

Smart students, low SAT scores

Why are some top students falling below the mark?

By Mark Greenstein

It is exasperating for parents and school counselors to see their diligent teens failing to complement their high grades with high SAT scores. Allow me to hypothesize based on my experience with high school test-takers and the SAT in particular.

Correlation does not equal causation

Though the correlation between high grades and SAT scores is strong, it is wrong to say that mastering a school's English and math curricula will result in a 1800+ SAT score. Any causation is better attributable to work ethic by the student than to a transfer of skills in traditional curricula, especially in the English section. Since the SAT tests very coachable skills, a student's desire to master those skills plays a large role in her/his performance.

Exposure to the SAT

For students at many schools, exposure to the college admissions process and standards comes almost automatically. If your students are not exposed early in their high school careers, seek out the information for them. To learn the skill set necessary for the SAT, purchase a copy of the College Board's most recent version of "The Official SAT Study Guide." This is the only guide to feature official SAT practice tests created by the test makers. With the resources available, there is no excuse for not knowing what skills are tested on the SAT.

Why SAT critical reading skills may not meet expectations

If the student is not an avid reader, he or she is unlikely to absorb the vocabulary tested on the later (tougher) SAT questions.

The SAT tests short, dense passages. Few English teachers invoke similar passages, followed by ques-

tions where the right answer sometimes turns on the forcefulness of a single word. SAT reading comprehension success is driven by careful analysis, both at the "big picture" and at the "detail" level. A careful reader, armed with good vocabulary, should be able to score a 700 on the verbal.

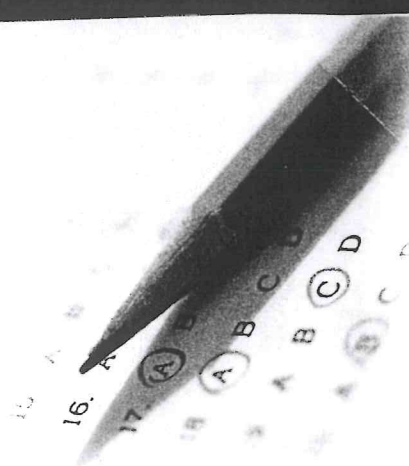
Why SAT math skills may not meet expectations

The math section of the SAT has more questions that directly correlate with a traditional high school curriculum than does the critical reading. Nevertheless, many "A" math students receive only mid-range scores on the SAT math for three reasons:

- ▶ Students spend a whole year in Algebra I, and a whole year in Geometry. They may never fuse the two, yet at least some SAT questions combine Algebra and Geometry.
- ▶ On average, high school math makes use of intricate and lengthy calculations. The SAT rarely does so. There is usually a creative and simple way to solve the problem in less than one minute.
- ▶ Rarely does a high school teacher teach "logic." Buried into the math section are questions relying on "pure logic" and others relying on "vision."

Where do we go from here? I conclude by imploring schools to teach mastery of the valuable skills tested on the SAT — critical reading and logical math. If "teaching to the test" is a taboo phrase, that's understandable. But teaching these skills will result in higher SAT scores, a valuable asset for your students when applying to college.

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science score, but excels in English.

Taking the tests again and again...and again.

Students can take either test as many times as they like. Most students take the tests twice, once as juniors and again as seniors, to improve their scores. Something to keep in mind is that the College Board sends every set of SAT scores to the colleges, whereas the ACT will only send the best scores from your student. Some admission officers may look poorly on more than three SAT scores, as it sends a message that the student is not comfortable with or may have had problems taking a test.

Allen Grove, a former director of a program for new college students, believes that "The SAT was designed as an aptitude test — it tests your reasoning and verbal abilities, not what you've learned in school...The ACT, on the other hand, is an achievement test. It is meant to test what you have learned in school."

The advice we hear most often for students trying to decide on the test that is right for them: Prepare.

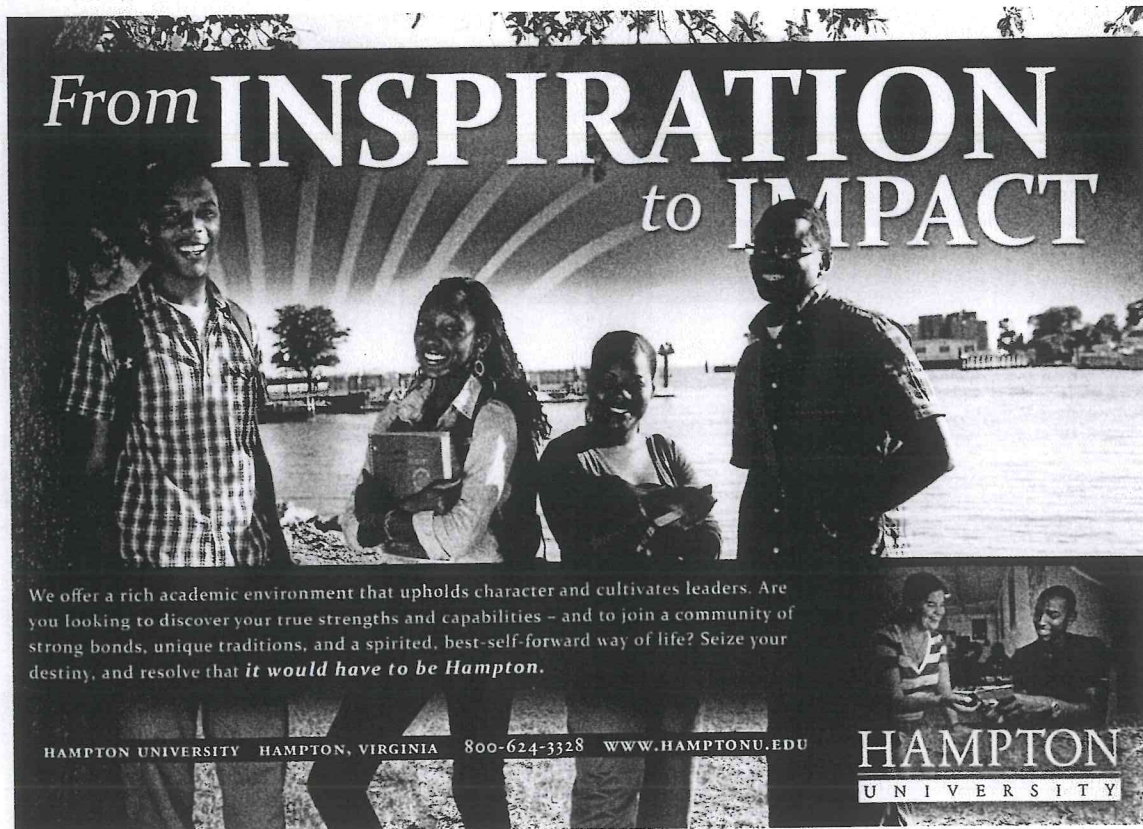
Take the PSAT and PLAN tests sophomore year and try a practice test or two online (ACT.org and SAT.org, along with The Princeton Review and Petersons offer free full-length tests). Getting a feel for each test and deciding which one will work best is the name of the game. And in the end, maybe the best advice you can offer is to take both!

Kelli O'Connor is a freelance writer in Rochester, N.Y.

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