

Advising Your Students About the New SAT

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In the domain of college admissions testing, the times, they are a-changing. If you haven't already fielded questions from families and students who are curious or nervous about the new SAT, rest assured the inquiries will be forthcoming. The SAT is undergoing a radical transformation, and the changes may affect your students' admission test choices and testing timelines.

In December the College Board released the most comprehensive problem set to date, offering a glimpse of what the new SAT and PSAT will entail. The released test items reflect a surprisingly different SAT, both in terms of content and level of difficulty. If this practice set is indeed representative of the new test in development, it will be the hardest SAT we've ever seen and significantly harder than the ACT.

This new SAT bears the deep imprint of the Common Core State Standards: nearly every defined learning objective in the recently released problem set maps directly to a Common Core standard. This focus on the Common Core has transformed the test. While success on the current SAT is predicated upon a student's ability to solve math, reading and writing items, the new SAT seeks to measure fluency and gauge a student's deeper understanding of the content. The latter approach will yield a more complete picture of a student's comprehension, but it comes at the price of a more challenging test, which may intimidate certain students and drive them toward alternative assessments.

Reading and Writing

Although the format of the sample SAT Writing section mirrors that of the ACT English section, the reading level of the passages is remarkably more advanced on the new SAT. Likewise, several passages in the sample SAT Reading section are more difficult than those that have historically appeared on the test. These passages resemble those typically found on the harder, more complex SAT Literature test, and demand a significantly higher level of reading fluency. Advanced vocabulary permeates the Reading passages and "SAT words," such as acuteness, partisan and empirically—which were purportedly to be excised from the new assessment—appear in correct answer choices. Additionally, the sample included a new question type that requires students to provide evidence for previous answers. These new

multi-part questions are time intensive and prone to creating a “domino effect” in which students miss both the initial inference question and the supporting evidence question. Given the elevated textual complexity, ongoing presence of advanced vocabulary, and time-intensive “command of evidence” question types, there is no doubt that this new Reading test is harder than its equivalent on the current SAT or ACT.

Optional Essay: Harder, but Better

The “optional” essay requires students to analyze the manner in which an author uses logic, structure and rhetorical skills to build an argument. It is markedly more challenging and analytical than the current required essay, which allows students to make up facts or cite personal experience to support a claim. On this new essay, students can attain a maximum score of 12, with a possible 4 points each for Reading, Analysis, and Writing. A profound departure from today’s SAT essay, this essay is better suited to assess a student’s readiness for college-level writing and analysis.

Math: Awaken the Slumbering Giant

Of all the sections, the math section is by far the most surprising and challenging. Emphasizing math fluency and conceptual understanding, the math questions require students to model realworld situations with complex formulas and articulate underlying math fundamentals. The student’s ability to merely solve a problem (e.g., find the value for x in a given equation) is now subordinate to the student’s ability to “read” the problem and understand its various components (e.g., articulate what abstract value $1/x$ represents in a given system of equations). Even when students are asked to simply solve problems, they will find the new problems require more discrete steps and significantly more time than do typical SAT problems. Additionally, for the first time on the SAT, students will need to wade through extraneous information and distractors to find the relevant information. This will add to the time and reading requirements for this new math section.

In particular, the calculator-free section is the most radical departure from anything we’ve ever seen on the SAT or the ACT. Questions in this section require a different method of perceiving a math problem. Students who are well-versed in the logic and language of the current SAT may, in fact, struggle on the new SAT because of their training. A student looking for the standard set up—find the relevant info in the problem, structure the work left

to right, top to bottom, and solve—may be confounded, wondering how to proceed when facing these new kinds of problems. Students trained on the current SAT will have to unlearn existing strategies to succeed on the new SAT, eliminating the prospect of transitioning seamlessly between the current and new SAT.

The scope of the math content is also broader than ever before. Students will be accountable to know more definitions, equations, and math structures on this new test. The variety of new concepts covered in the sample math sections was unprecedented, requiring deep knowledge of trigonometry, planar geometry, and much more. At times this test felt more like a high school Algebra II/Trig final than an SAT. Extrapolating from the depth and variety of content covered in this small sample of problems, students might be accountable for knowing over a hundred new math concepts, well beyond the 40 or so discrete topics assessed on the current SAT.

If the level of difficulty of this problem set is a reflection of what's to come, the College Board will need a very forgiving curve to round out the normal scoring distribution, allowing a student to miss numerous problems and still attain a high score.

More Time per Item: A Necessity Rather Than a Gift

While I was initially excited by the prospect of having more time per question on the new SAT and assumed the College Board was backing off processing speed, I now realize that much of the benefit from the additional time will be negated by the new, harder problem types. Though this test will continue to be gentler on processing speed than the ACT, the benefit will be less substantial than anticipated. Students have more time per item, and they will need it.

A Better Test?

From first analysis, it seems this better-aligned and more challenging SAT will give college admissions officers a better prediction of college preparedness and school administrators a better measure of their students' academic performance. Will school districts, states or college admissions officers engage with this new test? Maybe. The Michigan Department of

Education, for example, just opted out of its longstanding ACT contract and secured a three year contract with the College Board to ensure that every junior in the state takes the new SAT. With aggressive pricing and better Common Core alignment, the new SAT may make inroads at the district and state levels. The most important question for IECs is how will college admissions offices value the enhanced difficulty and Common Core alignment of this new test? Will they view the SAT as a superior instrument to the ACT, or will they continue to view these assessments on equal footing? If the data bears out that the new SAT is, in fact, a better predictor of collegiate success, college admissions offices will have to respond. But until that time, we cannot assume there will be any particular advantage in taking the more challenging SAT over the ACT.

Timelines and Potential Implications

By March or April of this year we will have the first complete, calibrated new SATs from the College Board. Until we have complete tests, it's essentially impossible to conduct an accurate, valid and reliable diagnostic test for the new SAT. A new Blue Book of College Board practice tests should arrive in the spring/early summer, and Khan Academy will release official College Board practice material in a digital format. In October the new PSAT will be administered, and the new SAT will replace the current test in March of 2016. Assuming the new SAT aligns with the test content provided in December and the College Board test writers are not merely showing off their hardest possible material, we anticipate significant changes in student behavior. Many current sophomores will shy away from this harder assessment, either completing testing on the current SAT by January 2016 or migrating to the ACT. Not only is the content harder on the new SAT, but the College Board has indicated that the initial March and May SAT results may not be released until 6–8 weeks after the tests are administered, denying students critical, timely feedback. While many students will avoid the new SAT, your top-performing students, those who will be unfazed by harder reading or more advanced math, may benefit from taking the new SAT.

If your sophomore students decide to stick with the current SAT, this will accelerate their testing timelines. These students will need to complete their preparation and take two or three official SAT administrations by January of 2016. Some IECs with whom we work have

encouraged sophomores to take their first SAT in May or June of this year. In any other year, I would discourage this to keep the testing in the junior year. However, given this year of transition and understanding that many current sophomores will have challenging schedules in the fall, I think it's okay if a student wants to knock out an official SAT in May or June.

Students who did well on their sophomore PSAT and are in the range for National Merit scholarships will need to practice with the new SAT content this summer and hone their skills before October. While success on the old PSAT by no means guarantees a similar performance on the new PSAT, we anticipate the majority of strong testers, particularly those willing to put in the necessary practice, will be able to successfully transition to the new test.

Summary

As the landscape of admissions testing is in flux, we will need to carefully track developments from the College Board and from college admissions offices. This new SAT is clearly a work in progress, but its current charted course will have significant implications for this field. We promise to keep you fully informed as we navigate the new landscape of admissions testing together.

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