

College Beat

Test Prep

The onset of spring means test prep time for many high school juniors. Looming ahead of them are the standardized tests with the familiar acronyms of SAT and ACT that many Colleges and Universities require of their applicants. It is about this time that students and parents ask me what they should do to prepare for the tests. Should we hire a tutor? Should we enroll in a test prep class? I often hear parents say, "It seems like every one is hiring help with test prep – I guess we have to, right?" Have to? No. Could it be a good idea? Maybe.

There are certain students for which outside test prep can prove to be very beneficial. The student who does well in school (mostly A's and B's) but is disappointed when his PSAT scores arrive is the one who should be seeking help. At this point I ask if his objective is to be economical with money or time? If money is the paramount issue then he should seek out self-help books and school sponsored SAT prep classes. If time is the scarce commodity then it can make sense to hire a private tutor so that he spends time working on only those areas that are personal weaknesses and he won't have to sit through a class reviewing what he already has a handle on but his classmates don't.

There are other students who should be careful about what they wish for in the test score department. A student with not-so-stellar grades (mostly C's and D's) can't really resurrect her academic record with a high test score. In fact, a high test score could hurt this student. If she is getting Cs and Ds and then pulls out a 1200 on her combined (Critical Reading and Math) SAT score a college admissions officer is likely to scratch his head trying to figure out why there is a disconnect. Could it be that she is just lazy when it comes to homework? Suffice it to say, these doubts are not ideal for the candidate.

It is important to recognize that test prep, in any form, will take time. If this means time away from school work then the student must decide, with the help of a counselor, if his grades need more help than his test scores. A surge in the transcript in the junior year can be just as attractive as a surge in test scores for some students. This is especially true if a student is targeting those colleges that are test-score optional. He may be better off putting extra effort into his school work and then not submit his test scores with his college applications. The word of caution here is that he made need test scores for some of his college applications. Again, a consult with a professional can help - the issue can get complex.

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