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College Board Shakes Up SAT

Entrance Test to Return to 1600-Point Scale; Essay Becomes Optional

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The group that runs the SAT college-entrance test is shaking up its format, scoring and potentially the \$1 billion test-preparation industry that has grown up around it. Caroline Porter reports on the News Hub. Photo: AP.

AUSTIN, Texas—The organization that runs the SAT said Wednesday it is shaking up the college-entrance exam and offering free online help, throwing a curve to the \$1 billion test-preparation industry that has grown up around it.

Out are obscure vocabulary words, mandatory essays, a deduction for incorrect answers and the 2400-point grading scale launched in 2005. In are questions that demand more analysis and familiarity with a narrower range of subjects as well as a return to the longtime 1600-point scale.

Also in the works are a plan to provide free online tutorials to all students and another to arrange for free college applications for economically disadvantaged students.

The nonprofit College Board, which runs the SAT, said the changes would help the test better gauge students' readiness for college and help bridge economic and demographic barriers. The new plan also could encourage more students to take the SAT at a time when it has fallen behind the rival ACT in the number of test-takers.

College Board President David Coleman said the SAT, which nearly 1.7 million students took last year, had become out of touch with what students are learning and was perceived to be a better assessment of "privilege rather than merit." Mr. Coleman, an architect of the Common Core math-and-reading standards rolling out to K-12 schools across the nation with backing from the Obama administration, hopes to close that gap by aligning the new SAT with the skills he believes are more predictive of college success.

The new reading section will ask students to support their answers from evidence in a passage provided. Vocabulary words like prevaricator, sagacious and ignominious will disappear in favor of words like synthesis and empirical whose meanings shift in different contexts.

The math section will draw from fewer topics, but mastery of those on the test is more likely to be predictive of student readiness and career training, Mr. Coleman said. Calculators will be allowed in only some of the math sections, rather than throughout.

The current essay section, which was added in 2005 and brought the potential perfect score to 2400, has been criticized because the compositions aren't graded on factual accuracy. The new essays, which students could write if their school districts or target colleges require them, will require evidence to be analyzed and an explanation of how the author built an argument.

For decades, the SAT was the nation's pre-eminent college-entrance examination. But its market share is waning. In 2012, for the first time, more high-school students took the rival ACT, which is tied closely to what is taught in high schools and has been gaining popularity as a way to measure achievement. Last year, that margin expanded to 200,000, according to Fair Test, a testing-watchdog organization.

The ACT has contracts to test all the 11th graders in 13 states, some beyond its traditional base in the Midwest, according to Paul Weeks, vice president of consumer engagement for nonprofit ACT Inc. Several more states are joining shortly, Mr. Weeks said.

"We're delighted the SAT folks have finally recognized the test should reflect what's going on in schools," Mr. Weeks said. "That's what we've been doing for a long time."

That growth has put the SAT, formerly known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, on the defensive, and not for the first time. The changes to the test—which go into place in the spring of 2016—follow the changes in 2005 after the University of California System threatened to stop considering it because of unhappiness with the analogy section of the test.

The College Board said the changes to the test—including taking away the 1/4 -point penalty for wrong answers—weren't expected to change an individual student's score for better or worse, but it acknowledged that the changes aim to make the test fairer overall.

Reactions were mixed. At Seton Hall University in New Jersey, Vice President of Enrollment Alyssa McCloud said she was pleased. "I think it will allow for greater access and opportunity for students," she said.

Neal McCluskey, an education analyst with the libertarian Cato Institute, was less impressed. "There is a lot of talk about problem solving, rigor and challenging kids, but that's not necessarily representing really high achievement," he said, adding that he won't know fully until more specifics are released. "It sounds like the same basic problem as Common Core appears to have. It's lots of rhetoric with lofty goals, but at least right now there is no clear evidence that it actually hits those goals or pushes kids to meet them."

In another big change, the College Board said it would coordinate with colleges to help students with few resources better understand their options to reach college. To that end, low-income students will be able to apply to as many as four participating colleges for free.

Mr. Coleman cited the lack of access to advanced-placement courses, which are also run by the College Board, among Latinos and African-Americans. "These patterns of access, if allowed to continue, will build an iron wall of inequality into the next generation," Mr. Coleman said.

Steven Syverson, a board member with the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, expressed some skepticism at the College Board's motives for arranging free college applications.

"The other thing it will do is encourage students to take the SAT instead of the ACT," he said. "I wonder if they're looking out there and wondering, 'What is the best way to get our market share back?'"

A College Board spokeswoman said its changes are about boosting college readiness "by offering a solution that goes well beyond simply administering another test."

The free online tutorials, through a partnership with nonprofit education website Khan Academy, are designed to flatten the advantage of wealthier students, who are more likely to have access to private test tutors. Students will have access to SAT-specific tutorials at no cost.

"Our intention is that this will be the best thing out there that happens to be free," said founder Salman Khan.

Test-preparation companies said any uncertainty generated by the new format would be a boon to their business. Changes to the SAT in 1994 and 2005 generated the two biggest years in terms of growth for Kaplan Test Prep Co., said Vice President Seppy Basili.

"Any time there is a high-stakes event, people want coaching, people are going to want an edge," said Mr. Basili.

The College Board also said it would work with teachers to align the test with the high-school curriculum to reflect "real demands of first-year college courses and career training programs."

"They are recognizing that the test has taken on a kind of cultural significance that gives the College Board an added responsibility to make sure it is used not only to evaluate students but to help them prepare for college," said Marjorie Hass, president of Austin College in Sherman, Texas. Ms. Hass was involved in conversations with the College Board as it redesigned the test.

Sonia Frank, a 17-year-old high-school junior in Chicago, has been doing test preparation for seven months and will take the ACT in April instead of the SAT because, she said, the former asks questions in a more direct language. But she said she was "a little bummed" that she can't take the redesigned SAT, particularly given the removal of the penalty for wrong answers.

"If the new version of the SAT was available now, I would definitely be taking this over the ACT," she said. "It's just like everything I've been learning in school, where we are analyzing documents and seeing how we came to that answer. The idea of condensed math makes it much easier to narrow down what you want to study."