

Steering Through the Maze of College Testing

In the old days high school students waited until senior year before thinking about college testing and choosing colleges. With increased numbers of students pursuing college, escalating college costs and competition for financial assistance, preparation for the college application process must begin much earlier than the senior year. The SAT and ACT college testing process causes anxiety among many students and raises the following questions:

- What are the differences in the two tests?
- Which tests should students take and when?
- How should students prepare for these?

SAT vs. ACT

To further complicate the college testing process, recent changes have been made to the SAT and Kentucky state legislation now mandates that every high school junior in Kentucky be required to take the ACT.

For many years, the SAT was the dominant player in the college testing game. However, two years ago the format of the SAT, published by the College Board, changed drastically. Changes initially were welcomed because the dreaded analogy section was eliminated and a writing section and essay added to better reflect a student's academic potential.

However, the test has had some bad press due to scoring errors and negative feedback from recent test takers. The SAT, while adding more advanced math and an English writing section, is now 20 minutes longer and more expensive than its competitor, the ACT. Although the public is more familiar with the SAT and it is still the test preferred by the most selective colleges, only a small minority of Kentucky students take the SAT because the ACT is accepted by Kentucky state universities.

Though it may appear one should go with the ACT, there are still some compelling reasons to consider the SAT. The vast majority of private colleges and out of state universities, as well as scholarship programs including the Kentucky KEYES program, accept scores from either the SAT or ACT.

Which to Take & When

Some students do better on one test than the other, so the best strategy is to try both tests in the late winter or spring of the junior year when there is still time to repeat the one that reflects best performance. The ACT has an essay component, now optional, but many college and universities are requiring it as well, so with the essay added, the ACT is actually more expensive than the SAT. The strategy of which test to take depends on what kind of test taker the student is and to which types of schools one is applying.

Test Preparation

With the increased importance of testing to the college application process, it is no wonder that parents seek out help for their students in preparing for either the SAT or ACT. While early preparation is good, preparing too early can cause a student to "burn out" or peak too soon. The summer before the junior year or fall and winter of the junior year are the best times to concentrate on SAT or ACT preparation.

There are many ways to prepare ranging from expensive, extensive national franchise programs to brief self review via a practice book or the internet. A good preparation program should include teaching a basic understanding of the test as well as strategies for answering questions.

The affordable SAT and ACT classes offered by Jewish Family and Vocational Service are taught by certified, experienced high school teachers and offer a strong combination of test taking strategies with timed simulated test taking conditions. JFVS' next ACT class starts November 13th and will run Monday and Tuesday nights until December 5. Call 452-6341 for more information.

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