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PREPPING FOR THE FUTURE: THE REDESIGNED SAT AND THE CHANGING COLLEGE ADMISSIONS TESTING LANDSCAPE

Submitted by Deirdre on 9/17/2014

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Prepping for the Future

The Redesigned SAT and the Changing College Admissions Testing Landscape

by Charlie O'Hearn

The Redesigned SAT – More than a Facelift

The March 2016 debut of the redesigned SAT will be a substantial departure from its current form, with each section experiencing consequential makeovers. The changes will dwarf the nip-tuck changes of 1994 and 2005, but will continue the evolution of the test from one that is intentionally disconnected from school curricula to one that is closely aligned to a specific set of learning standards. For a detailed look, see the College Board's most comprehensive communication on the redesign – *Test Specifications for the Redesigned SAT* – but prepare yourself for a ponderous, 211-page document that simultaneously defends, sells, and outlines the proposed changes. It also includes some sample test items, including one whopper on exchange rates that adds to my wonder about how this test will “deliver opportunity” to all students, the overall theme of the redesign. (Do all students do a lot of international travel?)

Among the notable thematic changes are: 1) A Math Test that emphasizes a narrower but deeper grasp of algebra, de-emphasizes geometry, and puts more questions in real-world context; 2) Reading, Writing, and Language Tests that require students to cite evidence for their answers, analyze writing, and discern Tier 2 vocabulary definitions from context; and 3) Questions and content that better reflect the work that students undertake in the country's “best high school courses.” More specific changes include a return to the 1600-point scale, an overhaul of the essay section (including making it optional), the addition of a no-calculator math section, and rights-only scoring (i.e., no penalty for wrong answers).

Until we see a real test, though, our understanding will remain at the 6000-foot level. For now, we know that the new version will certainly reward achievement over aptitude. We know that there will be some parts that look a lot like the ACT, namely the Language Test and rights-only scoring. We know that the underlying skills required will reflect a much-solidified alignment with the Common Core State Standards. And, we'll see a test that requires AP-type skills like citing evidence and rhetorical analysis, revealing a quiet effort to connect the SAT to AP curricula.

Strategic Drivers of Change

While the College Board presents one set of goals to the public, the redesign is clearly a strategic move driven in large part by the increasing popularity of the ACT, both as a college admissions test AND as a state assessment test. The ACT has been rapidly gaining in the former arena and dominates in the latter. The SAT, the College Board's flagship product, has been losing market share for some time. In fact, as of this post, the ACT has assessment contracts with 13 states while the SAT has just 2. When viewed from this perspective, the redesigned SAT accomplishes a number of strategic initiatives for the College Board: It will compete better as a college admissions test. It becomes more attractive to states as a potential state assessment test. And, by including AP-type skills like rhetorical analysis, which is taught in AP Language and Composition, the College Board positions its AP division for even more growth.

We Are Cautiously Optimistic

Until the new SAT is released and has a chance to cook for a while, we won't know for sure whether the goals put forth by College Board President David Coleman will be achieved, but the endeavor is commendable, even if it arises from competitive necessity. Historically, the SAT has tried to be nothing more than a college admissions test – a test designed to predict performance in college. The new SAT will still attempt to serve this purpose. Indeed, one of the College Board's stated objectives is "...sustaining, and ideally improving, the ability of the test to predict college success." Frankly, the goal of "sustaining" seems a low bar for such an extensive overhaul, but perhaps Coleman is simply being a realist.

Coleman's vision, though, is that the SAT will do more and be more, and we're hopeful that it will. It's hard to find fault in changes that could potentially drive curriculum and learning in a positive direction. When students are asked to cite evidence, they are learning to read critically. When they are required to analyze rhetoric, they are learning to write well. When they are studying math not superficially but deeply, and in real world contexts, they are learning math in a meaningful, "sticky" way. We at Summit applaud these goals, which are very much aligned with the way in which we work with our own students.

Summit's Recommendations for the Class of 2017

Prioritize the ACT

In the Northeast, where Summit operates, there has always been an SAT bias. Our parents, as I, knew a simpler time when they dealt only with the SAT, probably didn't do test prep, and certainly didn't have a testing plan. Even today, the majority of our families, particularly the parents, have an SAT-first mindset, but we work hard to determine early whether a student should move down an ACT or SAT path, so as not to complicate and add to an already heavy schedule. We believe strongly in creating a sensible plan that is in the best interest of the student and family.

For most students in the class of 2017, we'll likely be suggesting testing plans that prioritize the ACT over the new SAT, particularly during junior year. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't. Neither concordance tables nor reliably-scoring practice tests will be available when these students would ordinarily decide between SAT and ACT and when they would normally prepare. There will be no way to determine a preference for the new SAT or the ACT. An SAT-ACT concordance chart won't come until sometime AFTER March 2016, and real, retired tests won't become available until several official administrations after that. Moreover, unlike the run up to the new tests in 1994 and 2005 when a student could benefit from studying older versions of the test, the 2016 changes are far too drastic for that strategy to bear much fruit.

Familiarity breeds comfort and confidence, and the 2016 ACT will be substantially the same as it is today (with the exception of an upcoming revision to the ACT's essay). Comfort and confidence lead to better performance. If taking the ACT is like driving a familiar car, taking the new SAT will be a bit like switching to a manual transmission for the first time.

Have a Testing Plan

Today’s rising sophomores, the class of 2017, will be the first to encounter the new test, scheduled to debut in March 2016. They will have to decide not only between the SAT and ACT but also between an old SAT in fall of 2015 and/or a new SAT in spring of 2016.

When it comes to college admissions tests, we have always counseled students and parents to maintain perspective and to craft a testing plan early in the process – a plan that addresses which tests you’re going to take, when you’re going to take them, and how and when you’re going to prepare for them. There is no one “right” plan for everyone, but there is an optimal plan for each student and family. A good testing plan puts the student’s well-being front and center, prioritizes school work, and doesn’t give the tests more life than they deserve. Having a plan reduces anxiety and last-minute scurrying and, ironically, allows for changes to the plan when circumstances dictate. For the class of 2017, the advice remains unchanged but perhaps takes on even more importance.

Old SAT in the Fall 2015?

Students, parents, and counselors will naturally consider the old SAT in the fall 2015. After all, it’s familiar. While that timeline for testing is right for some students – certain athletic recruits, high scoring students, and spring semester abroad students – our usual advice and cautions are still in play. In most cases, fall testing is not optimal for middle and lower scoring juniors. They’re not ready, and they run the risk of having their confidence shaken. Moreover, students typically peak at the end of junior year and fall of senior year. This should stand to reason, given that time in the classroom is the best form of test preparation, particularly for a redesigned test that will be more closely aligned to what students are doing in school.

Looking Ahead

There is, of course, much yet to be revealed, and there are questions that won’t be answered anytime soon: How will the change affect college admissions policies? What is the fate of Subject Tests? Will colleges still require them with a new SAT that is more achievement and curriculum-oriented? What will the concordance between old and new SAT look like? Between new SAT and ACT? Will a 620 on the old SAT equate to a 620 on the new SAT? How long before the test goes online?

In the meantime, we at Summit are hopeful that the College Board’s goals for the SAT redesign are achieved. A test that is more relevant and less gimmicky dovetails well with our own educational philosophy and pedagogy.

Charlie O’Hearn is President and Founder of Summit Educational Group, Inc, a 26-year old test preparation and tutoring company serving students and schools in the Northeast.

*https://www.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/test_specifications_for_the_redesigned_sat_na3.pdf
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Suggested ACT/SAT Testing Guidelines for Class of 2017

	Most Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High Scoring • Recruited Athletes • Spring Semester Abroad
Sophomore Fall	Old PSAT (October 2014). Some schools have decided not to offer.	Old PSAT (October 2014). Some schools have decided not to offer.
Soph/Jr Summer	Take practice tests to begin planning process, but understand that ACT-new SAT comparison won’t be possible. old SAT, new SAT, ACT	Take practice tests to begin planning process, but understand that ACT-new SAT comparison won’t be possible. old SAT, new SAT, ACT

Junior Fall	New PSAT (October 2015)	New PSAT (October 2015)
Junior Winter/Spring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feb/Apr/June ACTs (1x or 2x) • Consider skipping new SAT • Old SAT/ACT in fall or early winter • Consider 2nd ACT in Apr/June • New SAT only if ACT is “wrong” test 	
Senior Fall	ACT and/or new SAT as needed	ACT and/or new SAT as needed

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