

# BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM

THE JAMES G.  
MARTIN  
CENTER  
FOR ACADEMIC  
RENEWAL

## Admissions Standards

*The democratic contention that everybody should have a chance is excellent provided it means that everybody is to have a chance to measure up to high standards.*

—Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*

### Why Academic Standards Matter

Institutions of higher education face a great deal of pressure to be accessible, inclusive, and diverse, but these goals should not come at the expense of maintaining high standards.<sup>1</sup>

Universal and vigilantly enforced standards exist not only to safeguard students' best interests, but are crucial to the academic integrity and core educational mission of higher education.

In the absence of consistently applied standards, students are likely to be accepted into institutions where they won't thrive. Admitting academically underprepared students disadvantages them in several respects.

First, they will start out behind their peers and that gap is likely to only widen during their time

1. To read more from the Martin Center about the importance of academic standards, visit:  
<https://www.jamesmartin.center/tag/academic-standards/>

in college. It is already unfair to expect students to catch up to everyone else, and it is extremely difficult to do so.<sup>2</sup> Admitting students who will be automatically at the bottom of all their classes will likely harm their motivation, self-confidence, and financial well-being.

Students who attend universities despite lacking the necessary preparation for college-level work are less likely to enroll in challenging majors,<sup>3</sup> more likely to require non-credit-bearing remedial courses,<sup>4</sup> are more likely to drop out of college,<sup>5</sup> and are more likely to struggle to pay off their student loan debt.<sup>6</sup>

2. Daniel T. Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 44-45.

3. Gail Heriot, Maimon Schwarzschild, *A Dubious Expediency: How Race Preferences Damage Higher Education*, (New York: Encounter Books, 2021), 4.

4. Mary Nguyen Barry, Michael Dannenberg, "Out of Pocket: The High Cost of Inadequate High Schools and High School Student Achievement on College Affordability," *Education Reform Now*, April 2016.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Mary Nguyen, "Degreeless in Debt: What Happens to Borrowers Who Drop Out. Charts You Can Trust," *Education Sector*, February 2012.

Safeguarding standards is the only way to be truly fair and impartial in making admission decisions. Holding students to different standards undermines the principle of equality of opportunity. Furthermore, academic quality suffers across the board when professors must teach students who are not ready for college material. This jeopardizes higher education's fundamental mission of education and truth-seeking.

Academic standards do not need to be identical for every institution in the country, and they shouldn't be. But all baccalaureate institutions should require that applicants at least meet SAT or ACT college-ready test score benchmarks *and* have a minimum high school GPA of 3.0. They should also be expected to fulfill core course requirements.

Studies show that when students meet SAT or ACT college-ready benchmarks, they have a 75 percent chance of earning at least a "C" in credit-bearing college courses.<sup>7</sup> And multiple data sources show that, on average, students with a high school GPA of less than 3.0 have a less than 50 percent chance of graduating in six years.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, institutions should require applicants to have a minimum GPA of 3.0.

Although there is a growing push to make standardized test scores "optional," strong evidence points to standardized testing as a useful and objective predictor of academic success in college. A 2020 report of the University of California Academic Council Standardized

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7. Jeff Allen, Justine Radunzel, [What are the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks?](#) ACT Research and Policy, October 2017., K–12 Educator Brief [The College and Career Readiness Benchmarks for the SAT® Suite of Assessments](#), College Board.

8. Elaine M. Allensworth, Kallie Clark. [High School GPAs and ACT Scores as Predictors of College Completion: Examining Assumptions about Consistency across High Schools](#), University of Chicago, July 5, 2019., Bowen, William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, Michael McPherson, [Crossing the finish line: Completing College at America's Public Universities](#), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Testing Task Force found that test scores were better than high school GPA at predicting student success in the first year of college.<sup>9</sup> It observed that the predictive power of testing has increased since 2007, while that of high school GPA has decreased due to grade inflation. Furthermore, it found that test scores are better predictors of academic success for minority and low-income students. Eliminating test scores and relying more on high school GPA in admissions would not benefit these students because of the wide variation in high school grading standards.

Other research suggests that consideration of both test scores and high school GPA is a more accurate indicator of student success than consideration of only one or the other.<sup>10</sup>

## Recommendations

**The Martin Center recommends** that universities and university systems take steps to articulate and safeguard academic standards.

### **Baccalaureate institutions and systems should:**

- Establish clear, consistent minimum admissions criteria, including grade point averages, standardized testing, and adequate prerequisite course preparation. All students should be held to the same academic standards;
- Require that applicants meet the College Board's (or the ACT's) college readiness benchmarks;

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9. Systemwide Academic Senate University of California, ["Report of the UC Academic Council Standardized Testing Task Force \(STTF\),"](#) January 2020.

10. Seth Gershenson, ["Grade Inflation in High Schools \(2005–2016\),"](#) The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, September 2018.

- Require applicants to have a minimum GPA of 3.0;
- End the practice of issuing “waivers” to select students, including student-athletes, who do not meet minimum standards;
- Stop offering non-credit remedial courses;
- End preferential treatment in admissions based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, geography, or legacy status. (See our [racial preferences policy page](#).)

## SAT and ACT College Readiness Benchmarks\*

Source: *The College Board and ACT*

Subject	SAT Score
Reading/Writing	480
Math	530
Composite	1010

Subject	ACT Score
English	18
Math	22
Reading/Writing	22
Science	23
Composite	21

\*Benchmarks are scores that represent the level of achievement required for students to have a 75 percent chance of obtaining a C or higher in credit-bearing college courses.

## Model Policy

[Minimum Admission Requirements: Model System Policy](#), James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal.

## Further Reading

From the Martin Center:

- [Did You Know? Some UNC Student-Athletes Don’t Meet Minimum Admission Requirements](#) by Shannon Watkins (September 2, 2021)
- [If We Jettison Standardized Testing, What’s Its Replacement?](#) by George Leef (June 26, 2020)
- [Goodbye Meritocracy, Hello... What?](#) by Shannon Watkins (April 20, 2020)
- [Never Let a Crisis Go to Waste: UNC BOG Hastily Enacts New Admissions Policy](#) by Shannon Watkins (April 6, 2020)
- [UNC Will Not Require the SAT Next Year](#) by Shannon Watkins (August 17, 2020)
- [It’s Time to Clear Up the Impending Confusion in UNC Admission Standards](#) by Jenna Robinson (October 5, 2015)
- [Class Warfare Comes to College Admissions](#) by Jay Schalin (July 1, 2008)

From the Web:

- [The Truth About the SAT and ACT](#), *The Wall Street Journal*
- [The War on Admissions Testing](#), *The Wall Street Journal*
- [The Trouble With Harvard](#), *The New Republic*
- [The College and Career Readiness Benchmarks for the SAT Suite of Assessments](#), College Board
- [ACT College and Career Readiness Benchmarks](#), ACT
- [Grade Inflation in High Schools \(2005-2016\)](#), The Thomas B. Fordham Institute

## Scholarly Articles:

- Sanchez, Edgar, I. and Moore, Rael (2022) [Grade Inflation Continues to Grow in the Past Decade](#), ACT.
- Systemwide Academic Senate University of California, “[Report of the UC Academic Council Standardized Testing Task Force \(STTF\)](#),” January 2020.
- Mattern, K.D., and Patterson, B.F. (2014). [Synthesis of Recent SAT Validity Findings: Trend Data over Time and Cohorts](#). New York: The College Board.
- Radunzel, J. and Mattern, K.D. (2015). [Providing context for college readiness measures: College enrollment and graduation projections for the 2015 ACT-tested high school graduating class](#). Iowa City: ACT.
- Radunzel, J. and Noble, J. (2012). [Predicting Long-Term College Success through Degree Completion Using ACT Composite Score, ACT Benchmarks, and High School Grade Point Average](#). Research Report No. 2012-5. Iowa City: ACT.
- Shaw, E.J. (2015). [An SAT Validity Primer](#). New York: The College Board.
- Westrick, P.A., Le, H., Robbins, S.B., Radunzel, J.M., and Schmidt, F.L. (2015). [College Performance and Retention: A Meta-Analysis of the Predictive Validities of ACT Scores, High School Grades, and SES](#). *Educational Assessment*, 20(1), 23-45.

## For More Information

For supplemental data or additional research on this topic, please contact the Martin Center by phone or email. you can reach us at 919-828-1400 or [info@jamesgmartin.center](mailto:info@jamesgmartin.center).

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## About the Martin Center

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

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