



More Than Half of Students at America’s Top Colleges Would Not Have Been Admitted If Only SAT Scores Were Considered, New Georgetown Report Says

Student bodies at top colleges would become more White and slightly more affluent if only students with the highest SAT scores were admitted

(Washington, DC, June 23, 2019) If the nation’s top 200 colleges only admitted students with the highest SAT scores, 53% of incoming students would be replaced, resulting in a student body slightly more affluent and less racially diverse. *SAT-Only Admission: How Would It Change College Campuses?* examines how implementing a test-only admissions policy at the most selective US colleges would alter the demographics and credentials of a recent college class.

More than half of students no longer qualified to attend as a result of test-only admissions would come from top-quartile socioeconomic status (SES) families. In their place, only students with SAT scores higher than 1250 would be admitted, slightly raising the share of top-quartile SES students from 60% to 63%. Among students with SAT scores below 1250 who actually enrolled at top colleges, more came from families in the top quartile of SES than from the bottom three quartiles combined, despite these groups having the same median SAT score of 1140.

“In the wake of the college admissions scandal, our thought experiment tested whether removing legacy and social capital from the admissions equation would have a more equitable outcome,” said Dr. Anthony P. Carnevale, CEW director and the report’s lead author. “But a test-only admissions policy would only further privilege in the higher education system.”

With test-only admissions, the share of White students at these top colleges would rise from 66% to 75%; the combined share of Black and Latino students would decrease from 19% to 11%; and the share of Asian students would fall slightly, from 11% to 10%.

Although Blacks and Latinos are often assumed to benefit from affirmative action, in reality, these groups are not being admitted in significant numbers with lower scores. Of the enrolled students whose SAT score is lower than 1250, 27% are Black or Latino, while 35% are affluent and White. Among applicants with lower test scores, Blacks and Latinos had a median score of 1120, similar to 1140 for Whites and 1130 for Asians.

“If we tested students, then lined ’em up and let ’em in, America’s top colleges would become less racially diverse on the basis of small differences in test scores,” said Jeff Strohl, CEW director of research and co-author of the report.

Test-only admissions would raise the median SAT score at the top 200 colleges from 1250 to 1320. But standardized tests are not a strong enough predictor of success in college that they should be used alone.

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As the CEW researchers found, only using standardized tests for admissions would create student bodies that are less racially diverse and slightly more affluent, but not much more likely to succeed in college.

In pursuing a holistic admissions process, selective colleges take into account more than just standardized test scores: high school grades, essays, letters of recommendation, activities, athletic ability, ability to pay tuition, and other factors. However, as currently practiced, this process allows colleges too much leeway to give additional advantages to those who are already advantaged. SAT-only admissions is not the solution, but admissions need to become more transparent to ensure that the process is based on merit.

For the full report, visit cew.georgetown.edu/SATOnly.

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