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Student walk through Sather Gate, the iconic entrance gate to the UC Berkeley campus, Oct. 9, 2018.
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COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

Should California students take the SAT? What counselors say amid UC uncertainty

By **Nanette Asimov**, Staff Writer
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As [University of California](#) regents wrestle with [whether to reinstate the SAT and ACT admissions requirement](#), college advisers are also wrestling with what to tell students applying now and in the years to come about taking the exams.

The regents are under [pressure from thousands of professors](#) to bring the standardized tests back immediately, and from many others never to do so — even as other top schools are, one by one, requiring the scores again after pandemic-era cancelations.

UC's faculty leadership will study the question this year and make a recommendation next spring about whether the regents should keep the current no-test policy, reinstate the exams or make them optional. No vote by the regents is expected before July.

For students applying to enter UC in fall 2027, the situation is straightforward: UC will not accept your SAT/ACT scores.

UC is also unlikely to accept scores from students entering in fall 2028 — even if the regents vote next summer to re-up the requirement — because applicants will have missed several testing windows. But that's a guess.

College counselors are left to untangle the uncertainty and advise students and parents — with certainty — what to do about college admissions tests: Take them anyway? Several other top schools around the country have reinstated the requirement, so that might make sense. Don't bother? The vast majority of colleges do not require the admissions tests.

And what about today's high school sophomores and freshmen — should they assume scores will be required when it's their turn to apply to UC?

Should California students take the SAT/ACT?

Wisdom about whether students should take the tests, when to do so and why — even if UC doesn't look at the scores — varies from adviser to adviser.

"I'd rather have a student have a test score they don't need, than need a score they don't have," said Robin Freed, director of counseling at the private advising firm IvyWise, offering up a maxim some applicants are bound to appreciate.

Freed says the tests also offer a useful way for students to improve their college-level reading and math, whether schools require them or not.

Most schools don't. Just 7% of four-year colleges in the U.S. require SAT or ACT scores — 151 schools, including Stanford and the eight Ivies — according to FairTest, an anti-testing nonprofit that tracks admissions exams across 2,089 schools. Today, the vast majority of four-year schools, 89%, give students the option of submitting scores, and fewer than 4% do not accept them, including UC and California State University.



"I'd rather have a student have a test score they don't need, than need a score they don't have," said Robin Freed, counseling director at IvyWise, Provided by IvyWise

Even so, "You absolutely should plan to take one of those tests and invest the time to prepare," said Freed, adding that any school could change its policy suddenly and require the exam.

Hold on — it's not that simple, cautioned Karla Salazar, executive director of ScholarMatch, a college counseling nonprofit in San Francisco that prioritizes support for students who are the first in their families to

attend.

“Unless it’s required, our recommendation is that students don’t need to take it,” Salazar said. “There’s a cost — time taken away from working. And you have to study for it. There’s no divine intervention; people spend a lot of money preparing for these tests. It’s an investment.”

Test prep classes typically charge families anywhere from hundreds to thousands of dollars, depending on whether the help is delivered online, in group classes or through personalized instruction.

Yet the buzz around UC possibly reinstating the exams has prompted 10,000 Degrees, another Bay Area college counseling nonprofit supporting low-income teens, to survey all free resources for SAT/ACT test prep this fall — including through the nonprofit Khan Academy and the test sites themselves: College Board for the SAT, and ACT Inc.

It also costs money just to take the tests. Students from low-income families may be eligible for [fee waivers from the SAT and ACT](#). Otherwise, the SAT costs \$68 per two-subject test, with an [array of other fees](#) for registering late, changing test sites, canceling by the deadline and canceling after the deadline. The ACT charges \$70 per three-subject test, and \$5 for its science exam. It [also charges extra fees](#).



Many students would have to choose between paying for test prep and paying rent, said Hugo Que, senior director of college access at 10,000 Degrees.

Stuard Lirette

“We love fee waivers,” said Hugo Que, senior director of college access at 10,000 Degrees. “For some students, \$68 is about paying rent, getting food on the table and transportation — and that’s just one exam.”

Testing critics often cite the cost of the exams and test-prep classes as creating an unfair divide among applicants; wealthier students are simply better able to pay for it all, generally conferring an advantage over low-income students.

Still, 10,000 Degrees and ScholarMatch say some students want to take the test even if UC won't accept the scores.

"Students are saying, 'I want to be eligible for a private university. How can I make my application stronger?'" Que said.

ScholarMatch advises applicants to strategize by checking the typical test scores of students who get into each school — information that can be found on college websites and in a [**Chronicle data analysis and tool**](#).

"If the student believes they can meet or exceed these, submitting test scores may benefit their application. Otherwise, they may not want to take the test or submit test scores," ScholarMatch guidelines say.

For example, high school students who [check Stanford's website](#) will find that 98.4% of students admitted this fall earned a composite SAT score of at least 1400 out of 1600 on the math and reading/writing sections. That's at least 700 out of a possible 800 per section.

On the ACT, 99.2% of this year's Stanford admits earned a composite score of at least 30, the average earned across English, math and reading. The highest possible score is 36. Science became optional in 2025.

"If a student aspires to go to an Ivy League school where admissions tests are required, we have the resources to help them," Salazar said. Otherwise, "our recommendation is that they don't have to take the test."

Que agreed: "I lean on waiting, partially because of the cost."

"Not many students know about the conversation about potentially bringing the tests back," Que said. "But I do foresee an increase in interest from students."

Counselors who specialize in low-income applicants are not the only ones advising UC hopefuls to wait.



Karla Salazar is executive director of ScholarMatch, a college counseling nonprofit in San Francisco.
Christopher A. Torres

“If I had a student who was only applying to UC schools, I would have them hold off for now on taking the test until given more direction about the change in policy,” said Michelle McAnaney, founder of College Spy, a private counseling firm in New York.

Again, it’s strategy. “Instead of doing test prep when they don’t need to, students could be focusing on their schoolwork,” McAnaney said. “It’s a better use of time.”

Yet she noted a key reason many professors say they want UC to restore the SAT/ACT: high school grade inflation.

“Everyone might be getting an A, but not everyone is getting a 1500 on the SAT.”

Despite her advice that UC-focused applicants hold off, nearly all of McAnaney’s students take the SAT or ACT, even when applying to test-optional colleges.

“It’s because I’ve advised them to take it,” she said. “I’m telling them this can be very helpful.”

It’s a strategy that gives students options, she said. Those with below-average scores don’t have to submit them.

Should younger students start preparing?

The SAT/ACT is as much for the applicant as it is for the school — even if the student is aiming for test-free UC, said Molly Morrow, a senior consultant with Forbes College Consulting in New Hampshire.

Beyond learning the material, taking the tests even when they aren’t required can help calm students with test anxiety, she said.

“It only makes sense to prepare yourself for what may be a requirement,” she said. “This way, fear of the unknown is no longer an issue. You’ve ripped the Band-Aid off.”

Also, “If the conversation is on the table again, there’s no harm in at least starting to explore which of the tests (SAT or ACT) will be a better fit. UC has opened the door,” Morrow said.



“It only makes sense to prepare,” said Molly Morrow, a senior consultant with Forbes College Consulting.
Charlie Joyce

The biggest difference? ACT test-takers all answer the same questions, while the SAT is adaptive; questions become easier or harder depending on earlier success.

The SAT went fully digital in 2023, while the ACT remains hybrid. Neither test is seen as being harder than the other, and colleges don’t appear to have a preference.

Even so, the entire testing debate has watchful parents on edge, wanting the best for their kids but aware that neither option, taking an admissions test or not, is *completely* best. Good scores might help, but getting to that place might also inspire enough stress to send students to the “crying room” — spaces that have cropped up in high schools where anxious teens go to shed tears or just tear their hair out.

If reinstating the exams at UC “is one way to assess what students have learned, what is being taught and what is being retained, I support that,” Pacifica parent Le Kieu said at the start of a conversation about the SAT/ACT

dilemma. Her son, 15-year-old Landon Kieu, is a sophomore at Oceana High in the Jefferson Union High School District and could be in the first group of applicants required to submit scores to UC in 2028.

But the more Kieu thought about it, the less certain she felt that UC should bring back the requirement.

“I see it both ways,” she said. “I want them to restore it — but ah, man, I don’t like that it’s an added-on stress for the student. Stress for the family if they want their child to do well. That’s where I’m struggling. I see the pros and cons of all this.”

Landon had no ambivalence, test-wise.

“I don’t really want to take the SAT, and it’s a lot of stress,” he said. “But if I have to do it, I’ll suck it up and kind of study for it. I guess.”

Why the debate has intensified

Many schools across the country, including UC and CSU, dropped the tests during the pandemic. In UC’s case, eliminating the tests coincided with a lawsuit, filed in 2019 just before the pandemic, arguing that the requirement unfairly disadvantaged low-income students who could not afford expensive test prep and would otherwise do well at UC. In a settlement, UC agreed not to reinstate the tests through spring 2025.

Yet more than 3,000 professors signed a pair of petitions this spring urging the UC regents to reinstate the tests because their students’ math skills appear to have worsened since the tests were dropped.

At Wednesday’s regents meeting at UCLA, the board learned that, in fact, the average grade in calculus 1, precalculus and preparatory math classes across UC’s nine undergraduate campuses has steadily declined over the last six years, dropping to B-minus from B (a grade-point average of 2.71, down from 3.18 in 2020-21). Also, 18% of students are withdrawing or earning grades of F, D or “no pass,” compared with 9.2% in 2020.

But which is the better approach? Should UC keep its doors open to more students and expand opportunities for those who might benefit, or use exams to screen out applicants who might be ill-prepared for UC’s academic rigor?

One image shows the controversy in a visual instant. It’s a line drawing resembling a rocky hiking trail that suddenly shifts upward in a near-vertical climb, as if heading up a mountain.

Loading...

The trail represents the number of freshman applicants in the years before and after 2020, when UC stopped accepting the tests.

And the mountain? That's an 18% growth in applicants — an additional 31,000 students who applied for fall 2021, the first test-free semester. The trail climbed again in 2022 as applicants grew again by 7,100, and have since leveled out at the top of the mountain.

Despite the flood of new applicants and the lack of admissions testing, the regents also learned Wednesday that in 2025, the university's freshman retention rate (93%) and its four-year graduation rate (74%) had reached record highs.

Yet the future of admissions testing at UC remains an open question. Following a presentation Wednesday about the history of admissions testing at UC, at least one regent indicated that he is leaning toward restoring the requirement. Regent Jay Sures said he has come to believe that the SAT and ACT tests are "much better predictor of college success" than he believed when he voted to get rid of the tests during the pandemic.

"I might have made a mistake," he said of that vote.

UC has promised that applicants will have plenty of warning if regents abandon their no-test policy.

CSU officials said they have no plan to reinstate the SAT/ACT.

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HIGHER EDUCATION REPORTER



Nanette covers California's public universities - the University of California and California State University - as well as community colleges and private universities. She's written about sexual misconduct at UC and Stanford, the precarious state of accreditation at City College of San Francisco, and what happens when the UC Berkeley student government discovers a gay rights opponent in its midst. She has exposed a private art college where students rack up massive levels of debt (one student's topped \$400k), and covered audits peering into UC finances, education lawsuits and countless student protests.

But writing about higher education also means getting a look at the brainy creations of students and faculty: Robotic suits that help paralyzed people walk. Online collections of folk songs going back hundreds of years. And innovations touching on everything from virtual reality to baseball.

Nanette is also covering the COVID-19 pandemic and served as health editor during the first six months of the crisis, which quickly ended her brief tenure as interim investigations editor.

Previously, Nanette covered K-12 education. Her stories led to changes in charter school laws, prompted a ban on Scientology in California public schools, and exposed cheating and censorship in testing.

A past president of the Society of Professional Journalists' Northern California chapter, Nanette has a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University and a B.A. in sociology from Queens College. She speaks English and Spanish.