

Breaking down the SAT and ACT

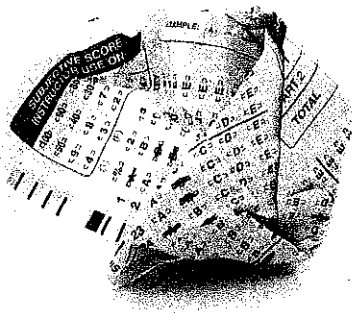
What test is best for your students?

By Kelli O'Connor

As your junior and senior year students are finding out, getting into college is a numbers game: how many applications to fill out and submit; how many students the college of their choice will admit; how much tuition, room and board will cost; and to start — what they scored on the SAT and ACT tests. But do they need to take both? Will the college of their choice look at both scores, or do they just consider one as they browse applications? We looked at both tests and broke it down for you.

According to the Princeton Review (princetonreview.com), there are seven key differences in the ACT and SAT tests.

1 ACT questions are easier to understand. If you have a student with timed test taking issues, or someone with reading comprehension concerns, the ACT test may be best for them.



2 The SAT emphasizes vocabulary. Knowing pronouns from verbs is pretty standard, but knowing the definition of transcendent (pervious to heat, for the record) takes some work. Students looking to major in English-related subjects, like political science, business administration and most liberal arts degrees should consider focusing on the SAT test.

3 The ACT has a science section, while the SAT does not. As with the vocabulary focus on the SAT, most students headed into the science-based majors, like pre-med and the earth sciences, should consider the ACT test first.

4 The ACT tests more advanced math concepts. While both tests have a math section, the ACT tests a wider variety of math skills (basic arithmetic through trigonometry) and some students find the SAT math questions difficult to understand. As well, the SAT test has some questions that require students to show their work while the ACT math questions are all multiple choice.

5 The ACT writing test is optional on test day, but may

be required by many schools. The SAT essay is required and is factored into your writing score. The ACT test is optional and if your students choose to complete the essay, it is not included in the final score and schools will see it listed separately. This is a situation where your student needs to read their potential college's requirements for admission very carefully.

6 The SAT is broken up into more sections. This is a perfect example of how different the tests are: the ACT is very straightforward — all the math questions are in one spot, all the science questions are in one spot — whereas the SAT test breaks up the questions — first some math, then English and science and then back to math. Students may prefer the quick change in subject matter to keep them on their toes, or may rather focus on one subject at a time.

7 The ACT is more of a “big picture” exam. Admissions officers will look at each SAT section score individually when determining admission while they take the ACT composite score into consideration. The composite score may benefit a student who may not have a great

science score, but excels in English.

Taking the tests again and again...and again.

Students can take either test as many times as they like. Most students take the tests twice, once as juniors and again as seniors, to improve their scores. Something to keep in mind is that the College Board sends every set of SAT scores to the colleges, whereas the ACT will only send the best scores from your student. Some admission officers may look poorly on more than three SAT scores, as it sends a message that the student is not comfortable with or may have had problems taking a test.

Allen Grove, a former director of a program for new college students, believes that "The SAT was designed as an aptitude test — it tests your reasoning and verbal abilities, not what you've learned in school... The ACT, on the other hand, is an achievement test. It is meant to test what you have learned in school."

The advice we hear most often for students trying to decide on the test that is right for them: Prepare.

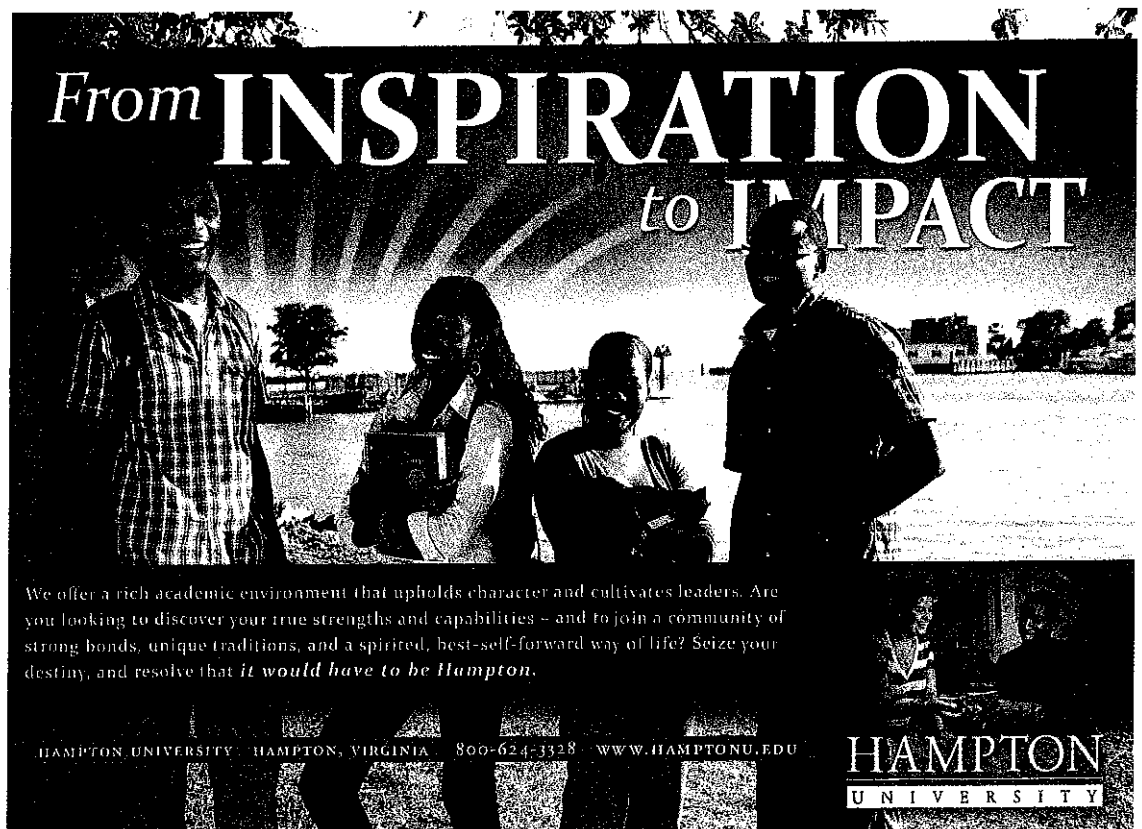
Take the PSAT and PLAN tests sophomore year and try a practice test or two online (ACT.org and SAT.org, along with The Princeton Review and Petersons offer free full-length tests). Getting a feel for each test and deciding which one will work best is the name of the game. And in the end, maybe the best advice you can offer is to take both!

Kelli O'Connor is a freelance writer in Rochester, N.Y.

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