

[October 2, 2021](#)

## Should You Take the SAT/ACT or Not?

For parents of 10th, 11th and 12th graders, the question of testing looms large (especially this fall as the test optional movement has really taken hold), so let me try to help you out and give you the lowdown to help you make decisions. I'm not going to do a detailed discussion of testing policy, overuse, misuse, or the like (that's my day job and this is my side gig), rather I want parents to come away with the tools to make the 3 binary testing decisions on the road to college application:

1. to prep for tests or not to prep
2. to test or not to test
3. to submit scores or not to submit

Also I might update this post like I do my [College Admissions Resources](#) post, so check back periodically.

Before jumping into our 3 core questions, let me lay out a few key testing dates. Many of the decisions that you have to make are time-sensitive and change based on how long your student has left before applying to college. (The reason I never mention freshmen in this post is because they are so far removed from college they should be focused on school and personal growth not the mechanics of applying to college.) So, here are key testing dates in most parts of the country:

Event	Typical Date	Notes
PSAT		Any PSAT before the fall of junior year is just a practice test that counts for basically nothing.
PSAT/NMSQT	Oct/Jan Junior year	This is the one that counts for some scholarships.
1st SAT/ACT	Spring of Junior Year	Unless there is a great reason to start testing earlier, this is when most kids want to take their first SAT/ACT.
2nd SAT/ACT	Summer/early Fall Senior Year	The August SAT and September ACT are great 2nd tests because they are 1. early and 2. before school begins for many/most kids.
College Applications	Nov 1 – Jan 15 Senior year	

### To prep or not to prep

Test prep usually lasts *roughly/typically/approximately* 8 to 12 weeks and the first ACT/SAT should happen 6 months or more before applications are due. Typically, reasonable high-quality assisted prep will get 150 points improvement on the SAT and 3 points on the ACT in 6 – 8 weeks (there are a million caveats that will change these numbers like how you prep, how much work the student does, what the student's starting score is but this gives you somewhere to start). Because of the timing, the decision to prep or not has to happen long before college lists are made or a particular college's policy can be determined (unless you know what schools you're going to apply to before spring of junior year, which would make me really sad).

So the best answer of whether to prep or not is probably (unless your kid hates the thought of the test or prepping): it's better to prep and not need it, than need to prep and not have time to do so. *With all other things being equal, and not knowing what schools your student is planning to apply to prep makes sense.*

Factors that would make prepping worth it:

1. **You've got money and/or time to spare.**

If \$3000, 20 hours of tutoring, 40 hours of independent studying, and 6 hours of Saturday mornings worth a .5% better chance of getting admitted at school X, then prep. You could spend less on tutoring but it will probably mean spending more time. So its always a time vs money question when thinking about prepping.

2. **You're a good test taker**

If you're good at a thing prep might make you great and that can certainly pay off.

3. **The school you're considering still has hard test cutoffs**

Some (not many, and shame on those who do since that's against the recommended usage guidelines) schools publish hard admissions cutoffs for GPA and test scores. Some haven't made test optional. If you're thinking of applying to one of those it would make sense to prep.

Factors that might make me choose not to prep:

1. My student scores really poorly (maybe 30th percentile) or really well (above the 90th percentile) with no prep after the fall of 11th grade. Why after the fall? Because the earlier you are in the process the more time you have to increase a score and the less meaningful that starting score is.
2. My student has only test-free schools in mind ([St. Mary's in TX](#), all of the [University of CA system](#), CalTech)
3. What might my student lose by dedicating several hours a week for several months to prepping?

The decision to prep occurs early and is about seeing what the best achievable test score might be and whether taking the test will be helpful. Unfortunately, most people should choose to do some kind of prep, even if its just taking one practice test to get a good estimate of the starting score. This leads, of course, to questions of how to prep and how much, if anything, to spend on prep but that's a different post.

### **To test or not to test**

The second decision point is whether to test or not. Ideally, this decision is made with some sense of the colleges the student plans to apply to in mind and a good understanding of the student's likely test score. The factors to consider:

1. **Is it safe?**

If you're in an area where covid is rampant it might not be safe to test and so skipping it might be the best way to go.

2. **Is it necessary?**

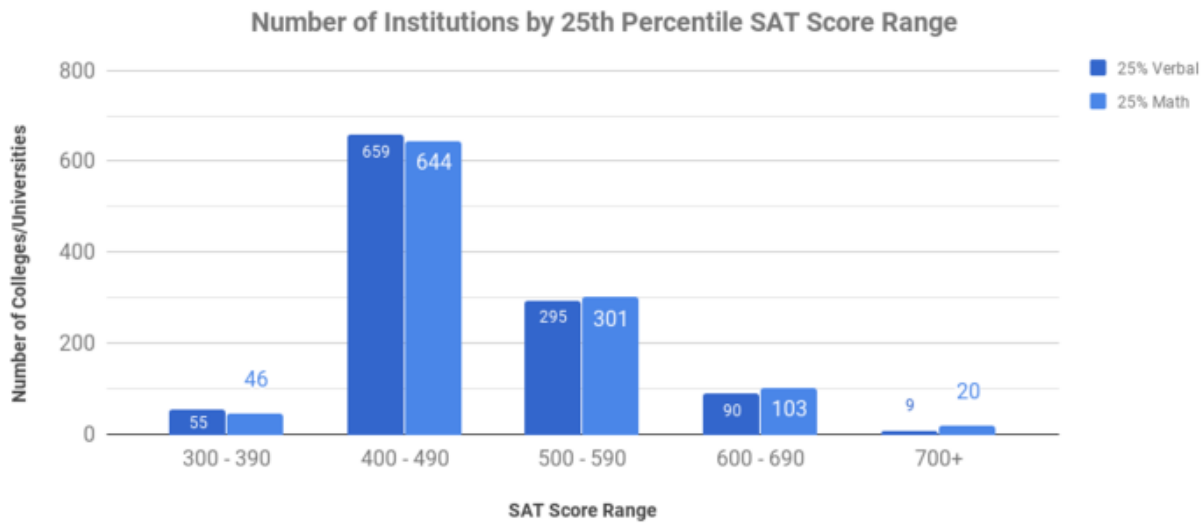
This is a no brainer. If you are required to submit a test score to apply or qualify for merit aid than duh. Florida public colleges required SAT scores and were never optional. Florida also has a Bright Futures scholarships that, in true Florida Man fashion, never waived the test requirement even during the height of the pandemic. If I'm a student in Florida or planning to apply to a public college in the madness state, I'm certainly testing. But if you change FL to CA, I'm not testing.

3. **Are you applying to a highly rejective college?**

If you're planning to apply to a highly rejective college (a place that rejects more than it admits), then unfortunately the game theory suggests that you should do everything you possible can that might give you an edge.

As long as you're not letting [rankings](#) strongly influence your choices, there are many places to get a great education. There are only about 80 (out of more than 2300) colleges that admit less than 25% of applicants and only 300 that admit less than 50%. And many of those [can be applied to without a test score](#) (some/many of which are also test optional for merit aid). Having a strong (for that school) test score *might* give you some small edge in

admission, maybe (no one really knows and anyone who tells you they know but they don't work in that schools admission office is lying to you). But if you test you have the choice whether to send it or not.



This chart, drawn from the government's IPEDs database in 2017, shows how many colleges (out of the 1200 that provided testing data) that had 25th percentile SAT Math and EBRW scores in each range.

### To send or not to send

So you decided to prep and then decided it was safe and valuable to take the test. The final decision point is whether it's worth it to send that test score to a particular college. If you have evidence the test score will help you then send the score. Helpful could mean, you've identified scholarships based on scores that you can access (some colleges have merit aid for scores as low as 1000 on the SAT or 21 on the ACT). Helpful might also mean it offsets something in your admissions profile that isn't great. If your academic rigor or GPA is slightly below the average for a school you're interested in an SAT above average might offset that.

## LIFE Scholarship



**Annual value: \$5,000**

**Four-year value: \$20,000**

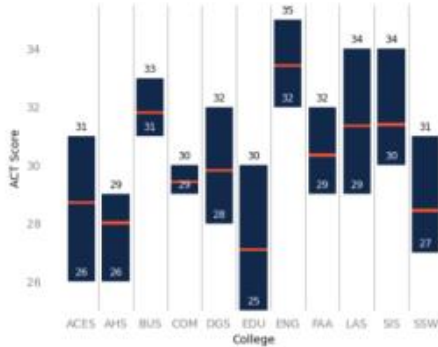
The Legislative Incentives for Future Excellence Scholarship is a state-awarded scholarship valued at \$5,000 per year. If you meet two of the following three requirements, you are eligible for this scholarship: 1) your final, cumulative grade point average is at least a "B" (3.00); 2) your SAT score is at least 1100 on critical reading and math sections combined (ACT composite score of at least 24); or 3) you graduate in the top 30 percent of your class.

To qualify for this \$5,000 grant a student only needs an 1100 on the SAT which is just slightly higher than the national average.

If your test score makes you look good then you should send it. It's like sending your resume, cello recital, or pastel drawing to colleges. The more positive info you give a college the more likely you are to get admitted (if it's allowed . . . many places don't want your weird pastel drawings or the pictures of your horse). The challenge is full data on scores at individual colleges or majors at a school aren't always available, you'll have to make do with the best data you can find.

Some colleges, like the great people at University of Illinois publish a lot of really helpful data (shout out to Andy Borst) like the below screenshot. If my child is applying for education and has a best SAT score (after *reasonable* effort) of 1200 that's a score that's probably helpful. If they are applying for Engineering then it's less than helpful.

## ENROLLMENT BY ACADEMIC PROFILE



**I** Office of Undergraduate Admissions | First-Year Enrollment 10th Day Report, Fall 2021

So once I put together the typical testing calendar with other timing considerations, you end up with this:

Event	Recommended Date	Notes
PSAT		Any PSAT before the fall of junior year is just a practice test that counts for basically nothing.
PSAT/NMSQT	Oct Junior year	This is the one that counts for some scholarships.
<b>Decide whether to prep or no to prep</b>		<b>After taking an initial practice test and perhaps doing some prep you'll be able to have some sense of your score and whether its worth the effort to try to increase it.</b>
1st SAT/ACT	Spring of Junior Year	Unless that is a great reason to start testing earlier this is when most kids want to take their first SAT/ACT.
<b>Decide whether to test or not to test</b>		<b>With an understanding of what you're likely to get from prep, what testing availability/conditions are likely to be, and what colleges you're likely to apply to you can decide whether testing is worth it.</b>
2nd SAT/ACT	Summer/early Fall Senior Year	The August SAT and September ACT are great 2nd tests because they are 1. early and 2. before school begins for most kids.
<b>Decide whether to submit or not to submit</b>		<b>After an initial college list is created, you'll be able to start to understand if your colleges of choice require, prefer or value testing and how your score stacks up against other applicants.</b>
College Applications	Nov 1 – Jan 15 Senior year	

Hopefully, this will help you make your decision and navigate testing in this crazy crazy year.