

INSIDE HIGHER ED

For Fate of SAT Writing Test, Watch California

More top colleges drop requirement and University of California is studying the test, which College Board defends. Plus, more colleges go test optional; controversy over math scores on SAT. *Update: Michigan drops essay.*

By [Scott Jaschik](#)

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The essay portion of the SAT and ACT has never been a requirement at most colleges and universities, and has been in place only at a few dozen colleges in recent years. But millions of students complete the essays every year, with many of them stressed out about doing so and paying tutors to help them.

Then in March, Harvard University [announced](#) it was dropping the requirement. Yale University and the University of San Diego [followed in June](#), leaving the total number of colleges still requiring the essay at 25. In July, Princeton and Stanford Universities [announced](#) that they were dropping the requirement. Then came word that the California Institute of Technology was [also dropping](#) the essay. And last week came an announcement from [Brown University](#), followed by Duke University [dropping](#) the requirement.

UPDATE: Today, the University of Michigan dropped the requirement. A spokesman said via email, "Several factors went into this decision, including the recent redesign of the evidence-based reading and writing section of the SAT that incorporates a more expansive reading and writing assessment within the body of the exam, as well as our continued requirement that applicants already submit multiple writing samples to our UM-specific admissions application."

The colleges dropping the requirement have cited a number of factors. Many note that as more states and school districts pay for SAT test taking during school hours, those tests don't include the essay, so those who feel they need the essay must take the test at another time -- adding expenses and stress for

test takers. All of the colleges' announcements have emphasized that they care deeply about the writing skills of applicants, but they quickly add that they don't think they need the SAT essay to judge those skills. (While the policies apply to the ACT essay as well, attention has focused on the SAT essay, as the SAT tends to be the most widely used test at the institutions that are dropping the essay requirement.)

Some have noted that their applicants already submit essays. Others have said that there may be superior ways to examine applicants' writing. Princeton will now require all applicants to submit a graded high school paper, and Brown is recommending that applicants submit such a paper.

For those hoping that that the essay disappears, there may be one giant obstacle: the University of California. The system's undergraduate campuses receive more than 200,000 applications per year, and all applicants must complete the SAT or ACT essay. The College Board has given every indication over the years that it sees the University of California as a crucial system when it comes to any changes in the SAT. A 2001 speech by Richard Atkinson, then president of the system, led the College Board to create the writing test, which debuted in 2005.

While faculty members have been involved in some colleges' decisions to drop the essay, the University of California decision is controlled by a systemwide faculty body, the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools, known by its acronym BOARS.

That committee has been "monitoring" the decisions of other colleges and has been studying whether UC should maintain the requirement, said Henry Sanchez, a professor of pathology at the University of California, San Francisco, and chair of BOARS. "We are looking at this."

He noted that UC has "a different situation" from some of the colleges dropping the requirement in the vast number of applications that the system receives, making a standardized option appealing.

BOARS will consider the issue over the next year, in what he said would be "a very faculty-driven, evidence-based analysis."

For Sanchez, he said, the key question is whether the data currently being collected show any correlation between the scores on the essay and performance of those who enroll. "We've got to get the data."

As many colleges have been dropping the essay, the College Board has largely remained silent. But in response to a request by *Inside Higher Ed* last week, a College Board spokesman said via email that the organization continued to stand by the value of the essay.

"Everyone agrees that writing essays and developing extensive research projects are essential for college readiness and success," he said. "We believe that the SAT essay provides a strong complement to the multiple-choice section by asking students to demonstrate reading, analysis, writing, and critical thinking skills in the context of analyzing a provided source text. As part of the redesign, we lengthened the SAT essay to 50 minutes to give students more time to engage in thoughtful, effective writing. Moreover, because essay responses are collected in a secure test administration, individuals and institutions making use of the essay's scores can have confidence that the work produced is each student's own."

While many critics of the test have hoped that the University of California would drop the essay, some say that real change could come before any shift in policy by UC.

James Murphy, director of national outreach for the Princeton Review, which offers many test-prep and admissions services to applicants, has been a critic of

the essay, saying that the vast majority of those who prepare and take it don't need to. He said he hoped that news of top college after top college dropping the essay would lead students to just stop taking it (unless they are applying to the University of California). "Hopefully high school students and their counselors will have the balls to say that they aren't doing this thing that isn't required," he said.

Going Test Optional

While the College Board is defending its essay test, other institutions are going completely test optional in admissions. The University of Chicago surprised many admissions experts when it announced in June that it **was going test optional**. It is too soon to see if other elite colleges will follow, as some have predicted would happen, as those decisions would generally involve faculty studies.

But in the past two weeks, two institutions that are not competitive in admissions announced that they were dropping the testing requirement. They are the **University of New England** and Sweet Briar College. For **Sweet Briar**, applying without SAT or ACT scores is limited only to those with a high school grade point average of 3.0 or higher.

Anger Over Math Scores

Adding to scrutiny of the SAT last week was the release of scores on the June exam. Many who took that exam reported that the mathematics section appeared to be easy.

But on Wednesday, many discovered that an SAT that is easier than expected can turn a projected 760 score into a 610 or worse. For rising high school seniors hoping for just another 40 points or so to impress colleges (beyond the score they likely earned a few months ago), this was not what they were expecting. Word spread on various social media outlets, including the new **@rescoreJuneSAT** Twitter feed and another one, **@rescoresat** (featuring the emoji at right). Angry test takers appealed to the College Board for a do-over of

some type and asked for intervention from President Trump and Ellen DeGeneres, among others.

Many students (and plenty of parents) posted comparisons of scores based on how many questions were incorrect on different tests.

"College Board! One daughter got 760 getting only 5 wrong in math in March. Her twin missed 6 in math on June 2 test and got 670? 90 point difference in overall SAT scores for just ONE math question? How is that fair or standardized? So many kids hurt," wrote one parent.

"My first SAT I miss 26 questions and score a 1400. My second SAT I miss 16 questions and score a 1350?!?!" wrote one student.

Several complained about having used tutoring services or coaches (frequently at considerable expense) in the months before the June SAT to improve their mathematics proficiency -- only to find their scores fall.

The problem, in short, is that the SAT is scored on a curve. If the mathematics exam is unusually easy, students will on average get more questions correct than in a typical SAT administration. But the College Board then compensates with a curve, and missing a relatively small number of questions can result in a much lower score than would typically be the case.

The College Board released the email message it has been sending to those students who have been complaining.

"We understand your questions about your June SAT scores," the message says. "We want to assure you that your scores are accurate. While we plan for consistency across administrations, on occasion there are some tests that can be easier or more difficult than usual. That is why we use a statistical process called 'equating.' Equating makes sure that a score for a test taken on one date is equivalent to a score from another date. So, for example, a single incorrect

answer on one administration could equal two or three incorrect answers on a more difficult version. The equating process ensures fairness for all students." The Princeton Review published a lengthy analysis of the situation last week called "[Why You Don't Want an Easy SAT.](#)"

The analysis was generally sympathetic to the idea of equating, as done by the College Board, and said that the process typically assures fairness. But the analysis also said that while this may work well for modest variations in the difficulty of two SAT administrations, it may be problematic for a test like the June SAT.

"The equating applied to the June 2018 SAT suggests that the College Board made the test far too easy to distinguish among high scorers who received a score of 650 (86th percentile) or higher. That is a problem for those colleges who treat a 650, a 700, a 750, and an 800 as accurate indicators of real differences in Math ability," the Princeton Review said. "It is a problem, too, for high-scoring students who make the occasional careless error or who misbubble on questions that they are quite capable of answering. With a typical curve, there's some cushion to mitigate the impact of such errors. There was no cushion on the June 2018 SAT."

As for why this matters, the analysis said, "It might be fair to say that the most accomplished students shouldn't make those kinds of errors, but is that true? Wouldn't it be more accurate to say that the most accomplished test takers don't make those kinds of errors. Small mistakes under time pressure can make a big difference in life, no doubt, but doing well in college tends to be about doing well over time with the possibility to revise, rethink, and do better."

https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2018/07/16/more-college-drop-sat-writing-test-all-eyes-are-california?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=e3f54e4e71-DNU_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-e3f54e4e71-198467257&mc_cid=e3f54e4e71&mc_eid=0c2028f1a2