

Admissions Insights

A Forum on the Future of the Admission, Financial Aid and School Counseling Professions

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Standardized Test Scores — How Should They Be Used?

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Reliability, criterion-referenced validity, construct validity, predictive validity, high stakes, low stakes — what does it all mean? You don't have to be a psychometrician to join in the test-score conversation and begin to form your own opinions and practices based on the appropriate use of standardized test scores. But how to be better informed?

Standardized tests play a significant role in education, and that role has been sharply debated. Standardized tests have been developed to assess potential, evaluate course content mastery, assist with course placement, assess content mastery for graduation and much more. A quick Internet search will yield hundreds of articles, opinion pieces and YouTube videos sharing a mix of opinions on how test scores should, or should not, be used. As enrollment management professionals, we have a clear obligation to make certain we follow good principles of test-score use, and take advantage of the resources available to help us develop our thinking on the appropriate use of test scores. Fortunately, those resources are not difficult to find.

Test developers provide test-specific information regarding reliability, validity and the appropriate use of scores. The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, established through collaboration among the American Psychological Association, American Educational Research Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education, provide an excellent framework in which to evaluate the appropriate use of test scores in the context of consequences or the importance of the outcome being influenced by use of the test score. High-stakes decisions involve significant potential consequences; the consequences are less significant in low-stakes decisions. The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing provide clear direction regarding the role standardized test scores should play in high-stakes decision making, indicating that a high-stakes decision should not be based on a single test score alone, but that additional relevant information must be included in the decision-making process.

To put this in the context of enrollment management, admission and financial aid decisions are clearly high-stakes decisions because we determine which students will be admitted to our institutions, and make financial aid decisions affecting a family's ability to finance an education. We are duty bound to follow principles of good practice and must ensure that as professionals we understand those principles. As a profession, we need to make certain we train those newest to our work so they have a strong knowledge of testing. As professionals, we need to seek out that training so we can be best prepared to help families understand the ways in which we use standardized test scores in the decisions we make. If we apply principles of good practice, we will minimize, and hopefully eliminate, unintended consequences. And if we work hard to better educate families, we will provide a level of transparency important for our profession.

Two very recent reports provide additional guidance from the profession: *The Report of the Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission* from the National Association for College Admission Counseling and *Preserving the Dream* from the College Board's Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century. Both reports make strong recommendations regarding the appropriate use of standardized test scores in admission and financial aid decisions, and, as important, highlight examples of the inappropriate use, or misuse,

of standardized test scores. Examples of test misuse include using “cut scores” for awarding financial aid; using standardized test scores to assess the quality of a college or university; in rankings; to assess the quality of a high school or school district; and as an indication of institutional financial health for bond ratings.

There is significant debate concerning the use of standardized test scores in admission and financial aid decisions. As professionals, we must be able to distinguish between the benefits of the test and the appropriate use of test scores, and the consequences of test-score misuse. And we must be able to articulate the difference. Some argue that standardized testing should be eliminated from admission and financial aid decisions as a result of the consequences associated with the misuse of scores, such as those listed above. Others argue that the evidence of the predictive utility of standardized test scores relative to college success outweighs the consequences of test-score misuse.

We have an opportunity to move the conversation forward and influence the future direction of testing in American education. The NACAC Commission on the use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission indicates that a one-size-fits-all approach to standardized testing does not represent the nation’s many colleges and universities well. We have a responsibility to understand standardized testing well enough to determine if using test scores makes sense for our institution given the institutional mission. And if we decide philosophically that we should consider using test scores, we must understand the properties of the test and conduct validity studies to determine if test scores help us predict success at our college or university. And if we choose to use test scores, we need to be certain we are using them appropriately.

We are obligated to ensure that members of the profession are well versed in standardized testing in general and in the appropriate use of standardized test scores. We must be able to articulate the clear purpose for which an individual test is developed and the appropriate use of that test. The controversy with standardized testing comes with the context in which the score is being applied. Good principles of test-score use in high-stakes admission and financial aid decisions require that we take a holistic view. This includes employing multiple indicators of potential success in our decisions, such as high school grades, rigor of curriculum, cocurricular activities, and letters of reference, which all add important information. Including multiple indicators follows the guidelines for good practice when making high-stakes decisions.

It should be part of our mission to ensure that standardized test scores are used appropriately, and we need to help educate prospective students and their families, our colleagues, and others of the consequences of test-score misuse. Rankings, bond ratings, evaluating schools and using cut scores for awarding financial aid are all inappropriate uses of test scores and can lead to significant angst for prospective students and their families. We need to help families understand that standardized test scores are only part of the admission decision — that deciding which college or university to attend should not be a function of the average standardized test score for last year’s freshman class, and that rankings don’t begin to tell the whole story relative to fit. We must follow good principles of test-score use in shaping our enrollment management policy to ensure that we are not complicit in the misuse of test scores. Much has been debated regarding the problems with standardized tests, but the problems lie in the misuse of test scores, and we are the professionals in the best position to explain how and why we use test scores in our decision making. Much of the test-score debate has been driven by the media. We are in the best position to help change the conversation and reduce anxiety by being transparent in our practices and helping prospective students and their families understand that test scores are only one factor among many.

So if you are not already, become informed. Take advantage of resources. Talk with colleagues. Become a voice on your campus. And, form an opinion.

Admissions Insights is a series brought to you by the College Board Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century. For more information, visit admissions21.collegeboard.org.

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