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THE COLLEGE BOARD SCORE CHOICE™ POLICY *A DISCUSSION OF ISSUES AND CASE STUDIES*

In 2009, the College Board (the organization that administers the SAT) introduced Score Choice for all of its tests. Previously, every College Board test (SAT or SAT Subject Test) that students took appeared on their records when they applied to colleges. Now students may choose which test scores to submit to colleges and which to withhold. Although this appears like a great change, it is not so simple. College reactions to this policy change are widely varied and mind-bogglingly confusing. Some colleges are not abiding by the College Board's Score Choice policy at all. For instance, Barnard, Carnegie Mellon, Colgate, Columbia, Cornell, Georgetown, McGill, Tufts, University of Maryland, University of Pennsylvania, and Yale required students (on their honor) to submit all of their test scores. Other schools strongly encouraged students to submit all of their test scores, while some others asked students only to submit their one best SAT score.

Further confusing the situation, different colleges are compiling composite scores differently. Under the old, non-Score Choice system, most colleges "super scored" the SAT. That is, if a student took the SAT multiple times, the colleges would look only at the student's highest score on each section (math, critical reading and writing) of the SAT, even if the highest section scores were achieved on different test dates.¹ Some colleges that abide by Score Choice still "super score" the SAT and look at section scores from across different administrations of the SAT. Others, however, will look only at the one complete test score. Therefore, the best strategy for when and how many times to take the SAT varies depending on a student's list of desired colleges. College's individual score use policies and other information can be found at: <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/sat-score-use-practices-list.pdf>.

The bottom line advice is to develop a list of potential colleges during your junior year. Investigate their Score Choice policies and plan your testing strategy accordingly. If all of your schools are abiding by Score Choice, you might plan to take the SAT three times.² If you are very uncertain about your school choices, just assume you are applying to at least one school that requires you to submit all of your test scores and aim to take the SAT only twice – when you are fully prepared.

CASE STUDIES

Although creating a testing plan is highly personalized and should be done on a case-by-case basis, below are a few examples to help you think generally about how to approach the SAT and Score Choice:

Case #1: An all-around strong student looking at top colleges

Ethan is a strong student who wants to apply to top schools. He starts preparing for the SAT the summer before his junior year, but has no idea where he wants to go to college. By December of his junior year, Ethan's practice tests scores have risen 300 points, but have not leveled off. Ethan wants to take the January SAT as a "practice run" and then take the test again for real in March.

¹ Under the old system, if a student took the SAT three or more times, some schools averaged all of the scores instead of just selecting the best section.

² However, be aware that even if a school is abiding by Score Choice this year, it might not do so next year. You MUST check with each individual admissions office to ask what its policy will be for your class year. When in doubt, play it safe and assume there is no Score Choice.



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What should Ethan do?

Ethan absolutely should not take the January SAT. If a student is unsure about his school choices (especially if he is considering top programs), he should not take the SAT until he is fully prepared to achieve his best score. When applying to schools that do not abide by Score Choice, a student ideally should submit only two test scores (the non-Score Choice schools will “super score” two tests but often will average the scores when three or more are submitted). Because the content on each individual SAT varies slightly, it is important for a student to have two attempts at the actual SAT test when he is fully prepared to do his best. If Ethan sits for the January SAT and posts only a mediocre score, he will have only one more opportunity to take the test when he is fully prepared and still be able to benefit from “super scoring” at all of the colleges to which he applies. Therefore, Ethan should wait until he is fully prepared to take the exam.

Case #2: An above-average student with test-taking anxiety and no clear idea of schools selection and chances of admissions

Kate is an above average student but not at the top of her class. She is smart, but gets nervous easily and as a result is not a good standardized test taker. Kate starts studying for the SAT at the start of her junior year and improves 100 points by November. Because she is so nervous about taking the SAT, Kate wants to take the test every time it is offered (December, January, March, May, June) in the hopes of landing at least one good score.

What should Kate do?

Kate should register for the December SAT, take the real test as practice and cancel her score immediately after the test. In immediately canceling her December score, Kate will suffer no adverse effects from a bad score, but will have the experience of taking the real test and will be able to ease her nerves. Kate should do the same thing with the January administration of the test. Kate should then aim to take the March test and keep her score. Kate can then retake the test in May. If things do not go well, Kate can retake for a third time in June. If absolutely necessary, Kate can retake the test yet again in October of her senior year. Since she likely will not be applying to the top schools, the chance that her desired schools will require her to submit all of her scores is lower since the majority of schools requiring students to submit all scores are top tier schools.

Case #3: A bright, but unmotivated, student aiming for a range of schools

Emily is very bright, but somewhat unfocused. As a result, her grades, while good, do not reflect her full potential. She has her heart set on going to the University of Michigan, a reputable public university, and feels she needs a very high SAT score to compensate for her less than stellar grades. Emily starts studying for the SAT in the fall of her junior year.

What should Emily do?

Emily should call the admissions office to see what Michigan’s Score Choice policy is for her application class. Currently, for the class of 2010, Michigan allows students to submit scores from whichever test dates they desire (although Michigan “recommends” students submit scores from all test dates, it is not required) and then uses the “super score” system. That is, Michigan compiles a score by taking the student’s best sections even if they are from different test dates. Emily should also think about some back-up schools and determine their Score Choice policies. If at least some of the other schools on Emily’s list allow Score Choice, Emily should plan to take the SAT a number of times to try to maximize her score. While studying vigorously, she should



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take the test in January, March and May. She can then take her SAT Subject Tests in June. If necessary, Emily could take the SAT a fourth time in October of her senior year.

The case studies above are hypothetical composites of students whom Ivy Link has tutored and advised, and do not cover all possible scenarios that parents and students may encounter. For more information, please contact one of our testing and admissions experts at info@myivylink.com or 1 (888) 844.4439.

Note: Given that colleges' use of Score Choice is in a constant state of flux and this article discusses information currently applicable to the class of 2010, the information presented herein should not be relied upon without consulting directly with the college admissions offices and/or your college guidance counselor.