
In the SAT World, 2400 Adds Up to Perfection

- The new test's higher maximum score can complicate college planning for some -- and bragging rights for others.

By Stuart Silverstein, Times Staff Writer

For generations of college-bound teenagers, nailing a 1600 on the SAT has been as good as it gets, equivalent in American popular culture to pitching a perfect game or bowling a 300.

But no longer. Starting Monday, the venerable college entrance exam will sport a new scoring format and frame of reference. With the recent addition to the SAT of a third section that includes a handwritten essay, 2400 is becoming the new 1600.

For students, parents, college counselors and others in Southern California and elsewhere, that will take some getting used to.

The shift of the scoring range — the lowest total score also is rising, from 400 to 600 — will muddy comparisons for those on opposite sides of the "new SAT" and the "old SAT" divide.

Students taking the exams often won't know whether they hold bragging rights over older siblings and friends, partly because of the new scoring scale and partly because percentile rankings on the new writing section won't be disclosed for 18 months.

"For so long, that perfect 1600 has been an icon of perfection in the testing world.... When somebody says, 'Well, I got a 2270,' there are going to be generations of people who will have to rethink what that means," said Jennifer Karan, director of SAT programs for Kaplan Inc.'s test preparation division.

Moving the SAT scale is complicating college planning for students such as Natalie Kolodinski, a junior at Eagle Rock Junior-Senior High School in Los Angeles.

She was among the somewhat light turnout of 304,000 students nationally who took the new SAT in the first administration of the revised test March 12. Their results are due to be posted on the Internet by 5 a.m. Pacific time Monday, and Kolodinski is eager to fire up her computer to see how she fared.

Still, she said, she isn't sure what exactly the numbers will mean for her college plans, since admissions officials themselves differ on how much emphasis to put on the scores from the new writing section.

Kolodinski, 17, who dreams of attending Stanford University and possibly going into medicine, said, "It's nerve-racking to know that my college career ... is kind of dependent on this test, especially since some colleges don't even know what they're looking for because they don't have any comparisons yet" from previous years.



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The weight that many Americans have put on SAT scores has been chronicled over the years in TV sitcoms and films such as last year's "The Perfect Score," about teens trying to steal an advance copy of the test.

A New Yorker magazine cartoon famously showed a tombstone bearing the deceased's "verbal" and "math" scores instead of his dates of birth and death. SATs also emerged as a topic during the 2000 presidential election, when it was reported that Al Gore outscored George W. Bush, 1355 to 1206.

And then, there's the long-running debate over whether SATs are fair predictors of college success.

To be sure, anyone capable of snaring a decent score on the math portion of either the old or the new SAT should be able to make rough comparisons between the formats.

As previously, scores on the individual sections will range from a low of 200 to a high of 800. A student who once would have aimed for a respectable but not brilliant total of 1200, hoping to score about 600 on each of the two sections, now likely would shoot for an average of 600 on each of the three sections in the new SAT (math, critical reading and writing), for a total of 1800.

But one of the main problems is that the College Board, which owns the SAT, won't tell current students how their writing scores ranked among all SAT takers or even calculate an average.

The College Board says it needs a full round of results over a year or longer before it can begin providing students with accurate national percentile rankings on the writing section. It plans to start releasing those rankings, from a floor of 1% to a top rating of 99+%, in October 2006.

For students taking the SAT in the interim, "the real question is ... if they add their scores together and come up with 1750 or 1820 or 1900, what constitutes a good score? We're not really providing them with an easy way to do that," acknowledged Brian O'Reilly, executive director for SAT information at the College Board.

However, students will continue receiving percentile rankings on the math and critical-reading sections, even though those have been modified too.

His advice to students: Remember that colleges don't look at just SAT scores. If students don't get in to their top choices, there are plenty of other great schools to attend.

Meanwhile, for those students aiming for top numbers, the odds of success will grow longer, since there now is a third section to ace.

O'Reilly notes that only 939 of the nearly 1.42 million SAT takers who graduated high school last year — meaning one out of more than 1,500 students — earned 1600. He says that the number of students achieving the new maximum of 2400 probably will be only somewhat more than 100 annually, or one out of about 10,000 test takers.

O'Reilly said it was "a pretty monumental achievement to get 800 on either SAT math or SAT verbal ... and really, really unusual to get it on both."

Nailing an 800 on all parts of the new three-section SAT, O'Reilly predicted, would be "exceedingly rare."

Kolodinski said she isn't aiming for a perfect score.

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"If by some miracle I get 2000, I'd be happy with myself," she said, adding that she doubts she will hit that goal on her first try.

She said she wasn't flustered by the timed writing test or by the other, less dramatic changes in the new SAT, which was lengthened by 45 minutes, bringing it to three hours and 45 minutes.

Neither was her Eagle Rock schoolmate Violet Ruiz, a 16-year-old junior. Still, Ruiz said, the new scoring range has given the jitters to some of her friends. "Because it's on a larger scale than the 1600 ... they think they will be scored differently somehow," she said.

Save for a few interruptions during the 1930s, when the math tests were shelved, SAT totals have ranged from a bottom of 400 to a maximum of 1600 since 1926. Yet the new 600-to-2400 range isn't the first scoring change in the test's history.

Most recently, in 1995, the scoring system was adjusted in a way that boosted totals by about 100 points for most test takers. That provided a credible explanation for countless parents who have been badly outscored by their children over the last decade.

Amid the most recent changes to the SAT, 11% fewer students showed up for the test this March than a year earlier, a decline that the College Board attributed partly to apprehension about the changes. Students who postponed can take the exam at subsequent dates during the year.

Linda Conti, director of college guidance at Oaks Christian School in Westlake Village and president of Western Assn. for College Admissions Counseling, said many California high schoolers probably were less concerned about the new writing section than students elsewhere.

She noted that the University of California system required applicants previously to take a similar predecessor test, the SAT II writing subject test, which also consisted of both multiple-choice and essay portions.

Still, in a recent chat with a parent about what would be a top score in the new SAT format, Conti said she fumbled over the numbers herself.

"It's an adaptation that we all have to make," she said.

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