

Neurodiversity and Standardized Testing for Colleges

Since the 1900s, most colleges in the United States have used standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT to help determine whether a student is qualified for admission. However, such evaluations can make the college application process more difficult, and especially so for neurodiverse students. Furthermore, while the tests are supposed to help schools gain a better understanding of a student's intellectual level, research has called into question the effectiveness of such evaluation. For example, Bates, the liberal arts college in Maine, has been test-optional since 1984 but required admitted students to submit scores upon matriculation for research purposes. In 2004, they released data from their experience, where they found only a 0.1% difference in graduation rates between submitters and nonsubmitters, and that the non-submitters who had scored much lower points on their standardized tests actually had higher graduation rates.

Since the pandemic, many colleges have started to make standardized tests optional in the college application process. Mary Churchill of *Inside Higher Ed* shares that more than 80% of colleges in the United States are test-optional as of 2023. But what does this really mean? As it sounds like, test-optional schools will not **require** students to submit test scores from the SAT or ACT when applying. However, this does not mean that they won't **look** at test results when submitted (that would be test blind). This makes it crucial when deciding if you should take a standardized test as part of your application or not.

The SAT and ACT were designed for neurotypical people and therefore may present a number of challenges for neurodiverse students. The tests often include long passages of text, require lengthy instructions and offer little time and a running timer. According to Sol Smith, all types of neurodiverse students can have trouble reading, noting that "the reasons could be visual or related to attention". A neurotypical student might spend about a minute or less reading the instructions, while neurodiverse people often take much longer and may have to reread it several times.

Neurodiverse students have ways to seek help, but oftentimes these methods or accommodations don't fully solve the problem. At many schools, neurodiverse students can seek accommodations by reaching out to the College Counseling Center at their school, or the Learning Specialist (if they have one). However,

according to one anonymous learning specialist, “for example, just because you have ADHD or dyslexia or whatever, doesn’t mean you necessarily need extra time, often you do, but not always, so there has gotta be a justification.” The College Board website affirms this idea of justification clearly, stating seven important guidelines for requesting accommodations, including a test to prove your diagnosis. One example of an accommodation is extended time, which can definitely help, but let’s not forget that this can simultaneously make it more difficult for neurodiverse students. For example, while students with ADHD may need more time to complete it, their focus may also fade over an extended time.

It is also important to take into consideration the changes being made to some of these standardized tests and how they might impact you. By the spring of 2024, the SAT will only be delivered online instead of on paper. For some students, the online format may be preferred. The new online SAT (and PSAT) offers various features for all students with or without accommodations to access, such as the ability to zoom, a calculator, a math reference sheet, an annotator, and a “mark for review” button for questions students wish to return to.

I talked to a college counselor and a learning specialist at my school to get their opinions on the matter. According to her, “Colleges look much more closely at grades and extracurriculars than test scores, and those tend to be areas that have more built-in support for neurodiverse students. A trend we’re seeing is that for very highly ranked colleges, students are only submitting test scores if they fall within a small, very high range, so for students whose scores don’t fall within that range, it’s generally not in their best interest to dedicate the time and energy needed to boost a score by several hundred points - and that’s true regardless of a student’s circumstances, neurodiversity, or other factors. If testing would detract from a student’s well-being in a meaningful way (taking time away from grades, other activities, or sleep, for instance), it’s better to focus that energy on those other areas.”

Ultimately, for any neurodiverse students faced with the question I was faced with: “Should I take the ACT or SAT if I am bad at standardized tests?,” I cannot give you a clear answer without generalizing the neurodiverse population. However, I can offer this suggestion: take a practice ACT or SAT and see where you are at and how you compare to your preferred schools’ typical incoming class test scores (these rates are usually readily accessible and published yearly). Using this information, you can

then determine how much work you would need to do to get into your intended schools' required or desired test score range, so as to help your chances for admission. If the gap between your scores or score potential is such that you can estimate that it would take effort away from extracurriculars and grades, then perhaps you might decide not to take it. And so with standardized tests, as in all settings, I strongly encourage all neurodiverse students to advocate for themselves and proactively seek out accommodations available to them and that they may need.

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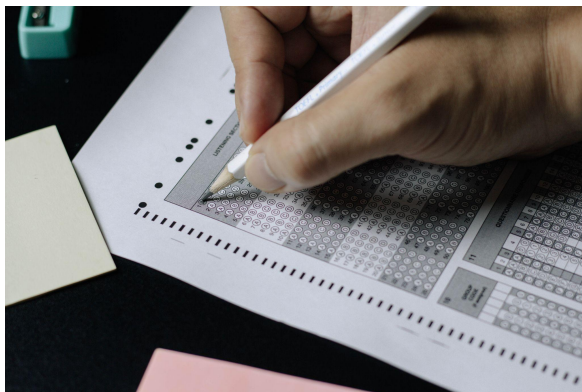
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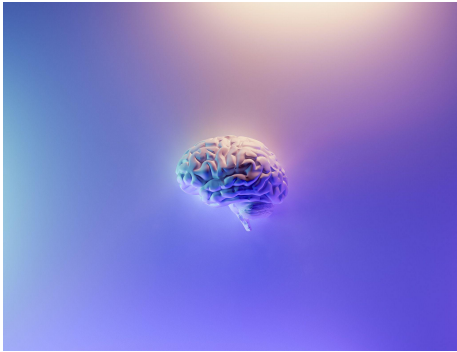
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