

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

Taming the Monster

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Published: April 23, 2006

THIS may be you, or someone you know: the student who took five SAT subject tests, eight Advanced Placement courses and prepped for even the PSAT; who played varsity soccer and tennis and cello; who spent three entire weekends writing 12 different essays for 12 different applications.

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Michael Klein

With all the competition over getting into great colleges, it's not surprising that applicants want to make sure they've done enough. But how much is too much (or too little)? Experts say it's possible to maximize chances without overdoing it. Here are their suggestions for taming the admissions monster.

1. TAKE TWO OR THREE PRACTICE TESTS

Standardized test scores are one of the top factors influencing admissions decisions, with 60 percent of colleges assigning

"considerable importance" to them, according to a survey by the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Familiarity with the test — the question types and what they're looking for — helps students do better, says Brian O'Reilly, executive director of SAT information services at the College Board, which administers the SAT. So, he advises: "Don't walk in cold. Every minute you spend reading the test directions is a minute you're not dealing with test material and answering questions." He recommends taking the PSAT and one or two other practice tests on your own right before taking the SAT.

How helpful is it to prep beyond that?

Add a zero to your math and critical reading PSAT scores, and if they fall within the range accepted by your target colleges (published in guidebooks), there's no need for test prep. If they don't, or you bomb the first time you take the SAT, chances are additional prep will raise your scores.

But there are limits to how much a student can expect to improve. Test prep companies contend that they can raise scores by hundreds of points. But studies show less impressive results. A 2001 study of about 3,500 students nationwide by Derek C. Briggs, an assistant professor of education at the University of Colorado, Boulder, found that the students' combined SAT scores were on average 60 points higher than their PSAT scores (adjusted to be an SAT equivalent). Those who had taken commercial test-prep classes scored on average just 20 to 30 points higher than students who had prepared in other ways.

The 150 or so juniors at Boston Latin School in Massachusetts who elected to take a 38-hour prep course taught by Kaplan last spring increased their SAT scores by an average of 130 points, says Jim Montague, the school's director of guidance. The results didn't make Mr. Montague an evangelist for commercial programs, though. Some students in that group increased their scores by only tens of points while some who studied on their own increased their scores significantly.

"It's an individual decision," he says. "It's taking the time to get familiar with the test, and some of our kids won't take the time themselves, or can't find the time, but if they've invested the money in a class, they're going to make sure they come."

One time-waster: PSAT prep. Mr. Montague discourages students from preparing for what is designed to be a practice test. Colleges don't see PSAT scores. And while the highest scorers win scholarship money, he observes, "there are not a lot of National Merit scholarships, quite frankly, and therefore, I'm not sure it's worth the investment."

2. TAKE THREE SAT SUBJECT TESTS

Most colleges do not require these exams, which measure knowledge in specific subjects. But a significant number of more competitive colleges — Georgetown, the University of Virginia, the [University of California](#) system — require scores from two, and several Ivy League colleges want three. None want more than three. So keep options open and don't be caught off guard if colleges suddenly start requiring the tests (as Boston University did in 2005). Take three. And while many selective colleges waive their subject test requirement for students who take the ACT instead of the SAT, not all do. ([Harvard](#) and Williams, for example, don't.)

Ellen Fisher, college adviser at the Bronx High School of Science, recommends starting early and taking one test at a time, following a rigorous class in your chosen subject, throughout your high school career. "If you don't have the SAT II's by November of your senior year, you're in a position of either having to take them in December" all in one sitting, diminishing your chances of doing well, "or simply not applying to that college," she says.

Even if they are not required, the tests come in handy. The State University of New York at Albany, doesn't request the subject tests, but submitting excellent results "can help a student who's in that gray area," says Robert K. Andrea Jr., its director of undergraduate admissions.

3. TAKE AS MANY A.P.'S AS YOU CAN HANDLE

The surest way to pique colleges' interest is to "take the hardest courses you can get into in high school," says Wylie L. Mitchell, dean of admissions at Bates College. His counterpart at the University of Pennsylvania, Lee Stetson, says that admissions officers consider Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses to be the most challenging work students can do, with honors classes "a little less so, unless that's the only advanced coursework that the school offers."

There's a catch, unfortunately. Gary L. Ross, dean of admissions at Colgate University, says this: "The question we get asked more than any other is, 'Is it better to take an A.P. course and possibly get a B or C or is it better to take a more basic course and get an A?'"

"Our response is, we want to see applicants who are able to do both — take advanced level courses and do well."

Hence, this advice from Mr. Andrea at SUNY Albany: "It should be an A.P. course if it's a strength of yours."

Admissions officers say there's no such thing as an ideal number of A.P., I.B. or honors courses on a transcript because they evaluate each applicant in the context of the high school — the number of such courses offered, other opportunities to do advanced work, school policies and even scheduling conflicts come into play (information that school counselors submit with their students' applications). It might not appreciably change your chances if you have four A.P. courses or five, provided you have taken a challenging program.

Still, Mr. Ross is able to define too little: "If the student comes from a school where there were 15 or 20 courses offered and didn't take advantage of any of those courses, that would certainly raise a flag."

4. ONLY DO EXTRACURRICULARS THAT YOU LOVE

"The student who says, 'Here's a long list of things, each of which I've done for four hours a week for a year,' really is not impressive to us," says Robert A. Seltzer, director of admissions at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. "We would rather see a few activities where a student has stuck with it and moved up in the ranks, so now they're a club president or a team captain, and they exhibit leadership. Students who have created a club, and now they've raised \$20,000 for Katrina victims — that looks strong to us."

5. SEND THREE TO FIVE RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

Top colleges often request three letters from specific people — say, two teachers in different subject areas and a counselor. Feel free to send additional recommendations, counselors say, but more than two extras is overkill.

Even if letters are optional, as they are at SUNY Albany, consider sending at least one. "The students in the top 5 percent of my applicant pool, they're not going to be at a loss if they don't send a recommendation — though of course, they're the students who are organized enough to send them," Mr. Andrea says. "For students who are not going to match up to the applicant pool whatsoever, letters are not going to make a difference. But for that middle student, it can make a difference."

If possible, get recommendations from teachers in upper-level, full-year core courses. Letters should come from people who really know you. If you haven't bonded with a lot of adults, refresh their memories with samples of your papers and other specifics.

Forgo people who don't know you at all. Mr. Ross at Colgate recalls turning down a student even though a former United States president submitted a letter on his behalf. "He had played tennis with the father of this particular student, but he'd never once met the applicant," he says. "It was a gigantic waste of time for everybody involved."

6. APPLY TO FIVE TO EIGHT COLLEGES

The rule of thumb is at least five colleges: one or two safety schools, two to four schools you have a good chance of getting into, and one or two dream schools.

Ms. Fisher has known Bronx Science students who have applied to 21 colleges. "It's a lot of work, and it's a lot of money, and in the end they generally get into the schools we assumed they'd get into," she says. "When students start applying to 21 schools, most of them are dream schools, and so most of those will be a rejection."

The more applications you do, the greater the chances you will make a poor impression. Mr. Seltzer of the University of Wisconsin explains: "I can't tell you how many times students have clearly taken an essay and modified it for us, rather than answering the question that we put forth.

"Every day," he says, "we get applications where the student says, 'I have always wanted to go to the [University of Michigan](#).' "

Samantha Stainburn is former managing editor of Teacher Magazine.