

Colleges and Universities that Do Not Require SAT® or ACT Scores

Glenn B. Milewski and Wayne J. Camara

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, conflicting reports have circulated about the number of colleges and universities that have made standardized tests optional, rather than required, for admission. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, or FairTest, has widely publicized a list of 391¹ colleges and universities that, it claims, do not require admissions tests for admitting substantial numbers of students into bachelor degree programs (<http://www.fairtest.org/optstat.htm>, n.d.). In this study, we reanalyze the number of such institutions by examining colleges and universities that have SAT^{®2} or ACT optional policies for making admissions decisions. Additionally, we compare the characteristics of institutions on the FairTest list—including the type of institutions and the competitiveness of their admissions policies—with all four-year U.S. colleges. Highlights from the *Trends in College Admission* surveys (Breland, Maxey, Gernand, Cumming, and Trapani, 2002) that pertain to this analysis are also provided.

FAIRTEST'S SAT OR ACT OPTIONAL INSTITUTIONS: A REANALYSIS

The College Board's Annual Survey of Colleges (ASC) functions as a method of collecting

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detailed information about postsecondary institutions that offer undergraduate degree programs. This information provides valuable

long-term trend data on institutional characteristics across the nation. In 2001, 1,935 four-year institutions were surveyed, and roughly 85 percent of these institutions responded (College Board, 2001). Included in the ASC are questions concerning test requirements for admission.

FairTest claims that they employed the same methods to identify SAT and ACT optional institutions as were used to generate this report; both FairTest and the authors of this study reviewed the 38th edition of the *College Handbook* (College Board, 2001), searched Internet sites, and conducted telephone interviews. However, we found that only 173 of the 390 institutions on the FairTest list did not require the SAT or ACT for making admissions decisions. The remaining 217 do use the SAT or ACT for admission for most or all of their applicants.

As shown in Table 1, 55.6 percent of the 390 FairTest institutions have some kind of SAT or ACT requirement. Fifty-two of the FairTest institutions (13.3%) require the SAT or ACT for all applicants and have no stated SAT/ACT optional policy in place. In addition, 165 of the 390 listed institutions (42.3%) require the SAT or ACT for a significant proportion, or a majority of, their applicants. For example, many postsecondary institutions will accept students with a strong high school record, regardless of their standardized test scores. This type of policy exists because research has found that it is highly probable that a student who performs extremely well in high school will also succeed in college (Camara and Echternacht, 2000). However, even these institutions may make use of test scores when needed; Table 1 reveals that 21.8 percent of the institutions on the FairTest list

¹ While FairTest claims to have compiled a list of 391 schools, we counted only 390 schools on its Web site. The remainder of this report will provide the results of analyses performed on the 390 schools included in its list.

² Prior to 1993-94, the College Board offered the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). This test was replaced by the SAT I: Reasoning Test. In this paper SAT is used to refer to both the earlier test and its replacement for consistency.

SAT-ACT Requirement	Frequency	Percent
Required for admission	52	13.3%
Required if other criteria not met	85	21.8%
SAT/ACT or another test required for placement	32	8.2%
Required for some applicants		
For out-of-state, home-schooled, select majors	35	9.0%
Unless another admissions test taken	13	3.3%
Total number of institutions with some test requirement	217	55.6%
Optional	173	44.4%
Grand Total	390	

require the SAT or ACT for applicants that do not meet other criteria (e.g., if a student does not rank in the top 10 percent of the high school class, earn a high school GPA greater than 3.0, etc.). There is a strong likelihood that most applicants to institutions with this type of admissions policy will be required to submit test scores since these criteria are usually very rigorous. A few institutions (3.3%) on the FairTest list will accept another admissions test in lieu of the SAT or ACT, including the SAT II: Subject Tests, the Career Programs Assessment test (CPAt), or the College Board’s ACCUPLACER®.

Other institutions require admissions tests for small segments of their applicants. For example, 9 percent of the original 390 institutions require the SAT or ACT for out-of-state or home-schooled students, or for those who apply to special degree programs or special schools within a university or college system. And while not required for admission, the SAT, ACT, or another

test is required by 32 (8.2%) of the institutions on the FairTest list for placement purposes.

It is clear from the analyses presented above that, of the original 390 institutions on the FairTest list, only 44.4 percent (173 colleges) actually have an SAT/ACT optional admissions policy for the majority of their applicants. In the next section, we examine the characteristics of these institutions in more detail.

SAT/ACT OPTIONAL POLICIES BY INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

When looking at SAT/ACT optional institutions, it can be useful to examine their institutional characteristics. The following section describes the characteristics of the 173 institutions on the FairTest list by the type of institution (e.g., public, private) in Table 2 and competitiveness in Table 3.

Institution Type	Frequency	Percent
Public Four-Year Technical College or University	2	1.2%
Public Four-Year Liberal Arts College or University	20	11.6%
Private Four-Year Technical, Art, or Music College or University	23	13.3%
Private Four-Year Liberal Arts College or University	64	37.0%
Private Four-Year Liberal Arts College or University with a Religious Affiliation	20	11.6%
Private Four-Year Bible College or University	10	5.8%
Proprietary Four-Year College or University	34	19.7%
Total	173	

TABLE 3
BARRON'S ADMISSION SELECTOR RATING FOR THE 173 COLLEGES INCLUDED IN THE FAIRTEST LIST THAT DO NOT REQUIRE THE SAT OR ACT FOR ADMISSION

Institution Type	Frequency	Percent
Most Competitive	2	1.2%
Highly Competitive	5	2.9%
Very Competitive	5	2.9%
Competitive	12	6.9%
Less Competitive	28	16.2%
Noncompetitive	23	13.3%
Special	28	16.2%
Not Rated	70	40.5%
Total	173	

TABLE 4
A COMPARISON OF ADMISSION SELECTIVITY BETWEEN THE 173 COLLEGES INCLUDED IN THE FAIRTEST LIST THAT DO NOT REQUIRE THE SAT OR ACT FOR ADMISSION AND ALL FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES IN 2001

Admission Selectivity	Percent of SAT-ACT Optional Schools (n = 173)	Percent of all Four-Year Colleges (n = 1,883)
Admit less than 50 percent of applicants	6.4%	7.1%
Admit 50 to 75 percent of applicants	9.2%	23.2%
Admit 75 percent or more applicants	13.9%	34.2%
Open admission	27.2%	3.5%
No response	43.4%	32.1%

Type of Institution

The majority (60.2%) of the 173 institutions on the FairTest list that do not require the SAT or ACT are either public or private (with or without a religious affiliation) liberal arts colleges (see Table 2).

Proprietary, four-year colleges or universities comprise 19.7 percent and private non-proprietary, four-year, technical, art, or music colleges or universities comprise 13.3 percent of the 173 colleges that do not require the SAT. (A proprietary college is a private institution operated by its owners as a profit-making enterprise [College Board, 2001].) Many of the proprietary institutions are art or technical schools, which might include agricultural or engineering colleges or universities. In contrast, 47.9 percent of all four-year U.S. colleges in 2001 (n = 1,883) are liberal arts colleges, 7.0 percent are proprietary colleges, and 7.1 percent are private nonproprietary technical, art, or music colleges. These national percentages by institution

type are significantly smaller than those for the 173 colleges on the FairTest list that do not require the SAT or ACT for admission, which suggests that liberal arts colleges, proprietary colleges, and private nonproprietary technical, art, or music colleges are more likely to have an SAT or ACT optional admissions policy.

Institutional Competitiveness

A summary of the Profiles of American Colleges (2001) in Table 3 reveals that most (86.2%) of the 173 institutions on the FairTest list that do not require the SAT/ACT of any students were rated by Barron's as being less competitive, noncompetitive, special, or were not rated at all. Institutions that are not competitive, or that are less competitive, are less likely to rely on the SAT or ACT to make admissions decisions than are more selective institutions, which may explain why the SAT or ACT is not required for admission at these 173

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colleges. SAT or ACT test scores may be used to inform placement decisions and academic advisement at these institutions, however. Among all four-year colleges, Barron's rated 51.2 percent as either less competitive, noncompetitive, special, or not rated; this percentage is significantly lower than the 86.2 percent reported for the 173 SAT or ACT optional colleges. This finding suggests that colleges that require the SAT or ACT will tend to be more competitive.

Another way to assess competitiveness is to examine the selectivity of an institution in the admissions process. Selectivity is typically determined by the number of individuals accepted divided by the number that apply to a given institution. Table 4 compares selectivity among all four-year colleges to selectivity among the 173 FairTest institutions that do not require the SAT or ACT. Many institutions did not provide selectivity percentages. Nevertheless, the results for those institutions that *did* respond reveal that colleges that do not require the SAT or ACT accept significantly more applicants and are much more likely to have an open admissions policy.

TRENDS IN COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PRACTICES

A survey of undergraduate admissions policies, sponsored by ACT, Inc., the Association for Institutional Research (AIR), the College Board, Educational Testing Service (ETS), and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), was administered in 1979, 1985, 1992, and 2000 to assess trends in college admissions practices. In 2000, 1,828 public and private four-year institutions were surveyed and 962, or 52.6 percent, responded. The results are summarized in a report by Breland, et al. (2002).

Several results from this survey are pertinent here. First, most four-year institutions that responded to the survey reported that admissions test scores were routinely considered when making an overall judgment of admissibility for a given applicant, and were viewed as moderately to very important for admissions decisions. Additionally, admissions test requirements from 1979 to 2000 at public, four-year institutions have increased from 91 to 96 percent and remained constant between 91 and 92 percent at private, four-year institutions,

while “only about 5 percent of selective institutions did not require admission test scores in 2000 [and] about 75 percent reported routine use of admission test scores in reaching an overall judgment regarding admissibility” (Breland, et al., 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

Research on the characteristics of four-year colleges and universities in the United States generates a profile of the typical institution with an SAT/ACT optional admissions policy. First, these institutions tend to be liberal arts colleges, proprietary institutions, or technical schools, and many have an open admissions policy. Most institutions with an SAT/ACT optional policy tend to be less competitive than other colleges and universities, and have a nontraditional academic emphasis.

How can we explain the differences between our results and the FairTest results? We understand that different stakeholders will continue to use widely differing numbers when describing colleges and universities with optional standardized test policies for admissions, especially when these stakeholders have ideologically different values concerning admissions tests. Some groups prefer to count an institution as SAT/ACT optional if 10 to 20 percent of applicants are exempted from submitting test scores because of rank or high school GPA, or for majors in a select field (e.g., applicants to fine arts and music programs). Others insist that any institution with a policy exempting less than half of the applicants from submitting admissions test scores does not have a comprehensive optional policy.

Clearly, the FairTest list of 390 institutions with SAT/ACT optional admissions policies is misleading, if only because 52 of these institutions do, in fact, require admissions tests. Unfortunately, FairTest has been depicted as the authoritative source of information about institutions that do not require applicants to submit test scores for admission, and it is in this way that its list is most commonly misinterpreted and misused. FairTest does acknowledge that its “list includes colleges and universities...that do not use the SAT or ACT to make admissions decisions about a *substantial* [emphasis added] number of freshman applicants” (FairTest, 2001, ¶ 1) and that “some of the schools require all applicants to submit test scores whether or not they use the test scores to make admissions decisions” (FairTest, n.d., ¶ 1).

Illustrated in this study are several discrepancies with the list of SAT and ACT optional institutions developed by FairTest, and other conditions that directly impact perceptions about the number of SAT and ACT optional institutions:

- Results from longitudinal joint admissions surveys between 1979 and 2000 show that admissions test requirements have increased from 91 to 96 percent in public, four-year colleges and from 91 to 92 percent in private, four-year colleges in 2000.
- Fifty-two four-year institutions listed by FairTest as SAT and ACT optional do in fact require these admissions tests.
- Eighty-five additional institutions do require the SAT and ACT for substantial proportions of applications who do not meet other high academic standards, resulting in a majority of applicants submitting test scores at all or most of these institutions.
- Thirteen institutions listed as SAT and ACT optional require an admissions test, but will accept other tests such as the SAT II in lieu of SAT or ACT.
- Over 30 additional institutions require SAT and ACT for placement or early decision, and some other institutions require tests for application to specific degree programs.
- Most of the 173 colleges that do not require admissions test scores tend to be liberal arts colleges.
- Compared to all four-year colleges in the United States, significantly more applicants were accepted at the 173 colleges that do not require the SAT or ACT; these 173 colleges were also much more likely to have an open admissions policy.

It is imperative that the number of SAT/ACT optional institutions not be overestimated. In many cases, newspapers have already made this mistake, misinterpreting the FairTest list and ignoring the caveats and footnotes reported—see, for example, Mathews (2000), Staples (2000), Wilgoren (2000), Fletcher (2001), and Steele (2001). We hope that this report clarifies the claims made by FairTest and serves as a source of more accurate information.

The authors are Glenn B. Milewski, assistant research scientist, and Wayne J. Camara, vice president of research and development.

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