

KNOW THE SCORE, PART II: *Preparing for College Admission Exams*

(Editor's note: This is part of a continuing series about the college admission process written expressly for the Sun by college consultant, Marilyn Morrison)

by Marilyn C. Morrison

While many parents, students, and educators would like to see standardized testing de-emphasized in the college admission process, these exams are an inevitable hurdle that most college-bound students must overcome. According to the latest survey conducted by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), 87% of college admission officers attribute moderate or considerable importance to standardized tests as a factor in their admission decisions, second only to grades earned in college preparatory courses.

No one should take a college admission test "cold." While formal test prep is not mandatory, it is important to be prepared. Students should be familiar with the format of the questions so they are not reading the instructions for the first time on the day of the test. Taking practice exams will help students become comfortable with the pacing of each test, and will ensure that they know important details like whether there is a penalty for guessing.

Two local experts, Jason Moreno of Eureka Review and Stephanie Meade of The Collegiate Edge, recently shared their thoughts on how and when to prepare for the SAT and ACT. Both emphasized that, whichever approach they choose, students cannot expect high scores if they wait until the last minute to cram for the tests.

ALLOW ENOUGH TIME

"The best time to prep for the SAT," according to Jason Moreno, founder and CEO of Eureka Review, "is when you have the time to devote to it, without impeding too much on your schoolwork. To fully prep for this test is a 60-80 hour endeavor over a two to three month span." Many students choose to do their test prep over the summer when they are not as overwhelmed with a hectic schedule of homework and extracurricular activities. Others prefer to coordinate their test prep so that it ends just before the exam date, giving them momentum and fresh memories of the strategies they've learned.

Stephanie Meade, president of The Collegiate Edge in Studio City, says "it really depends on the student...If someone comes in with a 1350 and wants to move to a 1420, that's a completely different project than someone who wants to go from a 980 to an 1150." Generally speaking, however, Meade believes that "a good time to start looking at it is the summer before junior year. I don't mean that they should start an intensive program, but that's when they should start figuring out what they want to do."

Both Meade and Moreno recommend taking the SAT a minimum of two times. Meade cautions that the test dates should not be too close together, however, explaining that "even The College Board admits that for every six months a student ages, their scores go up 50 points on average, even if they do absolutely [no prep]. Why would you not take advantage of that?" Her theory is that by the fall of their senior year, students have more academic experience, more testing experience, and more perspective about college admissions, leading to higher scores.

As for the ACT (accepted by most colleges as an alternative to the SAT Reasoning Test), Moreno and Meade share the opinion that students have nothing to lose by trying both tests, although neither advocates doing much prep work for the ACT. "If you know the facts, you're ready [for the ACT]," offered Moreno. Meade explained that "the SAT is far more coachable than the ACT. If they do similarly on both, I would recommend that they put their energy into coaching on the SAT, because they'll get more bang for their buck."

CHOOSE THE METHOD THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU

Professional test preparation can be effective, but it can also be expensive. Luck-

ily, there are many free or low-cost alternatives available. Students can sign up to have SAT questions or vocabulary words sent to them online each day at www.number2.com, www.collegeboard.com, or www.merriam-webster.com, and libraries and bookstores are full of test prep materials. Novels such as "Tooth and Nail," "The Ring of McAllister" and "The Marino Mission" incorporate SAT vocabulary words into the text for a relatively painless way to learn new definitions, and many software programs offer drills and practice exams.

Such self-administered test prep, however, requires discipline, and many students prefer to have their study guided by a tutor or test prep company. There are a variety of options, including group lessons, one-on-one tutoring, and online courses. In the latest modern twist, students can even access test prep via their cell phones and PDAs (available from Princeton Review, Kaplan, and Number2.com!)

The College Board's official position is that the best way for students to prepare for the SAT is "to take challenging academic courses and read and write as much as possible," along with taking the PSAT in 10th and 11th grades. Choosing a method of test preparation must be an individual decision, based on the needs of each student, but the goal should always be to help students feel more confident and comfortable about the tests without ever sacrificing the quality of their schoolwork.

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