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College Board to Shake Up SAT Exam

Entrance Test to Return to 1,600-Point Scale, Makes Essay Optional

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In a move that reflects the shifting economic and demographic pressures on U.S. higher education—and the testing companies that serve it—the organization that runs the SAT college-entrance test is shaking up its format, scoring and potentially the \$1 billion test-preparation industry that has grown up around it.

Out are the fancy vocabulary words, mandatory essays and recently adopted 2,400-point grading scale. In are questions that demand more analysis and familiarity with a narrower range of subjects as well as a return to the 1,600-point scale. Also in the works is a partnership with Khan Academy to offer free online tutoring to counter the advantage wealthier students can gain from private test-prep tutors.

"Too many feel that the prevalence of test prep and expensive coaching reinforced privilege rather than merit," said David Coleman, the head of the College Board, which runs the test.

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For decades the SAT, formerly known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, which was taken by 1.6 million students last year, was the pre-eminent college-entrance examination in the nation, but its market share is waning. In 2012, for the first time, more high-school students took the rival ACT. Last year, that margin expanded to 200,000, according to Fair Test, a testing-watchdog organization.

The ACT, which has traditionally been taken by students in the Midwest, is making notable inroads into the coasts—where the SAT has long prevailed, according to Paul Weeks, the ACT vice president of consumer engagement. The ACT has contracts to test all the 11th graders in 13 states—including some of the coasts—which has propelled their numbers in recent years. Several more states are joining shortly, Mr. Weeks said.

That growth has put the SAT on the defensive and not for the first time. The changes to the SAT—which go into place in the spring of 2016—follow changes in 2005 after the University of California System threatened to stop considering it because they were unhappy with the analogy section of the test.

In a news release and news conference on Wednesday, Mr. Coleman acknowledged a trouble in the company's business plan.

"It's time to admit that the SAT and ACT have become disconnected from the work of our high schools," he said in a statement.

Mr. Coleman, an architect of the Common Core curriculum rolling out to K-12 schools across the nation with backing from the Obama administration, hopes to close that gap by aligning the new SAT with the skills he believes will be more predictive of college success. The new reading section of the test will ask students to support their answers from evidence in a passage provided. Obscure vocabulary words like prevaricator, sagacious and ignominious will disappear in favor of words like synthesis and empirical that shift in different contexts.

The math section will draw from fewer topics, but mastery of those that are on the test is more likely to be predictive of student readiness and career training, Mr. Coleman said. Calculators will be allowed in only some of the math sections, rather than throughout.

And essays will no longer be mandatory. Those who choose to take them will analyze evidence and explain

how an author builds an argument. The current essays come without source material, so there is no way to gauge the accuracy of the essays.

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