

# Understanding SAT Scores in Context

## A Case Study on Building a Deeper Understanding of Students' Preparation for College Success

As competition for college admission becomes more intense and postsecondary institutions strive to improve completion rates, admissions officers seek additional context around applicants' accomplishments. Understanding students' achievements, relative to their peers' is key to deeper understanding of applicants' readiness for college. Traditional measures of collegiate preparation, such as SAT scores and high school GPA, become more valuable indicators of student preparation if we understand the educational challenges students face in high school—and how they responded to those challenges. Enrollment leaders appreciate that the educational context in which a student achieves may be as important as the grades and scores they have earned.

### Appreciating Context in Practice

Most college applications solicit a variety of data concerning an applicant, such as high school attended, course grades, and standardized test scores. This information is far more valuable, however, if we can compare individual students' achievements with those of other students at the same high school, the educational opportunities available to all students there, and whether they took advantage of those opportunities.

For example, knowing that an applicant successfully completed two AP courses is important, but this information becomes even more instructive if we know that the high school offered *only* two AP courses. This information tells us something more about the applicant: that she has taken advantage of challenging opportunities available at her high school. Similarly, an applicant presenting an SAT score of 1200 might be evaluated differently by an admissions reader when it is revealed that she scored above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile of SAT test takers in her high school. This additional context gives admissions officers insight they would not otherwise have about the achievements and persistence of applicants.

### Key Takeaways:

- The ability to assess college readiness using traditional admissions metrics, such as HSGPA and SAT scores, is improved when viewed in the context of an applicant's environment.
- Colleges and universities are assessing the tenacity or work ethic of their applicants using traditional admissions metrics and other contextual information.
- A variety of data and information are available to understand an applicant's scores in context of their high school peers.
- Higher education institutions are succeeding in quantifying nontraditional admissions factors, such as educational disadvantage, to inform admissions decisions.

### University of South Carolina: Highlighting Tenacity and Persistence

The University of South Carolina (USC) uses traditional measures of academic achievement to determine the readiness of applicants, such as test scores and high school grades, and reconceptualizes these academic indicators in insightful ways. For example, the institution considers SAT scores and high school GPA (HSGPA) as reflections of a student's overall academic potential. However, admissions leaders also view the HSGPA as a measure that includes a student's "academic work ethic" (AWE) and have built a metric – the AWE – that measures goal-orientation and tenacity that will serve them well in college.

To create the AWE metric, the institution uses the SAT to predict HSGPA. It then subtracts a student's actual HSGPA from the predicted HSGPA to arrive at a difference value. The difference represents how the student performed in high school versus how a standardized measure of academic performance (SAT) would predict them to perform. With this calculation, the institution could identify students who are significantly above or below the institutional AWE value average for use in admission or advisement decisions.

This AWE metric may be helpful in evaluating students for admission, but University leaders believe that its true value is assessing a student's probability of success after enrolling at the University. For example, a low AWE score might signal that a student may not be as prepared for the rigors of college compared to other students. These students may need assistance in time management or study skills after they enroll at the college. "We are focused not solely on initial admissions and matriculation, but primarily on degree completion. We're trying to better predict the type of academic intervention a student may need," says the AVP for Admissions and Enrollment. The combination of traditional metrics—SAT and HSGPA—provide context regarding the future success that would not be known otherwise.

### University of California: Honoring Context and Accomplishment

The University of California (UC) has a Comprehensive Review Admissions policy which emphasizes that applicants should be "evaluated for admission using multiple measures of promise while considering the context in which each student has demonstrated academic accomplishment." This policy leads to an approach that includes two important ideas:

- All information in the UC application is relevant in determining the admissibility of any given applicant.
- No single data point, such as a test score or a GPA, provides the basis for denial of admission.

All applications to the institution are read at least twice by admissions readers. These readers are trained to review the entire application before rendering a score, understanding that every applicant has a unique story to tell and that such a story cannot be told with a single data point. Also important is the idea that readers build a case for admission in the appraisal of each applicant. Approaching file review in this way casts a positive, forward-looking perspective, stressing for readers that every applicant brings a combination of skills and talents worthy of careful review and possible admission.

UC's approach to evaluating files is based on a wealth of information that provides context for every data point in the application. The UC read sheet—a summary of information

that accompanies every application— includes information about the applicant's high school and the performance of the applicant's peers at that school, in the same school district, and across the state. It also provides information about other factors likely to affect learning. Examples include:

- Student/teacher ratio
- Number of honors courses offered
- College prep course completion rate
- Average test scores
- Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch
- Student attrition rates
- Average family income

SAT scores and high school GPA remain critical to the UC admissions policy, but the institution believes that the utility of such measures *is improved* when used in combination with other information about the educational context of applicants.

### University of Colorado: Quantifying Nontraditional Admissions Factors

Interpreting scores in context presumes a fair and equitable comparison among applicants. A student's achievements in a well-resourced school may outshine those of a student from a school with fewer resources. Comparing these students is fairer with a gauge to measure "good" achievement.

The University of Colorado at Boulder has devised two measures designed to increase their confidence in comparing the achievements among students with similar backgrounds and challenges:

- **The Disadvantage Index** quantifies socioeconomic barriers to college access, such as first-generation status, family income, single parent household, and school size. These components, analyzed in context, quantify a student's likelihood of attending college, based on research and historical enrollment trends for students possessing one of more of these characteristics.
- **The Overachievement Index:** The factor quantifies an applicant's high school credentials, including grades and test scores, compared to the average academic achievement of applicants from the same socioeconomic profile. This allows admission officers to understand how a student achieved academically compared to peers within the same socioeconomic profile.

All applicants must meet minimum academic standards regardless of their placement on these indices and traditional admissions factors are also taken into consideration. Still, the

creation of these metrics provides admission officers with additional context that identify applicants whose achievements are exemplary.

Admission and enrollment leaders know that context requires multiple data points, calibrated and enlivened by professional judgement. Insights into student “work ethic,” “tenacity,” and “grit,” can be slippery and idiosyncratic unless bolstered by evidence of achievement and knowledge about the environment where those achievements were secured.

### **The Path Forward**

The institutional case studies presented here reflect increasing sophistication in devising strategies to assess applicants’ multiple talents and skills. Reviewing scores in context is not designed to minimize traditional measures of college readiness. Rather, it is a chance for colleges and universities to understand those measures and accomplishments more fully—and fairly. Using contextual measures in this way will allow enrollment leaders to have a better chance of selecting for admission students who will thrive at their institutions. One enrollment leader noted, “Building a case for context, while intense, rigorous, and time-consuming, is the right thing to do - both for students and for higher education.”

