



Unraveling the Mystery of the SAT and ACT Exams

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When I begin to breakdown the relationship between the college entrance standardized tests I think of it like this: The PSAT is the little brother of the SAT and the PLAN is the little sister of the ACT. Both the PSAT and the PLAN are the preliminary tests to their big brother and sister. Traditionally, the preliminary tests have been given in Junior year of high school, however, schools setting an earlier testing culture have administered these examinations on a practice basis as early as 8th and 9th grades.

As in any typical family, these examinations have their functional and dysfunctional traits. While the SAT is a reasoning test consisting of verbal, mathematics and writing sections, the ACT tends to have a greater concentration on content area in science, mathematics, reading and English. Students may take either the SAT or ACT or both. Just about every college requires at least one of these college entrance examinations. The SAT tends to be more common in the eastern part of the country, while the ACT gains more popularity in the west. However, in recent years many students in the east have taken both exams. It is a good practice to begin your college research early so you can become aware of the average test score a particular college may require as part of their admissions criteria. This helps to provide a realistic target for students setting attainable goals.

In the academic community, there is ongoing debate about the value of the SAT and ACT and the weight they hold in determining a student's entrance into college. Let's face it, if a student is not a good test taker or has a really bad day on the Saturday the test is administered, should they be penalized without consideration of the academic work they have been doing all along? Regardless of our sentiment, as it stands now, these tests continue to be administered because they provide measurable and standardized data used by schools for admissions purposes. However, they are not the only criteria for college admissions, there are other significant factors to consider. Therefore, make certain that you have the rest of your college credentials in order so you may present yourself as a competitive college candidate with a solid profile.

Perusing the College Board website at www.collegeboard.com can give you additional insight into these exams and provide testing dates and registration information. There is a fee to register for each exam and copies of test scores can be requested for distribution to select colleges as well as for academic purposes. Guidance counselors can assist with this process and answer questions as they arise.

Most families pursue tutoring outside of the regular school setting for the SAT and ACT exams. Tutoring is available on an individual and group basis. If financially feasible, it is recommended

to hire a personal tutor for test preparation; the next best thing would be small group tutoring. The “tutor-mill” large group sessions are available, however, the only benefactors of this program are usually the tutoring companies. Many students involved with the large group sessions don’t get much out of them and wind up going through the motions and subsequently repeating the class because they don’t receive favorable results. It is better to invest a little bit more up-front and increase the chances of success, rather than pay twice.

Preparation and accurate information play an important role in unraveling the mystery of the relevance and impact of standardized tests in the college admissions process. As this process unfolds, continue to seek good information from experts who can offer active support and advice for your family and college bound student.