they’re competing for slots at these elite universities and they’re arming themselves with the most sophisticated weaponry,” Mr. Schaeffer said. “They believe if the other guy is doing it, you need to do it, too.”

Is spending all that money worth it? The National Association for College Admission Counseling, a membership group for college admissions officers, high school counselors and other education professionals, found in a report it commissioned in 2009 that average gains from commercial test preparation courses were around 30 points on the SAT, and less than one point on the ACT — both lower than the providers typically claim. However, the report also noted that colleges and universities might make “inappropriate” distinctions among applications based on small score differences, “making even minimal test score gains potentially important in those decisions.”

Princeton Review offers a money-back guarantee for some prep packages, if students’ scores don’t increase by at least 200 points on the SAT, or by 3 points on the ACT. (The maximum score on the SAT is 2400, while the top ACT score is 36.) Robert Franek, senior vice president and publisher of The Princeton Review, says schools use the scores not just for admission decisions, but also to determine scholarship awards, so preparation is important. “It pays off,” he said.

The College Board, the nonprofit that administers the SAT, is unveiling a redesigned version of the test in 2016, to make it more reflective of what students are taught in high school, and what they need to know to succeed in college.

Mr. Franek said the change could push more students to take the ACT instead. But he also expects the revamp will increase demand for SAT preparation classes in 2015, as students seek to overcome uncertainty about the new format.

Here are the answers to some questions about college testing preparation services:

- *Are there any lower-cost options available?*

The College Board is teaming with Khan Academy, the free online tutoring service, to develop a no-cost preparation program, to become available next spring in advance of the new SAT. (Khan Academy already offers free preparation for the current SAT.)

The College Board also offers an SAT guidebook and DVD for about \$32 and provides a free online practice test. Other no-cost online options include Number2.com. The commercial prep companies also offer free sample tests — usually as a way to get students to sign up for their classes.

The main difference with free options is that they are mostly self-directed; students must have the self-discipline to complete the work and, in particular, the lengthy practice tests, on their own.

■ *Do all colleges require SAT or ACT scores from applicants?*

No. Mr. Schaeffer's organization, FairTest, tracks colleges and universities that make the tests optional. A list on the FairTest website includes more than 800 schools, including many state schools as well as private colleges like Bowdoin College and Wake Forest University.

■ *How much does it cost to take the actual tests?*

It costs about \$53 to take the SAT and have scores sent to four schools. (Fee waivers are available for low-income students.) The ACT charges \$38 for the basic test and four scores.

Email: [yourmoneyadviser@nytimes.com](mailto:yourmoneyadviser@nytimes.com)