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Answer Sheet

Study: High school grades best predictor of college success — not SAT/ACT scores

By **Valerie Strauss** February 21, 2014

A three-year national study of colleges that do not require applicants to submit ACT or SAT scores found only “trivial” differences in the college graduation rates or the cumulative grade point average of students between those who do and those who do not send in their standardized test results.

The study, titled “Defining Promise: Optional Standardized Testing Policies in American College and University Admissions” and released by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, says:

“With almost 123,000 students at 33 widely differing institutions, the differences between submitters and non-submitters are five one-hundredths of a GPA point, and six-tenths of one percent in graduation rates. By any standard, these are trivial differences.”

According to the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, a nonprofit dedicated to ending the abuse and misuse of standardized tests, more than 800 four-year colleges and universities are “test-score optional” for applicants, including schools in the California State University system. (You can see a list here).

The new study shows that admissions decisions for students who don’t submit ACT or SAT scores are just as reliable as for those who do submit their schools.

One interesting finding from the study, which was conducted by principal investigator William C. Hiss and lead researcher Valerie W. Franks, was that the students who are most likely not to submit their scores are

minorities, women, first-generation-to-college enrollees, Pell Grant recipients and students with learning differences.

In 2008, the National Association for College Admissions Counseling's Commission on the Use of Standardized Admission Tests in Undergraduate Admission issued a report about the use of standardized test scores in college admissions decisions and it said in part:

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*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.

InsideHigherEd.com quoted Joseph Soares, professor of sociology at Wake Forest University who has written about standardized admissions tests, as saying in an e-mail:

“This is important because it is our first national assessment of how well test optional is doing, and the results are solid. As we have experienced here at Wake Forest, which was one of the participants in the study, being test-optional expands opportunity for low [socioeconomic status] youths and minorities of color. The study confirms that high school

grades remain the best predictor of college grades; and suggests that anyone relying on test scores reduces the breadth of their applicant pool for no good reason. Test scores transmit social disparities without improving our ability to select youths who will succeed in college.”

and

“This study raises again, in my opinion, the question: If you are not test optional, how can you justify requiring a metric more social Darwinist than academic in its effects?”

Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog.  Follow @valeriestrauss