

Thought You Should Know:

Drop in Scores for New SAT has Educators Puzzled

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By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

College admissions officials seeing large drops in average scores for the critical reading and math sections of the new SAT college entrance exam say they are concerned about the drops and want to know why they're happening.

The College Board introduced a new version of the SAT last year.

"The College Board ... (was) very careful to say the new tests were closely equated with the previous test and that we should not expect to see a difference" in scores, says Susan Wilbur, director of undergraduate admissions for the nine-campus University of California system.

It is one of several schools that saw double-digit drops in average scores of applicants even as other qualifications, including class rank and academic coursework, grew stronger or remained similar to previous years. "A number of us are struggling to understand these outcomes," she says.

The College Board, a New York-based non-profit, is to release its annual report on SAT results in August. But in an e-mail last month responding to concerns by some colleges, James Montoya, the College Board's vice president for higher education, said preliminary estimates show a 4- to 5-point drop in average national scores for the critical reading and math sections compared with the verbal and math sections last year.

Fluctuations from year to year are not uncommon, he said in a phone interview — average annual scores, for example, were down 16 points in 1975; up eight points in 1985, down 5 points in 1990 and up 7 points in 1995.

In his memo, Montoya wrote: "We want to assure you that it is valid to compare students' scores from this year's exams with those from past years." But he also acknowledged that the larger drops reported by some colleges are puzzling. "We are working to understand this better," he wrote.

Concerns do not extend to the new writing section, which includes an essay. In the University of California system, combined average scores for critical reading



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and math were down 15 points for applicants, compared with verbal and math scores from the previous year; scores for a record 55,242 admitted students were down 19 points. Average composite scores for the ACT, a rival college admissions exam accepted by most colleges, were unchanged.

Other public schools reporting similar patterns include the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, where the average score for 19,720 applicants was down 12 points but the average for admitted students was unchanged. At North Carolina State University in Raleigh, the combined average score for critical reading and math was down 11 points for applicants and 5 points for admitted freshmen.

Among private schools, Texas Christian University in Fort Worth saw an average decline of 23 points among applicants; the average score of admitted students was similar to last year. Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pa., which recently announced it would make the SAT optional beginning with students entering in fall 2007, reported drops of 28 points for applicants and 22 points for admitted students.

Not all schools have noticed a problem. Elon (N.C.) University, for example, posted the strongest average scores ever among applicants and admitted students. Syracuse University saw a 7-point increase among admitted students, all in the math portion.

Admissions officials at several affected schools said applicants weren't disadvantaged because individual declines were relatively insignificant and because students compete against each other.

But Bob Schaeffer, a longtime critic of the test, says an unexplained overall decline could raise a potential public relations problem for colleges, many of whom point to rising SAT scores each year as a sign of growing selectivity.

Colleges "now have to explain why the scores are going down," says Schaeffer, spokesman for the non-profit Fairtest: The Center for Fair & Open Testing in Cambridge, Mass. "It's gamesmanship. This will hopefully lead more colleges to understand just how meaningless the fixation on test scores can be."

The average decline over wide swaths of students also raises a red flag because colleges use admission trend data to plan, and want to make sure they're comparing similar data from year to year. Many schools also factor scores into formulas to determine merit scholarships. High school guidance counselors often use scores to advise students on where to apply.

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"There's so much public concern about testing generally," says Stephen Farmer, director of admissions at UNC-Chapel Hill. "The fundamental question is what's driving this decline and whether we need to take action."

Bob Voss, admissions dean at La Salle University in Philadelphia, which admits students on a rolling basis and where average scores dropped 12 points among applicants and 10 points among admitted students, already plans to readjust policies for next year.

"Maybe it is a fluke limited to a few colleges," he says. But "we could be denying students who maybe we shouldn't have."

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