

## **EconoFact Chats: Should Colleges Require Standardized Tests?**

**David Deming, Harvard Kennedy School**

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### **Michael Klein**

I'm Michael Klein, executive editor of EconoFact, a nonpartisan, web-based publication of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at [www.econofact.org](http://www.econofact.org).

### **Michael Klein**

There are diametrically opposed views on whether standardized testing improves or worsens the chances for people from more disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds to be accepted to selective colleges and universities. This isn't just an academic issue, if you pardon the pun. In the wake of COVID, many colleges and universities drop the requirement that applicants submit SAT or ACT scores. But more recently, many schools, including Dartmouth, Yale, and Brown, will once again require applicants to submit standardized test scores. What does the evidence say about the use of test scores for college admissions? Do tests like the SATs and the ACTs measure innate ability? Or can this system be gamed by more privileged students through extensive test preparation and retaking tests? David Deming has studied this issue and wrote about it in the March 2024 issue of The Atlantic Magazine. He's also written about it on his substack blog, Forked Lightning. David is the Isabelle and Scott Black Professor of Political Economy and Academic Dean at the Harvard Kennedy School, and also Professor of Education and Economics at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. David, welcome back to Econofact Chats.

### **David Deming**

Thanks for having me, Michael. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

### **Michael Klein**

Me too. And we'll be scoring it at the end.

### **David Deming**

Sounds good. Don't tell me if I do badly. Only tell me if I do well.

### **Michael Klein**

Okay, I will.

### **David Deming**

And then I want to do this podcast test optional.

**Michael Klein**

Right. Then you can decide whether and I want to submit the score to your provost. So as a background, David, I think it'd be interesting and useful to talk about the history of standardized tests for college admissions. Could you do that, please?

**David Deming**

Yeah, sure. So the SAT in particular has a really interesting history that I talked about in my sub-stack, Forked Lightning, as you mentioned. So it was actually first given about 100 years ago. And it was a supplement to what was at the time mostly essay-based college admission at places like Harvard, other Ivy League schools. And it was used by Harvard President James Bryan Conant as a way to expand opportunity to students who didn't go to the elite East Coast boarding schools, Andover, Exeter schools like that, and therefore weren't prepared for the more traditional essay-based exams, which would do things like ask you how to decline verbs in Latin. And so the idea behind the SAT was that they were going to use it to award scholarships to academically talented boys who didn't attend those schools, but nonetheless scored very highly on the test. It was part of a package of reforms that President Conant instituted, including abolishing athletic scholarships, promoting co-education and opening graduate schools of law and medicine and things like that. So Harvard was a leader in this field. They started to use the SAT. I guess they felt it worked, and many other colleges followed. There was also kind of a general move toward testing during this period, not just with college admissions, but in other contexts such as in the military. And by the late fifties, the SAT and its competitor, which emerged later, the ACT, were basically everywhere.

**Michael Klein**

You point out in your article that there is also an ugly eugenicist undercurrent to this as well.

**David Deming**

Yes, like all things, the history of it is complicated and not always so great to look back on. So the inventor of the test, his name is Carl Brigham, originally thought of the SAT as a way to measure people's IQ. And he wrote in 1923 that he believed that SAT and IQ tests would prove the superiority of the Nordic race. And interestingly, for Brigham, he actually recanted this view over time. I'm not sure whether it was a response to pressure or response to evidence or some combination, but by 1930, so seven years later, he disavowed the idea that the SAT should stand in – that there were racial differences in test scores – that you should think about it as measuring IQ, and said he called it a composite, including schooling, family background, familiarity with English, and everything else relevant and irrelevant. So I think he arrived at the correct conclusion after observing how the test was used in the world and looking at the data. So give him credit for that.

**Michael Klein**

So that's what Brigham thought about the test. David, what do you think the SATs and the ACTs actually measure?

**David Deming**

Yeah, so I mean, I think that second, the statement, his second statement is far closer to the truth. I think about it as a measure of one's academic preparation for college level work, an imperfect measure. And that encompasses things, that's a positive statement, not a normative statement, Michael. So it encompasses things that we would think of as being just or fair, like how hard have you worked at school. It also encompasses things like whether your parents put you in the right schools from an early age, whether you got tutoring, coaching, so anything that feeds into a measure of how well you are prepared to do college level work, given that you're roughly in high school. And so I think the challenge with the SAT is to try to understand for each student what got them to the point where they were able to get this particular score, not to just simply take the people with high SAT scores, but to take somebody's score in context. And so I think that people should be using tests, but not kind of using them in a naive way.

**Michael Klein**

There are two aspects of test taking, coaching and retaking the test. And these contribute to the perception that standardized tests favor children from families with greater resources, right?

**David Deming**

Yeah, so let me take those each in turn. So on the retaking thing, this is actually, in my view, a pretty simple fix. So the SAT follows a practice called super scoring, which means every time you take the test, you know, there's two sections, math and reading, and you can get the highest score average over the two tests over multiple times. So if you get a 700 on each, you know, the first time you take it, and then you get a 720 and a 680 the second time, you get to keep the 700 and then the 720, right? So every time you take the test, you have two chances to improve your score and you only report the highest score. Now, College Board loves this because it means people want to take the test over and over again. That's good for them because people pay, but it harms people who don't have either the financial resources or the family resources to understand that there are big benefits to taking the test multiple times. And so we do, there's a paper by Josh Goodman and Mike Hurwitz and John Smith a few years ago, using College Board data showing that high income families are much more likely to retake the SAT. And when they do, they score an average of 40 to 50 points higher. And so that is easily fixed by just requiring people to report all their scores.

**Michael Klein**

What about coaching?

**David Deming**

Yeah. So for coaching, I think it's hard to give you one study that gives the answer to this, but coaching helps. It probably helps a little bit rather than a lot. There's some evidence on this, but it's not so clear cut. In some cases it seems to help people and some it doesn't. I think the best thing we can do in that case, since it's in some sense, like you want people to prepare for a high stakes test, they're always going to be doing that. I think the best approach is to try to make resources available to anybody who wants them. That's why Khan Academy has a free SAT prep class that many people take. And I think it would be sensible for colleges like Harvard and Tufts to provide funding, for example, for low income applicants who want test prep or something like that, to kind of level the playing field with respect to test prep.

**Michael Klein**

So, David, when I was in high school, back in the dark ages, everybody who wanted to go to college took the SATs. But there has been changes in the requirement more recently for submitting standardized test scores during the pandemic. When did this occur, and why?

**David Deming**

Yeah, so there's kind of two waves of the test optional movement, as it were. One is something that's been going on for a long time, Michael. There's mostly selective liberal arts colleges in the Northeast, colleges like Bowdoin, which has been test optional for 50 years. They've been doing that for a long time. Colleges have a long history with test optional, but it really accelerated during the pandemic when it was actually not possible for some people to safely take the SAT. And so many colleges went test optional out of necessity. And that stuck with a lot of them, either permanently, or many colleges like the school I work at, Harvard has committed to being test optional for the next few years and has declared that they're always reevaluating their options. So I think the pandemic changed the status quo from test required to test optional. And some schools like recently Dartmouth and Brown and Yale announced they were going to go back to requiring tests while other schools like Harvard and University of Michigan are committed to test optional for now. And then the University of California system is actually test blind. So they will not take the SAT or they will not use that as a criteria of admission. So it's really a very different landscape than it was even a couple of years ago.

**Michael Klein**

So there are arguments on both sides regarding whether standardized tests help or hurt applicants from more modest backgrounds. What's your view, David, after looking at the evidence?

**David Deming**

Yeah, so this is something Michael where the evidence really changed my beliefs about what the right thing to do is. And I paid particular attention to a report released by four scholars at

Dartmouth that was commissioned by the president of the university when they made, you know, prior to making their announcement that they would go back to requiring tests. So what they did was took the internal admissions data for Dartmouth and looked at who was submitting scores and what was happening with admissions outcomes for them. And what they found was that people are strategic about submitting scores. That's not surprising. But what they find is that basically people submit scores and they think it's going to help them. And so the question is like, who am I being compared to in the applicant pool? Right? And what are those people doing? And so what you see is that like, let's say the average SAT score at Dartmouth is 1450. Well, if you are a high income student, you actually need to do better than that to have a good chance of being admitted. But if you're a low income student, you don't need to do that well. Actually a 1420 for a low income student is a really excellent score. But not everyone knows that when they apply. And so what they found in the Dartmouth data was that low income first gen students, especially first gen students, were applying, taking the SAT, and getting scores like 1420 that they thought were not good scores and they were not submitting them. But actually the students who submitted those scores were about twice as likely to get in, as the ones who didn't among those who had the same score. And so what that showed is that basically low income first gen applicants were underestimating the gravity of the thumb on the scale that they were getting in the admissions process. And so the complexity of test optional and its really strategic decision about should I submit my score, you know, what's a good score for someone like me, they weren't getting it right. And actually it was harming the people that Dartmouth was intending to recruit. And so on that basis, they decided to require tests again. And so I wrote about that in a recent article in *The Atlantic* and how, looking at the evidence and reading what they did and seeing what's happening around the country really changed my belief on what's right. I do think that colleges should require the SAT or the ACT or some test, but they should be very careful to place those test scores in context with the students applying and consider what it took to get them to that level of preparation.

### **Michael Klein**

So this Dartmouth study, I know, got a fair amount of attention, but it's about Dartmouth. What about schools that are less elite? Is there like a similar view in your mind to the use of [tests there]?

### **David Deming**

Yes, I think two things matter here. One is the level of selectivity, right. So the SAT and the ACT are going to matter more when admission rates are really low because just having really good grades is not enough, right? So the question is what else differentiates you? So for sure, this is more important at selective schools. I think the other thing that matters, Michael, is that schools that have highly variable and national or even international applicant pools, which is related to selectivity, of course, those types of schools really benefit more from requiring a test because you

don't necessarily know how to compare transcripts across high schools that are in different states, private versus public, right? So the question is if someone applies to Harvard or Dartmouth or Tufts and they are from a high school in the middle of the country that has not sent someone to that school for many years or maybe never has, how does an admissions officer know how to interpret that person's grades, and their coursework, right, if they're not familiar with the high school? And the SAT, because everyone takes it, it's the same, cuts through all that. It says what is this person's level of preparation as compared to everyone else in the country? And so the SAT is helping people who come from schools that don't tend to send kids to top universities. And in a sense, it's their lifeline, it's their way to distinguish themselves and say, hey, I'm ready for this even though I don't come from the kind of background that makes me ready. So I think that's the real advantage of the SAT. And of course, that matters more at highly selective schools with international applicant pools. If you're a University of California school, and most people who you're taking are from California, then maybe it matters less because everyone has the same high school standards, they're taking the same classes at the same time, and the grades are similar. So it might be less important in those settings.

### **Michael Klein**

I guess that also speaks to the use of GPA in college admissions, because as you mentioned, what a 4.0 or 3.6 GPA can mean at one school could be quite distinct from what it means at another. And college admissions officers don't have an encyclopedic knowledge of all these schools.

### **David Deming**

Exactly. And it's not realistic to expect them to. And so my worry is that when GPAs are actually increasing pretty rapidly, there's a lot of grade inflation in high schools these days, perhaps in response to the increasing competitiveness of college admissions. So if you're looking at a bunch of people who all have 4.0's and you don't have any test scores, what else are you going to look at? You're going to look at fancy extracurriculars. You're going to look at unusual internship experiences. Did you start a business? Did you have this unusual, you know, were you champion of the international debate team? Those are all things that we know from our work are highly correlated with privilege. And so my worry is that even if the SAT favors unconditionally, favors people from wealthier backgrounds, it might be less biased than everything else in the process. And so getting rid of it is actually going to make the problem worse. The problem of privilege in college admissions, worse, not better.

### **Michael Klein**

So as economists, we typically think that choice is a good thing. And David, you and I have been talking about either requiring submission of test scores or not allowing them to be part of the application. But what about a middle path, test optional applications? Colleges could still allow applicants to submit their test scores if they think it will benefit them. Choice is good, right?

**David Deming**

Yeah, I mean, choice is sometimes good. But in this case, choice also means complexity. And complexity favors the prepared. Favors people who understand how to game the system. And the college admissions process in the US is already very complex. And adding the second layer of, you know, well, should I send my test in, it depends on whether people like me also do and what their scores are, is something that I think it's fair to assume that people whose parents are college professors, for example, might be better at figuring that out, than people whose parents didn't go to college all. And so the worry we've seen is in many other cases, when you make financial aid more transparently available, without making people fill out complicated forms to determine their eligibility, it tends to increase attendance among low income students and be better for them. So in general, we've seen in other settings that complexity tends to discourage low income first gen applicants, students of color from coming to your college. So I think test optional, it's just another unfortunate example of that when you make it more complicated, you discourage people from applying through complexity. And you end up with a situation where people who have more familiarity with the system, it's not that they're smarter, it's just that like, if you have a parent who's a college professor, like you and I, like we can help our kids navigate this differently than somebody who doesn't have experience with it, then it's unfair. And so I think we've ended up in a situation, again, like with the best of intentions, I understand the reasons why people advocate for test optional. But it just turns out from Dartmouth and other contexts that it tends to be harmful for the cause of increasing college access.

**Michael Klein**

So, so far we've been talking about admissions. What about college performance? How well does the performance on standardized tests correlate with how students ultimately perform in college? And how does this compare to other indicators like high school GPA?

**David Deming**

Yeah, it's a great question, Michael. So we found in my paper with Raj Chetty and John Friedman, where we linked SAT and ACT data and college's internal admissions records to tax records, we found that SAT scores are a very good predictor of long run outcomes. So people who get admitted to certain schools and have higher SAT scores tend to have higher earnings after they leave. And they tend to be more likely to go to top graduate schools and to work in prestigious firms compared to people who are admitted to the same schools but have lower SAT scores. So the SAT within school appears to be pretty predictive of success. Whereas high school GPA is really not very predictive. And I think that's partly because of this range restriction issue I mentioned earlier. If almost everybody has a near perfect GPA, then the difference between a 3.9 and a 4, or a 3.8 and a 3.9 is just not that meaningful, particularly because the GPA means something different at one school versus the other. And so it turns out that just looking at, should I admit this low GPA applicant or this high GPA applicant, it's not that predictive of longer run

outcomes, or even, other studies have shown, it's not that predictive of college grades either. But the SAT is. I think precisely because the SAT cuts through all the noise and all the variation across schools and says, here's a score that you can use to compare people across a very different contexts.

### **Michael Klein**

So David, we've talked about these different ranges of choices that colleges and universities are making with respect to test scores, widening of these ranges of choices, especially since the pandemic. What do you see coming forward from this? Do you think schools are going to move towards requiring tests again? Is it going to be different for schools that are highly selective as compared to other schools? How do you see things changing, especially in light of the evidence that you and others have brought forward?

### **David Deming**

Yeah, well, it's a great question. It's an important one. I hope that more colleges will start requiring tests again. And that's kind of why I wrote these pieces, Michael, because it's a moment where a lot of colleges are making these decisions. They're deciding whether they want to remain test optional as they were during the pandemic, or whether they want to start requiring tests again. And I think it's important for equity. I don't think it's obvious. So I don't think...this is one of these issues where there's a lot of moral claims that are like...what I care about is what's going to help the cause of getting the most talented and diverse, broadly speaking, students into schools. And I see the SAT and the ACT as being procedurally fair ways of figuring out who is ready to do college level work. Now, it doesn't mean that it's always fair in practice because of super scoring, because of differences in test prep and all that. But the idea that a way to decide who gets to attend a highly selective college is to give everybody the same assessment on the same scale, and then create some categories for...well, we don't just want to take the highest scores. We want a class that's also diverse. But within those categories of diversity, we want the most academically prepared students – seems pretty fair to me. And so to me, it's an issue of working out the details to make it be fair in practice, and not just fair in principle. So that's why I've written these pieces. That's why I've talked to some folks around the country who are making these decisions. I don't think it makes the job easy. There's still a lot of factors. No one, including me, is suggesting you admit only based on test scores. So a lot of things go into it. But I think it's hard enough to make these decisions already. Why would you throw away such a valuable piece of information that you get from a test like the SAT or the ACT?

### **Michael Klein**

So we've been discussing this in the context of the SATs or the ACTs as they exist now. Do you see that the questions on the test are culturally biased, or biased towards people who have certain



backgrounds or certain educational advantages? Or do you see them as more even-handed? And if the former, what would you want to see to have the test change to make them fairer?

**David Deming**

Yeah, it's a really important question, Michael. I should stipulate, I'm not aware of any conclusive evidence on whether the test is..., or particular parts of the test are biased against certain groups. I know that the College Board and the ACT work hard to try to prevent that from happening and they do some things to try to assess that. But they should have their feet held to the fire. Just because they, just because they're trying to fix it doesn't mean that they're fixing it as well as they could. I do think if you look at older questions on the SAT, I showed some examples on my sub-stack. They seem in retrospect to be quite biased towards people who take Latin, or people who understand table manners or whatever. And so it's not crazy to think that there are hidden biases in the tests today that we don't recognize. So I think it's important to be vigilant. I also don't, again, like to this point of principle versus practice, I think the principle of universal testing is a good one, but it's very possible, maybe even likely, that these tests are not ideal, that one could design a better or fairer test. And I personally would be very open to seeing one of those. I don't think there's any reason to assume that the College Board and the ACT have this right, and that no competitor should enter the arena. If somebody said, I have a better way to test applicants, I would be very open to that. And I think that ought to be contested ground because it's so important. So again, I think the principle, I defend more the principle of testing than all of the details of how it's implemented in practice today.

**Michael Klein**

So I'd just like to conclude by emphasizing that you are saying that the standardized tests are but one of a set of things to consider. And of course, it's very hard to understand somebody's grit or resilience, which is, of course, really important. But it is an important component of the admissions process.

**David Deming**

Yeah, let me just say too, Michael, something people say sometimes is that, well, why would you focus so much on a test when we actually want to pick students who have high character, moral character, who are resilient, who are great leaders? I agree with all that. I think that if we had credible means of selecting people on those characteristics, we would want to do it. My concern is that the way that colleges end up doing this in practice ends up privileging high income applicants. So the way we select for leadership is, do you have a lot of experiences in high school where you can say you are a leader, or a CEO, or a founder? And that ends up favoring people who think that way, and people who have parents and schools who could help them get those opportunities. And so I'm all for credible fair ways of selecting on traits other than pure academic talent. But I don't think we're there yet with the current system.

**Michael Klein**

Yeah, and as you're suggesting, those other things are much easier to game than a standardized test.

**David Deming**

Yeah, that's well said.

**Michael Klein**

So David, in my previous interview with you, you focused on the advantages of a college education, especially for students who attend a selective college. And this new work that you're doing is an important complement, since it focuses on admissions to these institutions. So I thank you very much for speaking with me today about this.

**David Deming**

Oh, it's my pleasure, Michael. Thanks so much for having me.

**Michael Klein**

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