

Office of the President

TO THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA:

DISCUSSION ITEM

For Meeting of September 16, 2026

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF STANDARDIZED TESTING AT UC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This discussion item provides historical background on undergraduate admission policy and the use of standardized college entrance exams at the University of California. Two Academic Senate reports, “Admissions Tests and UC Principles for Admissions Testing” issued by the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) in 2009 and the report issued by the UC Academic Council Standardized Testing Task Force in 2020, examined how the University used standardized tests and the efficacy of those tests in admission eligibility and selection. They also provide recommendations for future approaches, many of which were developed into policy following each respective report’s issuance.

BACKGROUND

Origins of Standardized Testing at UC: 1960s

For most of its early history, the University of California did not require the submission and use of national, standardized exams for admission. However, by the 1950s, the University was confronting serious challenges associated with growth. Eligibility studies conducted in 1965 and 1966 estimated that the University was significantly out of compliance with the eligibility cap of 12.5 percent from the California Master Plan for Higher Education of 1960. The State had an interest in limiting financial commitments that were perceived as associated with an admission guarantee for eligible students. The Academic Senate was called upon to develop an academically justifiable approach to limiting the number of students who would be guaranteed admission. Adopting an admission test requirement was seen at that time as a relatively easy means of reducing the pool of eligible students. In 1968, the Academic Assembly accepted the recommendation by BOARS that the University require the SAT and three achievement (SAT II/SAT Subject) tests. The requirement took effect for the class entering in fall 1968.

Establishing Principles for the Use of Admission Tests: 2002 to 2009

Not until 2002 did the University articulate and establish principles for appropriate uses for test scores. The document, “The Use of Admissions Tests by the University of California,”

(Attachment 1) was prepared by BOARS and stated that admission tests will be used at the University of California to:

- assess academic preparation and achievement of UC applicants;
- predict success at UC beyond that predicted by high school grade point average (GPA);
- aid in establishing UC eligibility; and
- aid in selecting students for admission to individual campuses.

These principles established that test scores may be used in a backward-looking mode to measure past achievement and in a forward-looking mode to predict future success. BOARS noted its preference for tests that measured mastery of college preparatory material over aptitude,¹ but justified the continued use of the SAT and ACT through their ability to predict college GPAs, retention, and degree completion, albeit limited. The principles moreover implied that test scores should augment the predictive power of the high school GPA without specifying by how much. The third and fourth principles justified using test scores for both eligibility determination and local selection.

A 2009 report from BOARS, “Admissions Tests and UC Principles for Admissions Testing,” (Attachment 2) further elaborates on the principles of testing and assessed the extent to which these principles were being met by the redesigned SAT and ACT. The report acknowledged the financial and social burdens imposed by standardized tests and that they continued to produce disparities across demographic groups. However, BOARS concluded that scores did add predictive information, provided a common statewide benchmark, and helped UC evaluate applicants consistently, particularly those with nontraditional academic records. BOARS endorsed the continued use of the SAT and ACT, but only as one element of a broader, individualized review, not as the dominant admission criterion. In this report, BOARS also recommended the elimination of the SAT Subject Tests as an eligibility requirement beginning with class entering fall 2012.

Systemwide Review and Reassessment: 2018 to 2020

In 2018, then UC President Janet Napolitano formally requested that the Academic Senate undertake its periodic evaluation of the University’s use of standardized tests in undergraduate admission. This request initiated a systemwide review of the role of the SAT and ACT in assessing applicant readiness, predicting student success, and promoting equity in access to UC within UC’s comprehensive review process.

In January 2019, the Academic Senate convened the Standardized Testing Task Force (STTF), a faculty-led workgroup charged with examining five core questions:

1. How well UC’s admission practices assess high school students’ readiness for UC
2. How well those practices predict student success at UC within a holistic review framework

¹ The importance of curriculum-based measures of achievement prompted the College Board to introduce a new SAT Reasoning Test that incorporated a writing component in 2005. Similarly, ACT Inc. introduced an optional writing component for its test in 2005. Both tests have undergone other significant changes since 2005.

3. Whether UC's testing practices should be improved, changed, or eliminated
4. Whether standardized tests promote diversity and opportunity for UC applicants
5. Whether UC's use of standardized tests enhances or detracts from academic eligibility

Later in 2019, two lawsuits were filed against UC alleging that the use of standardized tests in admission was discriminatory toward disabled students and students from low-income and underrepresented racial backgrounds. These legal actions were separate from the Regents' policy review but affected the timing and implementation of subsequent decisions.

The year 2020 marked a convergence of policy review, legal action, and pandemic-related disruption. In April 2020, in response to COVID-19–related test access barriers, the Academic Senate waived standardized test requirements for admission to the fall 2021 term. Around the same time, the STTF released its final report (Attachment 3), which recommended the continued use of standardized tests until UC could develop a new UC-specific assessment. The Task Force also recommended several changes to freshman eligibility criteria to reduce reliance on test scores: UC should expand Eligibility in the Local Context and consider revisions to the components of the statewide eligibility index. Additional recommendations included analyzing factors contributing to disproportionate representation, studying and expanding student academic support services, and conducting an item-level analysis of current standardized tests. While the Task Force concluded that UC used test scores appropriately within a contextualized review process, six out of the committee's 18 members expressed concern about the equity implications of continued test use and supported a more rapid timeline for elimination than the estimated eight years estimated to develop an alternative assessment.

In May 2020, President Napolitano issued a recommendation (Attachment 4) to phase out the existing standardized test requirement (ACT/SAT). At their May 2020 meeting, the Regents approved a plan to move to test-optional admission for fall 2022, followed by test-blind admission for fall 2023 and 2024, while exploring the feasibility of developing a new UC-specific test. The plan specified that if no suitable alternative was identified by fall 2025, UC would permanently eliminate the use of standardized tests.

In September 2020, a California Superior Court preliminary injunction halted UC's use of SAT and ACT scores in undergraduate admission and scholarship decisions, effective immediately while the litigation was pending. Concurrently, UC convened a steering group to explore potential alternative assessments.

Transition to Test-Free Admission: 2021 to 2022

In 2021, UC concluded its review of alternative testing options. In January, the Feasibility Study Work Group determined that developing a new UC-specific exam by 2025 was not realistic and that it was feasible to explore modification of an existing test, namely the Smarter Balanced (SB) assessment (Attachment 5). In April, then UC President Michael Drake requested that the UC Academic Senate evaluate the SB assessment, administered statewide to 11th grade students, as a potential admission tool. The Senate study group determined that the SB assessment was not appropriate for use in admission, either as a required or optional measure. In November 2021, the Regents confirmed President Drake's endorsement of this conclusion (Attachment 6).

During this period, UC also reached a settlement in one of the legal challenges, which accelerated the May 2020 Regents' action to permanently move to test-blind admission from fall 2025 to fall 2021. In March 2022, the California State University (CSU) Board of Trustees voted to discontinue the use of standardized tests in admission, aligning CSU with UC's test-free policy. CSU cited goals of expanding access and equity while continuing to rely on multifactor admission criteria. With this decision, all California public four-year higher education systems became test-free.

KEY TO ACRONYMS

ACT	A standardized assessment commonly taken for college admission that has traditionally covered four content areas: English, mathematics, reading, and science. Writing was added as an optional component in 2005, and science was also made optional in 2025.
BOARS	Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools
CSU	California State University
GPA	Grade point average
SAT	A standardized assessment commonly taken for college admission with two primary sections: reading and writing (formerly verbal), and mathematics
SB	Smarter Balanced assessment
STTF	Standardized Testing Task Force
UC	University of California

ATTACHMENTS

1. Attachment 1: [The Use of Admissions Tests by the University of California](#), January 2002
2. Attachment 2: [Admissions Tests and UC Principles for Admissions Testing](#), December 2009
3. Attachment 3: [Report of the UC Academic Council Standardized Testing Task Force \(STTF\)](#), January 2020
4. Attachment 4: [College Entrance Exam Use in University of California Undergraduate Admissions](#), May 2020
5. Attachment 5: [Report on the Outcome of the Feasibility Study of a New College Entrance Exam in University of California Undergraduate Admissions](#), January 2021
6. Attachment 6: [Update on the Potential Use of the Smarter Balanced Assessment in University of California Undergraduate Admissions](#), November 2021

Appendix A: Further Reading on Admission Test Research

(Listed in publication date order)

Title	Author	Publication	URL
UC and the SAT: Predictive Validity and Differential Impact of the SAT I and SAT II at the University of California	Saul Geiser; Roger Studley	Educational Assessment, 8(1), 1-26 (2002)	https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326977EA0801_01
College Performance Predictions and the SAT	Jesse M. Rothstein	Journal of Econometrics (July–August 2004)	https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeconom.2003.10.003
California and the SAT: A Reanalysis of University of California Admissions Data	Rebecca Zwick; Terran Brown; Jeffrey C. Sklar	Center for Studies in Higher Education, UC Berkeley 8.04 (July 2004)	https://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/california-and-sat-reanalysis-university-california-admissions-data
Race, Income, and College in 25 Years: Evaluating Justice O'Connor's Conjecture	Alan Krueger; Jesse Rothstein; Sarah Turner	Center for Studies in Higher Education, UC Berkeley 19.06 (November 2006)	https://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/race-income-and-college-25-years-evaluating-justice-oconnors-conjecture
The Role of Socioeconomic Status in SAT-Grade Relationships and in College Admissions Decisions	Paul R. Sackett; Nathan R. Kuncel; Adam S. Beatty; Jana L. Rigdon; Winny Shen; Thomas B. Kiger	Psychological Science, 23(9), 1000-1007 (September 2012)	https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0956797612438732
The ACT of Enrollment: The College Enrollment Effects of State-Required College Entrance Exam Testing	Daniel Klasik	Educational Researcher, 42(3), 151-160 (April 2013)	https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0013189X12474065
The Effect of Access to College Assessments on Enrollment and Attainment	George Bulman	American Economic Journal: Applied Economics (October 2015)	https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257%2FApp.20140062
The Growing Correlation Between Race and SAT Scores: New Findings from California	Saul Geiser	Center for Studies in Higher Education, UC Berkeley 10.15 (October 2015)	https://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/growing-correlation-between-race-and-sat-scores-new-findings-california-saul-geiser

Title	Author	Publication	URL
Predicting College Success: How Do Different High School Assessments Measure Up?	Michal Kurlaender; Kramer Cohen	Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University (March 2019)	https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/predicting-college-success-how-do-different-high-school-assessments-measure-2019
Relationship of the SAT/ACT to College Performance at the University of California	University of California, Institutional Research and Academic Planning	University of California, Office of the President, Institutional Research and Academic Planning (January 2020)	https://www.ucop.edu/institutional-research-academic-planning/files/sat-act-study-report.pdf
Take Two! SAT Retaking and College Enrollment Gaps	Joshua Goodman; Oded Gurantz; Jonathan Smith	American Economic Journal: Economic Policy, 12(2), 115-158 (May 2020)	https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20170503
SAT/ACT Scores, High-School GPA, and the Problem of Omitted Variable Bias: Why the UC Taskforce's Findings Are Spurious	Saul Geiser	Center for Studies in Higher Education, UC Berkeley 1.20 (March 2020)	https://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/satact-scores-high-school-gpa-and-problem-omitted-variable-bias-why-uc-taskforce%E2%80%99s
The University of California versus the SAT: A Brief History and Contemporary Critique	John Aubrey Douglass	Center for Studies in Higher Education, UC Berkeley 8.2020 (June 2020)	https://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/university-california-versus-sat-brief-history-and-contemporary-critique-john-aubrey
The Role of Standardized Tests in College Admissions	Rebecca Zwick	The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles (June 2023)	https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/reports/the-role-of-standardized-tests-in-college-admissions/
Diversifying Society's Leaders? The Determinants and Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges	Raj Chetty; David J. Deming; John Friedman	Quarterly Journal of Economics (February 2026; source also notes July 2023)	https://opportunityinsights.org/paper/collegeadmissions/
The G.I. Bill, Standardized Testing, and Socioeconomic Origins of the U.S. Educational Elite Over a Century	Ran Abramitzky; Jennifer K. Kowalski; Santiago Pérez; Joseph Price	NBER Working Paper 33164 (November 2024)	https://www.nber.org/papers/w33164
Standardized Test Scores and Academic Performance at Ivy-Plus Colleges	John Friedman; Bruce Sacerdote; Douglas O. Staiger; Michele Tine	American Economic Association Papers and Proceedings, 115, 676-681 (May 2025)	https://opportunityinsights.org/paper/test-scores/