

Standardized tests not always best indicator of success

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT have long been used in college admissions to sort through thousands of applications. Whether or not such tests accurately assess a student's ability to succeed in higher education is up for debate, but a Penn State expert says that, ultimately, current classroom performance is what prepares a student for admission -- and test day -- better than cramming or retesting to boost scores.

Donald Heller, director of Penn State's Center for the Study of Higher [Education](#), said there is even the possibility that students could study too much and reach a point of diminishing returns where they're not gaining anything from over-preparing.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "The SAT is not designed as an indicator of student achievement, but rather as an aid for predicting how well students will do in college." On the contrary, FairTest.org, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, notes that the exam is "designed to predict first-year college grades -- it is not validated to predict grades beyond the freshman year, [graduation rates](#), pursuit of a graduate degree, or for placement or advising purposes. However, according to research done by the tests' manufacturers, class rank and/or high school grades are still both better predictors of college performance than the SAT I." (SAT I is the standard exam, not to be confused with subject-specific achievement tests, now known as SAT II.)

Heller, also a professor and senior scientist in Penn State's College of Education, said that roughly two-thirds of graduating high school seniors go to college within a year. Many of those students have to take the SAT or ACT as part of the admissions process. Whether or not schools rely heavily on standardized test scores, students still find preparing for these tests worthwhile. Some students give credit for their success to the preparation book and practice tests, but their own intuition might deserve more credit, according to Heller. Heller said studies vary among standardized prep classes and proof of any success.

“Some show evidence that preparation helps boost scores, and of course test prep companies like the Princeton Review or Kaplan will argue that test preparation is helpful. Generally, the help is fairly modest,” he said, indicating that the tests are based on what students should already know. “For the most part even re-testing scores that go up are fairly modest.”

Each college or university weighs standardized test scores differently, he added, and undergraduate test scores measure very differently than scores from graduate school-level standardized tests, such as the GRE, LSAT and MAT. There are more than 400 colleges that don't require submission of SAT or ACT test scores. FairTest.org says these schools “de-emphasize the use of standardized tests by making admissions decisions about substantial numbers of applicants who recently graduated from U.S. high schools without using the SAT or ACT.”

Graeme Abraham, a Penn State Dickinson School of Law student from Utah, views standardized tests like the [Law School Admission Test](#) (LSAT) as well-targeted assessments of a person's analytical abilities but questions how they actually reflect success in school.

“Like any standardized test, the LSAT has its limits. I believe it is accurate in assessing a person's ability to analyze a set of rules on the spot. However, there are a lot of factors that make good law students that

the test just can't measure, such as ethics and time management," he said. "Testing in law school is fairly different from the LSAT that I really don't think you could apply the preparation tactics of one to the other. The LSAT is like a sprint that you trained months for, but a law school final is the sprint at the end of a long marathon."

Jessica Weaver, a Richland, Pa., native, is working on a joint law/MBA program in Smeal [College](#) of Business at Penn State as a way to further both her interests in law and business. She said by the time she took the [Graduate Management Admission Test](#) (GMAT), which measures a person's aptitude to succeed in business school, she was so used to standardized testing that she wasn't at all apprehensive before taking it. She said that while testing well with the GMATs is important to admissions, she also doesn't believe the GMAT actually reflects in any way a person's ability to handle business school.

"In a realistic situation, you would never be trapped alone in a room without resources," she said. "They may test whether or not you remember geometry from 10th grade, but they don't have any real bearing on someone's success in business school."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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