



**National Association for  
College Admission Counseling**

*Guiding the way to higher education*

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# **Report of the Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission**

September 2008

National Association for College Admission Counseling





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September 2008

From the National Association for College Admission Counseling

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## Executive Summary

Over the past decade, standardized admission tests have become an increasingly important factor in undergraduate admission, as burgeoning numbers of applications have resulted in a more comprehensive approach to admission at many undergraduate institutions. At the same time, reforms in elementary and secondary education at both the state and federal level have elevated the importance of standardized tests as a tool to measure educational outcomes. Nevertheless, long-standing concerns with standardized tests have persisted, and the role of the ACT and SAT in determining who gains entry into the nation's colleges and universities continues to be a hotly debated topic. A growing number of postsecondary institutions have adopted "test-optional" admission policies, and stakeholder anxieties about the role of standardized tests have never been higher.

This Commission wishes to emphasize at the outset that a "one-size-fits-all" approach for the use of standardized tests in undergraduate admission does not reflect the realities facing our nation's many and varied colleges and universities. These institutions differ greatly in size, selectivity and mission. At some, standardized tests are important predictors of students' academic success, while at others, they add little compared to high school grades. Instead, the Commission focuses on five critical issues that affect all institutions, and offers recommendations (a summary of which is included at the conclusion of the report) related to the use of standardized tests in undergraduate admission and for more effective ways to serve our nation's students.

### Regularly Question and Reassess the Foundations and Implications of Standardized Test Requirements

- Although many colleges find benefit in using admission tests in admission decisions, it is the view of the Commission that there may be more colleges and universities that could make appropriate admission decisions without requiring standardized admission tests such as the ACT and SAT. The Commission encourages institutions to consider dropping the admission test requirements *if it is determined that the predictive utility of the test or the admission policies of the institution (such as open access) support that decision and if the institution believes that standardized test results would not be necessary for other reasons such as course placement, advising, or research.*
- Despite their prevalence in American high school culture, college admission exams—such as the SAT and ACT—may not be critical to making good admission decisions at many of the colleges and universities that use them. While the exams, used by a large majority of four-year colleges and universities to make admission decisions, provide useful information, colleges and universities may be better served by admission exams more closely linked to high school curriculum. There are tests that, at many institutions, are more predictive of first-year and overall grades in college and more closely linked to the high school curriculum, including the College Board's AP exams and Subject Tests as well as the International Baccalaureate examinations.
- What these tests have in common is that they—to a much greater extent than the SAT and ACT—measure knowledge of subject matter covered in high school courses; that there is currently very little expensive private test preparation associated with them, partly because high school class curricula are meant to prepare students for them; and that they are much less widely required by colleges than are the SAT and ACT.

- A possible future direction for college admission tests is the development of curriculum-based achievement tests designed in consultation with colleges, secondary schools and state and federal agencies. Such achievement tests have a number of attractive qualities. Their use in college admission sends a message to students that studying their course material in high school, not taking extracurricular test prep courses that tend to focus on test-taking skills, is the way to do well on admission tests and succeed in a rigorous college curriculum.
- The Commission recommends that NACAC offer its membership the opportunity to share validity studies and additional research upon which college and university administrators may continually reassess their own practices. Moreover, the Commission recommends that NACAC create a knowledge center where colleges and universities can share research in a manner that allows the association to serve as an unaffiliated clearinghouse for information about admission test validity. Finally, the Commission recommends that NACAC consider establishing a professional development opportunity for chief admission or enrollment officers to share best practice information about admission test policies and practices. Resources of this nature will allow for a discussion of research and practice at various types of institutions.

#### **Understand Test Preparation and Take Into Account Disparities Among Students With Differential Access to Preparation and Information About Admission Testing**

- As long as colleges and universities require standardized tests for admission, admission test preparation activities will thrive. The precise increase in scores as a result of test preparation for an individual is difficult to determine. However, all available academic research suggests that an overall point increase of between 20 and 30 points on the SAT appears to be standard for test preparation activities. This modest gain (on the old 1600 scale) is considerably less than the 100 point or more gains that are often accepted as conventional wisdom. The Commission believes NACAC can help ensure that students and families are aware of the findings of objective research on test preparation.
- To ensure that the Commission's work is informed by the most current research, NACAC has commissioned a new, comprehensive white paper on test preparation that will be available in early 2009. The Commission hopes that this paper will help to further research that will keep the public fully informed about test preparation.
- The Commission recommends that NACAC pursue relationships with academic researchers and foundations that may support an extended "objective assessment" of the effects of test coaching methods to provide current, unbiased information to colleges and universities. The Commission calls on stakeholders from all sectors of the standardized testing community—including test vendors and test preparation companies—to commit resources necessary to establishing an ongoing research program at NACAC to conduct periodic research into the effects of various methods of test preparation.
- Commission members agreed that the best form of test preparation is focused on core knowledge content and on skills that will help prepare students for their academic future. Members of the Commission agree that, due to the inevitability of test preparation, there are aspects of test preparation that may be considered best practice. Students, families, counselors, schools, or school districts

seeking appropriate test preparation for standardized admission tests should require that each of the following attributes are present in the test preparation program:

- Familiarity with test question format
  - Familiarity with test administration procedures
  - Alignment with skills necessary to master college preparatory coursework
  - Instruction in basic study habits and skills
- 
- The Commission recommends that high schools and other organizations submit research to NACAC with the purpose of establishing a trusted source for best practice and professional development. From this central knowledge base, college admission counseling professionals, supported by the association, can continually assess and share information about test preparation that is aligned with the development of student study skills, academic achievement, and test familiarization.

#### **Draw Attention to Possible Misuses of Admission Test Scores**

- The Commission believes that the time has come to end the practice of using “cutscores,” or minimum admission test scores, for merit aid eligibility. The scarcity of aid and the advantages affluent students have in gaining access to preparation for admission tests or pre-tests require us to demand change.
- Accordingly, the Commission calls upon the National Merit Scholarship Corporation to cease using non-contextualized PSAT scores as the “initial screen” for eligibility for National Merit scholar recognition or scholarships. While we commend the National Merit Scholarship Corporation for providing financial assistance for post-secondary education, the Commission believes that the National Merit Scholarship competition contributes to the misperception of test scores as sole measures of “merit” in a pervasive and highly visible manner.
- The Commission also asks that institutions that commit significant institutional resources towards funding National Merit Finalists and Semi-Finalists reconsider whether or not their commitments are founded upon solid and equitable principles given the current selection processes. The Commission also calls on the College Board to explain why it appears to condone the use of its PSAT as a cutscore, a practice that is clearly at odds with best practices in the use of test scores.
- The Commission believes that, as tests designed to provide information about individuals to colleges and universities, the SAT and ACT were never designed as measures of the quality of an institution of higher education. Accordingly, the Commission encourages U.S. News and World Report to eliminate test scores as a measure of institutional quality. The Commission believes that the continued use of admission test scores as college ranking criteria creates undue pressure on admission offices to pursue increasingly high test scores.
- The Commission takes issue with bond ratings that use standardized admission tests in their institutional analyses for two primary reasons. First, the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, as well as the guidelines for use of the SAT and ACT, maintain clear restrictions against using admission test scores for purposes other than those for which the test is designed. Neither SAT nor ACT has ever

claimed that admission test scores are reliable indicators of institutional financial health. While there is undoubtedly a correlation between institutional financial resources and test scores, the Commission believes that the use of such scores confuses correlation with causation, and as such, comprises an inappropriate use of test scores. Second, the Commission believes that the continued use of admission test scores as bond rating criteria creates undue pressure on admission offices to pursue increasingly high test scores. While ratings firms may suggest that higher scores indicate more flexibility in times of scarcity, there is little evidence to suggest that institutions lower their test scores in such instances.

- The Commission recommends that states refrain from using standardized admission tests without significant modification as evaluators of student achievement, particularly when high stakes accountability measures are attached. Admission tests were not designed for this purpose, and are not sufficiently tailored to measure progress toward explicit measures for learning in a given state.
- A substantial body of research exists that can help states, school districts, and schools design measurements of “college readiness.” In addition, while admission tests are useful to many college and university admission offices, they are second to a student’s performance in challenging coursework. Therefore, efforts to ensure that schools are preparing their students for college should not look to a single admission exam for an assessment of their progress, but to the strength of the school’s curriculum and students’ performance in those courses as their primary indicator.
- The testing agencies, including the College Board and ACT, all publish and promote guidelines for appropriate use of their testing products. As an additional measure, the Commission believes that a periodic usage audit may be necessary and desirable to protect against misuse of these organizations’ testing products. There is precedent in the College Board’s recently-initiated audit of Advanced Placement programs at high schools across the United States. The Commission believes that a similar audit by the College Board and ACT may help limit misuse of tests by bringing the two organizations’ combined weight to bear on those institutions and organizations that misuse admission test scores.

**Establish Opportunities for Colleges and High Schools, As Well As College Admission Counseling Professionals, to Educate Themselves About the Appropriate Use of Standardized Test Scores**

- The Commission recommends that NACAC develop a fundamental training program for college admission officers, school counselors, and other college admission professionals to ensure best professional practice in the consideration and implementation of standardized admission test policies. This fundamental training should be provided by a source other than the testing agencies, whose training is most appropriate for the specific use of their own products.

**Understand Differences in Test Scores Among Different Groups of People, and Continually Assess the Use of Standardized Test Scores Relative to the Broader Social Goals of Higher Education**

- Researchers who study test bias focus on whether different items on the tests produce differing results across ethnic groups. The Commission is in agreement that the test’s questions generally measure what they purport to measure. A substantial body of literature indicates that test bias has been largely mitigated in today’s admission tests due to extensive research and development of question items on both the SAT and ACT.

- Research suggests that admission test scores may be over-predictive of first year GPA for some minority students, and may be under-predictive of first year GPA for some female students. Research also suggests that differences among racial/ethnic and socio-economic subgroups persist across a wide range of educational indicators, including high school grades, state testing, and national tests.
- The performance of students with limited English proficiency is a key consideration for colleges and universities, particularly as demographic changes in the U.S. are likely to result in greater numbers of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students seeking admission to college. Predicting first-year grades for such students is extremely difficult.
- The Commission understands that as practitioners, college admission counseling professionals will not soon settle the debate on the fairness of admission testing. However, some control clearly rests in the hands of postsecondary institutions to account for inequities that are reflected in test scores and other criteria for college admission. That choice, however, is constrained by the tendency of stakeholders inside and outside of the university to attach inappropriately high stakes to admission test scores.
- The Commission is concerned that test scores appear to calcify differences based on class, race/ethnicity, and parental educational attainment. To come to some resolution, the Commission agrees that without confusing correlation with causation, admission offices must remain aware that test score differences persist among already under-served populations. Part of the public mission of colleges and universities is to ensure that differences that are not attributable to a student's ability to succeed academically at an institution are mitigated in the admission process.

#### **A Future Direction for Admission Testing**

- Colleges most often determine the utility of admission test scores by assessing how predictive they are of first-year grades. The Commission wishes to underscore that as such, standardized admission tests should not be considered as sole predictors of true college success. Commission members unanimously agreed that college success is a term of sufficient breadth that it includes degree attainment, a wide range of GPAs, and the acquisition of experiences and skills that will propel a student into the workforce, graduate education, or responsible citizenship. For this broad definition of success, standardized admission tests—as well as other individual factors—are insufficient predictors of a student's likelihood of overall success.
- There are tests that, at many institutions, are both predictive of first-year and overall grades in college and more closely linked to the high school curriculum, including the College Board's AP exams and Subject Tests as well as the International Baccalaureate examinations. What these tests have in common is that they are—to a much greater extent than the SAT and ACT—achievement tests, which measure content covered in high school courses; that there is currently very little expensive private test preparation associated with them, partly because high school class curricula are meant to prepare students for them; and that they are much less widely required by colleges than are the SAT and ACT.

- Not all state high school exams are sufficient to measure the prospect of success in postsecondary education. However, if such tests can be developed so they predict college grades as well as or better than the SAT, ACT, AP, IB exams, and Subject Tests do, the Commission would urge colleges to use them in the admission evaluation process.
- Such achievement tests have a number of attractive qualities. Their use in college admission sends a message to students that studying their course material in high school—not taking extracurricular test prep courses that tend to focus on test-taking skills—is the way to do well on admission tests. Using achievement tests would encourage high schools to broaden and improve curricula, and would promote a sense of transparency about what tests measure. Further alignment of college entrance testing and preparation with high school curricula would also reduce the inequities inherent in the current system of preparation for and administration of college admission tests.
- Individually, colleges will always try to build the strongest entering classes they can, often as measured by test scores, but collectively they bear a larger responsibility to make the American educational system as good, as fair, and as socially beneficial as possible. By using the SAT and ACT as one of the most important admission tools, many institutions are gaining what may be a marginal ability to identify academic talent beyond that indicated by transcripts, recommendations, and achievement test scores. In contrast, the use of state level end-of-high school achievement tests, College Board Subject Tests and AP tests, or International Baccalaureate exams, would create a powerful incentive for American high schools to improve their curricula and their teaching. Colleges would lose little or none of the information they need to make good choices about entering classes, while benefiting millions of American students who do not enroll in highly selective colleges and positively affecting teaching and learning in America's schools.
- A possible future direction for college admission tests is widespread adoption of tests that more fully reflect subject matter from high school courses. Tests administered by states may provide valuable information for admission purposes, particularly in public institutions that predominantly serve a given state's population. However, such tests must be designed to measure a proficiency level that is more reflective of college readiness than minimum competency.

## Commission Background

Over the past decade, standardized admission tests have become an increasingly important factor in undergraduate admission, as burgeoning numbers of applications have resulted in a more comprehensive approach to admission at many undergraduate institutions. At the same time, reforms in elementary and secondary education at both the state and federal level have elevated the importance of standardized tests as a tool to measure educational outcomes. Nevertheless, long-standing concerns about standardized tests have persisted, and the role of the ACT and SAT in determining who gains entry into the nation's colleges and universities continues to be a hotly debated topic. A growing number of postsecondary institutions have adopted "test-optional" admission policies, and stakeholder anxieties about the role of standardized tests have never been higher.

### Purpose of Commission

Against this backdrop, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) appointed a Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission to make recommendations about standardized admission test use based on the core observations made by the National Research Council in its 1999 *Myths and Tradeoffs* report. The NACAC Commission was convened by the Board of Directors to represent the diverse perspectives of secondary and postsecondary institutions in the United States, as well as the college admission counseling professionals who work to assist students with the transition to college.

According to the *Myths and Tradeoffs* report, the key benefits of standardized tests include:

- Efficient source of comparative information for admission offices for which there is currently no substitute
- Valuable efficiencies for institutions that must review thousands of applications
- A high score for under-performing students may "lead admission officers to consider acceptance for a student who would otherwise be rejected"

The report also articulated key drawbacks of standardized tests, particularly regarding inappropriate use of tests, including:

- Admission policies and practices not derived from and clearly linked to an institution's overarching intellectual and other goals
- Use of test scores in admission that do not serve institutional goals
- Lack of clear articulation of the goals of standardized test use by colleges
- Use of scores as more precise and accurate measures than they are and reliance on test scores for making "fine distinctions among applicants"

The purpose of the NACAC Commission's work is to determine how NACAC, institutions of higher education, and other stakeholders interpret and implement policies or practices with regard to the use of standardized tests in undergraduate admission. The extent to which current practice reflects the conclusions made in the *Myths and Tradeoffs* report provided a framework for the Commission's discussions. The resulting recommendations will be referred to the NACAC leadership and members to develop into a variety of programs and to stimulate a vigorous public discussion of the many critical issues surrounding standardized testing.

**About NACAC**

NACAC is an Arlington, VA-based education association of more than 11,000 secondary school counselors, independent counselors, college admission and financial aid officers, enrollment managers, and organizations that work with students as they make the transition from high school to postsecondary education. The association, founded in 1937, is committed to maintaining high standards that foster ethical and social responsibility among those involved in the transition process, as outlined in the NACAC Statement of Principles of Good Practice. More information about NACAC is available at [www.nacacnet.org](http://www.nacacnet.org).

## 2007-2008 Commission Roster

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## Introduction

A discussion of any single factor in college admission decisions is incomplete without considering the rich context in which such decisions exist. Providing context for college admission decisions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires consideration of changes in postsecondary educational institutions, differentiated tools to accommodate diverse admission practices, the changing student population, and an assessment of the state of current admission practice. Each of the numerous factors that contribute to college admission decisions has its own history, purpose, and form. Of those, perhaps none attract as much attention as standardized admission tests. Before beginning a discussion of standardized tests in college admission today, the Commission believes it is important to consider the historical processes that have brought us to this point.

### The Evolution of Selective Admission

Throughout the twentieth century, colleges and universities in the United States evolved in different ways. Some institutions have become increasingly selective, some have settled into niches that offer focused educational opportunities, and still others have organized themselves to serve as much of the growing population of students interested in postsecondary education as possible. The resulting patchwork of colleges and universities is as diverse as the student population it attempts to serve. The nature of admission requirements at colleges and universities is similarly diverse, so attempts to generalize about universal standards or processes in undergraduate admission are difficult.

The admission mechanism that is most familiar to Americans today, a combination of academic and non-academic criteria, did not take shape until after World War I. (Wechsler, 1977) Prior to World War I, students applying to college typically sat for an interview and/or institutionally-administered exam at one or two colleges. The number of students expected to enroll in college then was drastically smaller than the number of students applying to college today. Between the late 1800s and early 1900s, colleges of varying types struggled to establish admission policies that would best serve their institutional mission. In the late 1800s, some agricultural colleges briefly experimented with reducing or eliminating admission standards to bolster enrollment. (Rudolph, 1990) These institutions later abandoned such approaches for a more basic measure of educational attainment as a primary admission standard in order to serve the largest number of qualified students. Around the same time, institutions that had provided a classical education posed the question, “why expand at a time when prestige [is] no longer measured by numbers, but by selectivity?” (Wechsler, 1977) Accordingly, these institutions set out to establish stricter admission standards to limit enrollment to students who met high academic standards. In this early phase of the evolution of higher education in America we find the roots of the variance among colleges and universities that persist to the modern era.

As more students sought entry into postsecondary education, institutions initiated two general and distinct efforts to organize admission standards within and across institutions. A group of Midwestern colleges, led by the University of Michigan, initiated the high school certificate system, precursor of today’s modern public high school transcript, to establish a reliable, certified record of a student’s academic qualifications. (Wechsler, 1977) A group of colleges on the East coast collaborated to form the College Entrance Examination Board, precursor to today’s SAT admission exam and the College Board (the organization that administers the SAT). (Rudolph, 1990) Soon after the establishment of the College Board, the ACT (formerly American College Testing) was founded in the Midwest as a similar effort to standardize admission requirements in the form of a single admission test. (Zwick, 2007)

**[T]he race for numbers is over, and...the race for quality has begun. A few years ago our colleges and universities were competing for students, and great emphasis was laid upon "healthy growth." Now we are beginning to limit our numbers, to compete only for the best students, and to point with pride to the multitude that we now turn away.**

**-- Frank Aydelotte, President, Swarthmore College (1928)**

**For the present our primary task is that of taking all types of young people and discovering their powers.**

**-- Alexander Meiklejohn, President, University of Wisconsin (1927)  
(Wechsler, 1977)**

After World War II, the selective college admission mechanism that most Americans recognize—consideration of high school grades, college preparatory coursework, admission test scores, recommendations, personal essays, extracurricular activities, and other non-academic factors in the admission decision—evolved to its present state.

Standardized admission tests (SAT and ACT) are not the most important factor in college admission decisions. High school grades in college preparatory classes have long been the most important criterion. While grades are generally the most reliable predictor of first-year academic performance in college, high schools employ differential grading techniques, making it challenging to assess the qualifications of students from different high schools with different grading standards and course strength. As NACAC survey research indicates, colleges and universities have attributed increasing importance to standardized tests over the past decade, even while a large number of colleges have dropped the requirement that students submit test scores. Beyond grades and test scores, other factors—including many unrelated to academic achievement—complete the list of attributes colleges consider when reading a student's application for admission. (See table next page)

Colleges across the board indicate that high school grades in college preparatory courses are the most important factor in admission. And while standardized admission tests are consistently rated as the second most important factor in admission, admission officers generally agree that high grades and low test scores are preferable to the converse. A large body of research, some of which is conducted by testing agencies, suggests that grades and test scores may be used interchangeably. (Bridgeman, 2004; Camara, 2006; Hezlet, 2001; Kobrin, 2002) There is an equally substantive body of research, however, that suggests high school grades are better indicators of grades beyond the freshman year in college than admission test scores. (Geiser, 2007)

**Percentage of colleges attributing “considerable importance” to factors in the admission decision: 1993 to 2006**

|  | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Grades in college prep/strength of curriculum <sup>1</sup> | 82%  | 83%  | 80%  | 78%  | 81%  | 79%  | 84%  | 78%  | 80%  | 76%  | 78%  | 80%  | 74%  | --   |
| Grades in college prep                                     | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | 76   |
| Strength of curriculum                                     | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | 62   |
| Admission test scores                                      | 46   | 43   | 47   | 48   | 50   | 51   | 54   | 58   | 52   | 57   | 61   | 60   | 59   | 60   |
| Grades in all courses                                      | 39   | 37   | 41   | 38   | 41   | 44   | 42   | 43   | 45   | 50   | 54   | 57   | 54   | 51   |
| Essay  | 14   | 17   | 21   | 20   | 18   | 19   | 19   | 20   | 20   | 19   | 23   | 25   | 23   | 28   |
| Class rank   | 42   | 40   | 39   | 36   | 34   | 32   | 32   | 34   | 31   | 35   | 33   | 28   | 31   | 23   |
| Counselor rec.   | 22   | 20   | 19   | 17   | 20   | 16   | 18   | 16   | 17   | 16   | 17   | 18   | 17   | 21   |
| Demonstrated interest                                      | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | 7    | 7    | 15   | 21   |
| Teacher rec.   | 21   | 19   | 18   | 19   | 19   | 16   | 14   | 14   | 16   | 14   | 18   | 18   | 17   | 20   |
| Interview  | 12   | 12   | 15   | 13   | 11   | 11   | 9    | 11   | 11   | 10   | 9    | 9    | 9    | 10   |
| Extracurricular activities/work <sup>2</sup>               | 6    | 6    | 7    | 6    | 6    | 4    | 5    | 7    | 6    | 7    | 7    | 8    | 8    | --   |
| Extracurricular activities                                 | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | 8    |
| Work   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | 3    |
| Subject tests (AP, IB)                                     | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | 6    | 7    | 5    | 7    | 8    |
| State exams  | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | 6    | 7    | 6    | 7    | 6    |
| SAT II scores  | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | --   | 5    |

-- Data are not available.

<sup>1</sup> On the 2006 survey, grades in college prep courses and strength of curriculum were listed as two separate factors. In previous years, one factor was listed as grades in college prep courses/strength of curriculum.

<sup>2</sup> On the 2006 survey, extracurricular activities and work were listed as two separate factors. In previous years, one factor was listed as work/extracurricular activities.

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Surveys, 1993 through 2006.

There are limitations to what admission tests measure, a point on which the Commission is in agreement. A growing field of research, in education and psychology, suggests different approaches to evaluation that may allow for broader and more inclusive review of individual talents. The theory of multiple intelligences, for instance, suggests that “human cognitive competence is better described in terms of a set of abilities, talents, or mental skills” called “intelligences.” (Gardner, 2006) Work is also underway to develop non-cognitive measures for potential use by colleges and universities to help explain lingering test score differences between subgroups of test takers. The term “non-cognitive” refers to “variables relating to adjustment, motivation, and

perceptions, rather than the traditional verbal and quantitative (often called cognitive) areas typically measured by standardized tests.” (Sedlacek, 2004) Because the purpose of this Commission is to discuss the use of standardized admission tests in undergraduate admission, this report covers those tests currently in use.

While we can generalize about the relative importance of factors in the admission decision across colleges and universities, (Hawkins, 2007) this Commission stresses that as a foundation for discussing the use of standardized admission tests for undergraduate admission, the varying form, function, and mission of colleges and universities prevents us from suggesting a one-size-fits-all approach.

Today, there are 643 public four-year colleges and universities, and 1,533 private four-year, not-for-profit colleges and universities. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007) The population these institutions serve is dramatically different from that served by colleges and universities in the past. The population of college-bound students will continue to change into the foreseeable future. According to the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE):

*The nation and more and more states are closing in on “majority-minority” status relative to public high school graduating classes, in which the number of graduates who are not White non-Hispanic exceeds the number of graduates who are. Between 2004-05 and 2014-15, WICHE projects that the nation’s public high schools will produce:*

- *Almost 207,000 more Hispanic graduates (an increase of 54 percent).*
- *Nearly 46,000 more Asian/Pacific Islander graduates (an increase of 32 percent).*
- *About 12,000 more Black non-Hispanic graduates (an increase of 3 percent).*
- *About 2,000 more American Indian/Alaska Native graduates (an increase of 7 percent).*
- *Nearly 197,000 fewer White non-Hispanic graduates (a decline of 11 percent).*

*These data show that minorities account for all the growth in our public high schools’ production of graduates. Especially noteworthy is that the projected increase in Hispanic graduates alone more than offsets the decrease in White non-Hispanic graduates. In fact, if minority students completed high school at the same rate that White non-Hispanic students do, this shift would be even more dramatic.*

*Clearly, the composition of our schools is changing. State policymakers and officials in school districts, K-12 schools, and postsecondary institutions need to be aware of these changes and how they might impact curriculum and preparation, the demand for support services, the demand for postsecondary education, affordability, and other issues. (Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, 2008)*

As another step in the sequence of events shaping colleges and universities in America, this demographic change, along with the continually expanding pool of students seeking entry into postsecondary education, is an important reason to carefully examine the foundations of our points of entry into higher education.

## Challenge to Stakeholders

The SAT and ACT have achieved nearly iconic status in America and throughout the world with powerful effects on public policy, social mobility, and even individual identity. (Gould, 1996) NACAC convened the Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission to determine how the association could add its unique perspective to the public debate about the proper role for such tests.

The ground that can be covered in any study of standardized testing in admission is so broad that it is impossible to address the entire range of issues. As an illustration, the Commission received thousands of pages of materials from stakeholders across the nation, consisting almost entirely of summary overviews of the extensive literature that undergirds the discussion of testing in admission. Accordingly, the Commission has chosen to focus on issues that (1) NACAC is well-positioned to address, and (2) that Commission members identified as most pressing at this time.

The annual ritual of the college admission process in the United States, combined with a large number of colleges' continued reliance on standardized admission tests as a factor in their admission decisions, will benefit from continued discussion and study. For that reason, the Commission has attempted to establish in this report a series of recommendations that can stimulate a rich and sustained process of introspection about how our nation's colleges and universities evaluate applicants for admission.

The Commission's challenge to colleges and universities is to assume control of the conversation about the use of standardized tests in admission. There are myriad ways in which admission tests are used in the United States, and myriad ways in which students intersect with the process of admission testing. The Commission found that the primary challenge in every case is to ensure that colleges and universities are able to think and communicate clearly, independently, and progressively about their use of standardized admission tests. Transparency, particularly at each individual institution, about standardized test use can emphasize the diversity of higher education institutions in America. A secondary, though important, challenge is to ensure that misuses and mischaracterizations of admission tests do not further perpetuate popular overstatement of the importance of these tests in the admission process.

Accordingly, the NACAC Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission recommends the following:

- 1.) Regularly question and re-assess the foundations and implications of standardized test requirements;
- 2.) Understand test preparation and take into account disparities among students with differential access to information about admission testing and preparation;
- 3.) Draw attention to possible misuses of admission test scores;
- 4.) Establish opportunities for colleges and high schools, as well as college admission counseling professionals, to educate themselves about the appropriate use of standardized test scores;
- 5.) Understand differences in test scores among different groups of people, and continually assess the use of standardized test scores relative to the broader social goals of higher education.

The remainder of the report is organized around these five recommendations. Each recommendation will be expanded upon in subsequent chapters of the report.

# 1. Taking Back the Conversation

## **Regularly question and re-assess the foundations and implications of standardized test requirements**

The national conversation about the relative importance of standardized admission tests is dominated by the media, commercial interests, and organizations outside of the college admission office, including rankings publications. Commission members frequently posed the question, “have the negatives associated with standardized admission testing come to outweigh the positives?” The Commission agreed that while it could not provide a definitive response to this question for all colleges and universities, there were some incontrovertible facts about admission testing in 2008.

First, some colleges and universities enroll sufficient qualified student populations without the standardized admission tests. In fact, more than 280 four-year, not-for-profit institutions do not currently require the submission of standardized admission test scores for admission. Accordingly, standardized admission tests are not universally essential for colleges and universities seeking to make good admission decisions. One critic of test-optional admission policy posed the questions, “Why would [a] college not want to use as much information as it could gather in determining admissions? Why is less evidence better than more?” (Locurto, 2005) The question, we believe, is not of more versus less evidence. This argument begs the question of why colleges don’t simply require every test score available, including both SAT and ACT, College Board Subject Tests, graduation exams and Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams. Rather, the question is about the utility of the means by which institutions achieve their mission-driven enrollment ends.

Admission tests provide an efficient tool for comparison, and the strength of the correlation between test scores and first year college grades is generally understood. However, when combined with high school grades, the additional predictive utility of these tests in making admission decisions has been debated. Results vary from institution to institution largely as a function of the score variability among the applicant pool. It is therefore incumbent on each institution to determine, through institution-specific validity studies, whether the predictive utility of these tests warrant their use as admission tools. Although many colleges find benefit in using admission tests in admission decisions, the Commission believes that there may be more colleges and universities that could make appropriate admission decisions without requiring standardized admission tests such as the ACT and SAT. The Commission encourages institutions to consider dropping the admission test requirements if it is determined that the predictive utility of the test or the admission policies of the institution support that decision and if the institution believes that standardized test results would not be necessary for other reasons such as course placement, advising, or research.

Second, colleges and universities must be able independently to establish, support and explain their admission criteria and selection processes. Whether an institution is test-optional or requires tests should be determined by conducting research on the utility of standardized tests to determine if the additional predictive utility of the tests warrants their use in admission at that institution. Institutions must exercise independence in evaluating and articulating their use of standardized test scores. There is also a need for an independent forum for inter-institutional evaluation and discussion of standardized test use in admission that can provide support for colleges with limited resources to devote to institutional research and evaluation.

Third, institutions use standardized admission tests differently. For that reason, it is critical for colleges and universities to articulate clearly the emphasis or lack thereof placed on such tests and the role they play in admission and scholarship decisions. The table below provides an overview of admission test score use by various types of institution.

**Percentage of colleges attributing “considerable importance” to factors in the admission decision by institutional characteristics: 2006**

|  | Grades in college prep courses | Strength of curriculum | Admission test scores | Grades in all courses | Essay/writing sample | Class rank |
|--|--------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------|
| <b>Total</b>   | 75.9%                          | 61.5%                  | 60.4%                 | 51.2%                 | 27.9%                | 23.1%      |
| <b>Control</b>   |                                |                        |                       |                       |                      |            |
| <b>Public</b>  | 73.6                           | 60.2                   | 67.8                  | 53.4                  | 15.6                 | 35.2       |
| <b>Private</b>   | 76.7                           | 61.9                   | 57.8                  | 50.4                  | 32.4                 | 18.9       |
| <b>Enrollment</b>  |                                |                        |                       |                       |                      |            |
| <b>Fewer than 3,000 students</b>                         | 72.9                           | 57.3                   | 55.5                  | 48.0                  | 29.2                 | 16.6       |
| <b>3,000 to 9,999</b>                                    | 90.6                           | 73.6                   | 67.9                  | 50.0                  | 30.2                 | 43.4       |
| <b>10,000 or more</b>                                    | 79.5                           | 68.2                   | 81.4                  | 69.0                  | 16.3                 | 34.1       |
| <b>Selectivity</b>                                       |                                |                        |                       |                       |                      |            |
| <b>Accept fewer than 50 percent of applicants</b>        | 85.7                           | 80.0                   | 57.1                  | 54.2                  | 57.1                 | 30.0       |
| <b>50 to 70 percent</b>                                  | 75.2                           | 62.0                   | 63.4                  | 53.0                  | 24.0                 | 27.6       |
| <b>71 to 85 percent</b>                                  | 83.5                           | 66.1                   | 63.4                  | 46.9                  | 21.7                 | 20.9       |
| <b>More than 85 percent</b>                              | 55.6                           | 34.4                   | 54.8                  | 51.6                  | 21.3                 | 14.5       |
| <b>Yield</b>   |                                |                        |                       |                       |                      |            |
| <b>Enroll fewer than 30 percent of admitted students</b> | 90.9                           | 78.9                   | 46.1                  | 44.6                  | 32.9                 | 22.1       |
| <b>30 to 45 percent</b>                                  | 82.1                           | 67.3                   | 66.4                  | 57.2                  | 22.1                 | 21.1       |
| <b>46 to 60 percent</b>                                  | 61.1                           | 40.7                   | 63.6                  | 48.2                  | 33.3                 | 30.9       |
| <b>More than 60 percent</b>                              | 43.2                           | 30.6                   | 62.2                  | 43.2                  | 35.1                 | 21.6       |

**Commission Recommendation: Conduct Institution-Specific Validity Research**

NACAC currently maintains a statement that “college admission professionals should research the degree to which standardized tests predict achievement in college alone and in conjunction with other credentials for all students, for men and women, and for members of different racial and ethnic groups.” The current Commission agrees with this statement, and recommends that colleges and universities regularly conduct research of this nature, especially institutionally-specific validity research. While support for validity research is available from the testing agencies, the Commission does not believe that colleges and universities should rely solely on the testing agencies for it.

**Commission Recommendation: Establish a Forum for Test Validity Under the Auspices of NACAC**

Rather, this Commission suggests that colleges and universities create a new forum for validity research under the auspices of NACAC. Such an independent discussion might begin to address questions the Commission and other stakeholders have posed about the tests. For instance, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing suggested that colleges “examine whether first-year grade point average is too narrow a criteria” for evaluating the utility of standardized admission tests, and “whether there are alternate criteria that would provide a better prediction of a student’s ability to persist and achieve beyond the first year.”(Rooney, 1998)

To accommodate this discussion, the Commission recommends that NACAC offer its membership the opportunity to share validity studies and additional research upon which college and university administrators may continually re-assess their own practices. Moreover, the Commission recommends that NACAC create a knowledge center where colleges and universities can share research in a manner that allows the association to serve as an unaffiliated clearinghouse for information about admission test validity. Finally, the Commission recommends that NACAC consider establishing a professional development opportunity for chief admission or enrollment officers to share best practice information about admission test policies and practices. We encourage college faculty and institutional research professionals to be a part of this discussion, given their critical role in establishing and analyzing the effects of admission policies. Resources of this nature will allow for a discussion of research and practice at various types of institutions.

## 2. Uneven Preparation for Tests

### **Understand test preparation and take into account disparities among students with differential access to information about admission testing and preparation**

*In the past decade, test preparation courses have proliferated and raised a number of issues. Some research has been done to determine the extent to which coaching can increase scores, but it is not definitive. An objective assessment of the effects of various coaching methods on scores is clearly needed. Are the numbers of coached students sufficient for there to have been a discernable effect on aggregate scores? ... How does the content of coaching programs relate to the subject domains the tests are designed to measure? Coaching also raises questions about fairness: such programs generally cost hundreds or thousands of dollars, and while some public school districts offered coaching to their students, it is clearly not equally available to all. (Myths & Tradeoffs, 1999)*

Since the *Myths and Tradeoffs* report was published in 1999, there has been exponential growth in the test preparation industry. Based on available data, the test preparation industry generates more than \$1 billion annually.<sup>1</sup> The industry would not, of course, exist without two primary inputs: (1) a majority of colleges and universities require standardized admission tests for admission, and (2) families sustain the demand for such services with disposable income and a desire to give their students ‘a leg up’ in the admission process

As long as colleges and universities require standardized tests for admission, admission test preparation activities will thrive. The precise increase in scores as a result of test preparation for an individual is difficult to determine. However, reliable academic research suggests that an overall point increase of between 20 and 30 points on the SAT appears to be typical for test preparation activities. (Briggs, 2001) This 20-30 point average gain is considerably less than the 100 point or more claims that test preparation companies often make for their short term programs. Although no reliable and independent research exists supporting the veracity of such large gains, they have been accepted as “conventional wisdom” promoted by test preparation companies and often not questioned by the media. The Commission believes NACAC can help ensure that students and families are aware of the findings of objective researchers on the subject.

As yet, there is insufficient research to assess fully the effect of the many different types of test preparation on standardized admission test scores. While short-term programs do not appear to be particularly effective (especially given their cost), less is known about long-term test preparation over many months or even years.

We do know, however, that test preparation is likely to provide an increase—however nominal—in standardized admission test scores. Access to test preparation will always be differentiated based on family income, school setting, and other variables external to the student. As a result, students without the financial resources to gain access to test preparation may, in effect, be penalized for lower test scores in some admission and scholarship scenarios, especially in those that use test scores in a ‘cut score’ or non-contextualized linear fashion. NACAC research indicates that many students, particularly those from modest economic backgrounds, attend high

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<sup>1</sup> Estimate based on available reports to the Securities and Exchange Commission for test preparation companies

schools with large student-to-counselor ratios or have no college counselor at all. (Hawkins, 2007) Such students have very few sources of advice about test preparation. Moreover, the ability of more affluent students to afford both test preparation and multiple test administrations, particularly when they are able to report the highest scores to colleges and universities, puts students of more modest economic means at further risk of being overlooked in the transition process.

### **The Value of Test Preparation**

After a decades-long debate about whether standardized admission tests can be “coached,” college admission counseling professionals, test preparation companies, and the test agencies are all in agreement that students’ scores can be improved at least to some extent by participation in activities designed to prepare students for the tests. The lingering question remains how much impact such activities—which range from taking practice exams to intense, expensive, one-on-one tutoring—have on the test score. According to a white paper on standardized admission testing commissioned by NACAC:

*During the last 15 years, several well-designed research studies have produced consistent results about the magnitude of score improvement that results from SAT coaching. Becker (1990), Powers and Rock (1999), and Briggs (2001; 2004) all concluded that the average gain from SAT coaching is between 6 and 8 points on the verbal section and between 14 and 18 points on the math section. Coaching studies on tests other than the SAT are quite scarce. Research suggests that coaching produces small benefits on the ACT (Briggs, 2001; Scholes & McCoy, 1998). (See Zwick, 2002, Chapter 7, and Kaplan, 2005, for additional reviews of coaching research.) Although many testing companies long maintained the position that test preparation programs were largely ineffective, the sponsors of all major admissions tests now produce test preparation materials, seemingly a tacit acknowledgment that preparation can be beneficial. (Zwick, 2007)*

To ensure that the Commission’s work is informed by the most current research, NACAC has commissioned a new, more comprehensive white paper on test preparation that will be available in early 2009. The Commission hopes that the white paper commissioned by NACAC will help to further research that will keep the public fully informed about test preparation. The paper is intended to:

- 1.) Describe and summarize ‘definitions’ of test prep programs.
- 2.) Synthesize and summarize existing academic research on the effects of admission test preparation.
- 3.) Advise the association on a message to the public about conclusions of academic research on the effectiveness of test preparation for admission testing.
- 4.) Advise the association on future research needs in this area.
- 5.) Provide recommendations to admission officers and high school counselors for implementing policies and training on how to account for the effects of test preparation in the college admission process.

The Commission concurs with the *Myths and Tradeoffs* report, which suggests that “[a]n objective assessment of the effects of various coaching methods on scores is clearly needed.”

**Commission Recommendation: Test Preparation Research**

The Commission recommends that NACAC pursue relationships with academic researchers and foundations that may support an extended “objective assessment” of the effects of test coaching methods to provide current, unbiased information to colleges and universities. The Commission calls on stakeholders from all sectors of the standardized testing community—including test vendors and test preparation companies—to commit resources necessary to establishing an ongoing research program at NACAC to conduct periodic research into the effects of various methods of test preparation.

Ultimately, the Commission believes this effort will accomplish two important goals. First, pooling resources into an objective source for admission information mitigates against self-interest in research conducted by any single actor. Second, the establishment of an ongoing research effort allows for the development of best practices that may provide greater knowledge for stakeholders seeking information about effective test preparation methods on a small or large scale. State and federal governments might help to verify research on the value of test preparation given the vast sum of money spent by the public on these activities.

**Commission Recommendation: Building the Base of Research**

The Commission also calls on high schools and colleges to share their own institutional research on test preparation to fully develop a knowledge center on test preparation. Such a knowledge center would contribute to a greater understanding of the vast array of methods of test preparation, and would enable individual schools to benefit from shared perspectives with other schools.

**Fairness of Admission Test Coaching**

A key point of concern about standardized admission testing is the ability of privileged students to obtain test preparation that may provide an advantage over their less privileged peers. While substantial inequities exist in the entirety of the K-12 educational system, colleges and universities—for the most part—are responsible for the requirement that students take admission tests. Therefore, the Commission believes that colleges and universities have a unique responsibility to mitigate the inequitable effects of test preparation.

According to the previous NACAC white paper on standardized testing:

*The effectiveness and ethics of commercial test preparation for admission tests, particularly the SAT, have long been the subject of controversy. Currently, the coaching debate tends to focus on the question of whether coaching, because it is likely to be most accessible to those who have already benefited from a lifetime of educational advantages, presents an impediment to test fairness for poor and minority test-takers. Powers and Rock (1999) and Briggs (2001) found that coached SAT-takers came from more affluent families than uncoached candidates...Although average coaching effects are apparently quite small, it is legitimate to question the fairness of a system in which some test-takers can afford coaching and others cannot. It is clear that coaching programs are here to stay, and that it is impractical, if not impossible, to create admissions tests that are not susceptible to coaching. Minimizing the impact of coaching on test fairness, then, requires that the availability of free and low-cost test preparation be increased. (Zwick, 2007) (emphasis added)*

**Fairness of College Admission Policy and Practice**

The NACAC Statement of Principles of Good Practice require that colleges “not use minimum test scores as the sole criterion for admission, advising or for the awarding of financial aid.” The Commission believes that this requirement is well-known and widely accepted among colleges and universities. The Commission further believes, as will be noted in a subsequent chapter, that some colleges, college-related scholarship organizations, and corporations are not as diligent as they could be in the application of this principle.

For most colleges and universities, admission test scores are rarely (if ever) used as a uniform “line in the sand” beyond which no student may enter the institution. However, there are a substantial number of institutions that rely on an academic index, which averages or otherwise compiles numeric academic achievement indicators into a single indexed number. Preliminary decisions about whether a student is definitely admissible, possibly admissible, or not admissible may be made on the basis of the index score.

**Commission Recommendation: Considerations for Admission Index Formulas**

In such systems, the Commission recommends that admission policymakers and practitioners remain aware of the implications of inequitable access to test preparation as they design and implement index systems. Maintaining a commitment to contextual decision-making in admission—ensuring that there is enough flexibility to evaluate candidates based on the entirety of their application—is critical, in the opinion of the Commission, to the fairness of such systems

**Adequate Provision of Test Preparation**

In addition to micro-level participation in test preparation, macro-level actors increasingly administer test preparation activities to large numbers of students. According to preliminary results from NACAC’s 2008 Counseling Trends Survey, approximately 70 percent of high schools offer test preparation resources of some type to their students. Also, the advent of state administration of standardized admission tests for all students—either for college preparation or statewide assessment for accountability purposes—has precipitated district- or state-level participation in test preparation programs.

Due to the lack of alignment with K-12 subject matter, preparation for standardized admission tests in the high school classroom detracts from the most important element of a student’s college preparation—understanding core subject matter. Grades in college preparatory courses are the single most important factor in the undergraduate admission decision and the best predictor of first year college grades.

**Commission Recommendation: Comprehensive College Preparation**

Secondary schools seeking to provide test preparation would be best advised to offer it as part of a continuum of college preparatory activities that includes other informational ‘coursework,’ such as information about financial aid eligibility, familiarization with the college application, overview of the college application and admission timeline, essay writing assistance, parent/family involvement, and other services.

**Best Practices for Test Preparation**

Commission members agreed that the best form of test preparation is focused on core knowledge content and on skills that will help prepare students for their academic future. Members of the Commission agree that, due to the inevitability of test preparation, there are aspects of test preparation that may be considered best practice.

Defining test preparation takes on added urgency in instances where preparation for standardized tests infringes on the ability of teachers to spend adequate time on core curriculum. Students, families, counselors, schools, or school districts seeking appropriate test preparation for standardized admission tests should require that each of the following attributes are present in the test preparation program:

- Familiarity with test question format
- Familiarity with test administration procedures
- Alignment with skills necessary to master college preparatory coursework
- Instruction in basic study habits and skills

**Commission Recommendation: Collecting Promising Test Preparation Practice**

The Commission recommends that high schools and other organizations submit research to NACAC with the purpose of establishing a trusted source for best practice and professional development. From this central knowledge base, college admission counseling professionals, supported by the association, can continually assess and share information about test preparation that is aligned with the development of student study skills, academic achievement, and test familiarization.

## 3. Test Misuse

### Draw attention to possible misuses of admission test scores

While appropriate uses for standardized tests are generally well-established, the Commission identified a number of well-known instances of apparent test misuse that persist. Such examples include:

- The use of test score cut off points as a sole screening factor for awarding scholarship money
- The use of score data to evaluate institutional “quality” (national ranking systems and bond ratings)
- The use of admission test scores as evaluative measures of a high school student’s achievement in their coursework or of secondary school performance

This list is not all-encompassing. Rather, it constitutes a starting point for those test misuses that the Commission believes are most prevalent and necessary to address.

The 1999 *Myths and Tradeoffs* report asked the question, “[T]o what extent are test scores being used in inappropriate ways? Is it possible to obtain this information, given both institutions’ reluctance to reveal the details of their practice, as well as practical constraints on the collection of detailed, comprehensive data?” The report also poses the questions, “What measures could improve the understanding of the benefits and limitations of admissions tests and reduce the risk of misuse of test scores? What steps could test makers, accreditation associations, higher education associations, and others take to ensure that sound test use policies are developed and followed?”

### Specific Examples of Test Misuse

#### National Merit Scholarship Program

The Commission believes that the time has come to end the practice of using “cutscores,” or minimum admission test scores, for merit aid eligibility. The scarcity of aid and the advantages affluent students have in gaining access to preparation for admission tests or pre-tests require us to demand change.

The use of cutscores for admission has long been inconsistent with ethical admission decision-making, and in 2004 the NACAC Assembly adopted a restriction on the use of cutscores for the awarding of financial aid.<sup>2</sup> Organizations such as the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) have long advocated for change in this area, and this Commission believes that the time to have a public debate on this issue is overdue.

#### **Commission Recommendation: Cease Using Cutscores As Initial Scholarship Eligibility Screen**

Accordingly, the Commission calls upon the National Merit Scholarship Corporation to cease using non-contextualized PSAT scores as the “initial screen” for eligibility for National Merit Scholar recognition or scholarships.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Addition to NACAC Statement of Principles of Good Practice, adopted by NACAC Assembly, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Information about National Merit eligibility and selection processes are available at <http://www.nationalmerit.org>

While we commend the National Merit Scholarship Corporation for providing financial assistance for post-secondary education, the Commission believes that among the misuses of admission tests or pre-tests, the National Merit Scholarship competition contributes to the misperception of test scores as sole measures of “merit” in a pervasive and highly visible manner. As stated by the Office of the President of the University of California, “using the PSAT exam alone to eliminate the vast majority of test takers from National Merit Scholarship consideration is inconsistent with the principles that standardized tests should be used in conjunction with other factors in measuring merit and that major decisions should not be made on the basis of small differences in test scores.”<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the Commission believes that problems associated with the use of cutscores as an initial screen are compounded by the establishment of different cutoff points for different states. Additionally, the Commission is concerned that the effects of such a preliminary screen may result in the unfair exclusion of subgroups of test takers. Research conducted for the University of California system illustrates the challenge in determining whether inequities exist, as “neither the College Board nor the NMSP [National Merit Scholars Program] has been willing to disclose the percent of National Merit Scholars who are Black, Hispanic, or American Indian. Nor have they been willing to disclose the percentage of poor students or non-native speakers of English who win National Merit Scholarships...nor...any information regarding the background of students who become National Merit Scholars.” (Hayashi, 2005)

The Commission holds no illusion about the scope of the project. We are aware that the National Merit Scholarship is a private endeavor, an exclusive partnership with a testing agency, explicit in its scope and purpose, and not a universal benefit for all students. Nevertheless, the Commission believes it is critical that the National Merit Scholarship Corporation cease the practice of using a PSAT cutscore as the initial screen, and move toward a practice that could be condoned by current standards for test score use.

The Commission also asks that institutions that commit institutional resources towards funding National Merit Finalists and Semi-Finalists reconsider whether or not their commitments are founded upon solid and equitable principles given the current selection processes. The Commission also calls on the College Board to explain why it allow the use of its PSAT as a cutscore, a practice that is clearly at odds with best practices in the use of test scores.

### **Evaluations of Institutional Quality**

#### *U.S. News and World Report Rankings*

SAT and ACT scores for first-year students at colleges and universities comprise part of the rankings compiled annually by U.S. News and World Report. The formula for the rankings includes a “student selectivity” score that constitutes 15 percent of a college’s overall rank. SAT or ACT test scores of enrollees comprise 50 percent of the student selectivity score.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Six UC Campuses to Redirect National Merit Funding to Other Merit-Based Scholarships,” Office of the President of the University of California, press release dated July 13, 2005, retrieved from <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/2005/jul13.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The methodology for U.S. News rankings is available at <http://www.usnews.com/articles/education/best-colleges/2008/08/21/about-the-rankingsmethodology.html>

The Commission believes that SAT and ACT scores are not a valid measure of institutional quality. The Commission acknowledges that in the minds of the public, institutional quality and selectivity have long been inextricable. However, the Commission believes that the continued use of admission test scores as a ranking-related measure creates pressure on admission offices to pursue increasingly high test scores.

The College Board's "Guidelines on the Uses of College Board Test Scores and Related Data" suggest:

[Educators, the media, and others should] not rank or rate teachers, educational institutions, districts or states solely on aggregate scores derived from tests that are intended primarily as a measure of individual students. Do not use aggregate scores as the single measure to rank or rate teachers, educational institutions, districts, or states.

The ACT similarly provides guidelines that discourage institutional comparisons:

[We communicate results of ACT-owned assessments in ways that promote valid interpretation and use. To accomplish this goal, we] discourage comparisons of data among schools, districts and states, because the data may not be representative of all students in a school, district, or state or of the achievement of examinees from one year to the next. Such comparisons may lead to invalid conclusions about differences in quality of education.

### **Commission Recommendation: End Use of Admission Test Scores as Measures of Institutional Quality**

The Commission believes that, as tests designed to provide information about individuals to colleges and universities, the SAT and ACT were never designed as measures of the quality of an institution of higher education. Accordingly, the Commission encourages U.S. News to eliminate test scores as a measure of institutional quality.

#### *College and University Bond Ratings*

The Commission also considers the use of SAT and ACT scores in bond ratings of postsecondary institutions as an inappropriate use of standardized admission tests. Criteria reports for the major bond ratings companies indicate that SAT and ACT scores are used to help assess demand using student quality indicators. The bond rating agencies contend that higher SAT and ACT scores afford colleges and universities the ability to adjust admission standards downward to offset decreased demand. In other words, colleges whose students have high admission test scores can survive economic hard times by lowering their admission requirements and accepting students with lower test scores. The logic suggests that colleges with lower test scores are less able to ensure their financial well-being by adjusting admission requirements.

Bond ratings firms suggest that "for schools that accommodate students who have not performed well historically on standardized tests, [we place] less emphasis on these ratios in [our] analysis and instead focus on the mission of the university or college and its success in achieving its recruitment goals."<sup>6</sup> However, the Commission

<sup>6</sup> "Rating Guidelines for Public Colleges and Universities," Fitch Ratings, July 2004; "Rating Guidelines for Private Colleges and Universities," Fitch Ratings, July 2006; "Public Finance Criteria," Standard & Poor's 2007.

believes this statement is not sufficient to mitigate the effect of improper use of admission test scores as a measure of institutional financial stability.

The Commission takes issue with bond ratings that use standardized admission tests for two primary reasons. First, the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, as well as the guidelines for use of the SAT and ACT, maintain clear restrictions against using admission test scores for purposes other than those for which the test is designed. Neither SAT nor ACT has ever claimed that admission test scores are reliable indicators of institutional financial health. While there is undoubtedly a correlation between institutional financial resources and test scores, the Commission believes that the use of such scores confuses correlation with causation, and as such, comprises an inappropriate use of test scores.

Second, the Commission believes that the continued use of admission test scores as bond rating criteria create inappropriate pressure on admission offices to pursue increasingly high test scores. While financial ratings firms may suggest that higher scores indicate more flexibility in times of scarcity of student applicants, there is little evidence to suggest that institutions lower their test score expectations in such instances. To the extent that colleges feel compelled to respond to the significance of test scores in rankings and bond ratings, they will tend to place greater emphasis on test scores, exacerbating the challenge of appropriate test use in admission.

**Commission Recommendation: Cease Use of Admission Test Scores as Measures of Institutional Financial Health**

For these reasons, the Commission urges NACAC to work with college and university leaders, counterpart organizations, and bond rating companies to end the use of admission test scores in bond rating evaluations of colleges and universities.

**State Assessments**

The Commission accepts that offering students the opportunity to take the SAT or ACT as part of the high school course of study may be an effective college access lever, as it may encourage students who did not believe themselves to be college-qualified to realize that they are eligible for admission to a wide range of colleges.

However, the Commission is concerned that the use of the SAT or ACT without significant modification to measure student achievement in high schools is an inappropriate use of these tests. Indeed, according to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing:

*Admission tests, whether they are intended to measure achievement or ability, are not directly linked to a particular instructional curriculum and, therefore, are not appropriate for detecting changes in middle school or high school performance. (American Educational Research Association, 1999)*

**Commission Recommendation: Refrain from Using Admission Tests as Measures of Achievement for Accountability Purposes**

The Commission recommends that states refrain from using standardized admission tests, without significant modification, as evaluators of student achievement, particularly when high stakes accountability measures are attached. Admission tests were not designed for this purpose, and are not sufficiently tailored to measure progress toward explicit measures for learning in a given state.

There is a substantial body of research that can help states, school districts, and schools design measurements of “college readiness.” In addition, while admission tests are useful to many college and university admission offices, they are less useful than a student’s performance in challenging coursework. Therefore, efforts to ensure that schools are preparing their students for college should not look to a single admission exam for an assessment of their progress, but to the strength of the school’s curriculum and students’ performance in those courses as their primary indicator.

#### **Usage Audit**

The testing agencies, including the College Board and ACT, all publish and promote guidelines for appropriate use of their testing products. As an additional measure, the Commission believes that a periodic usage audit may be necessary and desirable to protect against misuse of these organizations’ testing products. There is precedent in the College Board’s recently-initiated audit of Advanced Placement programs at high schools across the United States.

#### **Commission Recommendation: Institute Admission Test Usage Audit**

The Commission believes that a similar audit by the College Board and ACT may help limit misuse of tests by bringing the two organizations’ combined weight to bear on those institutions and organizations that misuse admission test scores.

#### **Commission Recommendation: Abide by NACAC’s Statements of Principles of Good Practice and Incorporate Additional Provisions on Test Practice**

In addition to the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, the Commission recommends that all colleges and universities abide by the standards set by NACAC for ethical and best practice in college admission counseling. The following statements are currently contained in NACAC’s Statement of Principles of Good Practice (SPGP). The Commission recommends that colleges and universities, as well as NACAC, strive to inform staff, administrators, and policymakers involved in admission practice of the importance of adhering to these principles.

#### **Excerpt from NACAC’s Statement of Principles of Good Practice:**

##### **Mandatory Practices and Interpretations**

Members agree that they will:

- not use minimum test scores as the sole criterion for admission and/or advising;
- state clearly the requirements for the first-year and transfer admission and enrollment processes, including secondary school preparation, standardized testing, financial aid, housing and notification deadlines, and refund procedures by
  - stating clearly and precisely the requirements for secondary preparation, admission tests and transfer student admission;
  - clearly publicizing policies relating to placement by tests, awarding of credit and other policies based on test results.

- initially report on all first-year admitted or enrolled students, including special subgroups in the reporting of test scores. If data on subgroup populations are also provided, clear explanations of who is included in the subgroup population will be made.
  - Postsecondary members will furnish data describing the currently enrolled freshman class and will describe in published profiles all members of the enrolling freshman class;
  - Subgroups within the profile may be presented separately because of their unique character or special circumstances.
- work with school officials and other relevant individuals to keep test results confidential as governed by law and local regulations;
- report on all students within a distinct class (e.g., freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) and subgroups, including non-native speakers, in the reporting of standardized test scores.

### **Best Practices**

Members agree that they should:

- educate staff in understanding the concepts of test measurement, test interpretation and test use so they make informed admission decisions about the test data;
- conduct institutional research to inquire into the most effective use of tests for admission decisions;
- refrain from the public reporting of mean and median admission test scores and, instead, report scores by the middle 50 percent of the scores of all first-year applicants, admitted and/or enrolled students;
- report test scores for special subgroups that may include athletes or non-native speakers. Universities with more than one undergraduate division may report first by division and then by special subgroups within divisions. Clear explanations of who is included in the subgroup should be made. Those institutions that do not require tests or for which tests are optional will only report scores if the institution clearly and emphatically states the limits of the scores being reported;
- clearly publicize policies, such as placement and awarding of credit, that are based on test results;
- inform students about the tests needed for admission, where students may take them, how to interpret the results, and how test results are used for admission;
- report, in the case of secondary schools, the middle 50 percent of all students tested by discrete grade level;
- work with school officials and other relevant individuals to keep test results in perspective;

**Recommended Additions to NACAC's Statement of Principles of Good Practice**

The Commission recommends that the NACAC Admission Practices Committee consider amending the Statement of Principles of Good Practice to include the following guidelines for test score use.

**Familiarity with Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing:** College admission officials in charge of setting admission test policy should be familiar with and adhere to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, particularly with respect to test score use and interpretation, test bias, and score differences between subgroups.

## 4. Equipping Our Professionals

**Establish opportunities for colleges and high schools, as well as college admission counseling professionals, to educate themselves about the appropriate use of standardized test scores.**

*In educational settings, those who supervise others in test selection, administration, and interpretation should have received education and training in testing necessary to ensure familiarity with the evidence for validity and reliability for tests used in the educational setting and to be prepared to articulate or to ensure that others articulate a logical explanation of the relationships among the tests used, the purposes they serve, and the interpretations of test scores. – Standard 13.12, Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*

### Background

While some school counselors may receive training in standardized testing as part of a counseling graduate program, many admission officers regularly review applications and test scores without the benefit of independent academic study or training in interpreting standardized test scores. However, there is currently no guarantee that any professional—school counselor, college advisor, or admission officer—involved in college admission has had independent training in the evaluation of standardized admission test scores.

*As NACAC's Statement of Counselor Competencies states, it is essential that college admissions counselors understand "the proper administration and uses of standardized tests and be able to interpret test scores and test-related data to students, parents, educators, institutions, agencies, and the public" (NACAC, 2000, p. 11). In order to develop a thorough understanding of test use and interpretation, counselors need to have a command of the fundamentals of educational measurement and statistics. However, like K–12 school personnel, who must also interpret test scores and explain them to multiple audiences, admissions counselors may not have had the opportunity to acquire training in the area of academic assessment and score interpretation...How, then, can we protect against the improper use and interpretation of tests and promote their wise and beneficial use? One essential step is to provide high-quality training to all test users, including college admission counselors. (Zwick, 2007)*

While many professionals may have had some contact with training in graduate education or with the testing agencies, the Commission believes it is important to offer education and training to college admission counseling professionals on evaluating admission test scores.

### **Commission Recommendation: Admission Test Training for Admission Officers and School Counselors**

The Commission recommends that NACAC develop a fundamental training program for college admission officers, school counselors, and other college admission professionals to ensure best professional practice in the consideration and implementation of standardized admission test policies. It is essential that such fundamental training be provided by a source other than the testing agencies, whose training is most appropriate for the specific use of their own products.

The Commission has identified the following components of standardized admission testing knowledge (along with the ability to communicate and apply this knowledge) that high school counselors and admission officers should have to perform their admission testing responsibilities (across their constituents – students, parents, teachers, administrators, general public). Knowledge components are principally arranged by order of logical progression (i.e., from before the test to after the test) and acquisition, and each core component is followed by examples of individual concepts that comprise each knowledge area.

- 1. Institutional Objectives for the Use of Admission Test Results:** formal institutional goal(s) for including admission tests as a requirement for enrollment, specific role and function of admission testing within an institution's admission criteria, decision points affected by admission tests.
- 2. Ethics and Ethical Standards in Admission Testing:** basic understanding of Standards for Educational & Psychological Testing related to admission testing, NACAC ethical principles, role(s) and limitations of admission test information, test uses and misuses, students' rights throughout the testing and reporting process.
- 3. Admission Test Properties:** components of admission tests (including subtest components), what knowledge and skills each test component measures, how the tests measure knowledge and skills, test difficulty, how the tests are scored to reflect knowledge and skill attainment, what the test scores represent.
- 4. Test Preparation:** overview of test preparation, preparing for the testing experience, understanding the effects of both test familiarization and test preparation on scores (as best understood by academic research), ability to understand ramifications of test score increases even of modest size.
- 5. Score Disparity:** understanding the potential distinction between possible 'test bias' (including gender, race/ethnicity, and SES issues) and valid score disparity, score change and score difference, understanding the relationship of K-12 inequity, curricular experiences, and socio-economic situation to test score patterns.
- 6. Statistical and Interpretive Concepts:** margin of error in test scores, scoring index, percentiles, norm and comparison groups, admission test benchmarks, test reliability, differences in scores within and across admission tests, and other basic statistical concepts related to the understanding and interpretation of scores.
- 7. Predictive Validity:** understanding the meaning of predictive validity – as well as understanding what it does not infer, understanding of standard practice in assessing predictive value of tests (and other factors), statistical concepts related to validity such as correlation and variance, variations in predictive value of tests for different groups, understanding of Freshman GPA vs. success in college (including academic performance and student persistence).
- 8. Admission Models:** understanding of basic operation of admission models and how tests are positioned in each model, including (but not limited to) holistic admission, "index" composites, and test-optional admission policies.

**Recommended Additions to NACAC's Statement of Principles of Good Practice**

The Commission recommends that the NACAC Admission Practices Committee consider amending the Statement of Principles of Good Practice to include the following guidelines.

- 1. College admission officer training:** To assure best admission practice, any college admission officer, or other individual acting on behalf of the institution, who is responsible for reading admission applications should complete a basic training program in standardized admission tests. Training should be provided by an agency or institution that is independent of companies that sponsor the tests or test preparation activities.
- 2. Counseling professional training:** To assure best practice in college admission counseling, any school counselor, independent counselor, or other individual engaged in providing professional college guidance to students should complete a basic training program in standardized admission tests. Training should be provided by an agency or institution that is independent of companies that sponsor the tests or test preparation activities.

## 5. Test Score Differences

### **Understand differences in test scores among different groups of people, and continually assess the use of standardized test scores relative to the broader social goals of higher education**

According to the association's white paper on college admission testing, "[c]ollege admissions test results often reveal substantial average score differences among ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic groups. In the popular press, these differences are often regarded as sufficient evidence that these tests are biased. From a psychometric perspective, however, a test's fairness is inextricably tied to its validity." (Zwick, 2007) The Commission believes the question of the effect of test score differences among subgroups on test validity may never be conclusively resolved, but can be acknowledged and appropriately factored into admission decisions.

#### **Score Differences and Disparate Impact**

The Commission is aware that "both sides of the bias argument can offer credible data to support their positions." (Zwick, 2002) The Commission acknowledges that there are distinct score differences between subgroups of test takers. A recent study at the University of California succinctly describes the effect of these differences:

*As an admissions criterion, the SAT has a more adverse impact on poor and minority applicants than high school grades, class rank, and other measures of academic achievement; admissions criteria that emphasize demonstrated achievement over potential ability are more likely to promote educational equity. (Geiser, 2007)*

The Commission agrees that by overemphasizing SAT and ACT scores in the admission process, colleges and universities may exacerbate existing disparities among under-represented students. While often referred to as "common yardsticks" for measuring applicants, test scores (on average) are strongly correlated with student and family attributes over which a student has no control (see examples on page 39).

Questions persist about whether standardized admission tests provide sufficient additional utility to justify their use in light of their correlation with wealth, parental education, and race/ethnicity. However, before determining whether the existence of a correlation between admission tests and socio-economic or ethnic attributes justifies a wholesale de-emphasis or elimination of the current admission tests, the Commission believes that it is important to take into account other factors that may contribute to test score differences among these subgroups. Such discrepancies, for instance, may have their origins in the inequitable allocation of public education resources, an issue beyond the scope of this Commission's work.

### Mean SAT Scores by Family Income and Parental Level of Education<sup>7</sup>

| SAT Reasoning Test                         | Test-Takers |     | Critical Reading |     | Mathematics |     | Writing |     |
|--|-------------|-----|------------------|-----|-------------|-----|---------|-----|
|  | Number      | Pct | Mean             | SD  | Mean        | SD  | Mean    | SD  |
| All Test-Takers                            | 1,494,531   | 100 | 502              | 113 | 515         | 114 | 494     | 109 |
| <b>Family Income</b>                       |             |     |                  |     |             |     |         |     |
| Less than \$10,000                         | 40,610      | 4   | 427              | 107 | 451         | 122 | 423     | 104 |
| \$10,000 - \$20,000                        | 72,745      | 8   | 453              | 106 | 472         | 113 | 446     | 102 |
| \$20,000 - \$30,000                        | 61,244      | 6   | 454              | 102 | 465         | 107 | 444     | 97  |
| \$30,000 - \$40,000                        | 83,685      | 9   | 476              | 103 | 485         | 106 | 466     | 98  |
| \$40,000 - \$50,000                        | 75,836      | 8   | 489              | 103 | 496         | 105 | 477     | 99  |
| \$50,000 - \$60,000                        | 80,060      | 8   | 497              | 102 | 504         | 104 | 486     | 98  |
| \$60,000 - \$70,000                        | 75,763      | 8   | 504              | 102 | 511         | 103 | 493     | 98  |
| \$70,000 - \$80,000                        | 81,627      | 9   | 508              | 101 | 516         | 103 | 498     | 98  |
| \$80,000 - \$100,000                       | 130,752     | 14  | 520              | 102 | 529         | 104 | 510     | 100 |
| More than \$100,000                        | 245,025     | 26  | 544              | 105 | 556         | 107 | 537     | 103 |
| No Response                                | 547,184     |     |                  |     |             |     |         |     |
| <b>Highest Level of Parental Education</b> |             |     |                  |     |             |     |         |     |
| No High School Diploma                     | 58,259      | 4   | 421              | 98  | 445         | 107 | 418     | 93  |
| High School Diploma                        | 413,137     | 31  | 466              | 98  | 476         | 102 | 457     | 94  |
| Associate Degree                           | 113,958     | 9   | 484              | 95  | 492         | 98  | 473     | 92  |
| Bachelor's Degree                          | 398,895     | 30  | 522              | 103 | 533         | 105 | 513     | 100 |
| Graduate Degree                            | 353,262     | 26  | 560              | 109 | 569         | 111 | 552     | 107 |

### Average SAT Composite Score by Race/Ethnic Group, 2007<sup>8</sup>

|                                 |      |
|---------------------------------|------|
| African American/Black          | 17.0 |
| American Indian/Alaska Native   | 18.9 |
| Caucasian American/White        | 22.1 |
| Hispanic                        | 18.7 |
| Asian American/Pacific Islander | 22.6 |
| Other/No Response               | 21.6 |

<sup>7</sup>College Board score report, 2007. Retrieved from [http://www.collegeboard.com/prod\\_downloads/about/news\\_info/cbsenior/yr2007/national-report.pdf](http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/about/news_info/cbsenior/yr2007/national-report.pdf)

<sup>8</sup>ACT National Score Report, 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.act.org/news/data07/charts/index.html>

### Test Bias

The Commission is in agreement that admission test questions generally measure what they purport to measure. There is a substantial body of literature indicating that individual item bias has been largely mitigated in today's admission tests due to extensive research and development of question items on both the SAT and ACT. Researchers who study test bias focus on whether different items on the test produce differing results across ethnic groups. One key question for admission officers is articulated in the following excerpt:

*Will the use of a single equation or index result in predicted college GPAs that are systematically too high or too low for certain groups? This question is at the root of the most prevalent definition of test bias in the psychometric world, articulated by Anne Cleary in 1968. Cleary's definition says that a test is biased against a particular subgroup of test takers "if the criterion score [in this case, CGPA] predicted from the common regression line is consistently too high or too low for members of the subgroup." (Zwick, 2002)*

Research suggests that admission test scores may be over-predictive of first year GPA for some minority students, and may be under-predictive of first year GPA for some female students. (Zwick, 2007) Research also suggests that differences among racial/ethnic and socio-economic subgroups persist across a wide range of educational indicators, including high school grades, state testing, and national tests. (Schmidt in Zwick, 2004)

According to NACAC's white paper on standardized testing, the performance of students with limited English proficiency is a key consideration for colleges and universities, particularly as demographic changes in the U.S. are likely to result in greater numbers of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students seeking admission to college. Predicting first-year grades for such students is extremely difficult.

*An increasing proportion of US college applicants are immigrants or children of immigrants. In response to a question about the first language they learned, 22% of college-bound high school seniors in 2005 responded, "English and another language" or "another language" (College Entrance Examination Board, 2005). The appropriateness of standard college admissions criteria for non-native speakers of English is therefore an issue of great practical importance.*

*Recent findings on the performance of students with limited English skills on college admissions tests (mainly the SAT) have been quite mixed, making this a difficult issue to resolve. Whereas prediction of college performance has sometimes been found to be less effective for language minorities than for native speakers of English, the reverse has been true in other cases (see Zwick & Schlemmer, 2004; Zwick & Sklar, 2005). In addition, the use of SAT scores to predict FGPA has sometimes led to underprediction (Ramist et al., 1994) and sometimes to overprediction (Zwick & Schlemmer, 2004; Zwick & Sklar, 2005). The inconsistency of results is probably due in part to the fact that language minority groups have been defined in varying ways (see Zwick & Sklar, 2005).*

*Of particular importance is the impact of the new SAT and ACT writing tests on non-native English speakers. The addition of a writing section to the SAT has long been a source of*

*controversy because of the anticipated effect on recent immigrants and minorities. In 1988, a member of a blue-ribbon commission that was assembled to consider an overhaul of the SAT strenuously objected to the addition of a writing requirement because of the possible adverse impact on non-native English speakers (Pitsch, 1990). These concerns played a role in the College Board's decision against adding a writing component to the main part of the SAT. Instead, a separate and optional test—the SAT II writing test—was instituted, and further research was promised.*

*Now that the SAT and ACT both have writing components (though the ACT's is optional), it will be necessary to monitor the impact on language minorities. The effect could be positive if otherwise promising language minority students who score poorly on the writing section are admitted, but routed to writing improvement courses. It could be detrimental, of course, if it leads to the exclusion of talented students without allowing them the opportunity to improve their writing skills. This is a key area for future work.*

In light of the extensive research on the subject, the Commission agrees that as practitioners, college admission counseling professionals will not soon settle the debate on the fairness of admission testing. However, some control clearly rests in the hands of postsecondary institutions to account for inequities that are reflected in test scores and other criteria for college admission. That choice, however, is constrained by the tendency of stakeholders inside and outside of the university to attach inappropriately high importance to admission test scores.

#### **Summary of Test Score Differences and the Public Debate**

College admission policies that are designed to determine whether a student will succeed at the institution academically must decide whether the contextual factors that may affect performance on standardized admission tests can be mitigated by the institution's resources to support student success, particularly if students have fulfilled the academic requirements for admission related to their high school coursework.

The Commission is concerned that test scores appear to calcify differences based on class, race/ethnicity, and parental educational attainment. To come to some resolution, the Commission agrees that without confusing correlation with causation, admission offices must remain aware that test score differences persist among already under-served populations. Part of the public mission of colleges and universities is to ensure that differences that are not attributable to a student's ability to succeed academically at an institution are mitigated in the admission process.

#### **Commission Recommendation: Independent Institutional Evaluation of Test Use**

The Commission believes that colleges and universities must continue to determine whether the admission tests, in combination with other factors, are sufficiently structured to provide a reliable assessment of the "wonderful variousness of human abilities" that may determine success in college. (Gould, 1996) At this time, our recommendation pertaining to independent institutional evaluation of admission test scores and policies constitutes our best guidance on the topic of factoring test score differences into admission decisions.

## A Future Direction for Admission Testing

Standardized test scores have clearly become more important at many of our colleges and universities. Why? Does the heightened importance of test scores reflect heightened concerns about student educational outcomes, institutional mission goals, or equitable college admission processes? Does it reflect heightened institutional concerns about the publicly reported profile and competitive positioning of the institution? Might the heightened use of test scores reflect concerns about disparities in high school grading systems and grade inflation? What purposes do standardized test scores serve in principle and in fact?

The SAT (now called the SAT Reasoning Test) was adopted by the College Board as a tool that elite colleges, which were then the Board's only members in higher education, could use to make their student bodies both more national and more academically inclined. It replaced essay tests on the curriculum taught in the handful of elite high schools that were the College Board's only members in secondary education. Without a common measure, colleges felt they had no way of judging the academic potential of seniors at public high schools from all over the country who had not been specifically prepared for the "College Boards." In the 1950s, out of a similar philosophical approach, the American College Testing company developed the ACT Assessment as an alternative to the SAT. According to ACT, the ACT assessment was developed to help students make better decisions about which colleges to attend and which programs to study, and provide information that was helpful to colleges both in admitting students and ensuring their success after enrollment.

In the initial decades of their use as college admissions tests, the SAT and ACT proved themselves to be reliable and meaningfully predictive of college grades, and they helped to change the student populations of elite colleges in healthy ways by making them more diverse. But a great deal has changed since those initial decades. Today, the SAT and ACT have a much broader effect on American life than they did at first. They profoundly influence college admissions generally, not just college admissions at highly selective schools. Average scores are widely viewed as measures of the quality of both colleges and of high schools—and often affect suburban real estate values. In addition, they have been interpreted by some as indications of the mental capacity of the individual test-taker as well as of the innate capabilities of ethnic groups. Because the SAT and ACT are so consequential in today's environment—arguably more so than their founders intended them to be—students strive mightily to improve their scores, sometimes (particularly if their families are affluent) by enrolling in expensive private test-preparation programs. Conversely, many less affluent students are not well informed about the impact of testing on college options and lack knowledge of or access to critical information about preparing for and taking the tests. Ironically, tests that were meant to help level the playing field for talented students who were born *without* significant socio-economic advantages are now helping those *with* privilege to transfer their position in society down to the next generation.

Colleges most often determine the utility of admission test scores by assessing how predictive they are of first-year grades. This report underscores that as such, standardized admission tests should not be considered as sole predictors of true college success. Commission members unanimously agreed that college success is a term of sufficient breadth that it includes degree attainment, a wide range of GPAs, and the acquisition of experiences and skills that will propel a student into the workforce, graduate education or responsible citizenship. For this broad definition of success, standardized admission tests—as well as other individual factors—are insufficient predictors of a student's likelihood of overall success.

**Commission Recommendation: Consider the Predictive Value of Achievement Tests**

There are tests that, at many institutions, are both predictive of first-year and overall grades in college and more closely linked to the high school curriculum, including the College Board's AP exams and Subject Tests as well as the International Baccalaureate examinations. What these tests have in common is that they are—to a much greater extent than the SAT and ACT—achievement tests, which measure content covered in high school courses; that there is currently very little expensive private test preparation associated with them, partly because high school class curricula are meant to prepare students for them; and that they are much less widely required by colleges than are the SAT and ACT. Seventy-two percent of colleges require either the SAT or ACT as a requirement for admission; only two percent require the College Board's Subject Tests.

As one aspect of the standards movement that has swept across American elementary and secondary public education over the past quarter-century, many states now require all public high school students to take achievement-based exams at the end of high school. These tests vary in quality; the better ones, such as those in New York, include end-of-course tests that students take upon completion of specific courses. Not all state high school exams are sufficient to measure the prospect of success in postsecondary education. However, if such tests can be developed so they successfully predict college grades as well as or better than the SAT, ACT, AP, IB exams, and Subject Tests do, and align with content necessary for college coursework, the Commission would urge colleges to consider them in the admission evaluation process.

Such achievement tests have a number of attractive qualities. Their use in college admissions sends a message to students that studying their course material in high school, not taking extracurricular test prep courses that tend to focus on test-taking skills, is the way to do well on admission tests. Using achievement tests would encourage high schools to broaden and improve curricula, and would promote a sense of transparency about what tests measure. Further alignment of college entrance testing and preparation with high school curricula would also reduce the inequities inherent in the current system of preparation for and administration of college entrance exams. Indeed, research at the University of California suggests that “the SAT is a relatively poor predictor of student performance; admissions criteria that tap mastery of curriculum content, such as high school grades and achievement tests, are more valid indicators of how students are likely to perform in college.” (Geiser, 2008) A report by Achieve, Inc. suggests that neither SAT nor ACT, in their current formats, are particularly reflective of the full range of high school achievement, though each test includes some areas of strength. (Achieve, Inc., 2007)

Colleges individually will always try to build the strongest entering classes they can, often measured by test scores, but collectively they bear a larger responsibility to make the American educational system as good, as fair, and as socially beneficial as possible. By using the SAT and ACT as one of the most important admission tools, they are gaining what may be a marginal ability to identify academic talent beyond that indicated by transcripts, recommendations, and achievement test scores. Is this modest addition of predictive validity counterbalanced by the arguably significant social and cultural costs of the growing weight of the SAT and ACT in college admission processes? By using state level end-of-high school achievement tests, College Board Subject Tests, or International Baccalaureate exams, colleges would create a powerful incentive for American high schools to improve their curricula and their teaching. They would lose little or none of the information they need to make good choices about entering classes, while benefiting millions of Americans who do not go on to highly selective colleges and positively affecting teaching and learning in America's schools.

A possible future direction for college admission tests is widespread adoption of tests that more fully reflect subject matter from high school courses. Tests administered by states may provide valuable information for admission purposes, particularly in public institutions that predominantly serve a given state's population. However, such tests must be designed to measure a proficiency level that is more reflective of college readiness than minimum competency. For private institutions and public institutions that serve students from a geographically diverse background, it may be useful to design a single subject matter test that can provide the same efficiency of use for the variety of institutions. Perhaps the absence of national standards has led to a de facto standards system where admission tests are viewed as the currency of educational attainment. From an admission perspective, a discussion of national college readiness standards may be desirable, particularly since state jurisdiction over education dissipates, though does not disappear altogether, after 12<sup>th</sup> grade. As former University of California president Richard Atkinson put it, "[c]urriculum standards should be clearly defined, students should be held to those standards, and standardized tests should be used to assess whether the standards have been met." Such standards, according to Atkinson, "should help admissions officers evaluate the applicant's readiness for college-level work." (Atkinson in Zwick, 2004)

## Consolidated List of Commission Recommendations

For federal and state governments:

- 1.) **Easing the K-16 transition.** Develop a college readiness assessment mechanism that is aligned with students' coursework in high school. Current admission tests are not sufficiently aligned with high school curricula to appropriately measure a student's academic achievement.
- 2.) **Refrain from using admission tests as measures of achievement for accountability purposes.** The Commission recommends that states refrain from using standardized admission tests as evaluators of student achievement without significant modifications, particularly when high stakes accountability measures are attached
- 3.) **Help to verify the research on the value of test preparation.**

For colleges and universities:

- 1.) **Institution-Specific Validity Research.** Colleges and universities should regularly conduct independent, institutionally-specific validity research.
- 2.) **Support for Independent Evaluation of Test Use.** The Commission calls for colleges and universities to share their validity studies and research on admission criteria with NACAC so that NACAC can create a knowledge base for the benefit of colleges and universities. The Commission has asked the association to create a system whereby colleges can submit such research in a manner that protects the institution's proprietary interests.
- 3.) **Building a research base on test preparation.** The Commission calls on colleges to share their own institutional research on test preparation to fully develop a "knowledge center" on test preparation. Such a knowledge center would contribute to a greater understanding of the vast array of methods of test preparation, and would enable individual schools to benefit from shared perspectives with other schools.
- 4.) **Colleges and universities should take into account disparities in access to test preparation when making admission decisions.** The Commission recommends that admission policymakers and practitioners remain aware of the implications of inequitable access to test preparation as they design and implement index systems. Maintaining a commitment to contextual decision-making in admission—ensuring that there is enough flexibility to evaluate candidates based on the entirety of their application—is critical, in the opinion of the Commission, to the fairness of such systems.

For high schools:

- 1.) **Building a research base on test preparation.** The Commission calls on high schools to share their own institutional research on test preparation to fully develop a "knowledge center" on test preparation.

Such a knowledge center would contribute to a greater understanding of the vast array of methods of test preparation, and would enable individual schools to benefit from shared perspectives with other schools.

- 2.) **States and secondary schools advised to offer test preparation only as part of larger college preparation effort.** Secondary schools seeking to provide test preparation would be best advised to offer it as part of a continuum of college preparatory activities—preferably administered by school counseling and/or college advising professionals—that includes other informational ‘coursework,’ such as information about financial aid eligibility, familiarization with the college application, overview of the college application and admission timeline, essay writing assistance, parent/family involvement, and other services.
- 3.) **Best practice in preparation for standardized testing overall.** The Commission encourages high schools and other organizations to share ‘best practice’ information about test preparation with NACAC so that NACAC can create a knowledge base for the benefit of educators, students and families. The Commission has asked the association to create a system whereby high schools and other organizations can submit such research in a manner that protects the institution’s proprietary interests.

For the association

- 1.) **Ongoing exploration of testing in admission by NACAC.** The Commission recommends that NACAC offer an annual publication to its membership containing sample validity studies and additional research upon which college and university administrators may continually assess their own practices. Moreover, the Commission recommends that NACAC create a knowledge center where colleges and universities can share research in a manner that allows the association to serve as an unaffiliated clearinghouse for information about admission test validity. Finally, the Commission recommends that NACAC consider establishing a professional development opportunity for chief admission or enrollment officers to share best practice information about admission test policies and practices. Resources of this nature will allow for a independent discussion of research and practice.
- 2.) **Objective assessment of test preparation and coaching.** The Commission recommends that the association pursue relationships with academic researchers and foundations that may support an extended “objective assessment” of the effects of test coaching methods to provide current, unbiased information to colleges and universities, families and the media.
- 3.) **Additional ethical principles for college admission counseling practice.** The Commission recommends that the NACAC Admission Practices Committee consider amending the Statement of Principles of Good Practice to include the following guidelines for test score use.
  - **Familiarity with Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing:** College admission officials in charge of setting admission test policy should be familiar with and adhere to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, particularly with respect to test score use and interpretation, test bias, and score differences between subgroups.

- **College admission officer training:** To assure best admission practice, any college admission officer, or other individual acting on behalf of the institution, who is responsible for reading admission applications should complete a basic training program in standardized admission tests. Training should be provided by an agency or institution that is independent of companies that sponsor the tests or test preparation activities.
- **Counseling professional training:** To assure best practice in college admission counseling, any school counselor, independent counselor, or other individual engaged in providing professional college guidance to students should complete a basic training program in standardized admission tests. Training should be provided by an agency or institution that is independent of companies that sponsor the tests or test preparation activities.

**4.) Training for college admission counseling professionals.** The Commission recommends that NACAC develop a fundamental training for college admission officers, school counselors, and other college admission professionals to ensure best professional practice in the consideration and implementation of standardized admission test policies. It is essential that such fundamental training be provided by a source other than the testing agencies, whose training is most appropriate for the specific use of their own products.

For other stakeholders:

- 1.) End use of PSAT scores as the sole criterion for eligibility for the National Merit Scholarship.** The Commission believes it is critical that the organization cease the practice of using a PSAT cutscore as the initial screen, and move toward practice that can be condoned by accepted standards for test score use.
- 2.) Cease using SAT or ACT scores as a measure of institutional quality.** The Commission believes that, as tests designed to provide information about individuals to colleges and universities, the SAT and ACT were never designed as measures of the quality of an institution of higher education. The Commission encourages U.S. News to eliminate test scores as a measure of institutional quality.
- 3.) Cease using SAT or ACT scores as a measure of institutional financial health.** The Commission urges NACAC to work with college and university leaders, counterpart organizations, and bond rating companies to discourage the use of admission test scores in bond rating evaluations for colleges and universities.
- 4.) College Board and ACT usage audits.** The Commission recommends that the College Board and ACT periodically conduct “usage audits” for their test products to ensure the proper use of admission tests.

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