

LEARNING

KEEPING SCORE

Want a job? Hand over your SAT results

By REBECCA L. WEBER
CONTRIBUTOR

Harvard University senior Zachary Podolsky has every reason to feel good about the record he has compiled in college. A classics major with a GPA above 3.8 and a writer for the Harvard Crimson, Mr. Podolsky is also well-informed about financial markets.

But when he applied to several dozen Wall Street firms, most of them asked for a bit of ancient history: his SAT scores.

Podolsky, who will start his new position at Goldman Sachs 10 days after graduation in June, says he had no idea he'd be asked to submit scores from the tests he took in high school.

Ironically, just at a moment when more colleges are questioning the value of standardized testing in the admissions process, some companies are taking a second look at the old scores.

In a tough job market, businesses have the luxury of being more choosy about whom they hire. Firms have always had the ability to request SAT scores, but some may be likelier actually to do so as a way to sift quickly through an ever-growing number of applicants.

The practice is not necessarily new. When asked how long Goldman Sachs has requested high school test scores, Aaron Marcus, head of campus recruiting, quips, "How long have they been around?" Mr. Marcus says they interview about 4,000 to

“The SAT is a cognitive test - and cognitive tests are the best predictors of job performance.”

- Renee Mazer, founder of an SAT prep product, on corporations that request SAT scores.

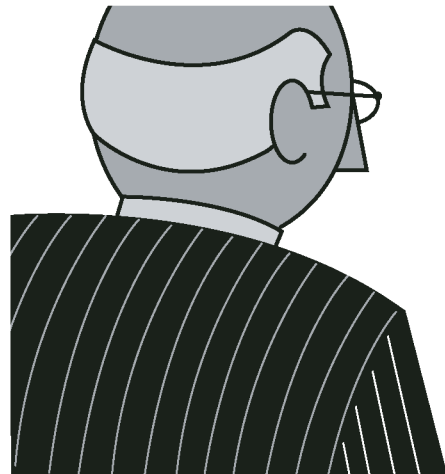
5,000 undergrads per semester, which doesn't leave a lot of time to ask detailed questions about how many calculus courses each one took.

Since Goldman Sachs takes students from any academic background, Marcus says math scores of 700 (out of 800) or higher indicate "whether they're comfortable with numbers." Applicants initially self-report test scores and submit a résumé that highlights leadership and work experience. An official college transcript is not reviewed until the company decides to make an offer.

That corporations are weeding out candidates by using available data does not surprise Renee Mazer, creator of "Not Too Scary Vocabulary," a new SAT prep product. "The SAT is a cognitive test - and cognitive tests are the best predictors of job performance," she says.

Some experts, however, question both the wisdom and the justice of using SAT scores as an employment tool.

Research shows that the SATs are a reasonably good predictor of first-year



J. KEHE

grades in college. But women tend to score lower than men, even though ultimately they tend to earn better grades in college, points out Erik Olson, director of guidebook publications at the Princeton Review. He likens the Wall Street practice to a Major League Baseball team judging a player by how many balls he pitched on one day several years ago.

"The test is high-stakes enough," Mr. Olson says, without 16-year-olds worrying that their scores will be used after college.

In addition, parents can now "buy their kid access to college and their first job by buying test-score steroids that boost scores and do nothing else of value," says Bob Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest, a testing watchdog in Cambridge, Mass.

The College Board itself says the SAT was not designed with job-seeking in mind. SAT scores are a "pretty far removed piece of information about the candidate," says Kristin Carnahan, a spokeswoman for the College Board. "The fact that somebody has already successfully completed college demonstrates their cognitive skills."

Some colleges and universities have questioned the value of standardized test scores in college admissions. Although the majority of US schools still are eager to know how students fared on the SAT, ACT, and AP exams, more than 700 do not ask to see the scores.

A number of very selective institutions, like Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, and Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass., have not required the tests for years.

Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif., is the first liberal arts college on the West Coast to experiment with making standardized test scores optional for admissions. Students in the top 10 percent of their class or who have at least a 3.5 grade point average through their junior year are no longer required to submit test scores.

Not surprisingly, high school students seem to like the option. Applications there have increased by 28 percent, or about 700, over last year.

Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, N.Y., is taking a more radical approach: Starting with the class of 2005, SATs will not be considered at all. Thyra Briggs, dean of admissions at Sarah Lawrence, says her team "realized how little [they] were using them," either in admitting students or in placing them in classes. And since testing

is deemphasized in the college's curriculum, the SAT requirement didn't feel quite right to the admissions team.

Most potential students will still take the SATs to apply for other colleges or scholarships. Still, says Ms. Briggs, she'd "love to think we're starting some sort of groundswell."

Advertisement

INVESTORS ARE WATCHING.

Monitor readers invest at a rate three times higher than the national average.

Like you, those who read these pages are smart consumers of financial services such as investment packages, tax and estate planning, and insurance. So if you want to reach other active investors, consider Monitor classifieds as a very intelligent investment.

Place your classified ad to reach over 170,000 Monitor readers. Call: 800-762-3555

Classifieds

The Christian Science Monitor