

U.S. Colleges Are Urged to Drop Reliance on SAT and ACT

By Sara Rimer - The New York Times - Monday, September 22, 2008

A commission convened by some of the most influential college admissions officials in the United States is recommending that American colleges and universities move away from their reliance on standardized test scores and shift toward admissions exams more closely tied to the high school curriculum and achievement.

The commission's report, the culmination of a yearlong study led by William Fitzsimmons, the dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard University, comes amid growing concerns that the frenzy over standardized college admissions tests is misshaping secondary education and feeding a billion-dollar test-prep industry that encourages students to try to game the tests. A growing number of colleges and universities like Bates College in Maine, Lawrence University in Wisconsin, Wake Forest University in North Carolina and Smith College in Massachusetts, have made the standardized tests, called the SAT and ACT, optional. And the report concludes that more institutions could make admissions decisions without requiring the SAT and ACT.

It encourages institutions to consider dropping admission test requirements unless they can prove that the benefits of such tests outweigh the negatives. "It would be much better for the country to have students focusing on high school courses that, based on evidence, will prepare them well for college and also prepare them well for the real world beyond college instead of their spending enormous amounts of time trying to game the SAT," Fitzsimmons said in an interview.

Fitzsimmons said that at Harvard, high school grades and individual subject tests are considered better predictors of college success than the SAT or ACT, and that the university is studying the use of standardized tests in its admissions. He added that it was possible that the university may eventually make those tests optional. The report also calls for an end to the practice of using minimum admission test scores for merit aid eligibility. And it specifically urges the National Merit Scholarship Corporation to stop using scores on the PSAT as the initial screen for eligibility for scholarships. The National Merit Scholarship competition "contributes to the misperception of test scores as sole measures of 'merit' in a pervasive and highly visible manner," the report says.

About a third of colleges accredited to grant bachelor's degrees, 770, have already made the SAT and ACT optional, said Robert Schaeffer, public education director for the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, a group critical of standardized admissions testing.