

The Truth About the SAT and ACT

March 15, 2018

This Saturday, hundreds of thousands of U.S. high-school students will sit down to take the SAT, anxious about their performance and how it will affect their college prospects. And in a few weeks, their older peers, who took the test last year, will start hearing back from the colleges they applied to. Admitted, rejected, waitlisted? It often hinges, in no small measure, on those few hours spent taking the SAT or the ACT, the other widely used standardized test.

Standardized tests are only part of the mix, of course, as schools make their admissions decisions. They also rely on grades, letters of recommendation, personal statements and interviews. But we shouldn't kid ourselves: The SAT and ACT matter. They help overwhelmed admissions officers divide enormous numbers of applicants into pools for further assessment. High scores don't guarantee admission anywhere, and low scores don't rule it out, but schools take the tests seriously.

And they should, because the standardized tests tell us a lot about an applicant's likely academic performance and eventual career success. Saying as much has become controversial in recent years, as standardized tests of every sort have come under attack. But our own research and that of others in the field show conclusively that a few hours of assessment do yield useful information for admissions decisions.

Unfortunately, a lot of myths have developed around these tests—myths that stand in the way of a thoughtful discussion of their role and importance.