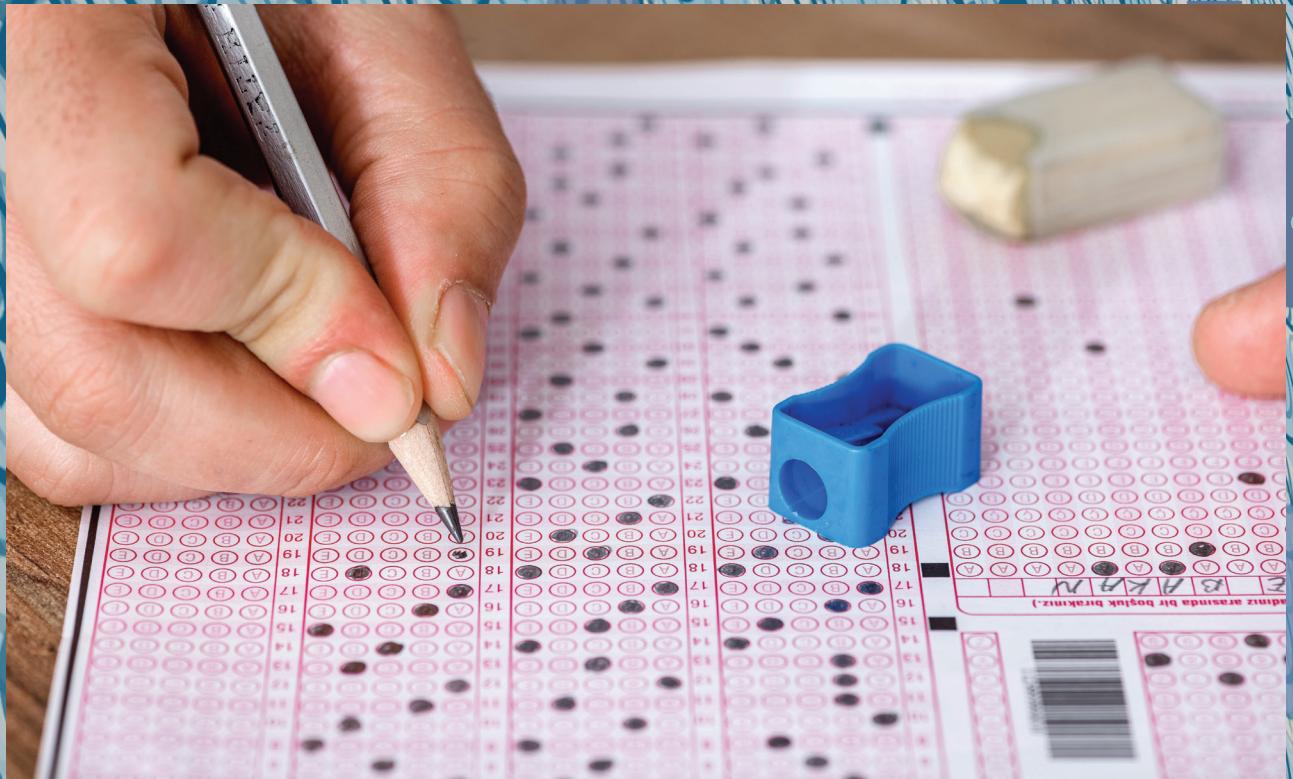


To Test or Not to Test





Alexander Chip

TO TEST OR NOT TO TEST. That is the question... of this article and of college-hopeful high school students across the United States. Students today find themselves burdened with one of humankind's great stress inducers: choice. And much like Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet soliloquizing about whether "to be" (endure the pain and agony of life) or "not to be" (escape by perishing), the choice may feel like a lose-lose. Take the test, and commit the time and resources like all of us "oldsters" have been doing for decades, or skip the test, and click submit on your college applications with trembling finger, wondering if your application will be viewed as "less than" without a score.

As with most of our twenty-first century concerns, we unnecessarily work ourselves into a frothy lather over a decision that need not be so complex. That said, having a student with ADHD and/or learning differences can add a layer both to the factors considered in a testing pathway and our emotional investment as parents. So let's educate ourselves on the vocabulary and landscape, talk about some factors to help you make a decision, and then understand and plan for the ramifications of that decision.

What are test-blind/free, test-optional, and test-required schools?

Test-blind and test-required schools provide the bliss of transparency (as far as testing is concerned at least). Test-blind (also called test-free) schools like the University of California school system won't look at your scores, even if they are great. Test-required schools like Georgetown, MIT, and a growing number of state schools in the Midwest and South require an ACT or SAT score. Before beginning your decision-making process around testing, check out the schools your student may consider, as that may take the decision (gloriously) out of your hands.

On to the messy middle, the test-optional schools. Superficially at least, the policy is quite simple—you do not need scores to apply or realistically get in. Otherwise outstanding applicants with poor access to tests will not be penalized and their GPA and accomplishments will be considered at no discount. The legitimately difficult question is that for the majority of students whose parents will read this article, who do have reasonable test access and aren't first-generation college applicants, should *they* prep for tests and send their scores?

Testing: yes, no, maybe so

Let's start with who *should* test. All students should take a full ACT or SAT diagnostic test (if not both) in tenth grade to gauge their testing strengths and weaknesses. If a student scores 1150 or above on the PSAT/SAT, they should plan to test. With even modest expected improvement, they will very likely send scores to some schools and the data will support the admissions process.

Who *shouldn't* test? If you tell your student their diagnostic test is important, and they give it their best effort and still score well below the national average (1060 SAT, 20 ACT), even improved scores will likely not do much for their admissions chances. Their time will be better spent building the rest of their application and achieving outstanding grades and leadership skills.

An important exception here would be a neurodiverse student with extended time accommodations who severely underperforms on their diagnostic tests because they were overwhelmed by the length, the newness of test format (hello ACT Science), and lack of intuitive testing approach strategies. These students have a much wider range of testing outcomes and higher possible ceilings, and initial scores will be less indicative of final scores, given quality preparation. Additionally, the executive functioning processes they can learn from mastering a test like these can be incredibly beneficial academically (and professionally) down the line, and the confidence they gain from overcoming the phrase “I can’t” on such a tangible challenge is immeasurable.

No test, no problem, but...

The SAT and ACT test important skills, but they do not test the *only* important skills. This is where people fail to understand the full purpose of test optional. It isn’t only to improve application access to underprivileged and underserved communities, though that is a high and worthy priority. Test-optional admissions policies allow schools to consider students who are exceptional in areas that don’t show up on standardized tests.

In theory, we should take schools at their word that an application *sans* test will not be penalized. That said, the recent data has shown students submitting scores are accepted at higher rates at most schools, so I like to live in the real world and tell my friends and clients this: *If your student will always struggle on testing, it is likely the right path to forego the test and pursue test blind and test optional schools. BUT, this isn’t a free pass—a student must demonstrate excellence that fills the “hole” in the application.*

How does one go about this? An average hard-working student may spend up to a hundred hours preparing for, practicing, and taking standardized tests. Plan to redistribute that one hundred hours to amplifying GPA, strength of curriculum, and narrative. As a parent, you will need to assist in creating accountability and structure for your student in doing so. The SAT, while a great devil to some, is the devil they know. The commitment is concrete and structured whether engaging a private tutor, joining a group class, or following an online, self-paced free program. The more subjective endeavor of improving the application through non-testing measures requires great planning on the part of both student and parent.

In the next section you will find meaningful ways to use that time. Of course, any student could accomplish some of these steps *and* take the exam, but for non-testers there should be a greater urgency.

Amplify academic rigor and GPA

When thinking about the academic strengths of an application, it’s typical to tout a gaudy GPA, but what matters as much is the rigorousness of curriculum. Students shouldn’t take courses in which they cannot keep up, but they should test those boundaries.

I always tell my students to *stretch but don’t break* in selecting their classes. And for those stretch classes, I advise students to prepare in August for the start of the school year. Ask your incoming teacher what the first two months will cover and do a preview using free online resources like Khan Academy. A little preview can make for a faster start in an accelerated course. Also have a plan for when the school year begins for how to overcome academic challenges. Office hours, peer tutoring, or paid tutoring, support can take so many forms, and waiting until there is a problem can be too late for students depending that much more on GPA given lack of testing.

In a sense, if a student needs no support at all for their academic load, they may not be stretching enough. So pick courses wisely but aggressively, expect to encounter struggle, and have a support plan in place.

Identify areas of interest and build the narrative

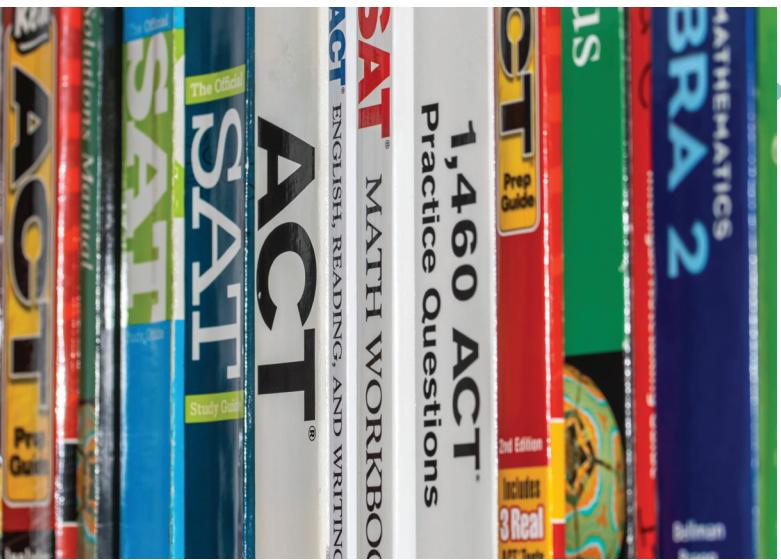
This should be the fun part! Time spent studying flash cards and taking mock tests will instead be spent on activities they love. You probably already know to some extent what your student cares about, but let them tell you. Don’t start with academia if your student is not an academic. Let the investigation be open and far reaching. Capture details and context. For example, ask:

- What kind of music—is it the rhythm or the lyrics that move you?
- What kind of fashion designers do you gravitate toward and why?
- What aspects off the field are interesting to you—coaching, marketing, contracts, and salary cap?
- Do you just enjoy playing video games for the escape, or are you also interested in the design, the advertisements, the world-building?

Their list should be thorough and thoughtful, but need not be overly serious or related in any way to a college major or future vocation. The exercise is meant to uncover and discuss what brings your student joy, what lights the fire. This is also an exercise that can expose any time-consuming activities that *don’t* contribute to their growth or happiness any longer.

Do a Marie Kondo overview of student time commitments and see what could be replaced with more meaningful endeavors that better contribute to their personal





Leadership roles

“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other,” said John F. Kennedy. Beyond the personal benefits of responsibility and self-confidence that come with leadership roles, admissions officers would rather see your student hold a leadership position within one club than butterfly about a handful. They could join one established club or charity (Model UN, Debate, Quiz Bowl) that has a clear path to a governing role and/or start a new club or volunteer organization around a passion with a favorite teacher as sponsor.

The X-Factor

So many students have difficulty answering perhaps the most important question in the cutthroat world of college applications: “What distinguishes you from your peers?” Brainstorm with your student to highlight something special within their strengths or investigate an aspect of their personality they might not uncover through typical school activities.

Not everybody can be an Olympic hopeful or play the harp, but shouldn’t we all spend a little time figuring out what makes us different? Special? A fascinating family history could be studied, cataloged, narrated. A love for a certain genre of music could be explored. Encourage them to choose the road less traveled, while keeping the journey practical and genuine. These niche interests, and the voice of the student explaining them, are often surprisingly memorable, and make for great personal essays.

While blazing an X-Factor path, a student should try to think about approaching any interest from personal, professional, charitable/community, and academic perspectives. Combining at least three of those elements to tell a cohesive true story of the self illustrates commitment, range, and distinction.

Discussing the choices with your student

I hope this article proves helpful as you sit down with your student to discuss the role of testing in their application process. Yes, the stress of making a choice is real. But if you put a modicum of thought into it, making the wrong decision is unlikely. Ultimately, success won’t be determined by the path your student chooses, but rather by the determination with which they walk it. ☀



Alexander Chip founded Top Score Education, a boutique tutoring, test prep, and academic counseling company headquartered in Washington, DC, in 2005. Over the past seventeen years, he has tutored several thousand students in high school and college admissions testing, developed innovative project-based learning programs for students of all ages, and launched new branches servicing students in Miami, Florida, and Durham, North Carolina. In addition to his work as an educator and entrepreneur, Chip is the author of *Building Your Student's Story: The Parent's Companion to College Admissions Strategies, Standardized Tests, and Crafting an Exceptional Application*. A graduate of Duke University (BA, English) and Johns Hopkins (MA, Nonfiction Writing), he lives in Washington, DC, with his wife and two children.

narrative, such as the following possibilities. Nobody will do all of the activities suggested here, but help your student choose two to three and replace some of those hundred hours of test prep with these efforts.

Internships and work experience

Disingenuous attempts to fluff a resume stand out like a bored high school student at their Uncle Cliff’s law firm. Yes, leverage your network and support your student. But help them by matching their interests and passions to weekend or summer positions by which they can be inspired. Seek out jobs or internships that might result in growth year over year, sales experience, customer service, management opportunity, or high quality interaction with potential mentors. Ask yourself how the position will complement your student’s story. Ultimately anything is better than nothing, but if your student is willing to plan ahead and help or own the research, there are opportunities in every field.

Community engagement

Service is a core value of so many high schools, and for good reason. Helping those less fortunate promotes for students important lessons in empathy and perspective. Yet I think the value of that time spent can be amplified for the student and those they help through community engagement. Completing school-required volunteer hours with a good attitude and open heart is admirable. But connecting with one’s community in a deeper way, aligning service with one’s passions and skills to maximize impact, is exceptional. Your student will make more lasting relationships, add more substantially to their student story, and be more profoundly impacted by the experience.

Help your student be thoughtful about how they will use their limited free time and energy. Budding engineers may be a great fit for Habitat for Humanity, whereas a top AP Spanish Language student might consider a program that assists Spanish-speaking immigrants. Future doctors might serve in hospitals or clinics, acquiring early medical experience, or focus on the emotional side of treatment by assisting physical therapy for wounded veterans.