SAT: Pros and Cons
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Background

Among the US News top 50 liberal arts colleges (actually 51 schools in the list), 34 (66.7%) schools require the SAT I or ACT. 11 (21.6%) schools require both the SAT I and SAT II or the ACT, and 6 schools (11.8%) do not require either test but will consider scores if submitted. Schools that do not require the SAT or ACT are Bowdoin College, Bates College, Mount Holyoke College, Connecticut College, Bard College, and Dickinson College. Bowdoin is the only school in the top 20 that does not require the SAT or ACT. It is important to note that at Bowdoin (and perhaps others) all students are still required to submit SAT scores upon matriculation. The scores are used for validity studies to compare student performance among submitters and non-submitters.

Whitman College’s Use of the SAT

Whitman College currently requires all applicants to submit SAT or ACT scores. Test scores are used as one component in a holistic approach to evaluating applicants: high school grades, curriculum rigor, an interview, and writing samples are all used in addition to SAT scores. SAT scores alone will neither admit nor deny anyone. Writing samples and course rigor are much more likely than test scores to change the likelihood of admission.

The SAT is much more of a factor when awarding merit scholarships. Slightly less than half of the index used to determine merit scholarships comes from the SAT score, slightly less than half comes from high school GPA, and the rest of the index comes from other factors. Note that this index is not used for minority students, so the SAT is not a factor in whether or not minority students are given merit aid. Also, this index will change again this year, further diminishing the weight of test scores and high school GPA, and increasing the weight of writing and course selection.

Advantages to Using the SAT in Admission

Arguably, the effect of the SAT is greater in merit aid decisions, where the SAT is the factor that most affects the outcome. The SAT may also be an important factor to make merit aid decisions consistent across students.

Arguments for and against the use of the SAT are from a variety of sources that I have not cited.
among First-Year students who started at Whitman from 1996-1998, the median first semester GPA for students scoring over 1400 on the SAT was 3.51, while the median first semester GPA for students scoring below 1200 on the SAT was 2.89. Put simply, students who do well on the SAT are more likely to get better grades at Whitman, so the test is very useful in the admission process.

Table 1: Predictive power of the SAT at Whitman College for First Year students matriculating from 1996-1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAT Score</th>
<th>% Withdrawing</th>
<th>% Graduating</th>
<th>Median 1st Sem GPA</th>
<th>Median Cum GPA</th>
<th>Total N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 1200</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>76.1%</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200-1290</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1300-1390</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>81.4%</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400+</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>88.0%</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>80.1%</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1080</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The SAT is one of the only ways to compare students from different high schools in parts of the country. Because the test is completely standardized, everything is held constant so that comparisons between students from widely different backgrounds are possible. Studies have shown that the effects of SAT coaching are less than claimed by major commercial test preparation companies. Rather, the best way to do well on the SAT is to be a good student over the long term. Whitman’s Office of Admission finds the test useful because students with similar backgrounds and qualifications can be better evaluated by using the meaningful national scale that the SAT provides.

Bowdoin’s experience. Bowdoin reports that some high ability students from far away interpret the optional nature of test scores as a sign that Bowdoin is not as strong as it really is. Whitman already suffers from a version of this problem. [This information comes from a conversation John Bogley had with the admission office at Bowdoin].

Test scores are an important part of how we award merit scholarships. SAT scores are a key part of an index used to determine who is offered a merit scholarship and how much they are offered. In short, for this 3310 point index, a student’s SAT score can earn him or her up to 1600 points. High school GPA can also earn a student up to 1600 points, and the remaining 110 points are from other factors. The average Whitman student earns 1330 points on this scale from SAT scores, and 1540 points from high school GPA.

Disadvantages to Using the SAT in Admissions

SAT tends to show race and class biases. Nationally, minority students and students from lower income schools and homes tend to score lower on the SAT. Studies have shown that student test performance is influenced as much by family environment as it is by formal education. Course selection in high school is highly correlated with SAT verbal and math scores. In dropping the SAT requirement, one outcome could be that minority students who would have been denied admission because of their test scores will now be admitted. For incoming Whitman students (1996-1998 cohorts), there are small, but significant correlations between SAT score, race and
gender. Because we do not have data on students’ family income, it is not possible to look for correlations in that area, or for interactions between race and income.

Reliance on the SAT undermines a college’s ability to judge students on achievements as opposed to general aptitude. Actual achievements are what should matter most, because students should be judged on what they have accomplished during four years of high school. Focusing on the SAT draws attention away from students’ achievements. In addition, students and families place undo importance on scores, in contrast to the actual weight the SAT is given in making admissions decisions.

Case studies of schools that do not use the SAT show positive results. A case study of five schools that are “SAT optional” indicates that high school performance is the best available method for screening applicants, and that tests add little useful information to the high school record. Dropping tests can also lead to greater diversity because the focus on test scores can deter otherwise qualified minority, low-income, first generation, and other students from applying. Test-optional schools have not experienced particular difficulties recruiting and selecting their entering classes.

Making the SAT optional will give the college some publicity. By being the first in the Northwest to make the SAT option, and with the SAT in the news recently, we would probably receive some press from this decision and increase awareness of our school. However, it is anyone’s guess as to whether this press would be positive or negative.

Making the SAT optional will raise our First Year student profile. Because the students who do not do well on the SAT will be less likely to submit their scores, our mean, median, and middle 50% SAT scores will increase. Because the SAT is an important part of the US News selectivity measure, our ranking would probably go up.

Editorial Comments:

Comment #1
While reality cannot be reduced to a 1600 point scale, it is important to remember that the SAT is simply meant to be a standard that colleges can use to make decisions about applicants. Problems arise, however, when the SAT is used for standardization. The SAT should not be the final arbiter of whether or not a student is admitted, or used as an “easy eliminator.” Whitman’s method of using the SAT as one component in the applicant’s index seems an appropriate use of this tool. It is not used to admit or deny anyone, rather it is used as one indicator of a students ability to do well at Whitman. In this way, I think, we are able to use the SAT properly and admit students based on their achievements and aptitudes, and not be blinded by high or low test scores.

Comment #2
Mt. Holyoke College recently altered their admissions process to make the SAT optional. According to their website, they did this because they “take an individualized, holistic approach to education and to the admission process. Because the SAT does not measure the range of
intellectual and motivational qualities that our educational environment requires, we wish to de-emphasize the its role in our admission decisions.” And in another publication, “As long as the test is required, it assumes a larger role than it should in the eyes of perceivers and blurs the message we wish to send about Mt. Holyoke.”

To me, their decision is as much a political decision as an admission decision. An admission office can use the SAT as much or little as they desire. I do not understand how the presence of a test score can prevent or hinder admissions officers from gleaning all of the applicant’s personal qualities—I give our officers more credit than that. Not requiring the test seems more of a statement that disassociates the school from the hype and impersonal-ness that tends to surround the SAT, as opposed to an action that will genuinely help the admission office.

Comment #3
Any race bias in the SAT itself will be less important for the Whitman admission office because of the way the SAT is used. A student can do relatively poorly on the SAT, but demonstrate strong writing abilities, do well in high school, and still be admitted to Whitman. While SAT has much more impact in awarding merit scholarships, this does not affect minority students because of the generous minority scholarships Whitman offers.