

# New *Fiske Guide* Policy Regarding Test Score Ranges

A special word needs to be said about the reporting of SAT and ACT test score ranges. Previous editions of the *Fiske Guide* regularly listed the range of scores for the middle half of enrolled freshmen—those between the 25th and 75th percentiles—on these tests for each college or university. We did so for two reasons: to help students assess their competitiveness as an applicant to a particular school and to give them a sense of how they might fit into the academic environment of the institution.

Several recent trends have now conspired to call into question the validity of admissions test data—and hence the reliability of using them for either purpose. Rather than publish inaccurate and misleading information, the *Fiske Guide*, beginning with this edition, has decided to omit any reporting of score ranges, at least for the foreseeable future. Such scores are, of course, readily available elsewhere on most college websites (search for “Common Data Set”) or through the College Navigator feature of the National Center for Education Statistics website ([www.nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator](http://www.nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator)).

The most obvious recent challenge to the integrity of SAT and ACT score ranges has been the soaring number of colleges adopting admissions policies that are “test-optional” (meaning that applicants have the choice of whether or not to submit scores) or “test-blind” (meaning that colleges do not look at scores even if applicants submit them). By the spring of 2020, more than 1,000 of the 2,330 bachelor-degree-granting institutions in the U.S. fell into one of these categories, with their ranks steadily rising. This trend has since been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused the widespread closing of testing sites and deprived hundreds of thousands of applicants of an opportunity to take the tests. As a result, many more colleges and universities have waived testing requirements for current applicants and become effectively test-optional. How many of these colleges will restore testing requirements once the pandemic has receded remains to be seen.

Unless the published score ranges reflect the scores of *all* freshmen, not merely those who were able to take the tests and chose to submit scores, the usefulness of these score ranges for assessing both an applicant’s chances of admission and where they would fit into the academic environment of the school is seriously compromised. Incomplete, and thus misleading, scores serve no one’s interest. Moreover, since it is likely that many students who choose not to submit test results do so because they have relatively modest scores, the result is to inflate a school’s reported score ranges (something that has not gone unnoticed by schools pondering whether to go test-optional). Artificially high score ranges may also discourage students who might otherwise qualify for admission from applying in the first place. (One mitigating factor is that some test-optional colleges do request and report the test scores of all incoming

freshmen who took the tests after they have enrolled.)

To be sure, the scores that would have been published in this edition of the *Fiske Guide*—those of freshmen who entered college in September 2019 and took their test in the spring or fall of 2018—have not been affected by COVID-related problems. But this data will not reflect the realities that students will encounter when they enter in the fall of 2021.

Students applying to college in the next few years will be rightly concerned about how these trends, especially their inability to access SAT and ACT testing, will affect their chances of admission to a school of their choice. Such students should find comfort in the fact that, well before the pandemic, selective colleges in general have been placing less and less emphasis on test scores in making admissions decisions. Based on their own experiences, they have concluded that the combination of two other metrics—the level and consistency of applicants’ high school grades and the rigor of curriculum they pursued—is by far the most reliable means to assess applicants’ abilities. Increasingly, test scores, if they are referenced at all, are viewed primarily as confirmation of these other metrics.

In this context, an effective strategy for college-bound high school students seeking to estimate their admissions prospects at competitive schools would be to focus on the two factors that we know to be keys to their chances of admission: high school grades and whether they took advantage of the most challenging course offerings at their school. The *Fiske Guide* includes exclusive academic ratings for each school as well as information on admissions selectivity. A school might be “highly selective” (5 to 25 percent of applicants accepted) or “selective” (26 to 50 percent). Students seeking to gauge whether they would fit into the academic environment of a particular school can consult the school’s write-up for information on academic advising, tutoring and mentoring programs, freshman seminars, and other programs to ease the transition to college in the first year. They can also read what students have to say about the level of competitiveness or supportiveness of fellow students. Retention and graduation rates are other useful clues.

Debate over the future role of SAT and ACT scores in college admissions—and their value for individual applicants—is playing out in the context of some broader social issues, including the extent to which admissions policies of selective colleges inadvertently perpetuate structural racism and economic inequality. The *New York Times* reported (August 24, 2017) that, despite well-publicized efforts to the contrary, the proportion of African Americans and Hispanics at public flagship, Ivy League, and other top colleges, is actually *lower* than it was 35 years ago.

Critics cite numerous routine admissions policies at selective private colleges and universities as biased against first-generation students and those from ethnic and racial minority groups. These include preferential admissions for legacies (14 percent of Harvard undergraduates) and for recruited athletes in niche sports such as lacrosse, crew, or golf that are played primarily by students from privileged

backgrounds. Other suspect practices include the strategic allocating of merit scholarships to maximize tuition revenue and growing pressure on students to apply through early decision, thereby surrendering their ability to negotiate a better financial aid package.

The role that SAT and ACT scores play in college admissions is at the center of these discussions. There was a time when one could make a credible argument that, since the tests, especially the SAT, were not curriculum-oriented, they offered colleges an independent way to identify “diamonds in the rough”—talented applicants, especially those from racial or ethnic minorities or from disadvantaged backgrounds, whose abilities might otherwise have gone unnoticed. In some cases, this still happens, but the broader argument no longer holds water. The enormous expansion of the \$1 billion test-prep industry that has grown up around admissions tests has now tipped the scales back in favor of privileged applicants with access to tutors and other sophisticated test prep and reduced the opportunities for those diamonds to glitter. Indeed, a wide body of research has shown that SAT and ACT scores closely track with socioeconomic data and may say more about a student’s zip code than about their academic potential.

This problem has, of course, been exacerbated by the pandemic. Stories abound about well-to-do students flying to other states to take the SAT or ACT and possibly gain an edge in the admissions process. In another sign of mounting public pressure on these tests, the College Board, which sponsors the SAT, announced in January 2021 that it was scrapping the optional writing section of the SAT as well as its numerous subject area tests.

The decision to end the reporting of test score ranges in the *Fiske Guide* for the foreseeable future has been informed by all of the issues described above. How this policy might develop over the long term remains to be seen, as the role of tests in the admissions process itself continues to evolve. No one knows what role the SAT and ACT will play in the “new normal” when colleges must make decisions without the benefit of testing for a majority of their applicants.