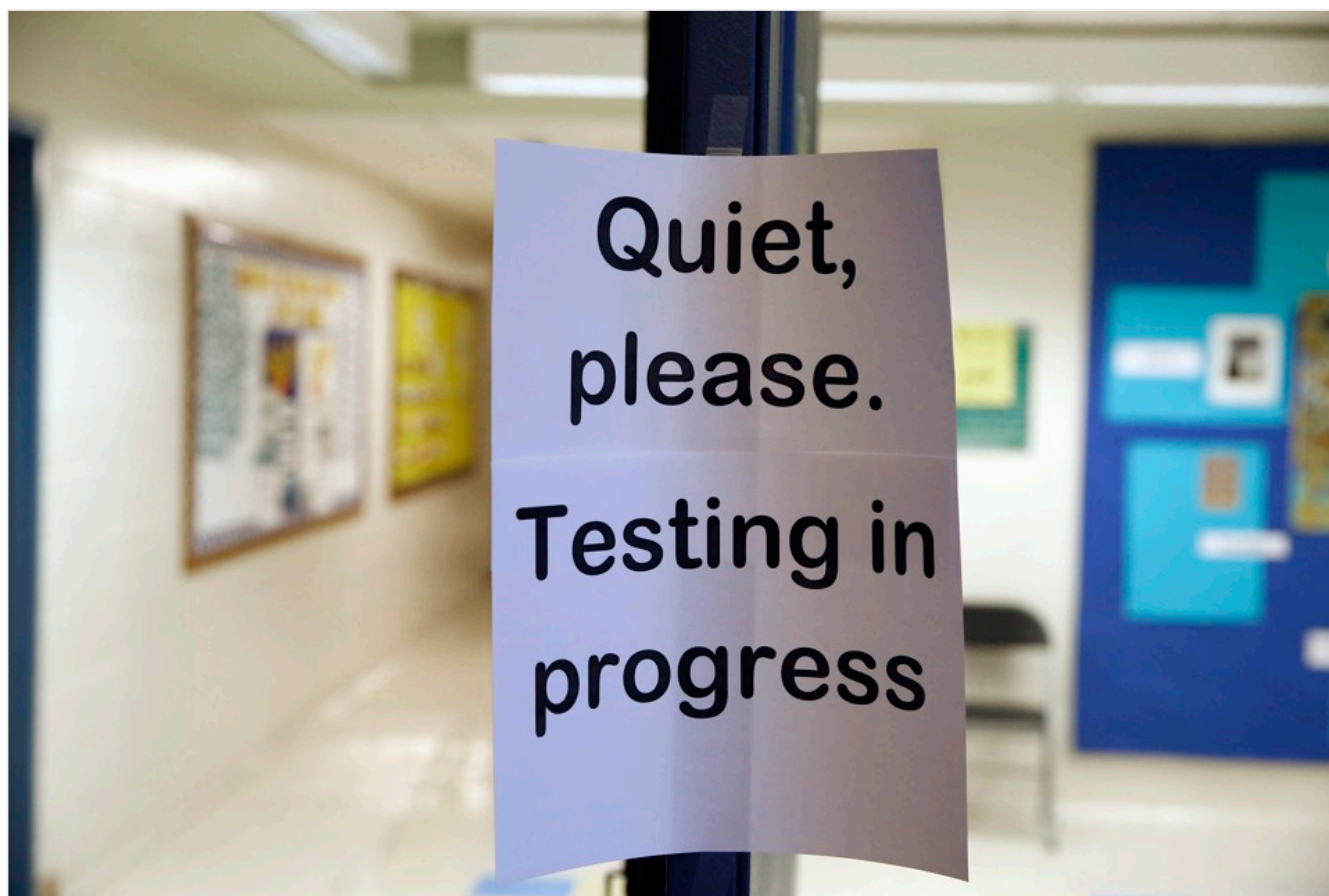


The Atlantic

A Simple Way to Bring Down College-Application Costs

Allowing students to report their own standardized-test scores could ease some of the financial burden of the process.



Alex Brandon / AP

JAMES S. MURPHY | SEP 11, 2017 | EDUCATION

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Shira Zar-Kessler spends a lot of time helping teenagers make schedules. As a college counselor at Match High School in Boston, she makes sure her students, many of whom will be the first in their family to go to college, take the SAT a couple of times, fill out the FAFSA, and submit their applications punctually. She also helps some students figure out when to send their official SAT or ACT scores, required by most colleges as part of their applications. That schedule is not built on some clever strategy. It is based on when and how much their parents get paid to ensure there will be enough money on the debit card to pay fees that can add up to hundreds of dollars.

Applying to college is expensive and complex. While many wealthy families pay private counselors thousands of dollars to help them navigate the process, the relatively small fees that many low-income and first generation students encounter can lead them to delay applications, send off scores that are not their best, or even not apply at all. In the past decade or so, universities; the College Board, which administers the SAT; and ACT have waived application and exam fees for students who qualify, but the fees to send official test scores to schools remain.

The College Board and ACT cover the cost of sending scores to four institutions for any student as long as he designates the recipient colleges within **nine and five days**, respectively, of taking the exam. After that, the former charges students \$12 per school, although College Board also covers the score-sending fees for an additional four schools for test-takers who took the SAT for free; these scores can be sent at any time. ACT, which recently celebrated the first anniversary of its Center for Equity in Learning, charges students **\$12 per test date per report**, and unlike the SAT, it doesn't offer "anytime" benefits to students.

Imagine a high-school senior who in late October receives a waiver to take the SAT but has not sent any test scores. Say she's taken the SAT twice because she

knows that most schools will superscore her two tests, meaning they will take the best score on each of the sections even if they were not accomplished on the same test. Private admissions counselors and test-prep tutors almost always advise their clients to take the test multiple times, but only about half of all SAT test takers and less than half the people who took the ACT last year did so multiple times. If the senior sends her scores to 10 schools—a practice experienced counselors often advise low-income students to do because financial-aid offers can be unpredictable—she will need to pay to send six of them. The total cost will be \$72.00. But if she takes the ACT and sends two scores to 10 schools, that will amount to 20 payments total, or \$240.00.

“Students with resources can be savvy with the scores they send.”

Economists describe such fees as microbarriers, and they can overwhelm not just students but those trying to help them as well. Some organizations pick up the fees, often relying on limited resources. Academic Success Program Dallas, for example, spent \$12,945 this past year to send colleges the SAT and ACT scores for students at the 15 public high schools it serves, according to Sara Urquidez, the organization’s lead college advisor.

To keep students’ costs down, Michelle Easton of [Bottom Line](#), an organization that works directly with students to help them get into and graduate from college, makes sure her counselors strategize score-sending schedules with their students. She wants to ensure their students send as many free scores as they’re allowed to the schools that are their best college matches. Because these schools have to be identified before the scores are released, this strategy can put low-

income students at a disadvantage. Wealthier students often wait to see their scores to confirm they are good enough to send to schools. As Diane Scott, a school counselor at Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter Public School in Boston, put it to me, “Students with resources can be savvy with the scores they send,” but most of her students cannot afford that luxury.

It is difficult to calculate the degree to which score fees prevent low-income students from going to a school that is a good fit, but a [recently published paper](#) by the University of Pittsburgh’s Lindsay Page and several other researchers, including one from the College Board, shows several positive effects of the “anytime” option. After the option was implemented in 2007, data suggest, students who would’ve otherwise only sent four scores were now sending eight. In other words, before the change, there was a cohort of students who wanted to apply more widely but had been held back by the cost. Perhaps most tellingly, the study showed that the policy change correlated with greater college-completion rates among the same cohort, potentially because applying to more schools meant they found a better institutional fit.

For those who don’t pay, the College Board at least covers the cost of sending four scores for students who are eligible. ACT, which is the test of choice in poor states such as Louisiana and Mississippi, does little to alleviate that cost for low-income students.

Asked to comment, the College Board and ACT both explained that the fees for sending scores cover a range of costs, including those required for schools that still require paper printouts of their applicants’ scores. Generally speaking, it costs the testing companies almost no money to send official scores to colleges but the fees help defray other costs associated with the development and administration of the exams. As a result, giving low-income students more free score sends would almost certainly mean that the cost of the exam would increase.

But Marie Bigham, a high-school counselor in New Orleans and one of the founders of ACCEPT, an organization of college-admission professionals dedicated to increasing equity in college admissions, doesn't think that solution goes far enough to solve the problem. Waivers require extra work on the part of counselors and students. The College Board and ACT, she pointed out, could reverse policy with a change in leadership or attitude.

Bigham thinks the simplest and best answer is for schools to accept self-reported test scores, which can then be confirmed once the student has been accepted. After all, score-send fees end up being a waste of money in every case but one—the one school a student attends—so why not let students just send the one that matters?

Self-reporting also simplifies the system for students and college admissions offices. A [2009 study](#) of college freshmen found that their self-reported and official SAT scores matched 80 percent of the time—and this was in a scenario when the students didn't face any penalties if they provided inaccurate information.

A few colleges, including the University of Chicago, the University of Iowa, and Texas Christian University, have already started accepting self-reported test scores; none had instances last year of students falsely reporting.

And at many schools, allowing students to self-report would simply codify an unofficial practice as actual policy. For instance, the University of California, Berkeley, sometimes evaluates and admits applicants who've only self reported their scores even if its admissions website directs students to send official scores, according to Amy Jarich, the school's director of admissions, said. Urquidez's team in Dallas keeps a list of more than 40 schools that will take scores by email or off a transcript. But what about the students not lucky enough to have a counselor who knows about these policies?

University and college admissions officers are, as a pack, risk-averse. It will likely take more schools to come out of the shadows and make it their official policy to treat applicants like responsible and trustworthy adults before we see this simple but significant barrier to college knocked down.

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