

A photograph of three students in a classroom setting. In the foreground, a young woman with long blonde hair is looking down. Next to her, a young man with short dark hair and blue-rimmed glasses, wearing a navy blue and white striped sweater, is looking towards the right. Behind him, another student is partially visible. The background shows a classroom with a whiteboard and wooden paneling.

The New Normal: Optional Testing

Guidance/Actions

Guidance

Many colleges have dropped or significantly changed their testing requirements for the current admissions cycle, and possibly for future cycles as well. For those colleges that have gone test-optional: **Optional truly means optional!** Admissions officers around the country have assured us that they are absolutely sincere in this. You will not be penalized for the lack of test scores.

Actions

Research is imperative. Find out what the different schools on your list require. The options this year are: test-required, test-flexible, test-optional and test-blind. Check each institution's website to understand precisely how they define their test policy so that you are making an informed decision when choosing whether or not to submit scores.

Focus on what you can control under current circumstances. Do your best to engage in learning at school this semester—whatever “school” looks like for you right now. Write a compelling essay to introduce yourself

to colleges in whatever way makes sense to you. Stay involved in activities that bring you joy, even if they do not look like traditional extracurriculars.

Keep your anxiety in check and remember that health and safety are more important than sitting for a test. In reality, it might be impossible to sit for a test this year.

Guidance

Colleges accept both the SAT and the ACT equally and there is no specific advantage to taking one over the other. If you are able to register and take the ACT or SAT, pick the test that's going to work best for you. If you do have test scores to submit, think of them as a supplemental piece of your application. Keep in mind that a high score doesn't guarantee admission, just as a lower score doesn't immediately disqualify an applicant.

Actions

If you want to take one of the tests, register as soon as possible. You might have already taken a diagnostic test at your high school to get an idea of which of these two tests is a better fit for you. If not, there are free diagnostic tests available online. Choose the test that you perform better on. ([See Resources](#))

Prepare for the test by doing some test prep and taking two or three practice tests ahead of time. It's best to do the prep within several weeks of the actual test—it's more effective when it's fresh in your mind.

Free test prep tools and programs are available online. ([See Resources](#))

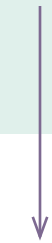
If you want to know how your test scores compare to other applicants at a specific college, you can visit the college's website and review the range and average median scores for both the ACT and SAT.

Test scores or no test scores, get comfortable with the very real possibility that you will be denied admission to some of the schools to which you apply. Separate emotion from fact: admissions is fickle and there are factors outside of your control that can determine your chances at a particular college. Engage in positive self-talk to combat fear of failure: the school you attend will be lucky to have you and all you bring to their campus.

Guidance/Actions

Guidance

Given that many colleges have implemented a test-optional policy, admissions offices are going to focus on what you *do* include in your application, not what you *don't* include. Your grades, high school transcript, personal statement (essay), list of extracurriculars, and teacher recommendation(s) give a college plenty of information to do a holistic review of your application. They want to understand you as a learner and a potential community member.



Actions

Remember that persistence and performance over time is what matters most. Your high school transcript showing the last three and a half years of academic work will tell an admissions office a lot more about you than three and a half hours of a standardized test taken on a Saturday.

The admissions team will look at your whole picture, not just grades and scores, during a review process that is more art than science.

If you have test scores and you don't think they're an accurate portrayal of you as a student, you have options. You can still be competitive without testing. Think about how best to showcase who you are and where you are coming from, including your interests, strengths, and passions. Context is everything. And there are many layers to the application, just as much as there are many layers to you.

Admissions officers are well aware that many low-income and Black communities have been hard hit by COVID (especially in Boston), and of the impact on students' ability to prepare for and take the tests. Trust that it's true that not having a score will not hurt your candidacy. In light of the pandemic, all students are allowed to choose to just let it go.



Our goal is to empower you with the right resources at the right time. College Guidance Network has carefully curated this list for you:

UPCOMING COLLEGE GUIDANCE NETWORK PROGRAMS:

“Inside Admissions: How an Application is Reviewed”
Wednesday,
Dec. 02, 7–8 PM

“Ask me Anything about College Admissions”
Wednesday,
Dec. 16, 7–8 PM

[FairTest](#) (The National Center for Fair and Open Testing): This organization maintains a free, online master list of test-optional schools. More than two-thirds of four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. will not require applicants to submit ACT or SAT scores for fall 2021.

[Bates’ twenty-year test-optional study](#): Bates College has found no differences in academic performance or graduation rates between submitters and non-submitters of standardized tests.

[Let’s Get Ready](#) provides high school students from low-resourced communities and first-generation-to-college students with free SAT preparation, admissions counseling and other support services needed to gain admission to and graduate from college. Services are provided by volunteer college students who also serve as role models and mentors.

[Khan Academy](#) offers a free SAT test preparation program. The creators of the SAT have given Khan Academy exclusive access and advice to build a personalized practice program for anyone, anywhere. Khan Academy offers thousands of practice questions, videos, lessons,

and hints plus study and test-taking tips and strategies. There are also eight full-length practice tests and content created in partnership with the College Board.

[Schoolhouse.world](#) Show your mastery of calculus or statistics through an optional, internet-based, free certification program provided by [Schoolhouse.world](#). Certification is achieved by completing an online Khan Academy test and recording yourself as you work through the questions. [The University of Chicago](#) will accept this certification as part of your application, if you wish.



[Fall 2020 SAT](#) dates and details provided by the College Board.

[2020–2021 ACT](#) test dates and details from ACT.

American Student Assistance (ASA) is dedicated to helping students and parents make smart decisions about education and career pathways. *This includes guidance on college planning and financing and career exploration.*

With more than sixty years of experience, ASA is well positioned to offer **free** advising and support to students and families across the United States.

Call 855-469-2724 (toll free)

An ASA counselor can offer **free** assistance with:

- Planning and paying for college
- Navigating the admissions process
- Guidance on applying for financial aid and understanding award letters
- Scholarship resources



To be a successful college applicant, it helps to know the lingo.

ACT:

The ACT is a two-hour-and-fifty-five minute standardized test used in the admissions process for colleges. The ACT has four multiple choice sections covering English, math, reading and science. There is also an optional writing section of the test. Each section of the ACT is scored in a scale of 1–36. A composite score is determined by averaging all four sections. Due to the ongoing pandemic many colleges are now test optional, so review the testing policies for each of the colleges for which you plan to apply before submitting your final application. Testing accommodations, such as large print or extended time, are available to students with documented physical or learning disabilities. Depending on personal preference, college applicants typically take either the ACT or SAT; most colleges will accept either test. It costs money to take the ACT, but fee waivers are available to eligible students.

Admissions Tests:

The ACT and SAT are the two main standardized admissions tests typically used in the college application process. Testing policies vary from college to college, and the ongoing pandemic has resulted in many colleges going test-optional. It is best to review the testing policies for each of the colleges to which you plan to apply before submitting your final application. Depending on personal preference, college applicants typically take either the ACT or SAT; most colleges will accept either. Fee waivers are available to eligible students.

CEEB code:

CEEB is an acronym which stands for College Entrance Examination Board. Issued by the College Board, a CEEB code is anywhere from four to six digits and serves as a standardized identification number assigned to test centers, as well as all high schools, colleges and universities. CEEB codes are used to register for the SAT and then to get those scores reported to the correct schools and relevant scholarship programs. To find your high school's specific CEEB code, you can go to the K-12 school code search page [<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/k-12-school-code-search>] on the College Board's website.

Holistic review:

An approach taken by college admissions departments when evaluating applicants. It is an application review process that takes each applicant into consideration as a whole person. As an admissions principle, an application is the sum of many parts and each part is one factor among many.

SAT:

The SAT is a three-hour standardized test used in the admissions process for colleges. The SAT has multiple choice sections covering math, evidence-based reading, and writing. There is also an optional essay section. Each section of the SAT is scored on a 200–800 point scale with the highest possible score of 1600. Due to the ongoing pandemic many colleges are test-optional, so review the testing policies for each of the colleges for which you plan to apply before submitting your final application. Testing accommodations, such as large print or extended time, are available to students with documented physical or learning disabilities. Depending on personal preference, college applicants typically take either the ACT or SAT; most colleges will accept either test. Fee waivers are available to eligible students.

School profile:

This is a document created by the high school you attend, and shared with the colleges to which you apply. The school profile is a “desired but not required” document, as not every high school in the country has created one. It details your school's curriculum, grading and ranking procedures, test score information, college attendance history, and extracurricular opportunities.

Test-optional:

Policy of admissions offices at colleges that aren't requiring test scores. An application is complete without test scores.

Test-flexible:

Policy of admissions offices at colleges that will allow you to choose which test scores to submit in support of your application -- ACT, SAT, SAT subject tests, AP, etc. As always, read the admissions application requirements carefully.

Test-blind:

A relatively new policy of admissions offices at several colleges that do not wish to see test scores from applicants under any circumstances. These colleges look exclusively at other parts of your application to discern your strengths as a student. “Test-blind” and “test-free” mean the same thing.

For many families, conversations about standardized testing can be challenging. So, where to start?

The table below offers suggestions for how to broach the important topics in a family-friendly way—both for parents and students. Scan, pick and choose to get the conversation started—and keep it going.

Topic	Parent Could Ask...	Student Could Ask...
Test or No Test?	• Since many colleges aren't requiring tests – at least this year – can we talk about what that might mean for you? • If you think you'd like to give one of the tests a shot, can we talk about the pros and cons of each one? • COVID has changed college admissions for everyone. How has it changed your thinking about applying to college? • Especially now, test scores aren't nearly as important as they used to be. Can we talk about all the things that will make your application strong?	• I'm not sure which test to take, or even whether to take one. Can you help me figure this out? • My grades are so up and down, I wonder whether I need to take a test in case a good test score might help me. What do you think about that? • I've never liked (or been good at) test taking. I know there are lots of ways to prepare, but I am not sure where to start. Could you help me with that? • I really want to go to (College X). What do you think I should be doing to make that happen? • If I don't take a test, I feel like there will be a big hole in my application. Can we brainstorm how to fill it?
If You Decide to Take a Test, which One(s)?	• Since colleges don't seem to prefer the ACT over the SAT, how are you thinking about which one(s) you want to take – and when? • Since it really does seem like practice tests help, at least by making you familiar with the test, do you know where to find those online?	• I'm not sure which test I'll do better on. Can you help me figure out which one I should take? • A lot of my friends are taking test prep courses or getting tutors. Is that a possibility for me? • It seems that without a test, they won't know if I'm smart enough or not. Should I just take one and see how I do?
Why Are You Desirable to Colleges?	• The good news is that since schools won't be able to rely so heavily on test scores, they will have to look at each student for who she/he really is! Would you like to bounce some ideas off me for how you might present your best self on applications? • Remember, colleges are also needing to figure out how to navigate a test-optional world. Would it be helpful to think about what colleges are looking for from their point of view?	• I want to make sure I am including everything I need to so my application is strong. What might I be missing? • [If a strong test taker]: I feel like one of my biggest strengths won't mean as much this year if colleges are down-playing the importance of scores. What can I still do to highlight that? • There are so many kids who do all the same stuff I do—how can I make sure I stand out as different from them?