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Dartmouth Reinstates SAT Requirement in First for Ivy League

Admissions requirement for SAT or ACT scores reverses pandemic-era test-optional policy

By [Melissa Korn](#) [Follow](#)

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The Dartmouth College campus in Hanover, N.H. PHOTO: BING GUAN/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Dartmouth College will require SAT or ACT scores beginning with next year's class of applicants, the first Ivy League school to reverse course on pandemic-era test-optional policies.

The New Hampshire school said it was making the move based on new research showing that, at Ivy League and other highly selective schools, standardized test scores help predict first-year college performance—even better than high-school grades do.

“I’ve become less convinced that [test] optional is working for us at Dartmouth,” said Lee Coffin, vice president and dean of admissions and financial aid. “We’re reanimating the policy based on evidence.”

He said there were many occasions since the school adopted its test-optional policy in 2020 when he wished he had one more data point on a student, “to confirm what we think is a high-achieving profile.”

Coffin said test scores will be especially useful as Dartmouth receives more applications from high schools that are unknown to the admissions office and schools where grade inflation is a concern.

The research, by faculty from Dartmouth and Brown University and published last month by Harvard University’s Opportunity Insights research center, found that test scores predicted variations in first-year college success even among students with similar characteristics and high school grades. Dartmouth faculty also reviewed anonymized data specifically for that college, issuing a report to Coffin and the school’s president endorsing the return to testing.

More than a thousand other colleges also scrapped their test-score requirement in 2020, as testing centers were closed during the public-health crisis and students were unable to take the SAT or ACT. Cornell University was the first Ivy institution to drop its requirement, with its peers all following within two months. In addition to logistical challenges, some schools noted concerns about correlations between test scores and family income.

After relaxing their testing policies, high-profile schools were inundated with applications. That led to lower acceptance rates, which in turn pushed the next class of prospective students to send out even more applications, driving a significant drop in acceptance rates in recent years. Coffin said he isn’t concerned if the school starts getting fewer applicants, especially after the recent uptick.

In light of the competition for spots at some schools, many applicants and college counselors have remained skeptical of just how optional the tests really are.

Dartmouth said on its admissions site last year that applicants wouldn’t be judged on whether or not they included their SAT or ACT scores. But it also encouraged students to submit their scores if they sat for either test, explaining that testing—alongside the academic record and recommendations—helps the school “better understand your academic preparation.”

Coffin called that a shift from “test optional” to “test recommended.”

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology said in 2022 that it would return to requiring test scores. MIT cited internal research and a goal of identifying more qualified low-income students who perhaps couldn’t afford to participate in many extracurricular activities or whose schools didn’t offer many rigorous courses. Some other schools, meanwhile, have made their pandemic-era test-optional policies permanent.

Bruce Sacerdote, a Dartmouth economics professor involved in that school’s testing-data review, said that under the test-optional policy, low-income applicants withheld their scores even when those results would have helped make their applications stand out.

Coffin said Dartmouth puts scores in context for each applicant, as it seeks to enroll students with diverse backgrounds. While a 1400 on the SAT might not wow admissions officers if it is reported by a student attending a high-achieving high school, he said, that same score would be notable from a student in a community where average scores were far lower.

According to the study, less-advantaged applicants—as measured by their financial situation or status as a first-generation college student—who submitted a 1400 score had twice the probability of admission to Dartmouth as more advantaged students with the same score.

Sacerdote said one of the most surprising findings for him was that an applicant’s high-school GPA might not be all that useful a predictor of college success. Students with a perfect 4.0 in high school earned college grades that were just 0.1 point higher than those with a high school GPA of 3.2, according to the study of Ivy-Plus schools.

“It explains a lot less than SAT does alone,” Sacerdote said of GPAs.

Coffin said he hasn’t spoken to his counterparts at other schools, but in light of the recent research about their own admissions trends, “I would be surprised if we are the only ones that make the move.”

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