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How the new SAT is different and what it means for you

Adumbrate, legerdemain, obstreperous: Students can breathe a sigh of relief as ornate SAT words are tossed aside as one of many changes announced by the College Board. Two years from now, students will begin taking the redesigned test, and experts say it's a step in the right direction.

The revisions make sense overall, according to Dr. Karen Pennington, vice president of campus development and student life at Montclair University. "I like those passages using works such as The Declaration of Independence or the Federalist papers students should know and be reminded of."

Overseeing admissions at Montclair, she mentions the College Board is also addressing aspects that simply didn't work. "The change to the total score is one that never worked, it never quite caught on."

Neither did the essay, which was added to the test in 2005 to raise potential scores to 2400; now it's becoming optional as scores revert back to 1600. "Those changes led to a decline in the last nine years when the ACT overcame," points out Bob Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest, a testing watchdog organization.

The College Board is also hoping to level the uneven financial playing field regarding test preparation accessibility. The announcement referenced a partnership in conjunction with Khan Academy for free online test preparation materials launching next spring.

Schaeffer points out free reference materials also already exist in high school guidance offices. "It's like physical fitness," he says. Though anyone can run outside, "If people have the means, they go to Gold's Gym." And if they have a lot of money, he adds, "They hire personal training, because they know one-on-one customized training is far superior than using a machine."

Seppy Basili, vice president of Kaplan Test Prep, echoes the sentiment of thinking like an athlete. "What do they do to get better? They practice, they practice, they practice."

Ironically, though Kaplan already offers test prep for free and says it's "terrific," the College Board is making free test preparation accessible to students. "For 40 years they spent time telling folks that test prep doesn't work and now apparently it works so well they're going to offer it for free," Basili says.

While he thinks test updates will lead to more fairness since it's more in alignment with what students actually learn in school, high schoolers shouldn't worry. "Now is not a moment to panic. It's a little early," Basili says. Instead of freaking out about the overhaul, think about "understanding the content, having a strategy and being confident."

And Dr. Pennington reminds students to look at the big picture, since this is still one test taken on one particular day that will be part of a more nuanced picture. "It's the entirety of a student's record that's really important. Study, buckle down and prepare for more than just one test."

Ch-ch-Changes

- Maximum scores will change from 2400 back to 1600.
- The essay will become optional.
- Impressive SAT words will be replaced by commonly used words.
- Each exam will include passages from the Founding Documents of America or the Great Global Conversation.
- Students must support answers with evidence.
- Scoring will not deduct points for incorrect answers.
- The math section will cover fewer topics.
- The new exam will be offered online in addition to paper.

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