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University of California admissions and the SAT: FAQs

Jesse Rothstein¹

September 2026

In 2020, the Regents of the University of California voted to stop considering SAT scores (or ACT scores) in undergraduate admissions. A group of UC faculty have recently signed open letters calling on the Regents to reverse this decision.

UC's renewed debate on the SAT follows decisions from a number of Ivy League institutions to return to requiring standardized test scores, after going "test optional" during the pandemic. UC, however, is a public institution, with a different mission from that of the Ivy League private universities. As the "About UC" page on the ucop.edu website describes it, "The University of California began more than 150 years ago with a simple but revolutionary idea: that college should be available to everyone. That same spirit still guides us today...We're an engine of social and economic mobility for hundreds of thousands of students, and our research and innovation powers health care for all Californians." As the Regents and other stakeholders consider the question of whether to bring back the SAT, they will need to do so in light of the UC's unique role in the state.

This document attempts to address a number of factual and interpretive issues about the role of SAT scores in college admissions, in general and specifically at the University of California. It takes the form of a series of frequently asked questions and answers. It may be updated as new questions arise or new evidence comes to light.²

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² This document was created September 6, 2026. This footnote will be updated as the document is revised.

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1. UC's experience with test-free admissions

Q: What happened to applications without the SAT?

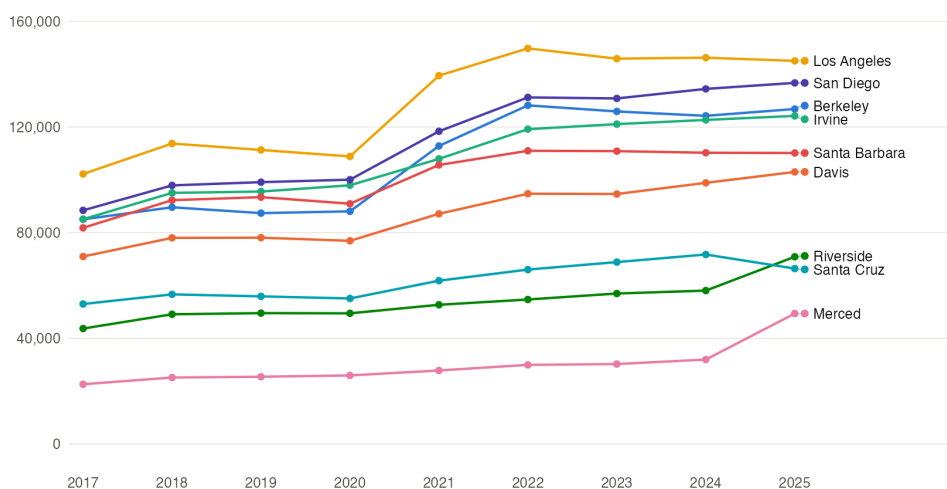
A: Applications rose substantially, especially at the most selective campuses.

When UC went test free in 2020, the number of students applying to the system's campuses surged. Every campus received more applications in 2021 than in 2020. At Riverside and Merced, the least selective campuses, which tend to admit nearly all eligible applicants, the increase was roughly in line with previous trends. There was a clear break in trend at all other campuses, however, with particularly large increases at Berkeley, UCLA, and San Diego, the most selective campuses. Of course, it is not possible to confidently distinguish what portion of this change, or the others discussed below, was due to the test-free policy versus other changes around the same time, including the COVID epidemic.

Figure 1: Freshman applications to UC, by campus

Freshman applications to UC, by campus

Total number of freshman applications, by campus, fall 2017-2025



Counts applications to each campus, not applicants: a single applicant applies to about four campuses, so these do not sum to a systemwide total.
Source: University of California, Freshman Fall Admissions Summary. Merced opened in 2005.

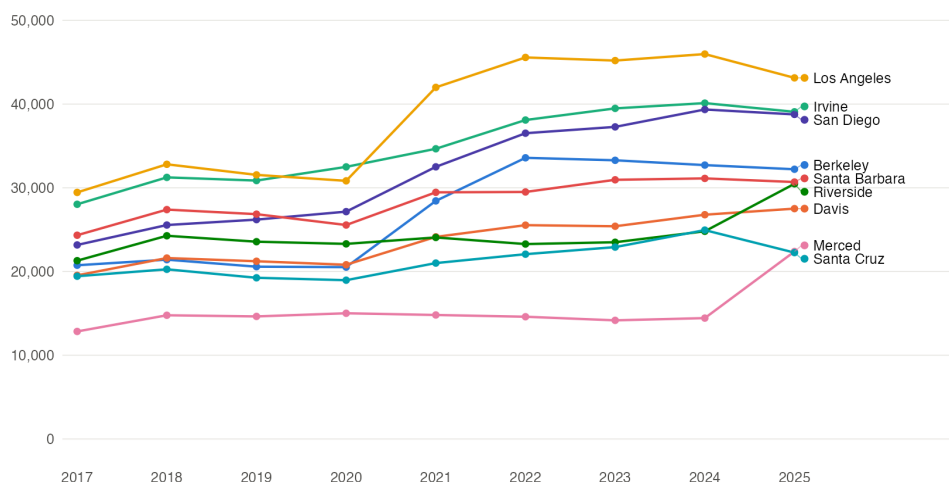
The number of applicants who were from underrepresented minority groups (African American, Hispanic/Latino(a), and American Indian³; hereafter, *URM*) or who were first-generation college students also grew dramatically.

³ The three racial/ethnic groups are named according to the language used in UC's reporting, and are mutually exclusive. Source: <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/about-uc/information-center/undergraduate-admissions-summary>

Figure 2. Applications to UC from Black, Latino, and American Indian students

Black, Latino, and American Indian applications to UC, by campus

Number of freshman applications from African American, Hispanic/Latino(a), and American Indian applicants, fall 2017-2025

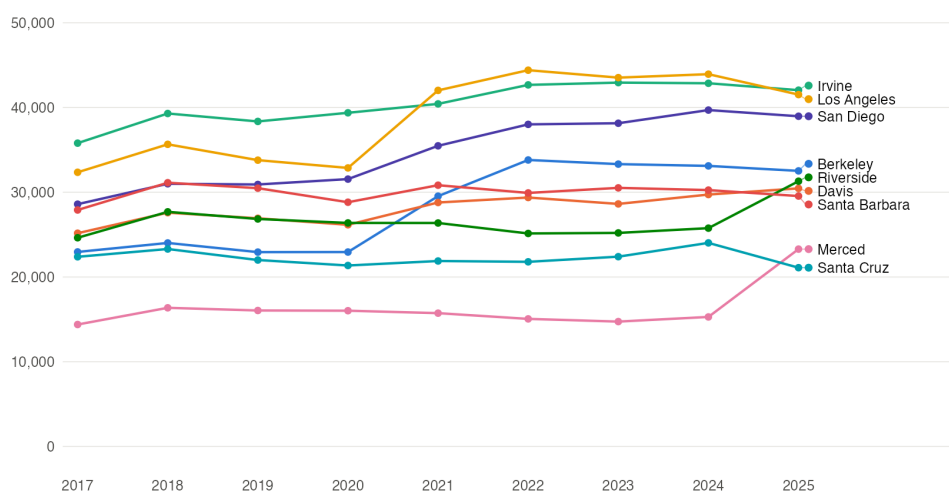


Counts: applications to each campus, not applicants: a single applicant applies to about four campuses, so these do not sum to a systemwide total.
Source: University of California, Undergraduate Admissions Summary.

Figure 3. Applications to UC from first-generation students

First-generation applications to UC, by campus

Number of freshman applications from first-generation applicants, by campus, fall 2017-2025



Counts: applications to each campus, not applicants: a single applicant applies to about four campuses, so these do not sum to a systemwide total.
Source: University of California, Freshman Fall Admissions Summary. Merced opened in 2005.

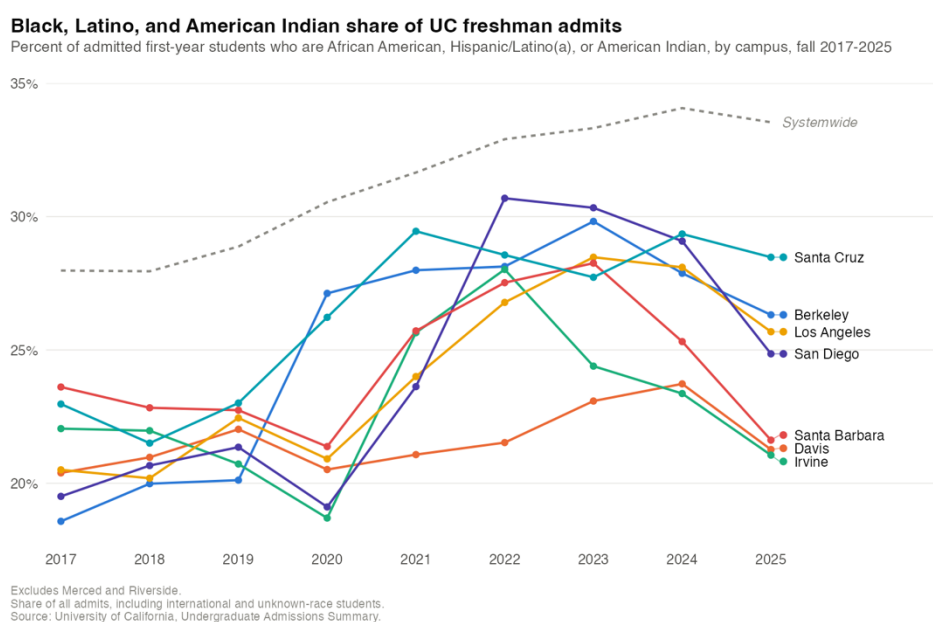
These increases were roughly proportional to the overall increase, so the demographic composition of the applicant pool did not change dramatically. The *share* of applicants who were URM or first generation was stable or fell slightly at all campuses except Merced and Riverside, which saw somewhat larger declines.

Q: What happened to diversity of admitted students without the SAT?

A: The share of admitted students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups rose dramatically at the more selective campuses. The share who are first-generation also rose at the most selective campuses, but fell at some others.

The shares of admitted students who are URM have risen at each of the most selective campuses over the last few years. This graph shows these shares for all of the selective campuses. (Riverside and Merced are excluded.)

Figure 4. Black, Latino, and American Indian share of UC freshman admits

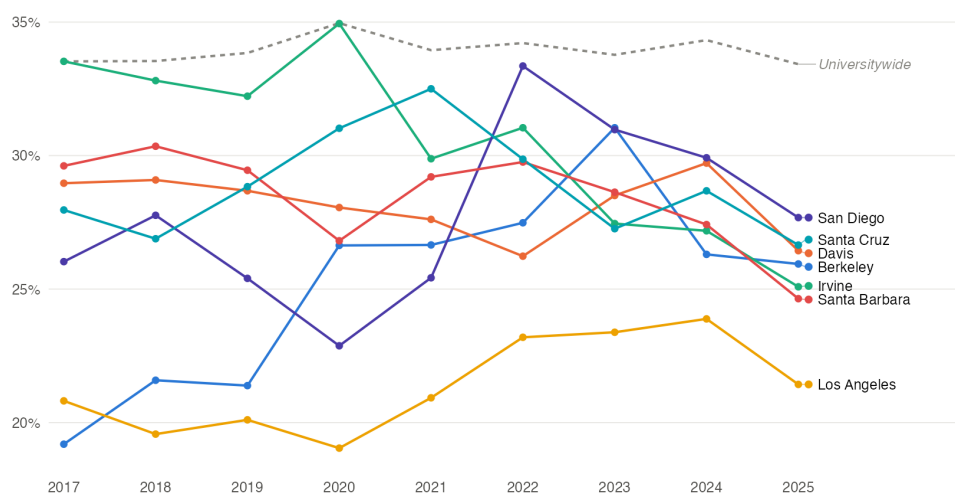


The first-generation share of admitted students also rose notably at Berkeley, UCLA, and San Diego, the most selective campuses. At other campuses, the change was less consistent - the first-generation share fell at Santa Cruz and (in 2022 and thereafter) Irvine, and was roughly stable at Davis and Santa Barbara.

Figure 5. First-generation share of UC freshman admits

First-generation share of UC freshman admits

Percent of admitted first-year students who are first-generation, by campus, fall 2017-2025



Excludes Merced and Riverside. Admits whose first-generation status is unknown (4-6%) are counted in the denominator.
Source: University of California, Freshman Fall Admissions Summary.
Denominator is all admits, from the first-generation breakdown. Merced opened in 2005.

At most campuses, the trend breaks in the URM share, and in the first-generation share at the campuses where that increased, occurred right in 2021, the first year of test-free admissions. (In these data, the year corresponds to the fall when students were admitted – so the “2021” point represents students who applied in November 2020 and matriculated in fall 2021.) As noted above, there was no dramatic change in the share of *applications* from URM or first-generation students, so the change is in the admissions rate.

At Berkeley, and to a lesser extent at Santa Cruz, the change does not align with the test-free policy, but appears a year earlier, in the 2020 cohort (who applied in November 2019). This could indicate some other cause. However, UC Berkeley’s admissions director, Olufemi Ogundele, has stated that he changed application review procedures in the 2019 cycle, in advance of the test-free policy, to down-weight the SAT. Rather than the SAT being one of the first items that an application reviewer saw, it was moved to the end of the review form.⁴ Thus, it is plausible that the change at Berkeley is in fact the result of downweighting SAT scores in admissions decisions, even though it predated the UC Regents’ decision to go test-free.

⁴ “When I got to Berkeley, you’d open up an admissions file, and the first thing you’d see was test score information. We moved that stuff [testing information] down, because when you are volume-reading files, your eyes go to the things that you’re looking for. So, we changed the order of information in the files.” As quoted [here](#), on p. 4. In the interview, Ogundele also discusses other changes he made to Berkeley admissions reviews, and there is no way to disentangle the effects of each of his changes in the aggregate admissions statistics.

Q: What should we make of admit rates across high schools?

A: Students from higher-testing high schools are much more likely to be admitted to every UC campus than are students from lower-testing high schools, even with test-free admissions.

Many commentaries on the SAT debate have bemoaned the fact that admissions rates are sometimes higher for students applying from disadvantaged high schools with low test scores than for students applying from high socioeconomic status, high-scoring schools. For example, an op ed in the *Free Press* by Berkeley Professor Zvezdelina Stankova (mathematics), an organizer of the STEM faculty open letter, argues that “[o]ver the last decade, the UC system has transitioned from a positive correlation between a high school’s math and English proficiency and its admissions success to a statistically significant negative correlation. Today, the more successful a public high school is at preparing its students, the lower its graduates’ chances of getting into top UC campuses like Berkeley and San Diego.”⁵

But this is misleading. The correlation that Stankova examines is between the school’s test scores and the share of *applicants* from that school who are admitted. A school from which many students apply to UC will tend to have a lower admit rate, by this calculation, than a school from which fewer students apply, even when the number of students admitted is the same.

A more informative calculation – one that more closely corresponds to Professor Stankova’s description of a school’s graduates’ chances of admission – examines the number of students admitted from a high school as a share of the number of graduates from the school. This is not affected by application decisions.

To illustrate, compare two high schools’ admissions to UC Berkeley: University High School in Irvine and Hollywood Senior High School in Los Angeles.⁶ Stankova describes University High as an “academic powerhouse”; few would describe Hollywood High that way. Nearly 70% of [University High](#) 11th graders scored proficient or advanced in the CAAPP testing in math in 2024; at [Hollywood High](#), that share was less than 20%. Hollywood High is an “LCFF+” school, meaning that it receives extra funding due to its high concentration of disadvantaged students. Over 90% of students are eligible for free

⁵ <https://www.thefp.com/p/bring-back-the-sat>

⁶ Stankova highlights University High, but compares it to Mission High School in San Francisco. Mission High is of course much closer to Berkeley than is University High, and a general pattern is that students are more likely to apply to UC campuses closer to their home. I instead contrast University High to Hollywood High, as they are both in Southern California.

or reduced-price lunches⁷; 80% of students are Black or Hispanic. University High is not an LCFF+ school; just 25% of students are eligible for subsidized meals, and just 15% are Black or Hispanic.

In the calculation that Stankova uses, the admissions rate to UC Berkeley in 2023-25 was 11.8% for University High, while for Hollywood High, the admissions rate was higher, 15.9%.⁸ But this is misleading. Roughly half of University graduates applied to Berkeley, versus just one-seventh of Hollywood graduates, and Berkeley admitted 94 University students versus just 20 Hollywood students over this period. Calculated as a share of the graduating class, rather than of applicants, the UC Berkeley admissions rate was 5.7% for University High and just 2.3% for Hollywood High.

This example illustrates a broader pattern: At more advantaged schools, more students apply to Berkeley (and to the other selective UCs), driving down the admissions rate among applicants. Figures 6 and 7 show the association between high school proficiency rates (the share of students meeting the CAASPP proficiency threshold in 11th grade) and admissions to Berkeley in 2023-2025.⁹ Figure 6 uses Stankova's calculation, dividing by the number of applicants.

This shows a negative correlation, -0.23: Admissions rates to UC Berkeley tend to be lower at high-proficiency schools than at low-proficiency schools. Similar calculations yield negative correlation at five of the six most selective UC campuses. (The Merced, Riverside, and Santa Cruz campuses are notably less selective than the others, and their admissions track closer to UC eligibility than at the other campuses. Irvine shows a positive correlation.) But, as explained above, these correlations are misleading.

Figure 7 computes the admissions rate divided by total enrollment at the high school, not just by the number of students who applied to Berkeley.¹⁰ The correlation is strongly positive here: 0.56 at Berkeley, and above 0.4 at all nine campuses. Students from schools with CAASPP proficiency rates around 70%, like University High, are about five

⁷ In California, all students can now receive free lunches, but eligibility under the federal guidelines remains a useful summary of poverty for K-12 schools. Data on school demographics are drawn from the [Common Core of Data](#), maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics, and pertain to the 2024-25 school year

⁸ Source: UC admissions & California high-school academic indicators, revision of 2026-07-31. UC High School Admissions project, 2026. <https://github.com/hart-hornor-jones/uc-high-school-admissions>. [Accessed September 2, 2026.]

⁹ Graphs are screenshots from a dashboard maintained by Hart Hornor-Jones. Citation: UC admissions & California high-school academic indicators, revision of 2026-07-30. UC High School Admissions project, 2026. <https://github.com/hart-hornor-jones/uc-high-school-admissions>. [Accessed August 17, 2026]

¹⁰ The denominator here is total enrollment in grades 9-12, as that is what was available in the dashboard from which these graphs were drawn. The y-axis would be roughly quadrupled if the number of graduates were the denominator, but I see no reason to think that the pattern would change.

times as likely to be admitted to Berkeley as are students from schools with proficiency rates around 20%, like Hollywood High.

There is no question that UC is admitting at a higher rate from schools with higher achievement.

Figure 6. UC Berkeley admissions as a share of applicants, by high school, 2023-2025

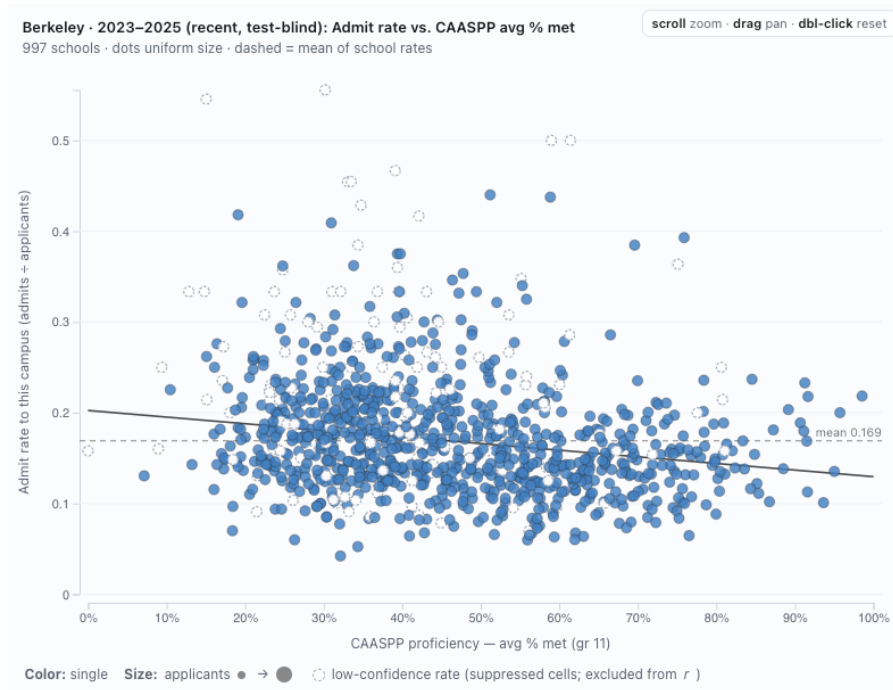
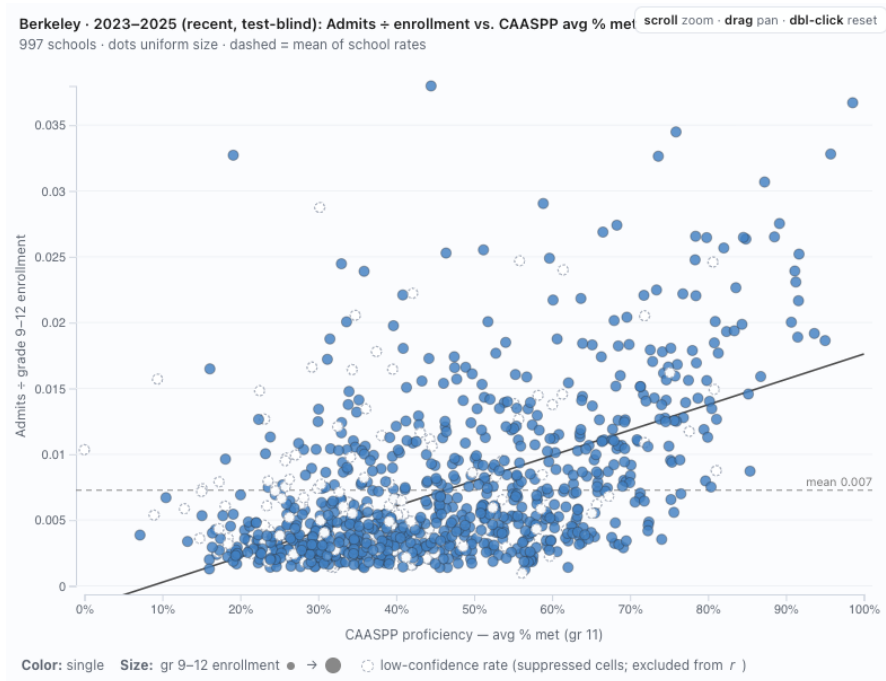


Figure 7. UC Berkeley admissions as a share of enrollment in grades 9-12, by high school, 2023-2025



Q: Did the decision to drop the SAT lead to declines in student preparedness at UC?

A: While preparedness seems to have declined in recent years, this has been a nationwide phenomenon, and as such cannot be attributed to UC's admissions policies.

Many faculty members at the UC have expressed concern that entering students are less well prepared than they expect since the SAT was dropped. But concerns about declining preparedness are not unique to UC, nor are they new. Professors have *always* worried about their students' preparedness, and have *always* perceived that their students' preparedness was lower than it had been in the past.

Something new does seem to be going on with recent cohorts. But it is not specific to UC, and is evident at schools that did not change their SAT policies. Educators nationwide have noticed similar changes in student preparation. In a Fall 2023 [survey](#), three-quarters of faculty members reported that first-year students were arriving with lower critical thinking, problem solving, close reading, and analysis skills. One respondent at a less selective public institution reported,

“There's been such a huge shift in the type of students we now have vs. just 3-4 years ago....the majority of them are telling us they NEVER had homework in high school....I had freshmen this semester writing at a 3rd-grade level.”

This is not beginning in college, nor is it specific to students admitted to selective colleges. In [nationally representative samples](#) of middle school students, NAEP test scores have declined since about 2013. The average 8th grade math score today would have been around the 35th percentile in 2013. This is a global phenomenon - on the international PISA test of 15-year-olds, the US average score has declined by 22 points since 2009, while the OECD average [has declined](#) by 20 points.

Changes in University of California admissions rules can't have caused this. An obvious potential explanation is the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic – the declines in both NAEP and PISA scores accelerated around 2020, though they didn't begin then. Other likely contributors include the spread of smartphones and social media, changes in curriculum and standards, difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, and reduced policymaker focus on student achievement relative to the early 2000s.

Many of the complaints about student preparedness have focused on preparation for introductory calculus classes. This, too, does not appear to be attributable to changes in UC admissions policies. At USC, which is test-optional, enrollment in pre-calculus classes has doubled in the last few years, and the university recently introduced a new, ungraded “basic mathematical skills” course as a pre-requisite for pre-calculus.¹¹

¹¹ Course enrollment counts are available here: <https://classes.usc.edu/home>.

Professor Stankova has argued that COVID-related explanations would imply that declines in performance of UC students should be broad-based, not concentrated at the bottom of the distribution.¹² This does not follow. COVID's impacts were quite uneven – one would expect larger impacts at schools where fewer students have computers and internet at home, where parents were less able to monitor and support remote instruction, and where schools stayed closed longer and discipline was harder to restore upon reopening. At a more basic level, students reacted heterogeneously to online instruction and other disruptions. There is no reason to expect that these disruptions would have lowered preparedness evenly throughout the distribution.

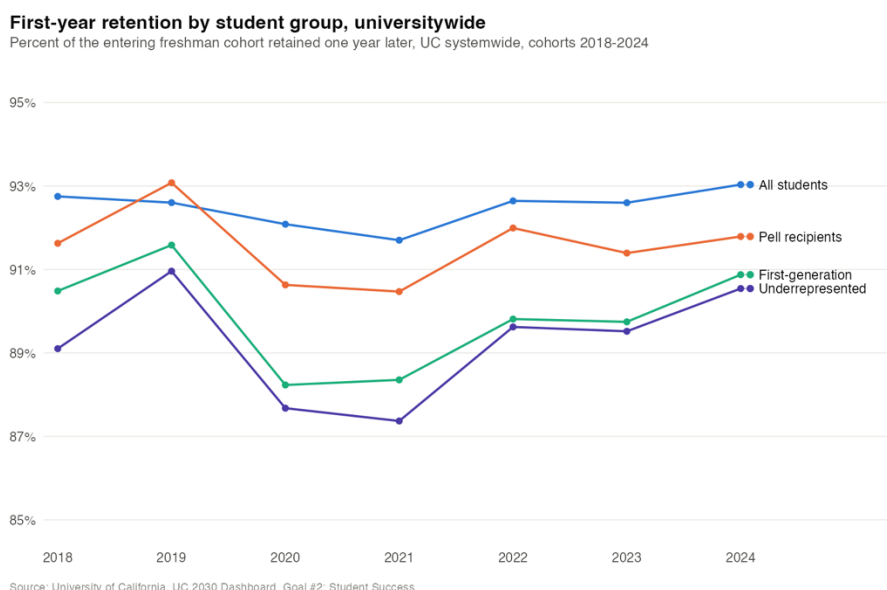
¹² See, e.g., <https://sfstandard.com/opinion/2026/08/15/uc-berkeley-sat-test-blind-admissions-math-scores>.

Q: What happened to student outcomes?

A: Persistence - retention from the first to the second year - has been steady through the test-blind era.

A basic metric of student preparedness is whether students are able to make it through their first years; most students who return for their second year will eventually go on to graduate. First-year retention rates dipped in 2020 and 2021, during the pandemic, but have since recovered. The retention rate for first-year students in 2024 was higher than in either 2018 or 2019.¹³ Retention rates are up since 2018 for first-generation students, for Pell Grant recipients, and for underrepresented students.

Figure 8. First-year retention by student group at UC, 2018-2024 entering cohorts



It is too soon to measure effects on longer-run outcomes, like successful college completion. But there is no indication that this will be lower for the post-pandemic cohorts than it was prior to 2020.

¹³ Data are extracted from <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/about-uc/information-center/uc-2030-dashboard#Goal2-Progress>.

2. SATs and predictions

Q: Aren't SAT scores useful as predictors of how well students will do in college?

A: SAT scores do predict college grades. But they do so in large part because they measure student family income well, and family income predicts college grades. They have much less predictive power among students from similar backgrounds.

The basic justification for using SATs in college admissions is that SAT scores help identify which applicants are prepared to succeed in college coursework. This is usually assessed through a “predictive validity” model in which SAT scores are correlated with first-year grade point averages for students who wind up being admitted and enrolling. Across a wide range of settings, this correlation is found to be positive, and to remain positive after controlling for high school GPAs. The SAT’s predictive power is generally found to be lower, but still positive, when examining medium- or longer-run outcomes like persistence, completion, or the cumulative GPA.

But predictive validity is complex to interpret, as not all predictors are useful in admissions. For example, parents’ income is almost certainly predictive of students’ first-year GPAs – students from higher-income families have generally gone to better high schools, received more support throughout high school, and are able to transition more seamlessly to college-level coursework. Thus, predictive validity evidence would indicate that an admissions office aiming solely to identify the students with the highest predicted first-year GPAs should attach positive weight to parental income, admitting students from high-income families over lower-income students with similar, or even somewhat better, SAT scores and high school GPAs.

Few colleges openly give preferences to higher-income students in admissions (though there is evidence that some do so more quietly – see, e.g., Chetty, Deming, and Friedman, 2026). One reason is that prediction is not the same as merit: selective colleges and universities, especially selective *public* colleges and universities, have always valued more than academic performance and have sought to recognize effort and its results in students’ varied contexts. Many colleges want to give a fair chance to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, or want to use admissions to identify students who have impressive accomplishments or have demonstrated their ability to overcome challenges. Family income accomplishes none of those things, despite its predictive validity.

But the fact that family background is correlated with student success makes it challenging to interpret predictive validity evidence for other potential admissions metrics. Any metric that proxies for family income will be predictive of college performance. Predictive validity evidence would support the use in admissions of

measures such as the value of a student's parents' car, the amount of foreign travel a student has undertaken, or the student's familiarity with the rules of lacrosse – not because any of these are important components of college preparedness but because all are markers for family income, and family income is a marker for college preparedness. If predictive validity is to be useful for setting admissions policy, it is important to distinguish between predictive power that arises because a candidate measure is proxying for family income and that which arises because the measure captures preparedness directly.

There is evidence that the SAT's predictive validity is in large part of the former type. In an analysis of University of California admissions, Rothstein (2004) finds that gaps by family background in SAT scores are much larger than in high school GPAs (a result confirmed in more recent data by Kurlaender and Cohen [2019] and Geiser [2020a]), and that the SAT's predictive validity declines sharply when controlling for the demographic composition of the high school that a student attended. Students from wealthy, white and Asian high schools get higher SAT scores and earn higher first-year college grades than do students from lower-income schools with higher Black and Hispanic shares, but when students from demographically similar high schools are compared, the remaining SAT differences are much less predictive of first-year college grades. There is no such pattern for the high school GPA, which is just as predictive within as across high schools and thus does not seem to be deriving its predictive validity from its association with family background.¹⁴

While the Rothstein (2004) analysis is based on data from the 1990s and thus might be out of date, the UC Academic Council's Standardized Testing Task Force 2020 [report](#) on UC admissions (hereafter, *the STTF report*) found a similar pattern in UC data from 2015: The predictive effect of the SAT, relative to that of the GPA, falls by 42% when first-generation status, family income, and high school test scores are controlled (Geiser

¹⁴ Geiser and Studley (2002) find that the "SAT II" subject tests, now defunct, were not as sensitive to socioeconomic factors as the regular SAT (then the "SAT I").

2020b).¹⁵ (For comparison, in the Rothstein (2004) study, the decline is just 23% when student race and school demographics are controlled.¹⁶)

Two recent studies of Ivy League admissions find similar results. In Chetty, Deming, and Friedman's (2026) study of students at "Ivy plus" colleges, the predictive power of the SAT relative to the high school GPA falls by 79% when race, gender, family income, and the high school attended are controlled for.¹⁷ In Friedman, Sacerdote, Staiger, and Tine's (2025) separate study of a possibly different set of Ivy plus colleges, the decline is 62% when the same background factors are controlled.¹⁸

Some have advocated "adjusting" the SAT to remove the association with family background. As discussed below, it is not clear that the UC can do this, legally or practically. But the predictive validity evidence indicates that if this could be done, it would undercut the test's value for predicting college grades – an adjusted SAT would be much less predictive than is the unadjusted SAT.

Another potential response is to conclude that admissions offices *should* use the information in family background – when considering two students with identical academic qualifications the admissions office should choose the one from a higher-income family, on the grounds that he or she will likely transition more smoothly to college. The UCSD [report](#) on math preparation, for example, recommends reducing admissions from LCFF+ schools, schools that receive extra state funding due to their high concentrations of disadvantaged students.

¹⁵ See Appendix 1, Table 3. In row 6, without demographic controls the standardized SAT coefficient is 0.38 and the standardized high school GPA coefficient is 0.22. In row 12, with controls, the SAT coefficient falls to 0.34 and the GPA coefficient rises to 0.34. The model with controls also includes controls for UC campus and major. The report does not appear to include sufficient information to separate out the effects of these controls from those of demographics, though of course to the extent that the SAT is merely predicting campus or major that is not especially useful for UC admissions so the same argument applies. I am grateful to Geiser (2020b) for finding these results within the STTF report appendices.

¹⁶ See Table 5. In column A, without controls, the SAT coefficient is 0.906 and the high school GPA coefficient is 0.583. In column G, with controls, the SAT coefficient falls to 0.725 and the high school GPA coefficient rises to 0.604.

¹⁷ This calculation is based on Appendix Table A.13, Panel C, in the [online appendix](#), which relates to prediction of the post-college outcome of employment at a prestigious firm, though results for other outcomes in panels A and B are similar. In column 3, without controls, the predictive coefficient of the SAT is 0.207 and that of the high school GPA is 0.037. In column 6, with controls, the former coefficient falls to 0.131 while the latter coefficient rises, to 0.156. In this sample, high school GPAs are *more* predictive within than across high schools, perhaps for reasons discussed in the "sample selection" section below.

¹⁸ This calculation is based on Panel A of Appendix Table 1 in the [online appendix](#). The dependent variable is the cumulative college GPA. In column 3, without controls, the SAT coefficient is 0.1664 and the high school GPA coefficient is 0.1051. In column 6, with controls, the SAT coefficient falls to 0.0988 and the high school GPA coefficient rises to 0.1536.

This would arguably conflict with the UC's role as a public university and its [commitment](#) to providing fair access to students regardless of their backgrounds. In any case, if the university wishes to do this, it can do so directly; it doesn't need the SAT to do so. There is nothing stopping UC admissions from selecting students from wealthy high schools over those from more disadvantaged high schools.

If the university prefers *not* to give explicit preferences to students from advantaged backgrounds, it is not clear why it would choose to use the SAT, which has a similar effect but disguises the source of the information as an apparently academic measure. Advocates of use of the SAT may suggest that a test score is "objective" in a way that other metrics are not, but the choice of assessment tool is inevitably subjective.

Q: Is the SAT or the high school GPA a stronger predictor?

A: In almost every setting, the GPA is a stronger predictor. The contrary finding in the STTF report likely reflects methodological shortcomings.

A general pattern in the predictive validity literature is that high school GPAs are stronger predictors of first-year college GPAs than are SATs (see, e.g., Geiser and Santelices, 2007). The STTF report found the opposite, however. There are several methodological limitations of the STTF analysis that could account for this result. First, the STTF analysis pooled all of the UC campuses, not distinguishing between a GPA of 3.5 earned at campuses that may have quite different grading standards. It is not clear what impact this has.

Second, a common problem in validity studies is that we are interested in prediction among *applicants*, but college grades are only observed for *matriculants*, who by definition were admitted. This creates sample selection that biases predictive validity results in systematic ways: The more weight that the admissions office puts on a variable in admissions, the lower will be its estimated predictive validity. This is because a student who is admitted despite having a low value on a metric that the admissions office weights highly must have something else very special that the admissions office saw that led them to admit him or her. (As an analogy: Height is relatively weakly correlated with basketball performance in the NBA, because any short players who make it to the NBA must be very, very good. In the broader population, the height-basketball performance correlation is much stronger.) Careful predictive validity studies use statistical strategies that adjust for this sample selection, but the STTF report did not. Thus, a plausible explanation for the STTF result is that, in the period that the STTF report studied, UC admissions offices were putting much more weight on high school GPAs than on SAT scores.

Third, as Geiser (2020b) points out, and as discussed above, the STTF analysis showed that the SAT's predictive coefficient is very sensitive to the inclusion of controls for student demographics, as in Rothstein (2004). Among students with similar demographic characteristics, the SAT is a *weaker* predictor than high school GPA even in the STTF analysis.

3. The SAT and other admissions metrics

Q: Is admission “randomized” without the SAT?

A: No.

A recent New York Times [editorial](#) made the incorrect assertion that “California’s top public universities have essentially randomized aspects of the admissions process, admitting unprepared students while rejecting many who could thrive there.” This is unsupported, and incorrect. In fact, admissions offices have a great deal of information to go on in making admissions decisions without the SAT: High school GPAs, detailed transcripts that provide information on courses taken as well as performance, information about past performance of students from the same high school, and answers to essay questions (called “PIQs” on the UC application). Using this information rather than the SAT is simply an alternative way to identify students to select; it is not random.

There is an easy test of the claim that admissions are essentially random: Do the different UC campuses tend to admit the same applicants? If admissions were random, they would not – each would draw randomly from the applicant pool. This is of course not what happens; a very high share of students admitted to Berkeley are also admitted to UCLA, and vice versa. This is a clear indication that admissions readers are able to make reliable distinctions even without the SAT.

Q: Doesn't grade inflation make the high school GPA worthless?

A: There is no evidence for this claim, and substantial reason to doubt it.

The College Board, publisher of the SAT, has been claiming for decades that high school GPAs were increasingly unhelpful for admissions due to rampant grade inflation. But, while the existence of grade inflation is not disputed, the evidence in support of the claim that high school GPAs have been so inflated as to be meaningless is surprisingly thin.

There are several reasons to doubt the claim, at least as it applies to the UC. First, validity studies (discussed above) – even the STTF report, despite the methodological limitations noted above – continue to show that high school GPAs are strongly predictive of success in college. Second, a commonly observed pattern is that grade inflation is more rampant at upper-middle-class public and private high schools, and less prevalent at schools serving more disadvantaged students. This pattern would *help* the high school GPA's predictive validity, since students from the former schools are generally better prepared for college. Third, policies that guarantee admission to applicants ranked in the tops of their classes by GPAs have led to increases in diversity of admitted applicants, and evidence indicates that the students so admitted benefitted, in terms of their college and career outcomes, from their admission, relative to the outcomes they would have achieved had these policies not been in place (Black, Denning, Rothstein 2023, Bleemer 2024). This result would be unlikely if GPAs, and by extension class ranks, were meaningless.

Sometimes concerns about grade inflation are couched as claims that, with such a large share of applicants reporting GPAs of 4.0, there is no variation left in the GPA to use in making admission decisions. But these statistics, like UC admissions, are usually based on *weighted* GPAs, which award extra points for honors and AP classes and can go well above 4.0. At Berkeley, more than two-thirds of applicants have weighted GPAs above 4.0, but there is still substantial variation for the admissions office to consider.¹⁹ UC has been considering class rank in admissions for decades, and does not have any evident trouble identifying students ranked at the tops of their classes (Bleemer 2024).

¹⁹ <https://calviz.berkeley.edu/t/OPAP/views/UGAdmissions/AcademicIndicators>

Q: Can admissions “compensate” for demographic differences in SAT scores?

A: Prior to 2020, UC admissions did not “compensate” for differences in SAT scores between demographic groups, and it is unlikely that they would be able to do so in the future.

The STTF report claimed, incorrectly, that UC admissions processes prior to 2020 effectively “compensated” for differences in SAT scores across demographic groups. Specifically, “admissions procedures appear to compare students’ SAT scores within socioeconomic groupings, but not across groupings” (p. 44) and “*comprehensive review effectively renorms SAT scores*” (p. 43; emphasis in original). The evidence that the report adduces for this conclusion is that gaps in SAT scores across demographic groups are approximately the same among admitted students as among applicants.

But a careful review of the STTF’s supporting tables indicates that this basic claim is incorrect. Whether students are grouped by race/ethnicity, family income, or family educational history, at every campus the SAT score gap between more-advantaged and less-advantaged students is *larger* for applicants than it is for admitted students (see Appendix V, tables 1-6).²⁰ This clearly indicates that differences are *not* compensated, using the STTF report’s own proposed metric for this.

Moreover, it is far from clear that the UC could do this kind of compensating, even if it once could. Under California’s Proposition 209, UC has long been prohibited from considering race directly in admissions, including to use it to compensate racial gaps in SAT scores. In the wake of the 2023 *SFFA v. Harvard* Supreme Court decision, which extended this prohibition nationally, the Trump Administration has argued that consideration of other factors, like income, that offset racial differences in SAT scores constitutes illegal racial discrimination. DOJ has recently opened investigations into [UC Davis Medical School](#) and the [Duke University Law School](#), among others, alleging exactly the kind of conduct that the STTF report (incorrectly) attributes to UC admissions.

²⁰ There is only one single exception to this: At UCLA, the gap between African American and Asian students is larger for admitted students than for applicants. This is not the case at any other campus; even at UCLA, the gap is smaller for admitted students than for applicants when comparing African American to white students, Hispanic students to either Asian or white students, low-income to not-low-income students, or first-generation to not-first-generation students.

4. SATs and diversity

Q: Does using the SAT in admissions raise or lower the diversity of admitted students?

A: Using the SAT in admissions almost certainly reduces diversity of admitted students.

Some have argued that using the SAT *benefits* high-achieving students of color and low-income students. This is sometimes known as the “diamonds in the rough” argument. The idea is that there are some disadvantaged students with exceptionally high SAT scores who are admitted but who would not be if the admissions office could not see their SATs. There are almost certainly some such students. But there are also disadvantaged students who are admitted under test-free admissions but who do not have exceptionally high SAT scores and would not be admitted if their scores were considered. These students are hard to identify or count, since SAT-aware admissions do not identify which students would have been admitted but for their SAT scores. But because disadvantaged students are dramatically underrepresented among high-SAT students, this second group is almost certainly much larger than the first. That is, while there are some disadvantaged students who are helped by consideration of SAT scores, on net the effect on disadvantaged applicants is almost certainly negative.

In a related evaluation of SAT-optional admissions at Dartmouth, Sacerdote, Staiger, and Tine (2026; hereafter *SST*) argue that “test optional policies disproportionately harm high achieving applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.” *SST* point out that some disadvantaged students who applied to Dartmouth under its test-optional policy (since repealed) withheld their scores when those scores were high enough that, had the students revealed their scores, their admissions chances would have increased.

The *SST* result is very narrow, however, and not sufficient to evaluate the effect of Dartmouth’s test-optional policy on the number of admitted students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The students *SST* identify, whose admissions chances would have been higher had they submitted their SATs, need to be set off against other students who withheld their scores and were admitted, but would not have been had the scores been required. Indeed, these students are the entire point of test-optional policies – students are allowed to apply without scores if they think their score will hurt them. *SST* do not estimate the number of such students, but the estimates in their paper indicate that there may well have been more of them than there were of the first group, and that test-optional admissions indeed increased admission rates, on net, for less-advantaged applicants.²¹

²¹ In the *SST* data, less than 20% of low-scoring applicants submitted test scores under test-optional (Figure 3a), and in this range submitting a score was associated with about a 1 percentage point reduction in admissions probabilities for less advantaged applicants (Table 2, Panel A, column 2). Thus,

Moreover, Dartmouth saw a large increase in applications under its test optional policy (as did the UC under its test-free policy). SST conclude that the new applicants had similar demographic characteristics as the existing ones. This means that the enlarged pool contained more highly-capable disadvantaged applicants than it would have under the previous test-required policy, giving the admissions office more flexibility to select disadvantaged applicants who could be successful at Dartmouth.

While it is difficult to generalize from Dartmouth to other institutions, a separate study of a broader set of institutions that have gone test optional finds that this leads to higher admissions of Pell Grant and underrepresented minority students (Bennett, 2022). As noted, this has been UC's experience under test-free admissions.

requiring tests would reduce admissions rates for less advantaged applicants with low scores by $0.8 \times 0.01 = 0.8$ percentage points. (This calculation assumes that the policy change had no effect on who applies; allowing for an effect on applications would increase this.) By contrast, among higher-scoring students about 60% submitted scores, and those who did not (the focus of the SST study) were about 4 percentage points less likely to be admitted than they would have been if their scores were reported, so the effect of requiring tests would have been to increase this group's admissions by $0.4 \times 0.04 = 1.6$ percentage points. SST do not report the number of disadvantaged applicants to Dartmouth with low and high test scores, but the standard errors in their Table 2 suggest that there were more than three times as many of the former than the latter. This would imply (because $3 \times 0.8 > 1.6$) that the net effect of test optional was to increase admissions of less advantaged applicants. I have asked the authors of the SST study for a more precise calculation, but they have declined.

Q: Aren't other admissions metrics more tilted against disadvantaged students than the SAT?

A: Some metrics certainly are. But UC's comprehensive admissions review considers applicants' whole portfolios, including evidence of overcoming disadvantage.

Whether using the SAT in admissions raises or lowers diversity depends on what it is replaced with. If the SAT is dropped and family income, or something even more strongly correlated with it than the SAT, is used in its place, then the net effect would be to reduce the admissions chances of lower-income applicants.

The most likely substitute for the SAT in test-free admissions is the high school GPA. This is less strongly associated with income than is the SAT (Rothstein 2004; see also Kurlaender and Cohen 2019 and Geiser 2020a), so shifting weight from the SAT to the high school GPA – or computations from it, such as the class rank – would tend to increase admissions chances of lower-income and otherwise disadvantaged applicants.

Some proposals would replace the SAT with a different test that is more closely aligned with the California curriculum, such as the Smarter Balanced (SBAC) tests that California 11th graders already take. Curriculum-aligned tests, including SBAC, tend to have smaller racial and income gaps than the SAT. The SBAC is as predictive of collegiate performance as is the SAT but yields a more diverse group of top scorers (Kurlaender and Cohen 2019).

Under UC's comprehensive review policy, campuses consider much more than just GPAs and test scores, of course. Alvero et al (2021) argue that UC student essays (known as "PIQs") can be used in a natural language processing model to predict family income even more accurately than do SAT scores. However, Alvero et al. do not have any evidence about how UC admissions readers actually use the essays. Though the Alvero et al. results show that it would be possible to predict income with them, and thereby to use them to tilt admissions against lower-income applicants, it seems unlikely that this is how they are in fact used at UC. Essays can also be used to identify students who have overcome disadvantages, or whose promise exceeds what is visible in their numerical qualifications. In a study of a pilot with letters of recommendation for UC Berkeley applicants, Rothstein (2022) finds that, when UC Berkeley application readers were given access to letters, which may play a similar role, admissions outcomes of lower-income and otherwise disadvantaged applicants improved modestly.

Chetty et al. (2026) find that non-quantitative admissions metrics, particularly letters of recommendation from elite high schools, are a source of a substantial increase in admissions probabilities for the wealthiest applicants to Ivy Plus colleges. But Ivy Plus schools have very different objectives and practices than does UC, and there is no

reason to think that their result generalizes here. (UC does not require or accept letters of recommendation for most applicants.) Indeed, the very same Chetty et al. (2026) evidence shows that the wealthiest applicants do *not* have an admissions advantage at public flagship universities.

As discussed above, the UC's actual experience with test-free admissions is that this shift coincided with a substantial increase in the number of applications and in the diversity of admitted students. This suggests that the SAT on net served to deter students from applying, particularly those who have historically been underrepresented on our campuses, and/or to reduce the admissions chances of those lower-income, first-generation, and Black and Latino/a applicants who apply.

5. Lessons from other universities

Q: What about other universities that have returned to using the SAT?

A: UC's mission and circumstances are wildly different than those of the Ivy League colleges. What makes sense for them may not be appropriate at UC.

Several highly selective colleges and universities, including the members of the Ivy League and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, have re-adopted the SAT in recent years with much fanfare. The mission and circumstances of these institutions differ dramatically from those of the University of California. There is no reason to think that UC should follow their lead.

UC is a public institution, and its mission requires admission of a cohort of students who graduate from and represent the high schools of the state. In contrast, highly selective, elite undergraduate programs that UC may consider its institutional peers are selecting from a national cohort to build a class that is, well, highly selective rather than necessarily representative of the nation as a whole. The private, elite colleges may be able to implement an admissions policy that yields very few low-income or otherwise disadvantaged students; UC cannot.

Moreover, the University of California dwarfs these elite institutions in every way. UC's more selective campuses each receive considerably more than twice as many - at some campuses, close to three times as many - applications as, say, [Harvard](#). The Ivy League admissions offices are able to carefully consider each applicant in context, and may be better able to understand how a low SAT score fits into an applicant's portfolio. UC's admissions are necessarily conducted at a much larger scale, and even with comprehensive review this kind of consideration is not feasible. Ivy League schools may be able to use their additional admissions resources to, in effect, compensate for SAT differences - though there is no evidence that they do - but UC is unlikely to be able to do so.

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