

SAT to Add 'Adversity Score' That Rates Students' Hardships

By **Anemona Hartocollis**

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The College Board, the company that administers the SAT exam taken by about two million students a year, will for the first time assess students not just on their math and verbal skills, but also on their educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, entering a fraught battle over the fairness of high-stakes testing.

The company announced on Thursday that it will include a new rating, which is widely being referred to as an “adversity score,” of between 1 and 100 on students’ test results. An average score is 50, and higher numbers mean more disadvantage. The score will be calculated using 15 factors, including the relative quality of the student’s high school and the crime rate and poverty level of the student’s neighborhood.

The rating will not affect students’ test scores, and will be reported only to college admissions officials as part of a larger package of data on each test taker.

The new measurement brings the College Board squarely into the raging national debate over fairness and merit in college admissions, one fueled by enduring court clashes on affirmative action, a federal investigation into a sprawling admissions cheating ring and a booming college preparatory industry that promises results to those who can pay.

Colleges have long tried to bring diversity of all sorts to their student bodies, and they have raised concerns over whether the SAT, once seen as a test of merit, can be gamed by families who hire expensive consultants and tutors. Higher scores have been found to correlate with students from wealthier families and those with better-educated parents.

“Merit is all about resourcefulness,” David Coleman, chief executive of the College Board, said in an interview on Thursday. “This is about finding young people who do a great deal with what they’ve been given. It helps colleges see students who may not have scored as high, but when you look at the environment that they have emerged from, it is amazing.”

A growing number of colleges, in response to criticism of standardized tests, have made it optional for applicants to submit scores from the SAT or the ACT. Admissions officers have also tried for years to find ways to gauge the hardships that students have had to overcome, and to predict which students will do well in college despite lower test scores.

The new adversity score is meant to be one such gauge. It is part of a larger rating system called the Environmental Context Dashboard that the College Board will include in test results it reports to schools. A trial version of the tool has already been field-tested by 50 colleges. The plan to roll it out officially, to 150 schools this year and more widely in 2020, was first reported by The Wall Street Journal.

But the score met instantly with an array of criticisms, from worries that it created a new cast of winners and losers in the admissions process, to concerns that it papered over an inherently flawed test. College counselors said they were swamped with calls from parents on Thursday as word of the new measurement got out.

“Anxiety’s ratcheting up,” said Hafeez Lakhani, a college admissions coach in New York. “People are worried about never being good enough.”

He said he had received emails from parents asking whether their children’s hard work in preparing for the SAT “would be completely negated just because we happen to have some means.”

Mr. Lakhani said that in his view, colleges were already doing a good job of considering adversity, as indicated by rising numbers of first-generation and low-income students, especially at elite colleges.

Others felt that the College Board’s efforts were misplaced. Robert Schaeffer, the public education director of FairTest, a group that is critical of standardized testing, said that if the SAT needed a sophisticated contextual framework to make it valid, then “it’s a concession that it’s not a good test.”

He added that the adversity score would not capture individual situations, like a child who was middle class but whose mother was addicted to opioids. “Mentally adjusting scores based on where a student came from and what obstacles she overcame is common practice,” Mr. Schaeffer said. “It’s this attempt to do it in a quantitative manner that opens up many other issues.”

News of the plan comes amid a sweeping college admissions scandal, in which 50 people across multiple states have been charged. Prosecutors said the scheme included tactics like fraudulently obtaining extra time on ACT or SAT tests, changing test answers and having a ringer take exams for students.

[A student whose father paid \$400,000 to get him into Georgetown is now suing the school for threatening to expel him.]

Universities like Harvard, Yale, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Texas at Austin are also facing challenges to their affirmative action policies, either in the courts or through federal investigations. Many schools are preparing for the possibility that a newly conservative Supreme Court will take a hard line on the use of race in admissions decisions. The College Board says race is not factored into adversity scores.

David Hawkins, the executive director for educational content and policy at the National Association for College Admission Counseling, said he believed that overworked admissions officers would welcome a more standardized measure of hardship and disadvantage.

“I think this is done with at least one eye to the legal considerations that admissions officers are subjected to, the long history of lawsuits about race and ethnicity,” Mr. Hawkins said.

Adam Mortara, a lawyer for Students for Fair Admissions, which is suing Harvard for what it says are discriminatory practices against Asian applicants, said he saw the adversity measure as a viable alternative to race-conscious admissions.

“This is what will give them a tool to achieve true diversity when and if they decide to stop using race, or if we’re ultimately successful in getting race out of admissions,” Mr. Mortara said, adding that he was speaking for himself, not his client.

[Read about Harvard's once-secret admissions process, which was unveiled in an affirmative action trial.]

Yale has used the College Board's new tool for two admissions cycles, said Jeremiah Quinlan, the dean of undergraduate admissions. He said it provided the same context that Yale has been looking at for decades, but does so in a standardized way across schools and applicants that is very helpful.

"There's nothing wrong with the SAT score," Mr. Quinlan said. "It just helps contextualize the SAT score for us. When you're able to see a student's SAT score and then compare it to the SAT scores of the other students at the school, that can be powerful to identify a truly transcendent student."

He added, however, that while Yale was seeking race-neutral tools for admission, he did not think they were enough to replace the consideration of race in some cases.

The adversity score is based on data from the Census Bureau, crime data from the F.B.I., and other sources, College Board officials said. It accounts for circumstances like wealthier students going to magnet schools in poorer areas, as well as the reverse. But Mr. Coleman said that these were likely to be outliers.

"It is much more common that poor people live in poor neighborhoods than the wealthy do," Mr. Coleman said. "But growing up in a neighborhood with less violence gives you advantages in your academic work."

Mr. Coleman said the tool ignored race because its premise was that race was less of a predictor of success at school than what he called resourcefulness. "It turns out in America that within every racial group — Asian, white, black, Latino — there are large numbers of people who show resourcefulness within very limited circumstances," he said.

Correction: May 16, 2019

An earlier version of this article misspelled the given name of one of the parents charged in the college admissions scandal. She is Lori Loughlin, not Laurie.

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