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**Office of the President**

**TO THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA:**

**DISCUSSION ITEM**

***For Meeting of November 17, 2026***

**RESEARCH ON STANDARDIZED TESTING**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This discussion item will consider recent research on standardized testing and higher education. Brown University Professor John N. Friedman and UC Berkeley Professor Jesse Rothstein will present research examining the relationship between SAT and ACT scores, high school grades, and first-year college performance. The discussion will provide the Regents with context as they continue to consider college readiness, admissions policy, and educational opportunity.

The presenters will discuss what their findings contribute to the broader evidence on standardized testing and higher education. In light of the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools' (BOARS) ongoing review, the discussion will help prepare the Regents to consider questions about academic preparation, student performance, and educational opportunity. This item is for discussion; no policy action is proposed at this time.

## BACKGROUND

The University of California has a long history of evaluating how admission measures identify academic preparation and inform undergraduate admissions.

In 2018, the UC President asked the Academic Senate to reassess the SAT and ACT in evaluating readiness, predicting student success, and promoting opportunity within UC's comprehensive review admissions policy. The Academic Senate's Standardized Testing Task Force convened in 2019 and issued its report in 2020, concluding that standardized tests provided meaningful predictive value beyond high school GPA for student success, while acknowledging persistent disparities in average scores across demographic groups. The Task Force also found that UC's holistic admissions process substantially mitigated those disparities by evaluating test scores in context. It recommended continued test use until UC could develop a UC-specific assessment. The Regents reviewed and subsequently approved the President's May 2020 recommendation that UC transition to test-optional admission in 2021-22 and to test-blind admission in 2023-24 while UC explored a possible UC-specific assessment, and subsequently either replace the SAT/ACT with another test or eliminate the use of standardized testing for admission. In 2021, a Senate study group concluded that the development of a UC test was not feasible.

A court case, filed in December 2019, *Smith v. Regents*, argued that using SAT and ACT scores violated state disability and civil rights laws. In September 2020, a Superior Court issued a preliminary injunction barring the University from using SAT or ACT scores in undergraduate admissions, accelerating the move to test-blind admission to fall 2021. Subsequently, in May 2021, the University reached a settlement with the plaintiffs, agreeing to a test-blind policy through at least the 2025-26 academic year, and subsequently amended Regents Policy 2102 – Policy on Undergraduate Admissions to no longer consider SAT or ACT scores in undergraduate admission decisions.

On July 22, 2026, the Academic Council directed BOARS to oversee an expedited, faculty-led, evidence-based review of standardized testing during the 2026–27 academic year. BOARS is to report to the Academic Council by February 12, 2027, followed by a systemwide review, with recommendations to the Regents no later than June 2027. The review is faculty-led and will examine how UC can promote academic preparedness, student success, and educational opportunity. Any future policy change would require a Regents vote and advance notice to prospective students and families.

The attached readings address related but distinct questions: how high school grades and standardized test scores predict college outcomes; how those relationships vary by institution, high school, and student background; and how admissions criteria relate to UC's goals for student success and educational opportunity. The materials include analyses of UC and other institutions' data, the Academic Senate Standardized Testing Task Force report, and policy commentary. Because the studies examine different populations, outcomes, and periods, their findings should be considered in context. They are intended to inform the Regents' discussion but do not, on their own, determine whether UC should reinstate testing or what weight scores should receive.

## SPEAKERS

**John N. Friedman** is inaugural Dean of the Watson School of International and Public Affairs at Brown University, Briger Family Distinguished Professor of Economics, and Founding Co-Director of Opportunity Insights. His research uses large administrative datasets to study the science of upward mobility and economic opportunity, including public policy issues within education, taxation, and urban policy. He previously served as Special Assistant to the President for Economic Policy at the National Economic Council in the White House and holds a Ph.D. in economics, an M.A. in statistics, and a B.A. in economics, all from Harvard University.

**Jesse Rothstein** is Professor of Public Policy and Economics at the University of California, Berkeley, where he holds the Carmel P. Friesen Chair in Public Policy and the David P. Gardner Chair of Higher Education. He directs Berkeley's Center for Studies in Higher Education. His research examines education policy, tax and transfer policy, and labor markets. He previously served as Chief Economist at the U.S. Department of Labor and as a Senior Economist with the President's Council of Economic Advisers. He earned a Ph.D. in economics and a Master of Public Policy from Berkeley and an A.B. from Harvard University.

**ATTACHMENTS**

1. Report of the Academic Council Standardized Testing Task Force (2020). The 2020 UC Academic Senate task force report reviewed how SAT/ACT scores relate to student success, access, and diversity. It found that scores help predict UC students' academic outcomes, while also recognizing that scores differ across racial and socioeconomic groups; the task force concluded that UC's comprehensive review appeared to mitigate some of these disparities. It recommended updating eligibility criteria, expanding the Eligibility in the Local Context program, studying disparities and student supports, and developing a broader UC assessment. At the time, it did not recommend test-optional admissions or replacing the SAT/ACT with Smarter Balanced.

2. Relationship of the SAT/ACT to College Performance at the University of California, UC Institutional Research and Academic Planning (2020). Using UC admissions and enrollment data, this 2020 report examines how SAT/ACT scores and high school GPA relate to student characteristics and college outcomes. It finds that test scores add predictive information beyond GPA, especially for first-year grades. However, after accounting for demographic factors, GPA predicts first-year grades about as well as test scores and is a stronger predictor of retention and graduation outcomes; test scores are also more closely associated with family income, parental education, and race or ethnicity. The report concludes that further analysis is needed to understand how different admissions criteria would affect outcomes.

**Research from Speakers:**

Speaker #1: Professor John Friedman

3. Standardized Test Scores and Academic Performance at Ivy-Plus Colleges — John N. Friedman, Bruce Sacerdote, Douglas O. Staiger, and Michele Tine; National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 33570 (March 2025), subsequently published in AEA Papers and Proceedings 115 (May 2025), pp. 676–681. Using admissions and transcript data from 12 Ivy-Plus colleges for students enrolled between 2017 and 2022, the authors find that SAT/ACT scores predict first-year college grades more strongly than high school GPA, conditional on students' race, gender, and socioeconomic status, and report no calibration bias by socioeconomic background. Students from less- and more-resourced high schools with similar test scores earned similar first-year GPAs. The authors also note that students from lower-income backgrounds tend to have lower scores and are less likely to take the tests; the study does not resolve how admissions should weigh predictive value alongside those access concerns. The findings concern the participating highly selective colleges and should be interpreted within that scope.

Speaker #2: Professor Jesse Rothstein

4. University of California Admissions and the SAT: FAQs, Jesse Rothstein, UC Berkeley Center for Studies in Higher Education, September 2026. The author's FAQ reviews evidence on UC's test-free admissions policy, including changes in applications, student diversity, academic preparation and outcomes, and the predictive value of SAT scores

compared with high school grades. He argues that the SAT's predictive advantage diminishes when students' backgrounds and high schools are taken into account, and that admissions without test scores are not random because UC considers grades, coursework, school context, and other factors. The brief cautions against reinstating the SAT at UC, emphasizing the University's public mission and the potential effects on access and equity.

**5.** UC Regents Should Consider All Evidence and Options in Decisions on Admissions Policy, Michal Kurlaender, Sarah Reber, and Jesse Rothstein, *Policy Analysis for California Education,* April 2020. In this 2020 commentary, the authors challenge the Academic Senate task force's recommendation to continue using the SAT/ACT while developing a replacement. They argue that test scores reflect unequal educational opportunity and that giving them substantial weight can reduce diversity. The authors urge UC to place greater emphasis on high school grades, consider the Smarter Balanced assessment, and strengthen the Eligibility in the Local Context program by guaranteeing admission to top students from every California high school.